



Big Idea 3

Slavery in American Life

By the time of the American Revolution, slavery was a well-defined and well-ingrained feature of American life. It had been a feature of British colonial life in America for over a century and part of the European — and African — experience for several more. It was also one of many forms of **hierarchy** that British North Americans were familiar with. Many Christians thought they were better than non-Christians, many Protestants believed Catholicism was wrong, and many wealthy people believed — and acted as though — they had more political, social, and economic rights than poor people. Most British North Americans could agree on one thing however: the King sat at the top of the hierarchy and enslaved people of African descent sat at the bottom.

Beginnings

Unfree labor had been a part of the colonial economy since the very beginning. In the 1700s, the British Empire operated under a system of mercantilism, where its colonies — mainland American, Caribbean, African, and Indian — produced raw goods and shipped them off to Great Britain. There, they were turned into refined products that were in turn sold throughout the empire, including back to the colonies, for a profit. In order for this system to be most profitable for British merchants and colonists, they needed cheap laborers to keep their costs low.

Indentured servitude provided one such source of labor, one that provided benefits for both the servants and their masters. In return for their labor, servants received free passage to the colonies, and the promise of land, money, and/or clothing once their term was over. They might also be able to develop specialized skills, like printing, smithing, or shoemaking. Masters received free labor for a specific amount of time, and they created laws that allowed them to extend that time for a variety of reasons. Some indentured servants had no choice but to serve in that role — they were sentenced to indentured servitude as punishment for a crime or for unpaid debts. But once indentured servants reached the end of their contract — however they had gotten into it — masters needed to find more labor. And the flow of indentured servants was uneven over time; if the Empire needed soldiers for a war, fewer people were available to enter into contracts. If enslaved people revolted, fear might cause the **importation** of slaves to decrease and the number of indentured servants to rise.

Slave labor in the British colonies developed alongside indentured servitude. The earliest people of African descent to what would become the British North American colonies arrived in 1526. They were enslaved laborers traveling as part of a Spanish expedition to form a colony somewhere along the coast of Georgia or South Carolina — historians disagree on the exact location. The colony, called San Miguel de Gualdape, failed in less than a year, however, after an **epidemic** and a rebellion. The Spanish left and the people of African descent either traveled with them or were left behind and blended into a local Native American community. Later, in the 1560s, enslaved Africans would again be brought to mainland North America by the Spanish, performing labor in the colony of St. Augustine, in Florida.

The earliest Africans to arrive in an established English colony came in 1619. Likely from the West Central African kingdom of Ndongo, in Angola, they had been captives on a Portuguese ship that was intercepted by British and Dutch privateers. These “twenty and odd” individuals were traded for food and supplies when their ship landed at Point Comfort, near present-day Hampton, Virginia. Historians disagree, however, on whether these men and women were enslaved. It seems many worked for a specified term and were eventually living as free people within the colony. One early arrival is recorded as eventually owning an enslaved person himself. Relationships and rights in the early years were somewhat flexible. However, in the mid-to-late 1600s, Virginians began passing laws that would mark Africans as enslaved or as “servants for life.”

Slavery and the Law

In 1640, an African servant named John Punch attempted to run away from his master alongside two European indentured servants. The two European servants had their indentures extended by a year from their original term’s end. Punch, however, was sentenced to serve “for the time of his natural life.” Many historians view this as the first instance of nationality being used to distinguish between punishments for a crime, and as the first that lifelong servitude was used as punishment for a crime, in an English colony in North America. However, British sailors, colonists, and merchants were already used to thinking about and treating Africans as objects and had been doing so since the mid-1500s. This was in part based on their views of the peoples of Africa themselves, including the powerful African traders who sold enslaved people to them. They saw them as “bestly” and “brutish.” But it was also based on their understanding that non-Christians were deserving of enslavement, because they were “infidels,” “heathenish,” and “without God.”

Using these as rationales, English colonists began to put laws in place to make newly arrived Africans and their descendants as slaves for life. In 1662, for example, the Virginia Assembly passed a law that said a child’s status of freedom would be determined by that of its mother. In fact, two wills and deeds in the 1650s show African women and their future, unborn children being given by European colonists to one another. In 1667, a Virginia law was passed declaring that an enslaved person could not become free through baptism into Christianity. This removed their concerns about enslaving Christians at the same time that they removed a potential path to freedom. In 1669, Virginia passed a law stating that if a slaveowner killed his enslaved person while disciplining him or her, the owner should not be punished because it could not be concluded that he had killed his own property on purpose.

Through the remainder of the 1600s and through the 1700s, laws continued to be passed in colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia that prevented people of African descent from becoming free, limited their rights as both enslaved and free people, and allowed slaveowners and the enslaving economy to profit freely off of their labor. People of African descent were prohibited from keeping weapons. Enslaved people were considered property, and were prohibited from gathering in large groups. Free people of African descent were not permitted to vote or pass property on to their children. Manumission — the freeing of individual enslaved people — was outlawed. And people of African descent could not testify against whites in court. These laws did not all appear at once. Rather, they developed as the need for free labor increased in the colonies and alongside ideas about racial superiority and inferiority. The law, economic needs, and ideas about race each supported one another.

Slavery and the Economy

As the number of indentured servants decreased in the 1660s and into the 1700s, the desire for enslaved laborers rose dramatically. Colonists attempted to enslave Native Americans, but diseases brought by Europeans sharply reduced their numbers, and many others moved further west to avoid or limit contact. Colonists turned to Africans to meet their needs. In Virginia and Maryland, tobacco and wheat production required the work of many hands. Along the southeastern coastline, rice was difficult but profitable. Growers benefitted from the knowledge of Africans who brought rice cultivation skills with them across the ocean. Further inland in South Carolina, indigo was labor intensive and needed many bodies. The goods these regions produced, and the wealth that came from them, were almost entirely dependent upon the work of enslaved men, women, and children.

Other regions were equally involved in maintaining and benefitting from slavery. Farming regions of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York produced the raw goods that fed the plantations down south. Southern plantations were so focused on the production of their cash crops that they couldn't or wouldn't produce the food and materials to sustain themselves. New England supplied fish for this effort and built the ships that transported enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and South, Central, and North America; that carried sugar cane, molasses, and rum; and that transported the sailors and their trade goods to the African coastline to start the process anew. Enslaved people sailed on whaling ships from Rhode Island, worked as farm laborers and domestic servants in Delaware, and assisted in every type of business across the colonies.

The success of the British North American colonies in the 1700s was based upon the labor of enslaved men, women, and children of African descent. Few questioned it at all. Enslaved people could be **inherited**, acquired through marriage, purchased by scramble, by contract, or at auction. They could be made to perform hard labor in fields or in households and be dressed in fancy clothes to display their owner's wealth and status. But this normalcy did not mean that enslaved Africans and people of African descent accepted their status. Changes in European thought in the 1600s and 1700s suggested that their acceptance of the practice of slavery might change as well.