Black People in Colonial North America

Who were the peoples of colonial North America?

How did black servitude develop in the Chesapeake?

What were the characteristics of plantation slavery from 1700 to 1750?

How did the experience of African Americans under French and Spanish rule in North America compare to that in the British colonies?

How did slavery affect black women in colonial America?

How did African Americans resist slavery?

This eighteenth-century woodcut shows enslaved black men, women, and children engaged in the steps involved in the curing of tobacco.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress
African Americans lived in North America for nearly three centuries before the United States gained independence from Great Britain in 1783. During that long time period, most of them were slaves in British, French, and Spanish colonies. As a result, they left scant written testimony about their lives. Their history, therefore, must be learned through archaeology and the writings of the white settlers who enslaved and oppressed them.

The passage that begins this chapter is an excellent example of what we can learn about African-American history by reading between the lines in the official publications of the colonial governments. As historian Winthrop D. Jordan points out, the founders of South Carolina in 1696 borrowed much of this section of the colony’s law code from the British colony of Barbados in the Caribbean.

The code indicates that the British Carolinians believed they needed the labor of enslaved Africans for their colony to prosper. It also shows that the colonial British feared Africans and their African-American descendants. This ambivalence among white Americans concerning African Americans shaped life in colonial South Carolina and in other British colonies in North America. The same ambivalence persisted in the minds of white southerners into the twentieth century. The dichotomy of white economic dependence on black people and fear of black revolt was a central fact of American history and provided a rationale for racial oppression.

The opening passage also reveals the willingness of British and other European settlers in North America to brand Africans and their American descendants as “barbarous, wild, [and] savage.” Although real cultural differences underlay such negative perceptions, white people used them to justify oppressing black people. Unlike white people, black people by the 1640s could be enslaved for life. Black people did not enjoy the same legal protection as white people and were punished more harshly.

This chapter describes the history of African-American life in colonial North America from the early sixteenth century to the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. It briefly covers the black experience in Spanish Florida, in New Spain’s borderlands in the Southwest, and in French Louisiana but concentrates on the British colonies that stretched along the eastern coast of the continent. During the seventeenth century, the plantation system that became a central part of black life in
America for nearly two centuries took shape in the Chesapeake tobacco country and in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia. Unfree labor, which in the Chesapeake had originally involved both white and black people, solidified into a system of slavery based on race. Although the plantation system did not develop in Britain’s northern colonies, race-based slavery existed in them as well. African Americans responded to these conditions by interacting with other groups, preserving parts of their African culture, seeking strength through religion, and resisting and rebelling against enslavement.

The Peoples of North America

In the North American colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, African immigrants gave birth to a new African-American people. Born in North America and forever separated from their ancestral homeland, they preserved a surprisingly large core of their African cultural heritage. Meanwhile, a new natural environment and contacts with people of American Indian and European descent helped African Americans shape a way of life within the circumstances that slavery forced on them. To understand the early history of African Americans, we must first briefly discuss the other peoples of colonial North America.

AMERICANS INDIANS

Historians and anthropologists group the original inhabitants of North America together as American Indians. (The terms Amerinds and Native Americans are also used, with the latter term including Inuits [Eskimos].) But when the British began to colonize the Atlantic coastal portion of this huge region during the early seventeenth century, the indigenous peoples who lived there had no such all-inclusive name. They spoke many different languages, lived in diverse environments, and considered themselves distinct from one another. Like other Indian peoples of the Western Hemisphere, they descended from Asians who, at least 12,000 years ago, had migrated eastward by coastal waterways and across a land bridge connecting Siberia and Alaska. Europeans called them Indians as a result of Christopher Columbus’s mistaken assumption in 1492 that he had landed on islands near the “Indies,” by which he meant near Southeast Asia.

In Mexico, Central America, and Peru, American Indian peoples developed complex, densely populated civilizations with hereditary monarchies, formal religions, armies, and social classes. Cultural developments in Mexico and the northward spread of the cultivation of maize (corn) influenced the indigenous peoples of what is today the United States. In the Southwest, the Anasazi and later Pueblo peoples developed farming communities. Beginning around 900 CE, they produced pottery, studied astronomy, built large adobe towns, and struggled against a drying climate. Farther east in what is known as the Woodlands region, the Adena culture flourished in the Ohio River valley as early as 1000 BCE and attained the social organization required to construct large burial mounds. Between the tenth and fourteenth centuries CE, what is known as the Mississippian culture established a civilization, marked by extensive trade routes, division of labor, and urban centers. The largest such center was Cahokia—located near modern St. Louis, Missouri—which at its peak had a population of about 30,000.

Climatic change and warfare destroyed the Mississippian culture during the fourteenth century, and only remnants of it existed when Europeans and Africans arrived in North America. By that time, a diverse variety of American Indian cultures existed in what is today the eastern portion of the United States. People residing in towns and villages, supplementing their agricultural economies with fishing and hunting. They held land communally, generally allowed women a voice in ruling councils, and—although warlike—regarded battle as an opportunity for young men to prove their bravery rather than as a means of conquest. Gravely weakened by diseases that settlers unwittingly brought from Europe, the woodlands Indians of North America’s coastal regions were ineffective in resisting British settlers during the seventeenth century. Particularly in the Southeast, the British developed an extensive trade in Indian slaves.

Because American Indians were experts at living harmoniously with the natural resources of North America, they influenced the way people of African and European descent came to live there as well. Indian crops, such as corn, pumpkins, beans, and squash, became staples of the newcomers’ diets. On the continent’s southeastern coast, British cultivation of tobacco, another Indian crop, secured the economic survival of the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland and led directly to the enslavement of Africans in them. The Indian canoe became a means of river transportation for black and white people, and Indian moccasins became common footwear for everyone.

The relationships between black people and American Indians during colonial times were complex. Although Indian nations often provided refuge to escaping black slaves, Indians sometimes became slaveholders and on occasion helped crush black revolts. Some black men assisted in the Indian slave trade...
and sometimes helped defend European colonists against Indian attacks. Nevertheless, people of African and Indian descent frequently found themselves in similarly oppressive circumstances in Britain’s American colonies. Although white officials attempted to keep them apart, social and sexual contacts between the two groups were frequent. Some interracial black-Indian settlements—and a few black-Indian-white settlements—have persisted to the present.

THE SPANISH EMPIRE
Following Christopher Columbus’s voyage in 1492, the Spanish rapidly built a colonial empire in the Americas. Mining of gold and silver, as well as the production of sugar, tobacco, and leather goods, provided a firm economic foundation. But few Spaniards came to the Western Hemisphere. Consequently, Spain’s colonial economy rested first on the forced labor of the Indian population and then increasingly on enslaved Africans when the Indian population declined from disease and overwork. Overseers in the mines and fields often brutally worked Africans and Indians to death. But because the Spanish were few, some of the African and Indians who survived were able to gain freedom and become tradesmen, small landholders, and militiamen. Often they were of mixed race and identified with their former masters rather than with the oppressed people beneath them in society. African, Indian, and Spanish customs intermingled in what became a multicultural colonial society. Its center was in the West Indian islands of Cuba and Santo Domingo, Mexico, and northern South America. On its northern periphery were lands that are now part of the United States: Florida, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California.

Africans came early to these borderlands. In 1526 Luis Vasquez de Ayllon brought one hundred African slaves with him from Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in an attempt to establish a Spanish colony near what is now Georgetown, South Carolina. A decade later, slaves who were either African or of African descent accompanied Hernando de Soto on a Spanish expedition from Florida to the Mississippi River. In 1565 Africans helped construct the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine in Florida, which is now the oldest city in the continental United States. In 1528 a Spanish expedition that departed Cuba to search for gold in western Florida and the Gulf Coast included a slave of African descent named Esteban. Following a shipwreck, Esteban reached the coast of Texas. After a brief captivity among the local Indians, he and other survivors made their way south to Mexico City.

THE BRITISH AND JAMESTOWN
While the powerful Spanish empire colonized warm, populous, and wealthy regions of the Americas, the relatively less powerful British acquired lands that were cooler, less populous, and deficient in easily acquired wealth. The British, like the Africans and the American Indians, were not a single nation. The British Isles—consisting principally of Britain and Ireland and located off the northwest coast of Europe—were the homeland of the English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish. By the seventeenth century, the English dominated the other ethnic groups. But at that time, the Kingdom of England was, compared to Spain, a poor country notable mainly for producing wool.

