

## **Web Review Essay**

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### **Assessment of Scholarship**

A quick search on any Internet search engine for web sites related to the early colonial period of slavery would return more than 1.6 million potential links. They vary wildly in terms of presentation, background research, and professional levels of scholarship. This is truly an overwhelming amount of data to process. How does one discern the level of usefulness for any of these? This essay will examine five specific sites related to colonial slavery and attempt not only to examine their level of scholarship but their usefulness by themselves and as a group. This analysis will show that while some of the web sites within the group come closer than others to meeting the criteria necessary for good scholarship, taken as a collection they could, with some adjustments in criteria, be seen as a scholarly treatment of the subject. Organized and seen in this way such collections could offer one small inroad in taming the Internet beast.

For the purposes of this essay a web site will be deemed as being a scholarly work if it has a clear argument that ideally is placed on its home or introductory page. Placement of the thesis is important in that visitors should be aware of the argument prior to navigating throughout the site. Second the site should have a clear narrative that connects supporting points used to defend the overall argument. If the author does not assist the viewer in seeing the logic and causation that defends their position then in fact they are not making an argument at all but are instead listing statements which may or may not be understood as having any relation to their point. Narrative then is the path visitors take that leads to an understanding of the author's stance and puts the viewer in a position to make their own judgment based on the evidence provided. A third area of

review includes the originality and contribution of the web site. Is the author rehashing materials or advancing knowledge on the subject? Finally does the design help or interfere or have no impact with the transmission of information? Scholars, ideally, should present their materials in a manner that aids in the visitor's understanding of the subject or at the very least does not detract from it. Navigation that confuses or impairs that ability clearly falls short of work performed at a professional level. With these criteria in mind each of the following sites was examined:

[Africans in America: The Terrible Transformation 1450-1750 \(part one of four\),](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>

[The Geography of Slavery,](http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html)

<http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html>

[Introduction to African-American life,](http://www.history.org/Almanack/people/african/aaintro.cfm)

<http://www.history.org/Almanack/people/african/aaintro.cfm>

[Tangled Roots,](http://www.yale.edu/glc/tangledroots/index.htm) and

<http://www.yale.edu/glc/tangledroots/index.htm>

[Slavery in Boston.](http://www.nps.gov/boaf/slaveryinboston.htm)

<http://www.nps.gov/boaf/slaveryinboston.htm>

The purpose of each web site greatly affects the ability to clearly discern what if any argument is being made. The five sites varied in purpose as one might expect given the nature of the organizations that created them. The *Africans in America* for example was produced as a companion to a PBS six-hour television series. Its purpose was to provide sources of additional information for viewers of the televised documentary. In the introduction the authors state that the site, through its collection of narratives, historical documents, interviews, and teacher's guides, has endeavored to reveal how African people during the early period of colonial slavery underwent a transformation from Africans to slaves. Though their labor supported all elements of colonial society their social status was marginalized and set apart. The narratives do provide a consistent thread in relating the chronological story and although they do not directly cite primary

sources the text is interspersed with hyperlinks to over 400 additional documents including primary source material. In addition the teacher's guide contains a bibliography of over fifty items. The additional materials from the resource bank include original documents and interviews of present day scholars, all of which lends support to the site's argument. This collection of contemporary and historic materials does represent a unique data set that other historians could utilize in their own research.

Colonial Williamsburg, a popular living history museum, produced the *Introduction to African-American Life* web site. Unfortunately the site lacks a clear thesis. Not surprisingly, they seem primarily concerned with preparing visitors for a visit to the actual town and are almost defensive at times with regard to the emotionally charged subject of slavery. The first paragraph heading on the first page proclaims, "Slavery existed in every colony" as if to say "so don't blame us" The paragraphs that follow touch upon various elements of eighteenth century slave life but do not follow a recognizable story line. Oddly enough the first paragraph is the only one to contain any sort of citation of source material. The site does contain a bibliography, however, listing 8 items, only one of which is a primary source. Other elements provided on the site include a journal article; historic newspaper accounts and runaway slave ads, sample diary entries, seven mini biographies, and a bullet point chronology. While they are useful and interesting they do not act as supporting elements in any particular argument and are in fact small samples of documentation available on other web sites in greater quantities with better search tools. One feature available here that is not found elsewhere are the photo slide shows of reenactors portraying slaves in their everyday routines. In addition there are recorded interviews with reenactors and the training staff. It is

impossible to tell from a web site how accurate these interpretations are but the added dimension of sight and sound is a powerful tool. It could be stronger still if the site contained video clips of the reinactors giving their presentations followed by citations to their reference material.

