

Creating Slavery in America: A History in 10 Slides

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While slavery had existed in many parts of the world for thousands of years by the time the first American colonies were founded, the practice took on a unique and terrible meaning in our country. By 1776, a new nation was dedicated to the proposition that “all men are created equal,” yet almost one million black men and women lived as slaves, enduring physical and psychological abuse.

In many ancient cultures, slavery was limited to prisoners of war and slaves could earn their freedom under certain conditions. In the American colonies, slavery was *durante vita*, for life. And it was based upon race. To have dark skin was to be instantly condemned to inequality: to slavery in the South and discrimination in the North.

In the Southern states, slavery became the basis of an entire culture. As historian Ira Berlin noted, “slavery stood at the center of economic production and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relationships.”

This slide show looks at how slavery become so powerful so quickly in America.

For more information on the history of slavery:

http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/49355.html

1607: Jamestown, the First American Colony



When the first English colonists arrived in Virginia in 1607 they had no intention of tapping into the existing trans-Atlantic African slave trade. The wealthy London merchants who founded the Virginia Company wanted it to be a trading and military outpost manned by Englishmen seeking new wealth. The English believed they could make alliances with the local Indians, trading with them and converting them to Christianity.

During its first decade, the Jamestown colony was a death trap. Between 1607 and 1622 more than 5,000 immigrants arrived, yet only 1,200 remained alive. Diseases (malaria, typhoid), periods of near starvation, exhausting work conditions and lack of a supportive community claimed many lives.

When the supply of volunteers ran low, the colony leaders turned to recruiting indentured servants from British cities and importing prisoners of war from Ireland.

This began a pattern of *coerced labor*. When volunteers could not be found, forced labor would be used. Men lured by false promises, convicted felons and prisoners of war from Ireland were transported to the colonies for work on the plantations.

For more information:

<https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm>

The Tobacco Boom



The history of slavery in America is closely connected to the tobacco boom of the 1600s and the spread of cotton plantations in the 1800s. White land owners realized they could reap wealth from these two crops if they owned huge swaths of land and applied large numbers of workers to raise the valuable plants.

Virginia exported its first, small shipment of native tobacco in 1619. By 1639, tobacco exported three million pounds of tobacco and plantations spread long 100 miles of the James River.

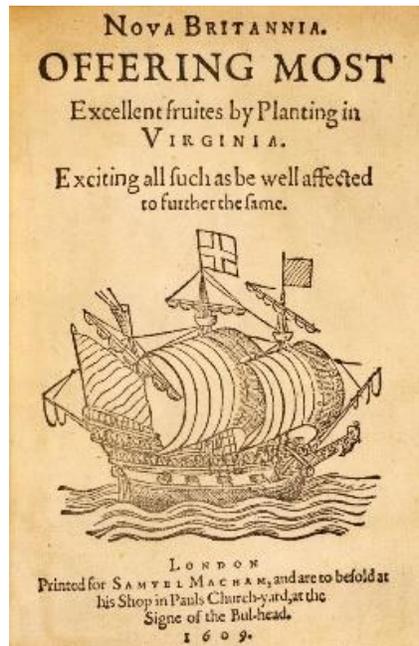
Tobacco had a major downside: it wore out men and the soil. At first, most laborers were white indentured servants who lived in drafty shacks with dirt floors. Many died within a year or two of arriving.

Tobacco plants also wore out the soil after a few seasons, forcing planters to abandon existing fields and seize additional land from the Indians. A small group of wealthy landowners dominated the government, amassing huge tracts of land and monopolizing trade with England. Wealth inequality grew, by 1680, around 100 families owned 80 percent of the cultivated land in Virginia.

For more information:

[http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John Carter Brown Library/exhibitions/jamestown/pages/settleme nt.html](http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/exhibitions/jamestown/pages/settleme nt.html)

Coerced Labor: Indentured Servants



In the 1600s, indentured servants existed in a grey area between freemen who were paid for their work, and slaves, who lacked any rights and were treated as property.