England’s claim to the east coast of North America rested on the voyage of John Cabot, who sailed in 1497, just five years after Columbus’s first westward voyage. But, unlike the Spanish who rapidly created an empire in the Americas, the English were slow to establish themselves in the region Cabot had reached. This was partly due to the harsher North American climate, with
winters much colder than in England. In addition, the English monarchy was too poor to finance colonizing expeditions, and social turmoil associated with the Protestant Reformation absorbed its energies.

Attempts failed in the 1580s to colonize Newfoundland, a large island off the east coast of what is today Canada, and Roanoke Island, a small island off the coast of what is today North Carolina. It took the English naval victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 and money raised by joint-stock companies to produce at Jamestown in 1607 the first permanent British colony in North America. This settlement, established by the Virginia Company of London, was located in the Chesapeake region, which the British called Virginia—after Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), the so-called Virgin Queen of England. The company hoped to make a profit at Jamestown by finding gold, trading with Indians, cutting lumber, or raising crops, such as rice, sugar, or silk, that could not be produced in Britain.

None of these schemes was economically viable. There was no gold, and the climate was unsuitable for rice, sugar, and silk. Because of disease, hostility with the Indians, and especially economic failure, the settlement barely survived into the 1620s. By then, however, English settler John Rolfe’s experiments, begun in 1612 to cultivate a mild strain of tobacco that could be grown on the North American mainland, began to pay off. Tobacco was in great demand in Europe, where smoking was becoming popular. Soon growing tobacco became the economic mainstay of Virginia and the neighboring colony of Maryland.

Sowing, cultivating, harvesting, and curing tobacco required considerable labor. Yet colonists in the Chesapeake could not follow the Spanish example of enslaving Indians to produce the crop. Disease had reduced the local Indian population, and those who survived eluded British conquest by retreating west.

Unlike the West Indian sugar planters, however, the North American tobacco planters did not immediately turn to Africa for laborers. British advocates of colonizing North America had always promoted it as a solution to unemployment, poverty, and crime in England. The idea was to send England’s undesirables to America, where they could provide the cheap labor tobacco planters needed. Consequently, until 1700, white labor produced most of the tobacco in the Chesapeake colonies.

AFRICANS ARRIVE IN THE CHESAPEAKE

By early 1619, there were, nevertheless, 32 people of African descent—15 men and 17 women—living at Jamestown. Nothing is known about when they arrived or from where they came. They were all “in the service of severall planters.” The following August a Dutch warship, carrying 17 African men and three African women, moored at Hampton Roads at the mouth of the James River. Historians long believed these were the first black people in British North America. They were part of a group of over 300 who had been taken from Angola by a Portuguese slaver that had set sail for the port of Vera Cruz in New Spain (Mexico). The Dutch warship, with the help of an English ship, had attacked the slaver, taken most of its human cargo, and brought these 20 Angolans to Jamestown. The Dutch captain traded them to local officials for provisions.

The Angolans became servants to Jamestown’s officials and favored planters. For two reasons, the colony’s inhabitants regarded both the new arrivals and those black people who had been in Jamestown earlier to be unfree but not slaves. First, unlike the Portuguese and the Spanish, the English had no law for slavery. Second, at least those Angolans who bore such names as Pedro, Isabella, Antoney, and Angelo were Christians, and—according to English custom and morality in 1619—Christians could not be enslaved. So, once these individuals worked off their purchase price, they regained their freedom. In 1623, Antoney and Isabella married. The next year they became parents of William, whom their master had baptized in the local Church of England. William may have been the first black person born in English America. He was almost certainly born free.

During the following years, people of African descent remained a small minority in the expanding Virginia colony. A 1625 census reported only 23 black people living in the colony, compared with a combined total of 1,275 white people and Indians. This suggests that many of the first black inhabitants had either died or moved away. By 1649 the total Virginia population of about 18,500 included only 300 black people. The English, following the Spanish example, called them “negroes.” (Negro means black in Spanish.) In neighboring Maryland, which was established as a haven in 1632 for persecuted English Catholics, the black population also remained small. In 1658 people of African descent accounted for only 3 percent of Maryland’s population.

Black Servitude in the Chesapeake

As these statistics suggest, during the early years of the Chesapeake colonies, black people represented a small part of a labor force composed mainly of white
people. From the 1620s to the 1670s, black and white people worked in the tobacco fields together, lived together, and slept together (and also did these things with American Indians). They were all unfree indentured servants.

Indentured servitude had existed in Europe for centuries. In England, parents indentured—or, in other words, apprenticed—their children to “masters,” who then controlled their lives and had the right to their labor for a set number of years. In return, the masters supported the children and taught them a trade or profession. Unrestrained by modern notions of human equality and democracy, masters could exercise brutal authority over those bound to them.

As the demand for labor to produce tobacco in the Chesapeake expanded, indentured servitude came to include adults who sold their freedom for two to seven years in return for the cost of their voyage to North America. Instead of training in a profession, the servants could improve their economic standing by remaining as free persons in America after completing their period of servitude.

When Africans first arrived in Virginia and Maryland, they entered into similar contracts, agreeing to work for their masters until the proceeds of their labor recouped the cost of their purchase. Indentured servitude could be harsh in the tobacco colonies because masters sought to get as much labor as they could from their servants before the indenture ended. Most indentured servants died from overwork or disease before regaining their freedom. But those who survived, black people as well as white people, could expect eventually to leave their masters and seek their fortunes as free persons.

The foremost example in early Virginia of a black man who emerged from servitude to become a tobacco planter himself is Anthony Johnson. (See the Profile.) But Johnson was not the only person of African descent who became a free property owner during the first half of the seventeenth century. Here and there, black men seemed to enjoy a status similar to their white counterparts. Free black men in the Chesapeake participated fully in the commercial and legal life of the colonies. They owned land, farmed, lent money, sued in the courts, served as jurors and minor officials, and at times voted.

This suggests that before the 1670s the English in the Chesapeake did not draw a strict line between white freedom and black slavery. Yet, since the early 1600s, the ruling elite had treated black servants differently than white servants. Over the decades, the region’s British population gradually came to assume that persons of African descent were inalterably alien. This sentiment did not become universal among the white poor during the colonial period. But it was a foundation for what historian Winthrop D. Jordan calls the “unthinking decision” among the British in the Chesapeake to establish chattel slavery. In this form of slavery, Africans and people of African descent became their master’s private property on a level with livestock.

**RACE AND THE ORIGINS OF BLACK SLAVERY**

Between 1640 and 1700, the British tobacco-producing colonies stretching from Delaware to northern Carolina underwent a social and demographic revolution. An economy once based primarily on the labor of white indentured servants became an economy based on the labor of black slaves. In Virginia, for example, the slave population in 1671 was less than 5 percent of the colony’s total non-Indian population. White indentured servants outnumbered black slaves by three to one. By 1700, however, slaves constituted at least 20 percent of Virginia’s population. Probably most agricultural laborers were slaves.

Although historians debate how this extraordinary change occurred, several interrelated factors brought it about. Some of these factors are easily understood. Others are more complicated and profound because they involve basic assumptions about the American nation.

Several economic and demographic developments led to the mass enslavement of people of African descent in the tobacco colonies. First, during the second quarter of the seventeenth century, Britain’s Caribbean sugar colonies set a precedent for enslaving Africans. Second, fewer poor white people came to the tobacco colonies as they found better opportunities for themselves in other regions of British North America. Third, as Britain gained increased control over the Atlantic slave trade, African slaves became less costly.

These changing circumstances provide the context for the beginnings of black slavery as a major phenomenon in British North America. Yet race and class were crucial in shaping the character of slavery in the British mainland colonies. From the first arrival of Africans in the Chesapeake, those English who exercised authority made decisions that qualified the apparent social mobility the Africans enjoyed. The English had historically distinguished between how they treated each other and how they treated those who were physically and culturally different from them. Such discrimination had been the basis of English colonial policies toward the Irish—whom England had been trying to conquer for centuries—and the American Indians. Because the English considered Africans even more different from themselves than either the Irish or the Indians, they assumed from the beginning that Africans were generally inferior.
Therefore, although black and white servants residing in the Chesapeake during the early seventeenth century had much in common, their masters made distinctions between them based on race. The few women of African descent who arrived in the Chesapeake during those years worked in the tobacco fields with the male servants, while most white women performed domestic duties. Also, unlike white servants, black servants usually did not have surnames, and early census reports listed them separately from white people. By the 1640s, black people could not bear arms, and local Anglican priests (although not those in England) maintained that persons of African descent could not become Christians. Although sexual contacts among blacks, whites, and Indians were common, colonial authorities soon discouraged them. In 1662 Virginia’s House of Burgesses (the colony’s legislature) declared that “any Christian [white person]” who committed “Fornication with a negro man or woman, lie or shee soe offending” would pay double the fine set for committing the same offense with a white person.

