

# Slavery in Colonial North America: 1600-1860

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The first generation of Africans in the New World tended to be remarkably cosmopolitan. Few of the first generation came directly from Africa. Instead, they arrived from the West Indies and other areas of European settlement. These "Atlantic Creoles" were often multilingual and had Spanish or Portuguese names. Sometimes they had mixtures of African and non-African ancestry. They experienced a period of relative racial tolerance and flexibility that lasted until the 1660s. A surprising number of Africans were allowed to own land or even purchase their freedom.

Beginning in the late 1660s, colonists in the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia imposed new laws that deprived blacks, free and slaves, of many rights and privileges. At the same time, they began to import thousands of slaves directly from Africa.

During the late 17th and 18th centuries, three distinctive systems of slavery emerged in the American colonies. In the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia, slavery was widely used in agriculture--in raising tobacco and corn and other grains--and in non-agricultural employment--in shipbuilding, ironworking, and other early industries.

In the South Carolina and Georgia Low Country, slaves raised rice and indigo and were able to reconstitute African social patterns and maintain a separate Gullah dialect. Each day, slaves were required to achieve a precise work objective, a labor system known as the task system. This allowed them to leave the fields early in the afternoon to tend their own gardens and raise their own livestock. Slaves often passed their property down for generations.

In the North, slavery was concentrated in productive agriculture on Long Island and in southern Rhode Island and New Jersey. Most slaves were engaged in farming and stock raising for the West Indies or as household servants for the urban elite.

At the beginning of the 18th century, most slaves were born in Africa, few were Christian, and very few slaves were engaged in raising cotton. By the start of the American Revolution, slavery had changed dramatically. We can look at these changes as a series of revolutions.

As a result of a demographic revolution, a majority of slaves had been born in the New World and were capable of sustaining their population by natural reproduction.

Meanwhile, a "plantation revolution" not only increased the size of plantations, but made them more productive and efficient economic units. Planters expanded their operations and imposed more supervision on their slaves.

A third revolution was religious. During the colonial period, many planters resisted the idea of converting slaves to Christianity out of a fear that baptism would change a slave's legal status. By the early 19th century, slaveholders increasingly adopted the view that Christianity would make slaves more submissive, orderly, and conscientious. Slaves themselves found in Christianity a faith that could give them hope in an oppressive world. In general, slaves did not join their masters' churches. Most became Baptists or Methodists.

A fourth revolution altered the areas in which slaves lived and worked. Between 1790 and 1860, 835,000 slaves were moved from Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas to Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. We know that slaves were frequently sold apart from their families or separated

from family members when they were moved to the Old Southwest.

Finally, there was a revolution in values and sensibility. For the first time in history, religious and secular groups denounced slavery as sinful and as a violation of natural rights. During the 1760s, the first movements in history began to denounce slavery.

Leaders of the patriot cause repeatedly argued that British policies would make the colonists slaves of the British. The colonists' emphasis on the danger of mass enslavement derived in part from the highly visible example of racial slavery.

Both the British and the colonists believed that slaves could serve an important role during the Revolution. In November 1775, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, promised freedom to all slaves belonging to rebels who would join "His Majesty's Troops." Some 800 slaves joined British forces.

Meanwhile an American diplomat, Silas Deane, hatched a secret plan to incite slave insurrections in Jamaica. Two South Carolinians, John Laurens and his father Henry, persuaded Congress to unanimously approve a plan to recruit an army of 3,000 slave troops to stop a British invasion of South Carolina and Georgia. The federal government would compensate the slaves' owners and each black would, at the end of the war, be emancipated and receive \$50. The South Carolina legislature rejected the plan, scuttling the proposal.

As a result of the Revolution, a surprising number of slaves were manumitted, while thousands of others freed themselves by running away. Georgia lost about a third of its slaves and South Carolina lost 25,000. Yet despite these losses, slavery quickly recovered in the South. By 1810, South Carolina and Georgia had three times as many slaves as in 1770.

