

University of Maine History Department
Statement Regarding the Protests Against Racism and Police Violence
June 2020

The faculty and graduate students of the University of Maine History Department endorse the [statement](#) of the American Historical Association on the history of racist violence in the United States. What follows is a condensed and modified version of the AHA's statement:

Everything has a history, including the deplorable record of violence against African Americans in the United States. George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers cannot be understood in isolation. What happened to George Floyd stands well within the national tradition.

The sordid history of racial violence in the United States also pre-dates and transcends the nation. From the largest forced migration in human history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the first slavery legislation in Virginia in 1662 and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the law has long been used as a tool of white supremacy. This does not just lie in the distant past. Reckless police actions have also triggered some of the most destructive episodes of civil unrest in recent history—from the raiding of an after-hours club in downtown Detroit in 1967 to the 1992 acquittal of the police officers who beat Black motorist Rodney King in Los Angeles to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014.

The recent series of cases marked by severe, even murderous overreach on the part of police officers are part and parcel of historic trends. The killing of George Floyd stems from a constellation of structural injustices that are immune to the platitudes of anguish and concern that routinely follow instances of police-initiated violence against African Americans.

As a nation, we have shown a reluctance not only to learn our own history but to learn from it, which helps to explain why we continue to witness—and set aside as exceptional—egregious forms of human-rights abuses in case after case. Throughout our history, those trusted to enforce the law have too often acted lawlessly, while too many civilians have acted with the tacit approval of law enforcement in targeting African Americans.

We are killing our own people. Even as we mourn the death of George Floyd, we must confront this nation's past; history must inform our actions as we work to create a more just society.

The University of Maine History Department recognizes the specific historical relationship that Maine has to the history of slavery, racism, and their legacies in our society today. The state's colonial origins hinged upon the dispossession of Wabanaki people and the exploitation of enslaved labor. We recognize that the land that the University of Maine occupies today, on Marsh Island, is in the homeland of the Penobscot nation. Maine's statehood in 1820 was tied to a national crisis over the expansion of slavery into western territories that resulted in a disastrous

compromise. Long after the abolition of slavery in Maine, Black and Indigenous people in Maine have struggled for equality in ways that are locally distinct, while also tied to the national history of racism in the United States.

The University of Maine History Department supports the protestors and activists voicing their outrage and demanding structural change in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others who have lost their lives to police violence. We stand with our students, faculty, staff, and community members who continue the fight for justice in our society today. We join with the UMaine chapter of AFUM, the Faculty Senate, and many others at our university in affirming our commitment to anti-racism. Black Lives Matter to us. As a department, we commit to continuing conversations, cultivating a climate of open-mindedness, and pursuing concrete actions as we collectively work towards the objectives of anti-racism and greater inclusion.

Faculty members and graduate students in the History Department at the University of Maine have worked together to generate a [list of resources](#) that speak to the historical context of the protests and the broader legacy of racism in today's world.