These distinctions suggest that the status of black servants had never been the same as that of white servants. But only starting in the 1640s do records indicate a predilection toward making black people slaves rather than servants. During that decade, courts in Virginia and Maryland began to reflect an assumption that it was permissible for persons of African descent to serve their master for life rather than for a set term. By then black men, women, and children often sold for higher prices than their white counterparts on the explicit provision that black people would serve “for their Life tyme,” or “for ever.”

THE EMERGENCE OF CHATTLE SLAVERY

Legal documents and statute books reveal that, during the 1660s, other aspects of chattel slavery emerged in the Chesapeake colonies. Bills of sale began to stipulate that the children of black female servants would also be servants for life. In 1662 the House of Burgesses decreed that a child’s condition—free or unfree—followed that of the mother. This ran counter to English common law, which assumed that a child’s status derived from the father. The change permitted masters to exploit their black female servants sexually without having to acknowledge the children who might result from such contacts. Just as significant, by the mid-1660s statutes in the Chesapeake colonies assumed servitude to be the natural condition of black people.

With these laws, slavery in British North America emerged in the form that it retained until the American Civil War: a racially defined system of perpetual involuntary servitude that compelled almost all black people to work as agricultural laborers. Slave codes enacted between 1660 and 1710 further defined American slavery as a system that sought as much to control persons of African descent as to exploit their labor. Slaves could not testify against white people in court, own property, leave their master’s estate without a pass, congregate in groups larger than three or four, enter into contracts, or marry, nor, of course, could they bear arms. Profession of Christianity no longer protected a black person from enslavement, nor was conversion a cause for manumission. In 1669 the House of Burgesses exempted from felony charges masters who killed a slave while administering punishment.

By 1700, just as the slave system began to expand in the southern colonies, enslaved Africans and African Americans had been reduced legally to the status of domestic animals except that, unlike animals (or masters who abused slaves), the law held slaves to be strictly accountable for their transgressions.

BACON’S REBELLION AND AMERICAN SLAVERY

The series of events that led to the enslavement of black people in the Chesapeake tobacco colonies preceded their emergence as the great majority of laborers in those colonies. The dwindling supply of white indentured servants, the growing availability of Africans, and preexisting white racial biases affected this transformation. But the key event in bringing it about was the rebellion led by Nathaniel Bacon in 1676.

Bacon was an English aristocrat who had recently migrated to Virginia. The immediate cause of his rebellion was a disagreement between him and the colony’s royal governor William Berkeley over Indian policy. Bacon’s followers were mainly white indentured servants and former indentured servants who resented the control the tobacco-planting elite exercised over the colony’s resources and government. That Bacon also appealed to black slaves to join his rebellion indicates that poor white and black people still had a chance to unite against the master class.

Before such a class-based, biracial alliance could be realized, Bacon died of dysentery, and his rebellion collapsed. But the uprising convinced the colony’s elite that continuing to rely on white agricultural laborers, who could become free and get guns, was dangerous. By switching from indentured white servants to an enslaved black labor force that would never become free or control firearms, the planters hoped to avoid class conflict among white people. Increasingly
thereafter, white Americans perceived that both their freedom from class conflict and their prosperity rested on denying freedom to black Americans.

Plantation Slavery, 1700–1750

The reliance of Chesapeake planters on slavery to meet their labor needs was the result of racial prejudice, the declining availability of white indentured servants, the increasing availability of Africans, and fear of white class conflict. When, following the shift from indentured white to enslaved black labor, the demand for tobacco in Europe increased sharply, the newly dominant slave labor system expanded rapidly.

TOBACCO COLONIES

Between 1700 and 1770, some 80,000 Africans arrived in the tobacco colonies, and even more African Americans were born into slavery there (see Figure 3–1). Tobacco planting spread from Virginia and Maryland to

PROFILE: Anthony Johnson

Little is known of the individual Africans and African Americans who lived in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A lack of contemporary accounts prevents us from truly understanding their personalities. In rare instances, however, black people emerge from bits and pieces of information preserved in court records. This is the case for Anthony Johnson and his family. Their accomplishments cast light on African-American life in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake.

Anthony Johnson arrived at Jamestown in 1621 from England, but his original home may have been Angola. He was fortunate the following year to escape death in an Indian attack on Jamestown. He was one of four out of 56 inhabitants on the Bennett plantation, where he labored, to survive. He was also lucky to wed “Mary a Negro Woman,” who in 1625 was the only woman residing at Bennett’s.

In 1635 Johnson’s master, Nathaniel Littleton, released him from further service. Johnson, like other free men of this time and place, then scrambled to acquire wealth in the form of land, livestock, and human beings. He received his own 250-acre plantation in 1651 under the “headright system,” by which the colonial government encouraged population growth by awarding 50 acres of land for every new servant a settler brought to Virginia.

The Johnson estates existed among white-owned properties in the same area. Like their white neighbors, the Johnsons were not part of the planting elite. But they owned their own land, farmed, and had social, economic, and legal relations with other colonists. Anthony Johnson in particular engaged in litigation that tells us much about black life in early Virginia.

In 1654, his lawsuit against his black servant John Casor and a white neighbor set a precedent in favor of black slavery but also revealed Johnson’s legal rights. Casor claimed that Johnson “had kept him his serv[an]t seven years longer than hee should or ought.” Johnson, whom court records described as an “old Negro,” responded that he was entitled to “ye Negro [Casor] for his life.” Johnson momentarily relented when he realized that if he persisted in his suit, Casor could win damages against him. Shortly thereafter, however, Johnson brought suit against his white neighbor Robert Parker, whom Johnson charged had detained Casor “under pretense [that] the s[ai]d John Casor is a freeman.” This time the court ruled in Johnson’s favor. It returned Casor to him and required Parker to pay court costs.

During the 1660s, the extended Johnson family moved to Somerset, Maryland, where its members had acquired additional land. They were still prospering as planters during the early eighteenth century. Some family members moved on to New Jersey and others to Delaware, where some of them intermarried with the Nanticoke Indians. Historian John H. Russell exaggerated when he claimed in 1913 that black people in the seventeenth century had roughly the same opportunities as free white servants. But industrious and lucky black people at that time could achieve a social and economic standing that became nearly impossible for their descendants.
Delaware and North Carolina and from the coastal plain to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. In the process, American slavery began to assume the form it kept for the next 165 years.

By 1750, 144,872 slaves lived in Virginia and Maryland, accounting for 61 percent of all the slaves in British North America. Another 40,000 slaves lived in the rice-producing regions of South Carolina and Georgia, accounting for 17 percent. Unlike in the sugar colonies of the Caribbean, where white people were a tiny minority, they constituted a majority in the tobacco colonies and a large minority in the rice colonies. Also, most white southerners did not own slaves. Nevertheless, the economic development of the region depended on enslaved black laborers.

The conditions under which those laborers lived varied. Most slaveholders farmed small tracts of land and owned fewer than five slaves. These masters and their slaves worked together and developed close personal relationships. Other masters owned thousands of acres of land and rarely saw most of their slaves. During the early eighteenth century, the great planters divided their slaves among several small holdings. They did this to avoid concentrating potentially rebellious Africans in one area. As the proportion of newly arrived Africans in the slave population declined later in the century, larger concentrations of slaves became more common.

Before the mid-eighteenth century, nearly all slaves—both men and women—worked in the fields. On the smaller farms, they worked with their master. On larger estates, they worked for an overseer, who was usually white. Like other agricultural workers, enslaved African Americans normally worked from sunup to sundown with breaks for food and rest. Even during colonial times, they usually had Sunday off.

From the beginnings of slavery in North America, masters tried to make slaves work harder and faster while slaves sought to conserve their energy, take breaks, and socialize with each other. African men

### FIGURE 3–1 AFRICANS BROUGHT AS SLAVES TO BRITISH NORTH AMERICA, 1701–1775

The rise in the number of captive Africans shipped to British North America during the early eighteenth century reflects the increasing dependence of British planters on African slave labor. The declines in slave imports during the periods 1751 to 1760 and 1771 to 1775 resulted from disruptions to commerce associated with the French and Indian War (or Seven Years’ War) and the struggle between the colonies and Great Britain that preceded the American War for Independence.