The Revolution had contradictory consequences for slavery. In the South, slavery became more entrenched. In the North, every state freed slaves as a result of court decisions or the enactment of gradual emancipation schemes. Yet even in the North, there was strong resistance to emancipation and freeing of slaves was accompanied by the emergence of a virulent form of racial prejudice.

During the early 19th century, slavery underwent a new boom, rapidly expanding in Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, Guiana, the Windward Islands, and new territories southwest of the Appalachian mountains in the United States: into Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, and Texas.

Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin gave slavery a new lease on life. Between 1792, when Whitney invented the cotton gin, and 1794, the price of slaves doubled. By 1825, field hands, who had brought \$500 apiece in 1794, were worth \$1,500. As the price of slaves grew, so, too, did their numbers. During the first decade of the 19th century, the number of slaves in the United States rose by 33 percent; during the following decade, the slave population grew another 29 percent.

Slaves suffered extremely high mortality. Half of all slave infants died during their first year of life, twice the rate of white babies. And while the death rate declined for those who survived their first year, it remained twice the white rate through age 14. As a result of this high infant and childhood death rate, the average life expectancy of a slave at birth was just 21 or 22 years, compared to 40 to 43 years for antebellum whites. Compared to whites, relatively few slaves lived into old age.

A major contributor to the high infant and child death rate was chronic undernourishment. Slaveowners showed surprisingly little concern for slave mothers' health or diet during pregnancy, providing pregnant women with no extra rations and employing them in intensive field work even in the last

week before they gave birth. Not surprisingly, slave mothers suffered high rates of spontaneous abortions, stillbirths, and deaths shortly after birth. Half of all slave infants weighed less than 5.5 pounds at birth, or what we would today consider to be severely underweight.

Infants and children were badly malnourished. Most infants were weaned early, within three or four months of birth, and then fed gruel or porridge made of cornmeal. Around the age of three, they began to eat vegetables, soups, potatoes, molasses, grits, hominy, and cornbread. This diet lacked protein, thiamine, niacin, calcium, magnesium, and vitamin D, and as a result, slave children often suffered from night blindness, abdominal swellings, swollen muscles, bowed legs, skin lesions, and convulsions.

It is a mistake to think that slave labor was mostly unskilled brutish work. Cultivation of cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar requires careful, painstaking effort. On larger plantations, masters relied on slave carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, wheelwrights, tanners, tailors, butchers, masons, coopers, cabinet makers, metal workers, and silversmiths. Large numbers also worked as boatmen, waiters, cooks, drivers, housemaids, spinners, and weavers.

During the 1850s, half a million slaves lived in southern towns and cities, where they worked in textile mills, iron works, tobacco factories, laundries, and shipyards. Other slaves labored as lumberjacks, as deckhands on riverboats, and in sawmills, gristmills, and quarries. Many slaves were engaged in construction of roads and railroads.

Most slave labor, however, was used in planting, cultivating, and harvesting cotton, hemp, rice, tobacco, or sugar cane. On a typical plantation, slaves worked ten or more hours a day, "from day clean to first dark," six days a week, with only the Sabbath off. At planting or harvesting time, planters required slaves to stay in the fields 15 or 16 hours a day. When they were not raising a cash crop, slaves grew other crops, such as corn or potatoes; cared for livestock; and cleared fields, cut wood, repaired buildings and fences. On cotton, sugar, and tobacco plantations, slaves worked together in gangs under the supervision of a supervisor or a driver.

There is a tendency to think of slavery as an economically backward and inefficient institution. In fact, sugar and cotton plantations were the most innovative economic unit of their time in terms of labor management and organization. They anticipated the assembly line and the factory system in their reliance on such as close supervision and division of tasks.