Under English law, owners were required to provide indentured servants with housing and a minimal amount of food. Colonial law restricted how servants could be punished, but these codes were often ignored. Many owners regularly whipped their servants, believing it was the only way to motivate them to work. Many servants lived in crowded, drafty cabins, worked sunrise to sunset and ate cold porridge for meals.

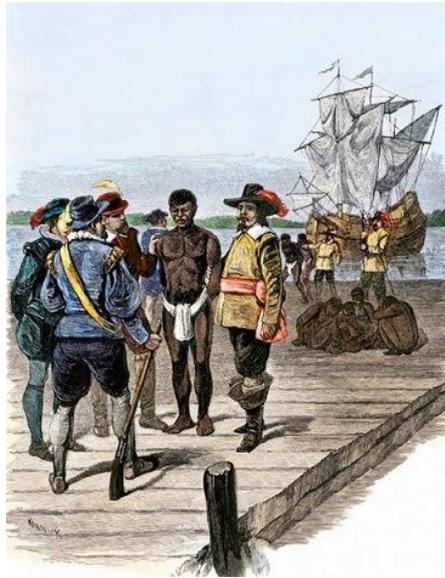
In the early 1600s, most indentured servants were illiterate young English men desperate for work. English officials saw Virginia as a “dumping ground” for the nation’s unemployed and homeless. London judges often sent convicted felons to Virginia to serve time as servants. In 1620, London city authorities rounded up some 300 homeless children, most under 12, and packed them into ships for Virginia. Many of the children, terrified and heartbroken, died within 12 months.

Plantation owners owned the contracts of the indentured servants and often sold them if they needed quick cash. If a servant completed his labor contract of four-six years, he was entitled to a 50-acre parcel of land and a small cash payment. Unfortunately, more than half died before completing their term.

For more information:

<http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/indentured-servants-in-the-us/>

1619: The First Africans Arrive in Virginia



The first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619. Carried aboard a mysterious privateer armed with brass cannon and flying the orange and white Dutch flag. The captain, an Englishman had obtained them on a raid on Spanish slave trade routes. He exchanged the two dozen blacks for fresh food and water and quickly departed for the open ocean.

Since the new colony had no laws accepting or forbidding slavery, the African men and women were put to work in the tobacco fields as indentured servants. Some of the men worked hard enough to earn their freedom, a few became plantation owners.

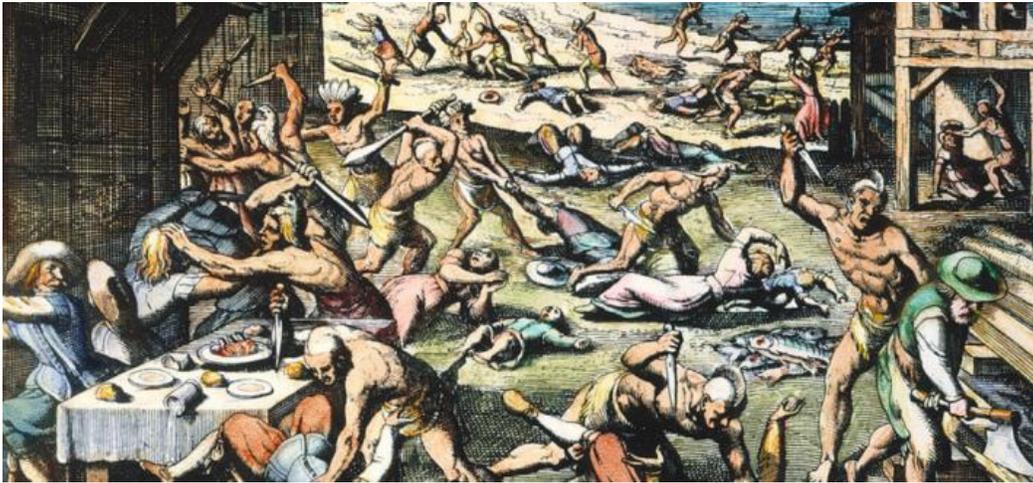
When the first Africans arrived, their names, ages and place of origin went unrecorded. They were simply listed as a male or female “negro,” a word for black adopted from the Spanish. This was the first step in the colonial authorities attempt to dehumanize black residents and deny them a historical record. In contrast, when the Mayflower landed in Massachusetts a year later, the full names, ages and home counties of all the adult passengers were carefully recorded.

