



Indentured Servitude and Slavery

Indentured Servants

One way for a poor young man in the British Isles to get to the New World was to become an indentured servant. These “bound men” were usually young men between the ages of 15 and 25 who signed a contract to work for five to seven years in exchange for passage to the colonies. By some estimates, as many as half of all the British immigrants to the colonies after the 1630s came as indentured servants.

During their time of indenture, these servants lived with the family that bought their contract. They often worked as field hands or occasionally as house servants, especially in the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia. Sometimes they were treated humanely and sometimes as slaves.

Maryland required that indentured servants who completed their contracts be given 50 acres of land, some tools, and seeds.

Women and children and even entire families were indentured. If a husband died at sea on the voyage over, his widow was assessed the terms of his indenture as well as her own. Poor orphans in London were often sent as indentured servants. Children were bound to work for their master until they turned 21. They often served as apprentices to their master, learning a trade in exchange for their unpaid labor. Some owners taught children to read as well as a trade and occasionally befriended them when they came of age and were ready to start work on their own.

Throughout the 1700s, many immigrants came to America from Europe through the indentured system.

Almost Slavery

Being bound to a cruel or stingy owner could be extremely depressing as it was very close to a slave’s existence. Children and young adults often ran away from their owners and could be caught by the authorities and sent back. Often, an indentured servant was so poor and job prospects were so few at the end of his term of service that the only thing some could do was accept another indenture.





Indentured Servitude and Slavery *(cont.)*

Indian Slaves

English settlers tried to enslave captured Indians without much success. Tens of thousands of Indians were enslaved after major conflicts, such as the Pequot War in Connecticut and the battles with the Tuscarora Indians in North Carolina. Indian slavery was usually unsuccessful because Indian laborers often refused to work and died from starvation, beatings, and depression. It was also easier for Native Americans to escape from their white owners because they were able to survive in the wilderness and were often near villages that would shelter them when they escaped.

African Holocaust

At the time Columbus discovered the New World, the population of Africa was about the same as the population of Europe, a little over 50 million people. In the period between 1526 and 1870, at least 10 million Africans were captured, enslaved, and taken to Europe and the Americas. Approximately 400,000 African slaves were brought to English colonies and America. Millions more were sent to the Middle East and Asia. It was a true holocaust affecting communities throughout Africa.

Seedbed for Slavery

Tobacco was the catalyst for the rise of African slavery in the English colonies. It took nearly all year to raise and harvest the plants and required a great deal of manual labor. Tobacco was a very profitable cash crop for the settlers at Jamestown and the later colonies. The settlers quickly realized that they needed a source of cheap labor. Cultivation of other cash crops such as rice, indigo, sugar cane, and cotton also required cheap labor, and the plantation system of slavery was quickly adopted.





Indentured Servitude and Slavery (cont.)

Growth of African Slavery

The first 20 Africans arrived in America on a Dutch warship in 1619. At first they were treated as indentured servants, but the law and social practice soon came to regard these men and future African arrivals as permanent slaves. In 1640 (just 20 years later) there were about 150 black slaves in Virginia, and by 1650 the number had increased to 300. By 1700 there were about 28,000 African slaves in the colonies.

From 1660 onward, slavery spread quickly through the colonies. A 1662 Virginia law declared that all Africans would remain slaves for life. Male slaves outnumbered females about three to one in the 1600s. Using modern money terms, a slave in the late 1600s cost about \$25 to buy in Africa and could be sold in the Americas for \$150. Since white laborers cost about 70 cents a day, a slave paid for himself over a period of seven to eight months.

Trade Triangle

Slaves were considered trade goods, and they were an integral part of the triangular trade pattern in the colonies. The colonies exported cash crops such as rice, indigo, and tobacco to England. Sugar and molasses were exported to the West Indies, and slaves were imported from Africa.

The total black population was about 550,000 in the 1770s, which was about 20% of the total population. Several thousand slaves lived in the northern colonies and worked on farms or as domestic servants and artisans.

Close to 90% of the slaves lived in the southern colonies, usually on plantations. Up to 8% of the blacks in the 1770s were living as free men, usually in the northern colonies.

The Middle Passage

The *Middle Passage* is the term used for the journey of African slaves across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. Slaves who had already been captured in tribal warfare or kidnapped from their villages by African or Arab slave catchers were often marched hundreds of miles to the coast and sold to sea-going slave traders from Europe or America.





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Aboard Ship

Male slaves often wore spiked iron collars, and slaves were branded like cattle to prove ownership. Once on board ship, Africans were afraid that the white crew would eat them or drink their blood. The death rate was usually about 20% on most voyages but could reach as high as 50% on some ships. Men were shackled hand and feet to prevent escape, revolt, or suicide by drowning.

All of the African slaves were held in tightly packed quarters in savage conditions. The ship's slave quarters had a foul stench, little air, very little drinkable water, and meager amounts of food. To keep the slaves healthy and exercised, they were brought on deck to dance to the music of one of the crew. People who did not exercise enough were whipped.

Slave Life in the Colonies

Slave prisons and slave markets were the holding pens and distribution centers for slaves in the colonies. Men were separated from their wives and children and often sold separately without regard for family bonds. Slaves were examined and marketed like cattle.

Gang labor was a common labor practice. A group of slaves worked the fields under the watchful eye of a harsh overseer. Field hands were less valuable in the social and economic context of Southern slavery than were domestic servants or urban slaves, who

sometimes had acquired skills as craftsmen. Few male slaves had duties in an owner's house.

Slaves usually owned no property, were forbidden to learn how to read and write, could not be witnesses in a court, and had no personal rights—regardless of how cruelly they were treated by an owner or any other white. Owners whipped, brutalized, and killed slaves as they wished. Slaves were fed, clothed, and housed in the cheapest manner possible. Plantation owners encouraged women to have many children because children provided an endless source of cheap new slaves. Slave children usually started work by the age of seven.

Slave rebellions terrified plantation owners. A rebellion in 1712 occurred in New York. Other rebellions and conspiracies to revolt occurred throughout the colonies, including in South Carolina in 1729 and in 1730 in Virginia, but these were put down with great force and brutality.