Slave masters extracted labor from virtually the entire slave community, young, old, healthy, and physically impaired. Children as young as three or four were put to work, usually in special "trash gangs" weeding fields, carrying drinking water, picking up trash, and helping in the kitchen. Young children also fed chickens and livestock, gathered wood chips for fuel, and drove cows to pasture. Between the ages of seven and twelve, boys and girls were put to work in intensive field work. Older or physically handicapped slaves were put to work in cloth houses, spinning cotton, weaving cloth, and making clothes.

Because slaves had no direct incentive to work hard, slave owners combined harsh penalties with positive incentives. Some masters denied passes to disobedient slaves. Others confined recalcitrant slaves to private jails. Chains and shackles were widely used to control runaways. Whipping was a key part of plantation discipline.

But physical pain was not enough to elicit hard work. Some masters gave slaves small garden plots and permitted them to sell their produce. Others distributed gifts of food or money at the end of the year. Still other planters awarded prizes, holidays, and year-end bonuses to particularly productive slaves.

Slave marriages and family ties were not recognized by American law. Any owner was free to sell husbands from wives, parents from children, and brothers from sisters. Many large slaveholders had numerous plantations and frequently shifted slaves, splitting families in the process.

The most conservative estimates indicate that at least 10 to 20 percent of slave marriages were destroyed by sale. The sale of children from parents was even more common. As a result of the sale or death of a father or mother, over a third of all slave children grew up in households from which one or both parents were absent.

On large plantations, one slave father in three had a different owner than his wife, and could visit his family only at his master's discretion. On smaller holdings, divided ownership and mother-headed households occurred even more frequently. Many slaves had to share their single room cabins with relatives or other unrelated slaves. Even on model plantations, children between the ages of 7 and 10 were taken from their parents and sent to live in separate cabins.

Despite the frequent breakup of families by sale, African-Americans managed to forge strong and durable family and kin ties within the institution of slavery. Most slaves married and lived with the same spouse until death, and most slave children grew up in two parent households. To sustain a sense of family identity, slaves often named their children after parents, grandparents, recently deceased relatives, and other kin. Slaves passed down family names to their children, usually the name of an ancestor's owner rather than their current owner's. The strength of slave families is nowhere more evident than in the advertisements slaveowners posted for runaway slaves. Over a third of the advertisements indicate that fugitives left an owner to visit a spouse, a child, or other relatives.

Ties to an immediate family stretched outward to an involved network of extended kin. Family destruction and dispersal created extended kinship networks stretching across whole counties. Whenever children were sold to neighboring plantations, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins often took on the functions of parents. When blood relatives were not present, strangers cared for and protected children.

Through their families, religion, folklore, and music, as well as more direct forms of resistance, African-Americans resisted the debilitating effects of slavery and created a vital culture supportive of human dignity. In addition, slaves exerted a profound influence on all aspects of American culture.

The American language is filled with Africanisms. Such words as bogus, bug, phony, yam, tote, gumbo, jamboree, jazz, and funky all have African roots. Our cuisine, too, is heavily influenced by African practices. Deep-fat frying, gumbos, and fricassees stem from West and Central Africa. Our music is heavily dependent on African traditions. Sea chanties and yodeling, as well as spirituals and the use of falsetto were heavily influenced by African traditions. The frame construction of houses; the "call and response" pattern in sermons; the stress on the Holy Spirit and an emotional conversion experience--these too appear to derive at least partly from African customs. Finally, Africans played a critical role in the production of such crops as rice or sweet potatoes that the English had not previously encountered.

Slave religious and cultural traditions played a particularly important role in helping slaves survive the harshness and misery of life under slavery. Many slaves drew on African customs when they buried their dead. Conjurers adapted and blended African religious rites that made use of herbs and supernatural powers. Slaves also perpetuated a rich tradition of West and Central African parables, proverbs, verbal games, and legends. They also retained in their folklore certain central figures. Cunning tricksters, often represented as tortoises, spiders, or rabbits, outwitted their more powerful enemies.