In recent years, historians with access to a computerized data base of Atlantic slave voyages, (www.slavevoyages.org). have established that the first Africans in Virginia came from the Kingdom of Ndongo in Angola and spoke Kimbundu, a Bantu language.

For more information:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/interactive/slavery-united-states/>

1622: Indian Attack Kills 374 Colonists



The first campaign by white colonists to subjugate a particular race was directed at the local Indians.

During the first decade of the Virginia Colony, the English generally viewed the Indians as innocent creatures of nature who just needed to be “civilized.” Several colonists made attempts to convert the Indians to Christianity. Colony leaders allocated 2,000 acres for an Indian “college” (i.e. high school).

By 1622, the local tribes had been decimated by European diseases. They had also been pushed out of many of their villages and hunting grounds by the colonists expanding their tobacco farms.

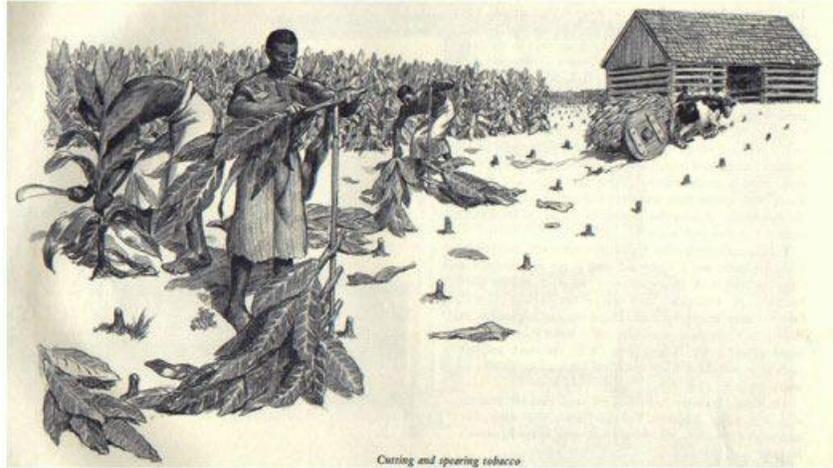
In that year, the local chief, Opechancanough, made a desperate gamble and launched a surprise raid against forty plantations. Some three hundred warriors attacked the colonists in their homes. More than 370 men, women and children were stabbed and clubbed to death. The colonists lost 25 per cent of their population in a few hours.

Colonial leaders in Jamestown and London were shocked by the mass killing of settlers. They declared the Indians to be brown-skinned “savages” who must be killed or removed. The Indians became the first nonwhite “other” in the new colonies. No longer allies, they would need to be subjugated because they threatened white domination.

For more information:

<http://blog.encyclopediavirginia.org/2013/04/a-short-history-of-virginia-indians/>

1640: John Punch, the First Slave



John Punch became the first African in Virginia to be sentenced to lifetime slavery. This single, initial step would eventually lead to a regional system of black slavery that would entrap four million men and women by 1860.

The case began in 1640 when Punch ran away from his plantation with two white indentured servants. All three were soon captured. The two white servants were whipped and had their labor contracts extended by four years. The Virginia court sentenced Punch to slavery for life.

The other 250 blacks living in the colony at this time remained servants or free men, although they faced growing discrimination. But in the coming decades, the Virginia legislature took away all the rights of its black residents and imposed harsh punishments (e.g., beating, dismemberment) for rebellious behavior. Most of the remaining free blacks were driven from the colony.

