

Slavery in Colonial America  
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North Carolina

Many cultures practiced some version of the institution of slavery in the ancient and modern world, most commonly involving enemy captives or prisoners of war. Slavery and forced labor began in colonial America almost as soon as the English arrived and established a permanent settlement at Jamestown in 1607. English colonists exploited Virginia Indians—especially Indian children—for much of the first half of the 17th century. Some colonists largely ignored Virginia laws prohibiting the enslavement of Indian children, which the Virginia Assembly passed in the 1650s and again in 1670.

While colonists continued to enslave Virginia Indians, the first unfree Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619. In that year, colonist John Rolfe wrote in late August a 160-ton man-of-war, the *White Lion*, brought “20 and odd Negroes” to Point Comfort (present-day Hampton, Virginia). Days later in September, two or three more Africans disembarked from the ship *Treasurer*.

The 1620 census of Virginia records 32 Africans living in Virginia, 17 women and 15 men, listed as “in service of the English” and “in ye service of several[sic] planters.” The legal status of these first Africans in Virginia is unclear—whether the English settlers in Virginia intended to enslave the Africans for life, or whether they served for a period of years before gaining their freedom (a system of indentured servitude) is unknown, though some of these early Africans did later become free.

As Europeans continued to settle the North American colonies throughout the 17th century, the legal codification of race-based slavery also continued to grow. Though many historians agree that slavery and indentured servitude coexisted in the early part of the century (with many Europeans arriving in the colonies under indentures), colonies increasingly established laws limiting the rights of Africans and African-Americans and solidifying the institution of slavery upon the basis of race and heredity. In New England, colonists continued the practice of enslaving indigenous Indians, particularly those captured during warfare, while also legally justifying the enslavement of African and African Americans. Massachusetts is widely regarded as passing the first law to legalize slavery in 1641.

The “triangle trade” largely defines the economics of slavery in the colonial era. In this cyclical system, slave traders imported enslaved Africans to North American colonies. Colonists in turn exported raw goods like lumber, tobacco, and sugar to Great Britain, where those materials were transformed into the finished, luxury goods like rum and textiles that merchants sold or traded along the African coast for enslaved Africans to be sent to North American colonies. Slave traders violently captured Africans and loaded them onto slave ships, where for months these individuals endured the “Middle Passage”—the crossing of the Atlantic from Africa to the North American colonies or West Indies. Many Africans did not survive the journey.

The 1660s was a watershed decade for slavery in colonial America. It is important to remember that during the colonial period, each colony enacted and enforced laws regarding slavery individually. Virginia's 1662 law establishing that children born to an enslaved mother would also be enslaved further codified race-based and hereditary enslavement in that colony. Maryland legalized slavery in 1663; New York and New Jersey followed in 1664. In addition, that year Maryland, New York, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia passed laws legalizing life-long servitude. Colonies also adopted laws prohibiting non-whites from owning firearms, and established laws that negated a person's conversion to Christianity from affecting their status as a slave.

Many factors contributed to the growth of slavery and the slave trade from the end of the 17th-century through the 18th century. The history and growth of slavery in colonial America was tied to the rise of land cultivation, and particularly the boom in the production of tobacco (in Virginia and Maryland) and rice (in the Carolinas). The Royal African Company's expansion in 1672 resulted in a growing surge of the transport of Africans to the colonies. When the RAC lost its monopoly in 1696, trade in captive Africans and their transport to the colonies increased further. As the numbers of enslaved Africans rose in the colonies, the practice of enslaving indigenous Indians decreased, and colonial officials further restricted the rights and movements of enslaved Africans and African Americans, including making it harder—even illegal—for slaves to be emancipated.

Enslaved people were regarded and treated as property with little to no rights. In many colonies, enslaved people could not testify in a court of law, own guns, gather in large groups, or go out at night. Especially on southern farms, enslaved people were expected to work from sunup to sundown, though they may have been given Sundays off to tend to their own small gardens, repair clothing, or tend to other needs that might supplement their meager allotments of clothing and food. As property, slaves were frequently bought and sold, and sometimes family groups were divided across plantations or even colonies, though some slave owners sought to keep families together as a safeguard against slaves running away. Slaves of small households often lived in the kitchen or a small outbuilding, while slaves on larger plantations often lived together in a quarter or a group of quarters with an overseer. Religion, storytelling, music, and dancing were important parts of an enslaved person's life, and could help share and preserve African cultural traditions across generations. Increasingly in the 18th century, slaves responded to the Great Awakening and began converting to Christianity, worshiping both alone and together with whites in Baptist and Methodist congregations.

An enslaved person's experience of slavery was as unique as the individual themselves. Slavery differed greatly from the 17th to 18th centuries, in part because of the various slave laws enacted by colonial authorities as time progressed. Further, the geographic location could help to define an enslaved person's experience of slavery. In the South, many enslaved individuals found themselves working primarily in agricultural labor, such as in tobacco fields, while others (including women and children) worked as grooms, maids, cooks, or other domestic servants to wealthy plantation owners. In the North, as well as in urban city centers in the South,

enslaved individuals may have been skilled tradesmen, worked on the eastern seaboard's many wharves and ports, or worked on the smaller farms of middling landowners.

In the northern colonies, slave-owning households may have only owned two or three slaves, while the enslaved population accounted for less than 5% of the total population of New England (though in larger cities like Newport, Rhode Island, slaves accounted for closer to 20% of the population of the city). In the mid-Atlantic colonies like Virginia, enslaved people made up closer to 50% of the population by the mid-18th century. This number increased to roughly 60% in colonies like South Carolina, where much of the enslaved population lived and worked on vast plantations together with 50, 100, or more slaves.

As slavery expanded and the numbers of enslaved men, women, and children increased in the colonies, so too did anxieties about possible slave rebellions, uprisings, and insurrections. In New York in 1741, a series of suspicious fires fanned the flames of unrest between the colony's white, Black, free, and unfree populations. Anxious whites concluded, with little evidence, that enslaved men acted in concert to set fires in the city in a conspiratorial act of rebellion. Thirty enslaved men were executed, while 70 more were sent out of New York.

By 1775, enslaved people accounted for 20% of the population of the colonies, with over half living in the south. On the eve of the Revolution, aided by the patriot rhetoric of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, enslaved and free African Americans worked to further the growing abolition movement and petitioned governments for gradual cessation of slavery. Further, enticed by promises of freedom in exchange for their service, enslaved African Americans took advantage of opportunities to serve the British army. Thousands of formerly enslaved men, women, and children left the new United States with the British in 1783, looking towards new lives of freedom in Nova Scotia and other British colonies.

The American Revolution offered many enslaved African Americans opportunities to pursue freedom that did not exist previously. The Revolution also influenced public opinion of slavery—in 1780 Pennsylvania became the first major slave-holding state to begin the process of ending slavery. Though some other new states followed suit, the Revolution failed to end the institution of slavery in America. Instead, the economy's reliance on slavery proved to be a defining element in the creation of the new United States government.

## Questions

1. How were people taken into slavery in ancient civilizations?
2. Who were typically enslaved in the early years of Virginia?
3. When did the first Africans arrive in America?
4. What was indentured servitude? How did colonial laws make the status of African slaves much more harsh than servants?
5. What was the triangle trade? How was slavery involved in it?
6. What factors contributed to the growth of the slave trade through the 18th Century?
7. How were the experiences of slaves different between the North and the South?

8. Why did slaves make up such a large percentage of the population in the South?
9. How did the Revolution help many slaves pursue freedom?