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### FROM SERVITUDE TO SLAVERY

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1619
Thirty-two Africans reported to be living at Jamestown; 20 more arrive.

1621
Anthony Johnson arrives at Jamestown.

1624
First documented birth of a black child occurs at Jamestown.

1640
A black man is sentenced to servitude for life.

1651
Anthony Johnson receives estate of 250 acres.

1661
House of Burgesses (the Virginia colonial legislature) recognizes that black servants would retain that status throughout their life.

1662
House of Burgesses affirms that a child’s status—slave or free—follows the status of her or his mother.


Chapter 3

European Claims in America, c. 1750

The British colonies on the North American mainland were divided into four regions. They were bordered on the south by Spanish Florida and to the west by regions claimed by France.

How did African Americans in the British colonies benefit from the close proximity of regions controlled by France and Spain?

Regarded field labor as women’s work and tried to avoid it. But, especially if they had incentives, enslaved Africans could be efficient workers. One incentive to which both slaves and masters looked forward was the annual harvest festival. These festivals were held in both Africa and Europe and became common throughout the British colonies early in the eighteenth century.

After 1750 some black men began to hold such skilled occupations on plantations as carpenter, smith, carter, cooper, miller, potter, Sawyer, tanner, shoemaker, and weaver. By 1768 one South Carolina planter noted that “in established Plantations, the Planter has Tradesmen of all kinds in his Gang of Slaves, and ’tis a Rule with them, never to pay Money for what can be made upon their Estates, not a Lock, a Hinge, or a Nail if they can avoid it.” Black women had, with the exception of weaving, less access to skilled occupations. When they did not work in the fields, they were domestic servants in the homes of their masters, cooking, washing, cleaning, and caring for children. These duties could be extremely taxing because, unlike fieldwork, they did not end when the sun went down.

Low-Country Slavery

South of the tobacco colonies, on the coastal plain or low country of Carolina and Georgia, a distinctive slave society developed (see Map 3–1). The influence of the West Indian plantation system was much stronger here than in the Chesapeake, and rice, not tobacco, became the staple crop.

The first British settlers who arrived in 1670 at Charleston (in what later become South Carolina) were mainly immigrants from Barbados rather than England. Many of them had been slaveholders on that island and brought slaves with them. Therefore, in the low country, black people were never indentured servants. They were chattel from the start. The region’s subtropical climate discouraged white settlement and encouraged dependence on black labor the way it did in the sugar islands. During the early years of settlement, nearly one-third of the immigrants were African, most of them male. By the early eighteenth century, more Africans had arrived than white people. White Carolinians also enslaved more American Indians than other British colonists did, and during the early 1700s, Indians accounted for approximately one-quarter of the colony’s slave population. Carolina also became the center of an Indian slave trade. Although official colonial policy sought to keep Africans and Indians apart, black slaves sometimes helped acquire and transport Indian slaves. Carolina exported Indian slaves to the West Indies and to other mainland British colonies.

By 1740 the Carolina low country had 40,000 slaves, who constituted 90 percent of the population in the region around Charleston. In all, 94,000 Africans arrived at Charleston between 1706 and 1776, which made it North America’s leading port of entry for Africans during the eighteenth century. A Swiss immigrant commented in 1737 that the region “looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people.”

During its first three decades, Carolina supplied Barbados with beef and lumber. Because West Africans from the Gambia River region were skilled herders, white settlers sought them out as slaves. Starting around 1700, however, the low-country planters concentrated on growing rice. Rice had
been grown in West Africa for thousands of years, and many of the enslaved Africans who reached Carolina had the skill required to cultivate it in America. Economies of scale, in which an industry becomes more efficient as it grows larger, were more important in the production of rice than tobacco. Although tobacco could be profitably produced on small farms, rice required large acreages. Therefore, large plantations on a scale similar to those on the sugar islands of the West Indies became the rule in the low country.

In 1732 King George II of England chartered the colony of Georgia to serve as a buffer between South Carolina and Spanish Florida. James Oglethorpe, who received the royal charter, wanted to establish a refuge for England’s poor, who were expected to become virtuous through their own labor. Consequently, in 1734 he and the colony’s other trustees banned slavery in Georgia. But economic difficulties, combined with land hunger among white South Carolinians, soon led to the ban’s repeal. During the 1750s, rice cultivation and slavery spread into Georgia’s coastal plain. By 1773 Georgia had as many black people—15,000—as white people.

As on Barbados, absentee plantation owners became the rule in South Carolina and Georgia. In these colonies planters preferred to live in Charleston or Savannah where sea breezes provided relief from the heat. Meanwhile, enslaved Africans on low-country plantations suffered a high mortality rate from diseases, overwork, and poor treatment, just as did their counterparts on Barbados and other sugar islands. Therefore, unlike the slave population in the Chesapeake colonies, the slave population in the low country did not grow by natural reproduction. Instead, until shortly before the American Revolution, it grew through continued arrivals from Africa.

Low-country slave society developed striking paradoxes in race relations. As the region’s black population grew, white people became fearful of revolt, and by 1698 Carolina had the strictest slave code in North America. In 1721, Charleston organized a “Negro watch” to enforce a curfew on its black population, and watchmen could shoot recalcitrant Africans and African Americans on sight. Yet, as the passage that begins this chapter indicates, black people in Carolina faced the quandary of being both feared and needed by white people. Even as persons of European descent grew fearful of black revolt, the colony in 1704 authorized the arming of enslaved black men when needed for defense against Indian and Spanish raids.

Of equal significance was the appearance in Carolina and to some extent in Georgia of distinct classes among people of color. Like the low-country society...
itself, such classes were more similar to those in the Caribbean sugar islands than to the mainland colonies to the north. A Creole population that had absorbed European values lived alongside white people in Charleston and Savannah. Members of this Creole population were frequently mixed-race relatives of their masters and enjoyed social and economic privileges denied to slaves who labored on the nearby rice plantations. Yet this urban mixed-race class was under constant white supervision.

In contrast, slaves who lived in the country retained considerable autonomy in their daily routines. The intense cultivation required to produce rice encouraged the evolution of a “task system” of labor on the low-country plantations. Rather than working in gangs as in the tobacco colonies, slaves on rice plantations had daily tasks. When they completed these tasks, they could work on plots of land assigned to them or do what they pleased without white supervision. Because black people were the great majority in the low-country plantations, they also preserved more of their African heritage than did black people who lived in the region’s cities or in the more northerly British mainland colonies.

**PLANTATION TECHNOLOGY**

During the American colonial era, most people of African descent living on southern plantations employed technologies associated with raising and processing crops for distant markets. A minority gained technical skills associated with a variety of trades.

In tobacco-growing regions, the harvest began a process of preparing leaves for market. Slaves hung plants in “tobacco houses,” whose open construction kept out sunlight and rain while allowing breezes to circulate and dry the leaves. After six weeks, slaves removed the leaves and packaged them in wooden barrels for shipment. On low-country rice plantations, slaves built, operated, and maintained irrigation systems. They threshed, winnowed, and pounded rice to remove the husks. At first they performed these labor-intensive operations by hand. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, masters introduced “winnowing fans and pounding mills” powered by draft animals. Also, during the eighteenth century, low-country slave artisans built the vats, pumps, and structures required for turning indigo plants into a dye that was popular in Europe. As the indigo fermented in vats—releasing noxious fumes—slaves pumped in water, stirred and beat the plants into pulp, drained away blue liquid, solidified it with lime, dried it, and cut it into blocks.

Enslaved carpenters used a variety of hand tools to construct the buildings required for all these processes. They also built other plantation buildings. Slave sawyers operated water-powered mills to cut lumber. Other slaves made barrels. They cut and prepared oak staves—a process that took three years—trimmed the staves, soaked them, and bound them with iron hoops. Plantation blacksmiths used charcoal-burning hearths and bellows to form the hoops from iron ingots and—using tongs and hammers—pounded the hoops into shape on anvils. They used a similar process to fashion nails, axe and hammer heads, hooks, horse shoes, hinges, and locks.