The National Park Service hosts the *Slavery in Boston* web site that presents a unique geographically focused look at slavery in Boston. While shorter than most of the sites examined it has a clear argument that states slavery in Massachusetts in general, and Boston in particular, was illustrative of the precarious social status of African Americans in colonial era New England. The opening narrative defends that position well but, as is the case with the other sites, lacks clear documentation of it's sources although it does present a two item bibliography at the end of the narrative. Supporting materials include a black historic trail map for visitors, small biographies of important historic figures, time lines, information about educational programs and a collection of articles on nineteenth century black history.

The *Tangled Roots* web site is a subset of a larger project called the *Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition* produced at Yale University. It examines Irish and African slave and servant history through case studies, journal articles, and source documents stored as part of the larger Gilder project which include primary source materials. Their argument is that the two races share a common heritage of slavery and abuse as well as mixed bloodlines that came as a result of working, living, and suffering together under and oppressive system. There is almost no narrative however but rather the visitor is encouraged to explore the questions and issues raised on the site by searching through and assessing the primary documents themselves.

The idea of culling a collection of related materials from a larger set to demonstrate their connection offers an interesting model that could be applied to other sites but under a strict definition of scholarship this case falls short of defending its argument. It would be more accurate to say that the site has a unique scholarly objective as opposed to suggesting it is a professional failure.

*The Geography of Slavery in Virginia* web site is an archive sponsored in part by the Virginia Center for Digital History. Based originally on Lathan A. Windley's collection of slave advertisements it contains a searchable database of "all runaway and captured ads for slaves and servants placed in Virginia newspapers from 1736 to 1790"(Windley, 1983). But where Windley edited the ads this database presents each one in full. In addition the site offers Virginia court records, other Chesapeake regional newspapers, diaries, articles, and literature on the colonial slave period. In addition there are mini biographies, links, a glossary, teaching materials, and notes on the original Windley collection. What the site clearly lacks, however, is any kind of argument. It is a tremendous tool for research but not what would traditionally be considered scholarly work.

The combination of history and new media requires new definitions and categories for assessment. It seems that in fairness some of these works should be considered as being scholarly in intent and focus. How is that different than saying they tried but failed at scholarship? A web site that attempts to present itself as a work of scholarship but then fails is different from one in which the intent was to aid the advancement of scholarship. *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia* web site is a prime example. A search of its database produces the following fields:

Field Names		
Date of Publication	Runaways in Ad	AssociateDocs
Paper Name	Geography in Ad	
Ad Type	Subscriber	

The database schema was designed with serious scholarship in mind and provides the metadata needed to go back to and interpret the original sources. The designers actually did this themselves in order to restore text deemed by Windley to be unnecessary such as passages concerning white runaway servants and advertisements of capture. Their goal was to allow the researcher to form their own questions rather than make assumptions as to what future researchers might be interested in. In addition the database contains cross-referenced links to more documents stored in the Associated Docs field. Here the researcher is provided with an image of the document itself as well as a transcription of the text. Clearly this site was built to aid scholarly research. This same classification of scholarly focus and intent could be applied to the *Tangled Roots* site. Although less well organized and searchable it has the same intention and offers some tools for searching via its parent site. The remaining three sites while providing some research materials can not successfully claim that they were created to assist scholarly research. Despite having an argument and a collection of supplemental documents, both primary and secondary, the *Africans in America* and *Slavery in Boston* sites both lack direct citations of evidence needed beyond mere bibliographies. While both make a contribution to the visitors understanding of slavery from their particular institutional perspectives they fall short of professional scholarship. The Colonial Williamsburg site while offering a hint of potential through its use of alternative media still falls short of scholarship as defined in this essay.

## Navigation and Design

Even the most well researched, documented, and reasoned argument based article would still fall short of scholarship if the supporting paragraphs were so arranged as to make it difficult to understand the logic at its core. A poorly designed web site can produce the same effect on even the best research. Good web site design includes, but is not limited to:

- Clear and intuitive navigation between screens and links,
- Graphics that enhance the presentation of data rather than distract from it,
- Text that is easily read and appropriate in length,
- A sense of cohesion wherein the visitor has a sense of where to start, where the middle points all lead and when they have reached the end.