Virginia was not the only colony to adopt legal slavery. Connecticut legalized it 1650 and New York and New Jersey in 1664. By 1776, 12 of the 13 colonies had legalized slavery. Although a Massachusetts court overturned slavery within the state in 1783, ships supporting the slave trade continued to sail from Boston and Newport, R.I. until the early 1800s.

For more information:

<https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~arihuang/academic/abg/slavery/history.html>

1705: the Virginia Slave Code



By 1705, Virginia had some 70,000 white residents and 20,000 blacks, almost all of them slaves. The yawning gap between the small group of wealthy white families and thousands of poor white freemen created tension in the colony. In 1676, a wealthy young nobleman, Nathaniel Bacon, led a failed rebellion (he died of typhoid before being captured). Colonial leaders in Jamestown and London realized they needed to take steps to prevent poor whites and black slaves from joining together again.

Historian Edmund S. Morgan wrote in his classic book, *American Slavery, American Freedom*, that “...for those with eyes to see, there was an obvious lesson in the rebellion. Resentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class.”

In 1705, the Virginia legislature revised some of its earlier laws and passed the first comprehensive slave code. This legal template for brutally enforced mass black supremacy was later copied by many other Southern states. The era of white supremacy had begun in the South.

For more information:

[https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/ An act concerning Servants and Slaves 1705](https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/An_act_concerning_Servants_and_Slaves_1705)

Slavery Spreads to Carolinas, Georgia



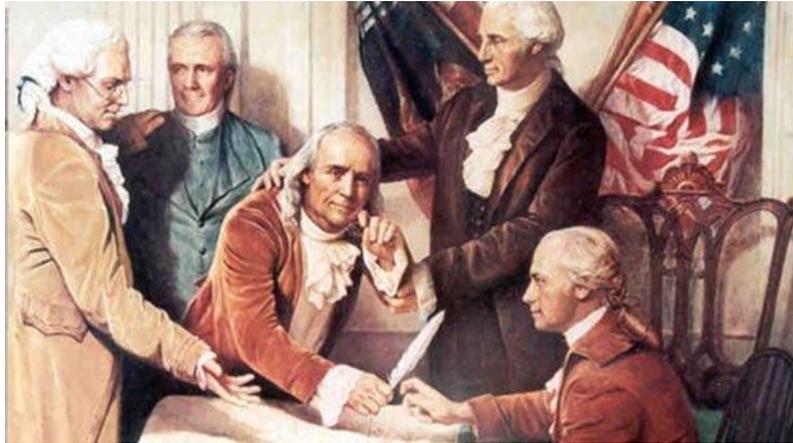
In 1663 King Charles II granted a new charter for the colony of Carolina. The colony adopted a constitution written by John Locke, one of the leading social philosophers of the era. The new constitution guaranteed religious liberty (including toleration of “Jews and heathens”), but also enforced African slavery. It read in part, ““Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves.” This included punishment and even death.

The Georgia Colony was founded in 1734 by London merchants with strong religious ties. The colony leaders initially banned black slaves, hoping to provide a haven for unemployed white workers from England. Major landholders complained they needed slaves to man their new tobacco and rice plantations. The colony leaders gave in and adopted slavery in 1751. Within months, slave ships crowded Savannah Harbor.

For more information:

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/maps-reveal-slavery-expanded-across-united-states-180951452/>

1787: The New Constitution Accepts Slavery



In 1787, 55 delegates (all male property owners) from the newly independent states met to draft a new constitution. Delegates from the Southern states threatened to leave unless the new document accepted slavery. While most (but not all) Northern delegates opposed slavery, they were desperate to keep the economically strong South in the union. The Northern believed that if the United States was divided into two or more separate countries, it would be reconquered by England.

Embarrassed by allowing slavery in a Constitution that provided representative government and specific freedoms for its citizens, the final draft did not mention the word "slave." The term "persons bound to labor" was used instead. But the institution of slavery was clearly protected in existing states and the importation of more slaves from Africa was safeguarded for twenty years.

In 1790, the newly independent thirteen states had a total population of four million, of whom 700,00 were slaves.

For more information:

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/thirteenthamendment.html>