Like carpentry, tanning was essential. But, like indigo production, it was a laborious, smelly, and extended operation. Slaves cooked deer and cow hides in lime to remove fur and then washed off the lime with a mixture of animal dung, salt, and water. They used tannin, a chemical found in tree bark, to cure the hides. After drying, softening, stretching, and trimming, slave craftsmen used the leather to make shoes, boots, garments, and other articles.

**Slave Life in Early America**

Little evidence survives of the individual lives of enslaved black people in colonial North America. This is because they, along with American Indians and most white people of that era, were poor and illiterate and kept no records. Yet recent studies provide a glimpse of their material culture.

Eighteenth-century housing for slaves was minimal and often temporary. In the Chesapeake, small log cabins predominated. They had dirt floors, brick fireplaces, wooden chimneys, and few, if any, windows. African styles of architecture were more common in coastal South Carolina and Georgia. In these regions, slaves built the walls of their houses with tabby—a mixture of lime, oyster shells, and sand—or, occasionally, mud. In either case, the houses had thatched roofs. Early in the eighteenth century, when single African men made up the mass of the slave population, these structures were used as dormitories. Later they housed generations of black families.

The amount of furniture and cooking utensils the cabins contained varied from place to place and according to how long the cabins were occupied. In some cabins, the only furniture consisted of wooden boxes for both storage and seating and planks for beds. But a 1697 inventory of items contained in a slave cabin in Virginia includes chairs, a bed, a large iron kettle, a brass kettle, an iron pot, a frying pan, and a “beer barrel.” Enslaved black people, like contemporary Indians and white people, used hollowed-out gourds for cups and carted water in wooden buckets.
for drinking, cooking, and washing. As the eighteenth century progressed, slave housing on large plantations became more substantial, and slaves acquired tables, linens, chamber pots, and oil lamps. Yet primitive, poorly furnished log cabins persisted in many regions even after the abolition of slavery in 1865.

At first, slave dress was minimal during summer. Men wore breechcloths; women wore skirts, leaving their upper bodies bare; and children went naked until puberty. Later men wore shirts, trousers, and hats while working in the fields. Women wore shifts (loose, simple dresses) and covered their heads with handkerchiefs. In winter, masters provided heavier cotton and woolen clothing and cheap leather shoes. In the early years, much of the clothing, or at least the cloth used to make it, came from England. Later, as the account of George Mason’s Gunston Hall plantation indicates, homespun fabric made by slaves replaced English cloth.

From the seventeenth century onward, slave women brightened clothing with dyes made from bark, decorated clothing with ornaments, and created African-style head wraps, hats, and hairstyles. In this manner, African Americans retained a sense of personal style compatible with West African culture.

Food consisted of corn, yams, salt pork, and occasionally salt beef and salt fish. Slaves also caught fish and raised chickens and rabbits. When, during the eighteenth century, farmers in the Chesapeake began planting wheat, slaves baked biscuits. In the South Carolina low country, rice became an important part of African-American diets, but even there corn was the staple. During colonial times, slaves occasionally supplemented this limited diet with vegetables that they raised in their own gardens, such as cabbage, cauliflower, black-eyed peas, turnips, collard greens, and rutabagas.

**Miscegenation and Creolization**

When Africans first arrived in the Chesapeake during the early seventeenth century, they interacted culturally and physically with white indentured servants and with American Indians. This mixing of peoples changed all three groups. Interracial sexual contacts—miscegenation—produced people of mixed race. Meanwhile, cultural exchanges became an essential part of the process of creolization that led African parents to produce African-American children. When, as often happened, miscegenation and creolization occurred together, the change was both physical and cultural. However, the dominant British minority in North America during the colonial period defined persons of mixed race as black. Although enslaved mulattoes—those of mixed African and European ancestry—enjoyed some advantages over slaves who had a purely African ancestry, mulattoes as a group did not receive enhanced legal status.

Miscegenation between blacks and whites and blacks and Indians was extensive throughout British North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it was less extensive and accepted than it was in the European sugar colonies in the Caribbean, in Latin America, or in French Canada, where many French men married Indian women. British North America was exceptional because many more white women migrated there than to Canada, Latin America, or the Caribbean. Therefore, white men were far less likely to take black or Indian wives and concubines. Sexual relations between Africans and Indians were also more limited than they were elsewhere because the coastal Indian population had drastically declined before large numbers of Africans arrived.
Yet miscegenation between black people and the remaining Indians was extensive, and there were striking examples of black-white marriage in seventeenth-century Virginia. In 1656 in Northumberland County, a mulatto woman named Elizabeth Kay successfully sued for her freedom and immediately thereafter married her white lawyer. In Norfolk County in 1671, Francis Skiper had to pay a tax on his wife Anne because she was black. In Westmoreland County in 1691, Hester Tate, a white indentured servant, and her husband James Tate, a black slave, had four children. One was apprenticed to her master and the other three to his.

Colonial assemblies banned such interracial marriages mainly to keep white women from bearing mulatto children. The assemblies feared that having free white mothers might allow persons of mixed race to sue and gain their freedom, thereby creating a legally recognized mixed-race class. Such a class, wealthy white people feared, would blur the distinction between the dominant and subordinate races and weaken white supremacy. The assemblies did far less to prevent white male masters from sexually exploiting their black female slaves—although they considered such exploitation immoral—because the children of such liaisons would be slaves.

The Origins of African-American Culture

Creolization and miscegenation transformed the descendents of the Africans who arrived in North America into African Americans. Historians long believed that in this process the Creoles lost their African heritage. But since Melville J. Herskovits published The Myth of the Negro Past in 1941, scholars have found many African legacies not only in African-American culture but in American culture in general.

The second generation of people of African descent in North America did lose their parents’ native languages and their ethnic identity as Igbos, Angolans, or Senegambians. But they retained a generalized West African heritage and passed it on to their descendants. Among the major elements of that heritage were family structure and notions of kinship, religious concepts and practices, African words and modes of expression, musical style and instruments, cooking methods and foods, folk literature, and folk arts.

The preservation of the West African extended family was the basis of African-American culture. Because most Africans imported into the British colonies during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were males, most black men of that era could not have wives and children. It was not until the Atlantic slave trade declined briefly during the 1750s that sex ratios became more balanced and African-American family life began to flourish. Without that family life, black people could not have maintained as much of Africa as they did.

Even during the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans created “fictive kin relationships” for mutual support, and in dire circumstances,
African Americans continued to improvise family structures. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, extended black families based on biological relationships dominated. Black people retained knowledge of their kinship ties to second and third cousins over several generations and wide stretches of territory. These extended families had roots in Africa but were also a result of—and a reaction to—slavery. West African incest taboos encouraged slaves to pick mates who lived on plantations other than their own. The sale of slaves away from their immediate families also tended to extend families over wide areas. Once established, such far-flung kinship relationships helped others, who were forced to leave home, to adapt to new conditions under a new master. Kinfolk also sheltered escapees.

Extended families also influenced African-American naming practices, which in turn reinforced family ties. Africans named male children after close relatives. This custom survived in America because boys were more likely to be separated from their parents by being sold than girls were. Having one’s father’s name or grandfather’s name preserved one’s family identity. Also, early in the eighteenth century, when more African Americans began to use surnames, they clung to the name of their original master. This reflected a West African predisposition to link a family name with a certain location. Like taking a parent’s name, it helped maintain family relationships despite repeated scatterings.

The result was that African Americans preserved given and family names over many generations. Black men continued to bear such African names as Cudjo, Quash, Cuffee, and Sambo, and black women such names as Quasheba and Juba. Even when masters imposed demeaning classical names, such as Caesar, Pompey, Venus, and Juno, black Americans passed them on from generation to generation. Bible names did not become common among African Americans until the mid-eighteenth century. This was because before that time masters often refused to allow slaves to be converted to Christianity. As a result, African religions—both indigenous and Islamic—persisted in parts of America well into the nineteenth century. The indigenous religions in particular maintained a premodern perception of the unity of the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred, and the living and the dead. Black Americans continued to perform an African circle dance known as the “ring shout” at funerals, and they decorated graves with shells and pottery in the West African manner. They looked to recently arrived Africans for religious guidance, held bodies of water to be sacred, remained in daily contact with their ancestors through spirit possession, and practiced divination and magic. When they became ill, they turned to “herb doctors” and “root workers.” Even when many African Americans began to convert to Christianity during the mid-eighteenth century, West African religious thought and practice shaped their lives.