To further this last goal requires a restrained use of intrasite hypertext placed in a manor that does not rip the viewer out of one context and drop them jarringly into another. Intersite hypertext should be used with great caution. Links should be logical in nature and above all (and this also applies to intrasite hypertext) should only go to active sites. There are numerous other elements of good design not listed here but these are some of the most important and were upper most in mind when reviewing the slavery sites being considered for this essay.

Web sites can develop an inverse relationship wherein the more material that is provided the more difficult it is to find anything. The *Africans in America* site shown here (see figure 1) contains a narrative, youth activity and teacher guides, over 400

documents in its resource bank, and additional information on the television series. Fortunately the PBS web designers did an excellent job of keeping the navigation simple, preventing the user from getting lost. There are some intrasite hypertext links that provide additional materials but because they are placed next to the main body of text and not in the middle of it they do not distract from the narrative.

The red background and black text on the initial page are a little difficult to read but they are replaced with a predominately white page when viewing the supporting pages. The red background is used in the top banner and thus maintains continuity. The only fault here is that the navigation links were placed right over the break between the red and white areas making it very difficult to read (See figure 2).

The Colonial Williamsburg site appears at first to contain a traditional list of intrasite links that one could follow consecutively. After clicking on the first topic the



Figure 1. Africans to Americans Section Page.

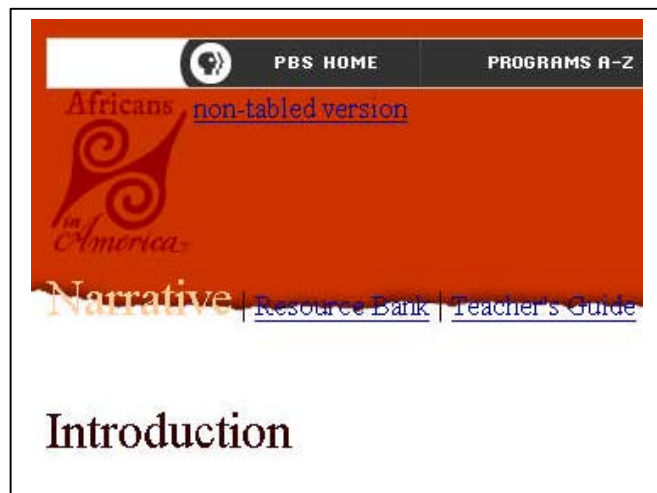


Figure 2. Africans to Americans Navigation Links.

visitor can read the text that may or may be followed by additional links at the bottom. Instead of being able to proceed to the next item on the original list, however, links go to other areas of the web site that are not necessarily related to the topic of slavery. In order to continue the original sequence of topics the visitor must use the back button. This can cause confusion and frustration. In contrast the National Park Service's Slavery in Boston site is a model of simplicity. A menu of related links remains in the left margin at all times and allows the user to easily move from one page to the next. The limited number of additional materials of course makes that easy to maintain.

At first glance the *Tangled Roots* page appears to be designed much as the *Slavery in Boston* site. While it maintains a left hand menu for most of the pages directly related to the African – Irish subject matter it also contains links back to collections within the

Gilder Lerhman parent site as well as to pages outside of either organization. It is easy to lose the thread of this site especially when one considers how little actual narrative there is.



**Figure 3. The *Tangled Roots* Home Page.**

While none of these issues are overwhelming in and off themselves they create a muddled picture when taken as a whole. Ironically their logo is symbolic of that confusion. The colors of the Irish, US, and Black Nationalism flags obscure the title that is supposed to unite them.

The Geography of Slavery site is presents the best design out of the five explored in this essay. As mentioned earlier it is an archival site whose focus lies with assisting scholarly research. A fixed left side menu aids navigation through both the search tools as well as the other numerous

resources provided. Search results are presented in table form and contain active links to related documents thus enabling the researcher to collect additional information. Although the table results necessitate horizontal

sliding while viewing online, the data fits within a standard portrait

alignment when printed. It is also possible to cut and paste the search results into a separate file on the visitor's personal computer and that can easily formatted for use in another database or spreadsheet such as Microsoft Access or Excel. The colors, layout, and text all combine to make this web site an effective scholarly tool (see figure 4).

