

ished for beating them to death,” write Heinegg and Hoff, a retired engineer and the editor of the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, respectively. Africans and white servants shared a similar lot, joining households where they worked, ate, slept, got drunk, and ran away together. Some slaves were freed, and a number of the men married white servant women. “By the mid-17th century,” the authors write, “some free African Americans were beginning to be assimilated into colonial Virginia society. Many were the result of mixed-race marriages.”

As slaves grew in number in Virginia and increasingly replaced white servants, racial attitudes changed. The colonial legislature “passed a series of laws between 1670 and 1723 designating slavery as the appropriate condition for people of African descent.” It outlawed

interracial marriage, required that any illegitimate mixed-race children of white mothers be bound out as servants for 30 years, and restricted the manumission of slaves. Yet “white servant women continued to bear children by African American fathers . . . well into the 18th century.” Indeed, such births appear to have been “the primary source of the increase in the free African American population in Virginia for this period.”

Because so many free African Americans had light skin, it was assumed that they descended from white slave owners who took advantage of their female slaves. But the evidence gathered by the authors does not bear this out: “Only three of the approximately 570 [free black] families in Virginia and the Carolinas were proven to descend from a white slave owner.”

PRESS & MEDIA

Journalism's Second Draft

“Whose Turf Is the Past?” by Andie Tucher, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Sept.–Oct. 2004), Journalism Bldg., 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

High-minded journalists used to boast that they were writing the first, rough draft of history, but lately they seem to be essaying finished drafts as well. Take, for example, the thick, well-received volumes by Anne Applebaum, David Maraniss, and Robert Caro. Works by academic historians such as Joseph Ellis and Robert Dallek also show up on best-seller lists, notes Tucher, a historian and former journalist who teaches at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. Do any consequential differences still separate the two breeds?

“Historians try to pose a really interesting problem or contribute to the debate in a field,” observes journalist Nicholas Lemann, author of *The Promised Land* (1991) and other works, and now the dean of Columbia’s journalism school. “But it’s striking how little professional historians know about how to tell a popular story. They think ‘popular’ means ‘picking a good topic.’”

Yet journalistic storytelling has a “stylized quality, which can be a disadvantage as well as an advantage,” says Robert Darnton, a historian at Princeton University. “By that I mean a

tendency to look for a lead instead of an argument, to hype things, overuse colorful quotes, and exaggerate the importance of personal quirks.”

As Tucher notes, “People have always used stories—carefully told or not—to make sense of the world, to explain its big mysteries (‘Why are there bad guys?’) and its small ones (‘Why did he kill her?’). Journalists and the public together construct stories to order the chaotic buzz of breaking events into a satisfying narrative that reconfirms what’s both important and familiar in the world.”

That can lead to oversimplification, according to Mary Marshall Clark, director of Columbia’s Oral History Office. Many reporters covering 9/11 naturally tended to fit that day’s tragic events into “a highly nationalistic frame” of tragedy and heroism. But the academic interviewees she dispatched into New York City’s streets after the attack recorded other things, such as the self-doubts of firefighters who were portrayed as heroes. Journalists may be writing a first draft of history, but apparently some modern historians are writing the second draft of journalism.