THE GREAT AWAKENING

The major turning point in African-American religion came in conjunction with the religious revival known as the Great Awakening. This extensive social movement of the mid- to late-eighteenth century grew out of growing dissatisfaction among white Americans with a deterministic and increasingly formalistic style of Protestantism that seemed to deny most people a chance for salvation. During the early 1730s in western Massachusetts, a Congregationalist minister named Jonathan Edwards began an emotional and participatory ministry aimed at bringing more people into the church. Later that decade, George Whitefield, an Englishman who with John Wesley founded the Methodist Church, carried a similarly evangelical style of Christianity to the mainland colonies. In his sermons, Whitefield appealed to emotions, offered salvation to all who believed in Christ, and—although he did not advocate emancipation—preached to black people as well as white people.

Some people of African descent had converted to Christianity before Whitefield’s arrival in North America. But two factors had prevented widespread black conversion. First, most masters feared that converted slaves would interpret their new religious status as a step toward freedom and equality. A South Carolina minister lamented in 1713 that “the Masters of Slaves are generally of Opinion that a Slave grows worse by being a Christian, and therefore instead of instructing them in the principles of Christianity . . . malign and traduce those that attempt it.” Second, many slaves remained devoted to their ancestral religions and were not attracted to Christianity.

With the Great Awakening, however, a process of general conversion began. African Americans did indeed link the spiritual equality preached by evangelical ministers with a hope for earthly equality. They tied salvation for the soul with liberation for the body. They recognized that the preaching style Whitefield and other evangelicals adopted had much in common with West African “spirit possession.” As in West African religion, eighteenth-century revivalism in North America emphasized personal rebirth, singing, movement, and emotion. The practice of total body immersion during baptism in rivers, ponds, and lakes that gave the Baptist church its name paralleled West African water rites.
Because it drew African Americans into an evangelical movement that helped shape American society, the Great Awakening increased mutual black-white acculturation. Revivalists appealed to the poor of all races and emphasized spiritual equality. Evangelical Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches welcomed black people. Members of these biracial churches addressed each other as brother and sister. Black members took communion with white members and served as church officers. The same church discipline applied to both races. By the late eighteenth century, a few black men gained ordination as priests and ministers and—often while still enslaved—preached to white congregations. They thereby influenced white people’s perception of how services should be conducted.

Black worshipers also influenced white preachers and white religion. In 1756, a white minister in Virginia noted that African Americans spent nights in his kitchen. He recorded in his diary that “sometimes, when I have awakened about two or three a-clock in the morning, a torrent of sacred harmony poured into my chamber, and carried my mind away to Heaven.”

Other factors, however, favored the development of a distinct African-American church. From the start, white churches seated black people apart from white people, belying claims to spiritual equality. Black members took communion after white members. Masters also tried to use religion to instill in their chattels such self-serving Christian virtues as meekness, humility, and obedience. Consequently, when they could, African Americans established their own churches. Dancing, shouting, clapping, and singing became especially characteristic of their religious meetings. Black spirituals probably date from the eighteenth century, and like African-American Christianity itself, they blended West African and European elements.

African Americans also retained the West African assumption that the souls of the dead returned to their homeland and rejoined their ancestors. Reflecting this family-oriented view of death, African-American funerals were often loud and joyous occasions with dancing, laughing, and drinking. Perhaps most important, the emerging black church reinforced black people’s collective identity and helped them persevere in slavery.

**LANGUAGE, MUSIC, AND FOLK LITERATURE**

Although African Americans did not retain their ancestral languages, those languages contributed to the pidgins and creolized languages that became Black English by the nineteenth century. It was in the low country, with its large and isolated black populations, that African-English creoles lasted the longest. The Gullah and Geechee dialects of the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia, which combine African words and grammatical elements with a basically English structure, are still spoken today. In other regions, where black people were less numerous, the creole languages were less enduring. Nevertheless, they contributed many words to American—particularly southern—English. Among them are yam, banjo (from mbanza), tote, goober (peanut), buckra (white man), cooter (tortoise), gumbo (okra), nanse (spider), samba (dance), tabby (a form of concrete), and voodoo.

Music was another essential part of West African life, and it remained so among African Americans, who preserved an antiphonal, call-and-response style of singing with an emphasis on improvisation, complex rhythms, and a strong beat. They sang while working and during religious ceremonies. Early on, masters banned drums and horns because of their potential for long-distance communication among slaves. But
the African banjo survived in America, and African Americans quickly adopted the violin and guitar. At night, in their cabins or around communal fires, slaves accompanied these instruments with bones and spoons. Music may have been the most important aspect of African culture in the lives of American slaves. Eventually, African-American music influenced all forms of American popular music.

West African folk literature also survived in North America. African tales, proverbs, and riddles—with accretions from American Indian and European stories—entertained, instructed, and united African Americans. Just as the black people on the sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia were most able to retain elements of African language, so did their folk literature remain closest to its African counterpart. Africans used tales of how weak animals like rabbits outsmarted stronger animals like hyenas and lions to symbolize the power of the common people over unjust rulers. African Americans used similar tales to portray the ability of slaves to outsmart and ridicule their masters.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMPACT ON COLONIAL CULTURE

African Americans also influenced the development of white culture. As early as the seventeenth century, black musicians performed English ballads for white audiences in a distinctively African-American style. Meanwhile, in the northern and Chesapeake colonies, people of African descent helped determine how all Americans celebrated. By the eighteenth century, slaves in these regions organized black election or coronation festivals that lasted for several days. Sometimes called Pinkster and ultimately derived from Dutch-American pre-Easter celebrations, these festivities included parades, athletics, food, music, dancing, and mock coronations of kings and governors. Although dominated by African Americans, they attracted white observers and a few white participants.

The African-American imprint on southern diction and phraseology is especially clear. Because black women often raised their master’s children, generations of white children acquired African-American speech patterns and intonations. Black people also influenced white notions about portents, spirits, and folk remedies. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English lore about such things was not that different from West African lore, and white Americans consulted black conjurers and “herb doctors.” Black cooks in early America influenced both white southern and African-American eating habits. Preferences for barbecued pork, fried chicken, black-eyed peas, okra, and collard and mustard greens owed much to West African culinary traditions.

African Americans also used West African culture and skills to shape the way work was done in the American South during and after colonial times. Africans accustomed to collective agricultural labor imposed the “gang system” on most American plantations. Masters learned that their slaves worked harder
and longer in groups. Their work songs were also an African legacy, as was the slow, deliberate pace of their labor. By the mid-eighteenth century, masters often employed slaves as builders. As a result, African styles and decorative techniques influenced southern colonial architecture. Black builders introduced African-style high-peaked roofs, front porches, wood carvings, and elaborate ironwork.

**Slavery in the Northern Colonies**

The British mainland colonies north of the Chesapeake had histories, cultures, demographics, and economies that differed considerably from those of the southern colonies. Organized religion played a much more important role in the foundation of most of the northern colonies than it did in those of the South (except for Maryland). In New England, where the Pilgrims settled in 1620 and the Puritans in 1630, religious utopianism shaped colonial life. The same was true in the West Jersey portion of New Jersey, where members of the English pietist Society of Friends (Quakers) settled during the 1670s, and in Pennsylvania, which William Penn founded in 1682 as a Quaker colony. Quakers, like other pietists, emphasized nonviolence and a divine spirit within all humans. These beliefs disposed some Quakers to become early opponents of slavery.

Even more important than religion in shaping life in northern British North America were a cooler climate, sufficient numbers of white laborers, lack of a staple crop, and a diversified economy. All these circumstances made black slavery in the colonial North less extensive than and different from, its southern counterparts.

By the end of the colonial period during the 1770s, only 50,000 African Americans lived in the northern colonies in comparison to 400,000 in the southern colonies. In the North, black people were 4.5 percent of the total population, compared with 40 percent in the South. But, as in the South, the northern black population varied in size from place to place. By 1770 enslaved African Americans constituted 10 percent of the population of Rhode Island, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania (see Figure 3–2).

New York City had a particularly large black population—20 percent of its total by 1750. This dated to 1626 when the city bore the name New Amsterdam and served as the main port of New Netherlands, a Dutch colony stretching along the Hudson River. By 1638, free and enslaved Africans constituted a large part of the city’s small but cosmopolitan population. They spoke a variety of European languages and converted to a variety of Christian churches. The English conquered New Netherlands in 1664, but as late as the 1810s, many African Americans in and about New York City still spoke Dutch.