## Conclusions

Of the five sites examine none completely fulfill all the requirements for scholarship as set forth at the start of this essay. Some, like the PBS produced *Africans to American* and the National Park Service's *Slavery in Boston* sites, come close but fail to cite the evidence upon which their narratives are based. The producers no doubt consider this appropriate for the general public audience they intended to serve. The *Slavery in*

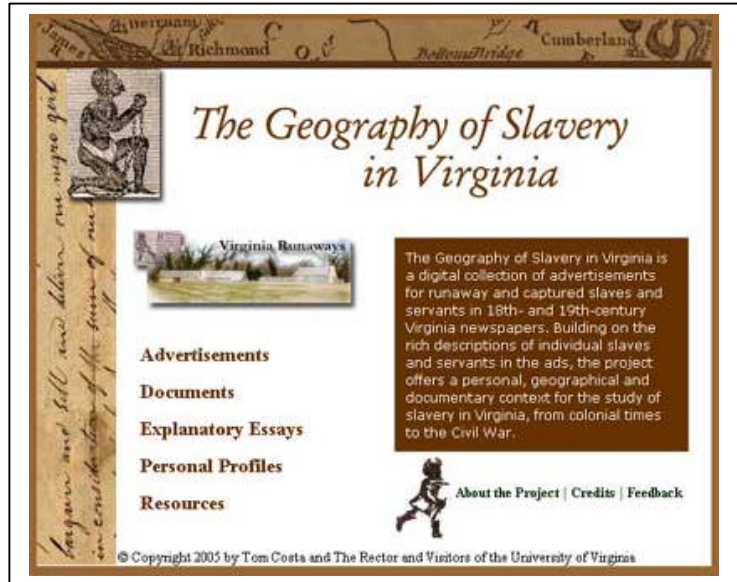


Figure 4. *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia* Home Page.

*Boston* site does, however, meet its own goals of providing visitors to the Boston area with information regarding historic sites related to African American History. The *Tangled Roots* page offers a specialized research tool dealing with the shared experiences of the Irish and African servants and slaves. While it doesn't provide an argument and is somewhat distracted in its method of information delivery it does offer a unique perspective on the issue of slavery and oppression. *The Geography of Slavery in Virginia* site is an excellent tool but again does not live up to the full criteria for scholarship. The Colonial Williamsburg site has potential in its use of new media to use other forms of teaching to prepare its visitors for a more rewarding experience at their facility. So after citing this litany of seeming failure is there anything positive to be said here for scholarship on the web? The answer is a firm and optimistic maybe.

It is apparent that the traditional definitions of scholarship as applied to print media do not quite fit here. They can be used to quickly condemn web-based presentations but offer no recompense for areas that go beyond what print can provide. No book can compare with a searchable database that can retrieve multiple records at a time. Nor is there any reward for the additional knowledge that comes from hearing and an artisan demonstrating a traditional craft. Of course a site can not make up for an egregious lack of professionalism or even the lack of cited sources but those sites that are scholarly in focus and intent deserve higher recognition. There is room for more than one form of scholarship. Call them scholarly if you will but recognize their professional contribution at the very least.

A second ray of hope for this collection, yes even for the Colonial Williamsburg site, lies in the model of scholarship itself. A good print article will put forth an

argument based on demonstrated sources that are available for peer review. Seen in this way future historians could conceivably take the group of web sites like the five discussed here and use them as component parts to argue some point. The *Tangled Roots* site comes close to doing this with its use of a subset of data from its parent site. For instance, if one were to argue that slavery is not an issue isolated to the south but instead crossed geographical, racial, and temporal boundaries one could conceivably make use of the five sites listed in this essay. The *Slavery in Boston* site provides a northern perspective. The *Tangled Roots* page demonstrates cross racial impact, and Colonial Williamsburg reinactors demonstrate continued fascination with slavery in this modern period where people still search for information about their own past. The archival evidence offered by the *Geography of Slavery* tool combined with the viewpoints presented by modern scholars as shown on the PBS site offer a context in which to frame, blend, and present this information. There are as mentioned earlier over one million six hundred thousand slavery related web sites out there in cyber space. Many no doubt are of dubious value but even if we assume 99.9 percent are useless we are still left with 1600 potentially useful sites that could perhaps be utilized as component parts to answer scholarly questions. There is a vast database of information out there just waiting for an argument.