Through folklore, slaves also sustained a sense of separate identity and conveyed valuable lessons to their children. Among the most popular folktales were animal trickster stories, like the Brer Rabbit tales, derived from similar African stories, which told of powerless creatures who achieved their will through wit and guile, not power and authority.

Of the 10 to 16 million Africans who survived the voyage to the New World, over one-third landed in Brazil and between 60 and 70 percent ended up in Brazil or the sugar colonies of the Caribbean. Only 6 percent arrived in what is now the United States. Yet by 1860, approximately two thirds of all New World slaves lived in the American South.

For a long time it was widely assumed that southern slavery was harsher and crueler than slavery in Latin America, where the Catholic church insisted that slaves had a right to marry, to seek relief from a cruel master, and to purchase their freedom. Spanish and Portuguese colonists were thought to be less tainted by racial prejudice than North Americans and Latin American slavery was believed to be less subject to the pressures of a competitive capitalist economy.

In practice, neither the Church nor the courts offered much protection to Latin American slaves. Access to freedom was greater in Latin America, but in many cases masters freed sick, elderly, crippled, or simply unneeded slaves in order to relieve themselves of financial responsibilities.

Death rates among slaves in the Caribbean were one third higher than in the South, and suicide appears to have been much more common. Unlike slaves in the South, West Indian slaves were expected to produce their own food in their "free time," and care for the elderly and the infirm.

The largest difference between slavery in the South and in Latin America was demographic. The slave population in Brazil and the West Indies had a lower proportion of female slaves, a much lower birth rate, and a higher proportion of recent arrivals from Africa. In striking contrast, southern slaves had an equal sex ratio, a high birthrate, and a predominantly American-born population.

Slavery in the United States especially distinctive in the ability of the slave population to increase its numbers by natural reproduction. In the Caribbean, Dutch Guiana and Brazil, the slave death rate was so high and the birth rate so low that slaves could not sustain their population without imports from Africa. The average number of children born to an early 19th century southern slave woman was 9.2--twice as many as in the West Indies.

In the West Indies, slaves constituted 80 to 90 percent of the population, while in the South only about a third of the population was slaves. Plantation size also differed widely. In the Caribbean, slaves were held on much larger units, with many plantations holding 150 slaves or more. In the American South, in contrast, only one slaveowner held as many as a thousand slaves, and just 125 had over 250 slaves. Half of all slaves in the United States worked on units of twenty or fewer slaves; three quarters had fewer than fifty.

These demographic differences had important social implications. In the American South, slave owners lived on their plantations and slaves dealt with their owners regularly. Most planters placed plantation management, supply purchasing, and supervision in the hands of black drivers and foremen, and at least two thirds of all slaves worked under the supervision of black drivers. Absentee ownership was far more common in the West Indies, where planters relied heavily on paid managers and relied on a distinct class of free blacks and mulattos to serve as intermediaries with the slave population.

Another important difference between Latin America and the United States involved conceptions of race. In Spanish and Portuguese America, an intricate system of racial classification emerged.

Compared with the British and French, the Spanish and Portuguese were much more tolerant of racial mixing, an attitude encouraged by a shortage of European women, and recognized a wide range of racial gradations, including black, mestizo, quadroon, and octoroon. The American South, in contrast, adopted a two category system of racial categorization in which any person with a black mother was automatically considered to be black.

Enslaved African Americans resisted slavery in a variety of active and passive ways. "Day-to-day resistance" was the most common form of opposition to slavery. Breaking tools, feigning illness, staging slowdowns, and committing acts of arson and sabotage--all were forms of resistance and expression of slaves' alienation from their masters.

Running away was another form of resistance. Most slaves ran away relatively short distances and were not trying to permanently escape from slavery. Instead, they were temporarily withholding their labor as a form of economic bargaining and negotiation. Slavery involved a constant process of negotiation as slaves bargained over the pace of work, the amount of free time they would enjoy, monetary rewards, access to garden plots, and the freedom to practice burials, marriages, and religious ceremonies free from white oversight.