Like all Americans during the colonial era, most northern slaves were agricultural laborers. But, in contrast to those in the South, slaves in the North typically lived in their master’s house. They worked with their master, his family, and one or two other slaves on a small farm. In northern cities, which were often home ports for slave traders, enslaved people of African descent worked as artisans, shopkeepers, messengers, domestic servants, and general laborers.

Consequently, most northern African Americans led lives that differed from their counterparts in the South. Mainly because New England had so few slaves, but also because of Puritan religious principles, slavery there was least oppressive. White people had no reason to suspect that the small and dispersed black population posed a threat of rebellion. The local slave codes were milder than in the South and, except for the ban on miscegenation, not rigidly enforced. New England slaves could legally own, transfer, and inherit property. From the early seventeenth century onward, Puritans converted the Africans and African Americans who came...
among them to Christianity, recognizing their spiritual equality before God.

In the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, where black populations were larger and hence perceived by white people to be more threatening, the slave codes were stricter and penalties harsher. But even in these colonies, the curfews imposed on Africans and African Americans and restrictions on their ability to gather together were less well enforced than they were farther south.

These conditions encouraged rapid assimilation. Because of their small numbers, frequent isolation from others of African descent, and close association with their masters, northern slaves usually had fewer opportunities to preserve an African heritage. However, there was an increase in African customs among black northerners between 1740 and 1770. Before that time, most northern slaves had been born or “seasoned” in the South or the West Indies. Then, during the mid-eighteenth century, direct imports of African slaves into the North temporarily increased. With them came knowledge of African life. But overall, the less harsh and more peripheral nature of slavery in this region limited the retention of African perspectives, just as it allowed the slaves more freedom than most of their southern counterparts enjoyed.

**Slavery in Spanish Florida and French Louisiana**

Just as slavery in Britain’s northern colonies differed from slavery in its southern colonies, slavery in Spanish Florida and French Louisiana—areas that later became parts of the United States—had distinctive characteristics. People of African descent, brought to Florida and Louisiana during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, had different experiences from those who arrived in the British colonies. They and their descendants learned to speak Spanish or French rather than English, and they became Roman Catholics rather than Protestants. The routes to freedom were also more plentiful in the Spanish and French colonies than they were in Britain’s plantation colonies.
The Spanish monarchy regarded the settlement it established at St. Augustine in 1565 as primarily a military outpost, and plantation agriculture was not significant in Florida under Spanish rule. Therefore, the number of slaves in Florida remained small, and black men were needed more as soldiers than as fieldworkers. As militiamen, they gained power that eluded slaves in most of the British colonies, and as members of the Catholic Church, they acquired social status. By 1746 St. Augustine had a total population of 1,500, including about 400 black people. When the British took control of Florida in 1763, these local people of African descent retreated along with the city’s white inhabitants to Cuba. It was with the British takeover that plantation slavery began to grow in Florida.

When the French in 1699 established their Louisiana colony in the lower Mississippi River valley, their objective, like that of the Spanish in Florida, was primarily military. In 1720 few black people (either slave or free) lived in the colony. During the following decade, Louisiana imported about 6,000 slaves, most of whom were male and from Senegambia. Although they faced harsh conditions and many died, by 1731 black people outnumbered white people in the colony. Some of the Africans worked on plantations growing tobacco and indigo. But most lived in the port city of New Orleans, where many became skilled artisans, lived away from their masters, became Roman Catholics, and gained freedom. Unfortunately, early in its history, New Orleans also became a place where it was socially acceptable for white men to exploit black women sexually. This custom eventually created a sizable mixed-race population with elaborate social gradations based on the amount of white ancestry a person had and the lightness of his or her skin. Unlike the case in Florida, Louisiana’s distinctive black and mixed-race population did not leave when the colony became part of the United States in 1803.

African Americans in New Spain’s Northern Borderlands

What is today the southwestern portion of the United States was from the sixteenth century until 1821 the northernmost part of New Spain. Centered on Mexico, this Spanish colony reached into Texas, California, New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. The first people of African descent who entered this huge region were members of Spanish exploratory expeditions. As we mentioned earlier, the best known of them is Esteban, an enslaved Moor (the Spanish term for a dark-skinned Muslim) who survived a shipwreck on the Texas coast in 1529 and joined Spanish explorer Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in an arduous seven-year trek from Texas to Mexico City. Esteban, a skilled interpreter, later explored regions in what are today New Mexico and Arizona. Black men also accompanied Francisco Vásquez de Coronado’s 1540–1542 search across the Southwest for the mythical Seven Cities of Cíbola as well as Spanish expeditions along the upper regions of the Rio Grande in 1593 and 1598. During the seventeenth century, black soldiers participated in the Spanish conquest of Pueblo Indians. Some black or mulatto women also joined in Spanish military expeditions. The best known of them was Isabel de Olvena, who traveled with an expedition through New Mexico in 1600.

During the colonial era, however, New Spain’s North American borderlands had far fewer black people than there were in the British colonies. In part this was because the total non-Indian population in the borderlands was extremely small. As late as 1792, only around 3,000 colonists lived in Texas, including about 450 described as black or mulatto. There were even fewer colonists in New Mexico and California, where people of mixed African, Indian, and Spanish descent were common. Black men in the borderlands gained employment as sailors, soldiers, tradesmen, cattle herders, and day laborers. Some of them were slaves, but others had limited freedom. In contrast to the British colonies, in New Spain’s borderlands most slaves were Indians. They worked as domestics and as agricultural laborers or were marched south to Mexico, where they labored in gold and silver mines.

Also in contrast to the British mainland colonies, where no formal aristocracy existed but where white insistence on racial separation gradually grew in strength,
both hereditary rank and racial fluidity existed in New Spain’s borderlands. In theory, throughout the Spanish empire in the Americas, “racial purity” determined social status, with Spaniards of “pure blood” at the top and Africans and Indians at the bottom. In Texas free black people and Indians suffered legal disabilities. They paid special taxes and could not own guns or travel freely. But almost all of the Spaniards who moved north from Mexico were themselves of mixed race, and people of African and Indian descent could more easily acquire status than they could in the British colonies. In the borderlands black men held responsible positions at Roman Catholic missions. A few acquired large landholdings called ranchos.

In this painting African Americans await sale to slave traders, who stand at the doorway on the left.

Black Women in Colonial America

The lives of black women in early North America varied according to the colony in which they lived. The differences between Britain’s New England colonies and its southern colonies are particularly clear. In New England, where religion and demographics made the boundary between slavery and freedom permeable, black women distinguished themselves in a variety of ways. The thoroughly acculturated Lucy Terry Prince of Deerfield, Massachusetts, published poetry during the 1740s and gained her freedom in 1756. Other black women succeeded as bakers and weavers. But in the South, where most black women of the time lived, they had few opportunities for work beyond the tobacco and rice fields and domestic labor in the homes of their masters.

During the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, approximately 90 percent of southern black women worked in the fields, as was customary for women in West Africa. White women also did fieldwork, but masters considered black women to be tougher than white women and therefore able to do more hard physical labor. Black women also mothered their children and cooked for their families, a chore that involved lugging firewood and water and tending fires as well as preparing meals. Like other women of their time, colonial black women suffered from inadequate medical attention while giving birth. But because black women worked until the moment they delivered, they were more likely than white women to experience complications in giving birth and to bear low-weight babies.

As the eighteenth century passed, more black women became house servants. Yet most jobs as maids, cooks, and body servants went to the young, the old, or the infirm. Black women also wet-nursed their master’s children. None of this was easy work. Those who did it were under constant white supervision and were particularly subject to the sexual exploitation that characterized chattel slavery.

European captains and crews molested and raped black women during the Middle Passage. Masters and overseers similarly used their power to force themselves on female slaves. The results were evident in the large mixed-race populations in the colonies and in the psychological damage it inflicted on African-American women and their mates. In particular, the sexual abuse of black women by white men disrupted the emerging black families in North America because black men usually could not protect their wives from it.

