



Promote Environmental Justice

A Shameful History

Powerful people know that exploiting marginalized communities is the fastest route to even more power. About 400 years ago, American slave traders started kidnapping African people by the millions and shipping them in unspeakable, sometimes deadly conditions to America. Once here, they were for generations enslaved to provide free labor, largely for the burgeoning cotton industry. Countless slaves died in servitude from starvation, beatings, or exhaustion. Many women were raped by their masters. Yet many of our founding fathers were slave owners themselves, despite proclaiming that all men are created equal. Counter to the accounts told in our school books, our forebears set in motion a shameful chapter in American history.

Later, in the early 1800s, American cotton farmers wanted desperately to expand their holdings to millions of acres of rich farming land in states of the Southeast. Just one speedbump: the “Indian problem” – the native Americans who had occupied and cultivated these lands for generations. In the 1830s, President Andrew Jackson ordered the removal of all native Americans living on these lands – some 125,000 men, women and children – marching them at gunpoint hundreds of miles on a “trail of tears” to specially designated “Indian territory” across the Mississippi. Plainly said, white Americans stole the land of native peoples, murdering and sickening untold numbers of them in the name of “progress.”

Black Americans in particular have been dying in disproportionate numbers ever since. Often living in poverty as a legacy of enslavement, Black Americans continue to bear a lopsided burden of the by-products of fossil-fuel infrastructure – killed or sickened from exposure to toxic chemicals in the air they breathe and the water they drink.

As he lay dying in 2020 on a Minneapolis street with a police officer’s knee crushing his windpipe, George Floyd pleaded at least 20 times, “I can’t breathe!” It’s a refrain echoed for generations of families living in sacrifice zones from coast to coast, who find themselves disproportionately close to hazardous-waste landfills, waste-transfer stations, incinerators, garbage dumps, diesel bus and truck garages, auto body shops, smokestack industries, industrial hog and chicken processors, oil refineries, chemical manufacturers, and radioactive-waste storage areas.