Some fugitives did try to permanently escape slavery. While the idea of escaping slavery quickly brings to mind the Underground Railroad to the free states, in fact more than half of these runaways headed southward or to cities or to natural refuges like swamps. Often, runaways were relatively privileged slaves who had served as river boatmen or coachmen and were familiar with the outside world.

Especially in the colonial period, fugitive slaves tried to form runaway communities known as "maroon colonies." Located in swamps, mountains, or frontier regions, some of these communities resisted capture for several decades.

During the early 18th century there were slave uprisings in Long Island in 1708 and in New York City in 1712. Slaves in South Carolina staged several insurrections, culminating in the Stono Rebellion in 1739, when they seized arms, killed whites, and burned houses. In 1740 and 1741, conspiracies were uncovered in Charleston and New York. During the late 18th century, slave revolts erupted in Guadeloupe, Grenada, Jamaica, Surinam, San Domingue (Haiti), Venezuela, and the Windward Island and many fugitive slaves, known as maroons, fled to remote regions and carried on guerrilla warfare (during the 1820s, a fugitive slave named Bob Ferebee led a band of fugitive slaves in guerrilla warfare in Virginia). During the early 19th century, major conspiracies or revolts against slavery took place in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800; in Louisiana in 1811; in Barbados in 1816; in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822; in Demerara in 1823; and in Jamaica and in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831.

Slave revolts were most likely when slaves outnumbered whites, when masters were absent, during periods of economic distress, and when there was a split within the ruling elite. They were also most common when large numbers of native-born Africans had been brought into an area at one time.

The main result of slave insurrections was the mass executions of blacks. After a slave conspiracy was uncovered in New York City in 1740, 18 slaves were hanged and 13 were burned alive. After Denmark Vesey's conspiracy was uncovered, the authorities in Charleston hanged 37 blacks. Following Nat Turner's insurrection, the local militia killed about 100 blacks and 20 more slaves, including Turner, were later executed. In the South, the preconditions for successful rebellion did not exist, and tended to bring increased suffering and repression to the slave community.

Violent rebellion was rarer and smaller in scale in the American South than in Brazil or the Caribbean, reflecting the relatively small proportion of blacks in the southern population, the low proportion of

recent migrants from Africa, and the relatively small size of southern plantations. Compared to the Caribbean, prospects for successful sustained rebellions in the American South were bleak. In Jamaica, slaves outnumbered whites by ten or eleven to one; in the South, a much larger white population was committed to suppressing rebellion. In general, Africans were more likely than slaves born in the New World to participate in outright revolts. Not only did many Africans have combat experience prior to enslavement, but they also had fewer family and community ties that might inhibit violent insurrection.

Like other slave societies, the South did not produce urban centers on a scale equal with those in the North. Virginia's largest city, Richmond, had a population of just 15,274 in 1850. That same year, Wilmington, North Carolina's largest city, had just 7,264 inhabitants. Southern cities were small because they failed to develop diversified economies. Unlike the cities of the North, southern cities rarely became centers of commerce, finance, or processing and manufacturing and southern ports rarely engaged in international trade.

By northern standards, the South's transportation network was primitive. Traveling the 1,460 miles from Baltimore to New Orleans in 1850 meant riding five different railroads, two stage coaches, and two steamboats. Its educational system also lagged far behind the North's. In 1850, 20 percent of adult white southerners could not read or write, compared to a national figure of 8 percent.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that slavery was doomed for economic reasons. Slavery was adaptable to a variety of occupations, ranging from agriculture and mining to factory work. During the decades before the Civil War, slave grown cotton accounted for over half the value of all United States exports, and provided virtually all the cotton used in the northern textile industry and 70 percent of the cotton used in British mills.

