

How Phoenix marked the 400th anniversary of slavery in America

[Elizabeth Montgomery](#), Arizona Republic

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The American slave trade began on the East Coast in 1619. In time, it spread west of the Mississippi River, inflicting pain for generations of African Americans.

The pain was evident during a Phoenix event this week marking the 400th anniversary of slavery being brought to America. The event brought Africans and African Americans together at the First Institutional Baptist Church to reflect on commonalities.

“People of African descent have endured the worst inhumanity ... in the form of slavery,” said pastor Warren Stewart Sr. “This 400th anniversary affirms the strength, perseverance and the faith of people of African descent.”

The event explored the impact slavery had on Arizona. For many, it proved the state is not always behind others.

“For Arizona to be doing this (commemoration) ... is monumental,” said Gershom Williams Sr., professor at Mesa Community College and a panelist at Tuesday's event. “When [we were one of the last states to get the \(Martin Luther King Jr.\) holiday](#), everybody said we were behind the times. So for us to be doing this ... it's our time.”

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Arizona's black population has historically been small, but that doesn't mean it can't have an impact or that it wasn't affected by 400 years of oppression.

“(African Americans) are 5 percent of the state, and even though we're tiny, we are mighty,” said West Mesa Justice of the Peace Elaissia Sears, another speaker on Tuesday.

“This event is huge, because we need to disperse this information and say, ‘Yes you can go to Africa, you can go back and connect with your ancestors.’ We must continue the conversation.”

Africa is the birthplace of Africans and African Americans alike. How they arrived in America may differ, but they are all connected, the panelists agreed.

"We carry Africa in our DNA," said Adama Sallu, a panelist and native of Sierra Leone who works as director of equality and inclusion at Chandler Unified School District. "We are a sacred people, home can be wherever we are."

During the commemoration, Rio Salado College psychology and religious studies professor Wanda Tucker was recognized with a standing ovation. She is just back from [a trip with USA Today that retraced the steps of her ancestors in Angola, Africa](#). The Arizona Republic is part of the USA TODAY NETWORK.

Tucker's family is believed to be among the "20 and odd," the first enslaved Africans brought to America.

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In Angola, Tucker walked a path in the fortress of Massangano, where her ancestors were beaten, baptized and branded before being forced onto a slave ship.

"I couldn't walk the whole path. It was too difficult, too emotional," Tucker told The Republic. "The Angolans are very proud people and, in my mind, they walked down that hill with their heads held high. My head dropped, but with a conscious effort, I held my head up."

Regardless of the size of Arizona's black population, or whether they believe home is in Africa or America, Tucker brought a message from a village leader in Angola: "He said, 'Tell them they have relatives here.'"

Commemorating the 400th anniversary of enslaved Africans being brought to America is just as important for Phoenix as it is anywhere else in the nation, she told the crowd of several hundred people.

"It doesn't matter if it's 5 percent out here or 2 percent in the Midwest, we are all survivors and we are all descendants of Africa," Tucker said. "One story is not enough, because (the black community) has occupied all of the Americas. We have contributed to the building of all of America. All of our stories are relevant."

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