Although black women were more expensive than white indentured servants—because, unlike the children of white indentured servants, their children would become their master’s property—slave traders and slaveholders never valued black women as highly as they did black men. Until 1660 the British mainland colonies imported twice as many African men as women. Thereafter, the ratio dropped to three African men for every two women, and by the mid-eighteenth century, natural population growth among African Americans had corrected the sexual imbalance.
Black Resistance and Rebellion

That masters regularly used their authority to abuse black women sexually and thereby humiliate black men dramatizes the oppressiveness of a slave system based on race and physical force. Masters often rewarded black women who became their mistresses, just as masters and overseers used incentives to get more labor from field hands. But slaves who did not comply in either case faced a beating. Slavery in America was always a system that relied ultimately on physical force to deny freedom to African Americans. From its start, black men and women responded by resisting their masters as well as they could.

Such resistance ranged from sullen goldbricking (shirking assigned work) to sabotage, escape, and rebellion. Before the late eighteenth century, however, resistance and rebellion were not part of a coherent antislavery effort. Before the spread of ideas about natural human rights and universal liberty associated with the American and French revolutions, slave resistance and revolt did not aim to destroy slavery as a social system. Africans and African Americans resisted, escaped, and rebelled but not as part of an effort to free all slaves. Instead, they resisted to force masters to make concessions within the framework of slavery and escaped and rebelled to relieve themselves, their friends, and their families from intolerable disgrace and suffering.

African men and women newly arrived in North America openly defied their masters. They frequently refused to work and often could not be persuaded by punishment to change their behavior. "You would really be surpris’d at their Perseverance," one frustrated master commented, "They often die before they can be conquered." Africans tended to escape in groups of individuals who shared a common homeland and language. When they succeeded, they usually became "outliers," living nearby and stealing from their master’s estate. Less frequently, they headed west, where they found some safety among white frontiersmen, Indians, or intermarriage bandits. In 1672 Virginia’s colonial government began paying bounties to anyone who killed outliers, and six decades later, the governor of South Carolina offered similar rewards. In some instances, escaped slaves, known as maroons—a term derived from the Spanish word cimarron, meaning wild—established their own settlements in inaccessible regions.

The most durable of such maroon communities in North America existed in the Spanish colony of Florida. In 1695 the Spanish king officially made this colony a refuge for slaves escaping from the British colonies, although he did not free slaves who were already there. Many such escapees joined the Seminole Indian nation and thereby gained protection between 1763 and 1783, when the British ruled Florida, and after 1821 when the United States took control. It was in part to destroy this refuge for former slaves that the United States fought the Seminole War from 1835 to 1842. Other maroon settlements existed in the South Carolina and Georgia backcountry and the Great Dismal Swamp of southern Virginia.

As slaves became acculturated, forms of slave resistance changed. To avoid punishment, African Americans replaced open defiance with more subtle day-to-day obstructionism. They malingered, broke tools, mistreated domestic animals, destroyed crops, poisoned their masters, and stole. Not every slave who acted this way, of course, was consciously resisting enslavement, but masters assumed that they were. In 1770, Benjamin Franklin, who owned slaves, complained to a European friend, "Perhaps you may imagine the Negroes to be mild-tempered, tractable Kind of People. Some of them indeed are so. But the Majority are of plotting Disposition, dark, sullen, malicious, revengeful and cruel in the highest Degree." Acculturation also brought different escape patterns. Increasingly, the more assimilated slaves predominated among escapees. Most of them were young men who left on their own and relied on their knowledge of American society to pass as free. Although some continued to head for maroon settlements, most sought safety among relatives, in towns, or in the North Carolina piedmont, where there were few slaves.

Rebellions were far rarer in colonial North America than resistance or escape. More and larger rebellions broke out during the early eighteenth century in Jamaica and Brazil. This discrepancy resulted mainly from demographics: in the sugar-producing colonies, black people outnumbered white people by six or eight to one, but in British North America black people were a majority only in the low country. The larger the proportion of slaves in a population, the more likely they were to rebel. Also, by the mid-eighteenth century, most male slaves in the British mainland colonies were Creoles with families, who had more to lose from a failed rebellion than did the single African men who made up the bulk of the slave population farther south.

Nevertheless, there were waves of rebellion in British North America from 1710 to 1722 and 1730 to 1741. Men born in Africa took the lead in these revolts, and the two most notable ones occurred in New York City in 1712 and near Charleston, South Carolina, in 1739. In New York, 27 Africans, taking revenge for
“hard usage,” set fire to an outbuilding. When white men arrived to put out the blaze, the rebels attacked them with muskets, hatchets, and swords. They killed nine of the white men and wounded six. Shortly thereafter, local militia units captured the rebels. Six of the rebels killed themselves; the other 21 were executed—some brutally. In 1741 another revolt conspiracy in New York led to another mass execution. Authorities put to death 30 black people and four white people convicted of helping them.

Even more frightening for most white people was the rebellion that began at Stono Bridge within 20 miles of Charleston in September 1739. Under the leadership of a man named Jemmy or Tommy, 20 slaves who had recently arrived from Angola broke into a “warehouse, & then plundered it of guns & ammunition.” They killed the warehousemen, left their severed heads on the building’s steps, and fled toward Florida. Other slaves joined the Angolans until their numbers reached one hundred. They sacked plantations and killed approximately 30 more white people. But when they stopped to celebrate their victories and beat drums to attract other slaves, planters on horseback aided by Indians routed them, killing 44 and dispersing the rest. Many of the rebels, including their leader, remained at large for up to three years, as did the spirit of insurrection. In 1740 Charleston authorities arrested 150 slaves and hanged ten daily to quell that spirit.

In South Carolina and other southern colonies, white people never entirely lost their fear of slave revolt. Whenever slaves rebelled or were rumored to rebel, the fear became intense. As the quotation that begins this chapter indicates, the unwillingness of many Africans and African Americans to submit to enslavement pushed white southerners into a siege mentality that became a determining factor in American history.

CONCLUSION

Studying the history of black people in early America is both painful and exhilarating. It is painful to learn of their enslavement, the emergence of racism in its modern form, and the loss of so much of the African heritage. But it is exhilarating to learn how much of that heritage Africans and African Americans preserved, how they resisted their oppressors and forged strong family bonds, and how an emerging African-American culture began to influence all aspects of American society.

The varieties of black life during the colonial period also help us understand the complexity of African-American society later in American history. Although they had much in common, black people in the Chesapeake, in the low country, in Britain’s northern colonies, in Spanish Florida, in French Louisiana, and in New Spain’s borderlands had different experiences, different relationships with white people and Indians, and different prospects. Those who lived in the fledgling colonial towns and cities differed from those who were agricultural laborers. The lives of those who worked on small farms were different from the lives of those who served on large plantations.

Finally, African-American history during the colonial era raises fundamental issues about contingency and determinism in human events. Did economic necessity, racism, and class interest make the development of chattel slavery in the Chesapeake inevitable? Or, had things gone otherwise (e.g., if Bacon’s Rebellion had not occurred or had turned out differently), might African Americans in that region have retained more rights and access to freedom? What would have been the impact of that freedom on the colonies to the north and south of the Chesapeake?

RECOMMENDED READING


Betty Wood. Slavery in Colonial America 1619–1776. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2005. This is a brief history that emphasizes life among the slaves.

Peter H. Wood. Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion. New York: Norton, 1974. This is the best account available of...
slavery and the origins of African-American culture in
the colonial low country.


**ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**COLONIAL SOCIETY**


**ORIGINS OF SLAVERY AND RACISM IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE**


**THE CHESAPEAKE**


**The Carolina and Georgia Low Country**


**The Northern Colonies**


**Spanish Borderlands and Louisiana**


**African-American Culture**


**Black Women in Colonial America**


**Resistance and Revolt**


**Retracing the Odyssey**

African Americans at Jamestown, Colonial National Historical Park, Jamestown and Yorktown, Virginia. [http://www.nps.gov/jame/historicculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm](http://www.nps.gov/jame/historicculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm). This program covers the period from 1619, the date when the first reports of black inhabitants at Jamestown, to 1705 when Virginia formally adopted a slave code.


**Review Questions**

1. Based on your reading of this chapter, do you believe racial prejudice among British settlers in the Chesapeake led them to enslave Africans? Or did the unfree condition of the first Africans to arrive at Jamestown lead to racial prejudice among the settlers?
2. Why did vestiges of African culture survive in British North America? Did these vestiges help or hinder African Americans in dealing with enslavement?

3. Compare and contrast eighteenth-century slavery as it existed in the Chesapeake, in the low country of South Carolina and Georgia, and in the northern colonies.

4. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the black family in the eighteenth century?

5. How did enslaved Africans and African Americans preserve a sense of their own humanity?