Nevertheless, the South's political leaders had good reason for concern. Within the South, slave ownership was becoming concentrated into a smaller number of hands. The proportion of southern families owning slaves declined from 36 percent in 1830 to 25 percent in 1860. At the same time, slavery was sharply declining in the upper South. Between 1830 and 1860, the proportion of slaves in Missouri's population fell from 18 to 10 percent; in Kentucky, from 24 to 19 percent; in Maryland, from 23 to 13 percent. By the middle of the 19th century, slavery was becoming an exception in the New World, confined to Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, a number of small Dutch colonies, and the American South. But the most important threat to slavery came from abolitionists, who denounced slavery as immoral.

As late as 1750, no church condemned slave ownership or slave trading. Britain, Denmark, France, Holland, Portugal, and Spain all openly participated in the slave trade. Beginning with the Quakers in the late 1750s, however, organized opposition to slavery quickly grew. In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance barred slavery from the territories north of the Ohio River; by 1804, the nine states north of Delaware had freed slaves or adopted gradual emancipation plans. In Haiti in 1791, nearly a half million slaves emancipated themselves by insurrection and revolutionary struggle. In 1807, Britain and the United States outlawed the African slave trade.

The wars of national liberation in Spanish America ended slavery in Spain's mainland New World Empire. In 1821, the region that now includes Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela adopted a gradual emancipation plan. Two years later, Chile agreed to emancipate its slaves. In 1829, Mexico abolished slavery.

In 1833, Britain emancipated 780,000 slaves, paying 20 million pounds sterling compensation to their owners. In 1848, Denmark and France freed slaves in their colonial empires. Slavery survived in Surinam and other Dutch New World colonies until 1863 and in the United States in 1865. The last

New World slaves were emancipated in Cuba in 1886 and in Brazil in 1888.

Within the span of a century and a half, slavery came to be seen as a violation of Christian morality and the natural, inalienable rights of man. The main impetus behind antislavery came from religion. New religious and humanitarian values contributed to a view of slavery as "the sum of all villainies," a satanic institution that gave rise to every imaginable sin: violence, despotism, racial prejudice, and sexual corruption.

Initially, many opponents of slavery supported "colonization"--the deportation of black Americans to Africa, the Caribbean, or Central America. But by the late 1820s, it was obvious that colonization was a wholly impractical solution to the problem of slavery. Each year the nation's slave population rose by 50,000, but in 1830, the American Colonization Society persuaded just 259 free blacks to migrate to Liberia, bringing the total number of blacks colonized in Africa to just 1,400.

African Americans were the first to denounce colonization as an effort to cleanse the United States of its black population. In 1829, a 25-year-old white Bostonian named William Lloyd Garrison demanded "immediate emancipation" of slaves without compensation to their owners. Within six years, 200 antislavery societies had sprouted up in the North, and had mounted a massive propaganda campaign against slavery.

The growth of militant abolitionism provoked a harsh public reaction. Mobs led by "gentlemen of property and standing" attacked the homes and businesses of abolitionist merchants, destroyed abolitionist printing presses, attacked black neighborhoods, and murdered the Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy, the editor of an abolitionist newspaper.

In the face of vicious attacks, the antislavery movement divided over questions of strategy and tactics. Radicals, led by Garrison, began to attack all forms of inequality and violence in American society, withdrew from churches that condoned slavery, demanded equal rights for women, and called for voluntary dissolution of the Union. Other abolitionists turned to politics as the most promising way to end slavery, helping to form the Liberty Party in 1840, the Free Soil Party in 1848, and the Republican Party in 1854.

By the late 1850s, a growing number of northerners were convinced that slavery posed an intolerable threat to free labor and civil liberties. Many believed that an aggressive Slave Power had seized control of the federal government, incited revolution in Texas and war with Mexico, and was engaged in a systematic plan to extend slavery into the western territories. John Brown's raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October 1859 produced shock waves throughout the South, producing fears of slave revolt and race war. When Abraham Lincoln was elected in 1860, many white southerners were convinced that this represented the triumph of abolitionism in the North and thought they had no choice but to secede from the Union. The new president, however, was passionately committed to the preservation of the union, and peaceful secession proved to be impossible.