

Think About it: What was the Importance of Slavery to the Colonies?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial examines slavery in the American colonies in the mid-18th century. It addresses the similarities and differences in slavery in the northern and southern colonies. By incorporating a runaway slave advertisement from a colonial Virginia newspaper, this tutorial enables students to examine the variety of relationships and barriers that racial slavery created in the American colonies.

The importance of slavery to the colonies is addressed in three parts:

1. The Northern Colonies: "A Society With Slaves"

Racial slavery was a critical component of the colonial American economy. Commerce in much of the Atlantic World consisted of enslaved people themselves, crops produced by those enslaved people, and goods destined for societies built on an economic foundation of slavery. Enslaved men, women, and children comprised a significant proportion of the colonial population.

British North America imported between 400,000 and 600,000 enslaved Africans during the colonial period. By 1770, around one-fifth of the approximately 2.3 million people living in British North America (excluding Native Americans) were of African descent. Slavery was legal in every American colony, and it influenced every aspect of colonial society. Economic priorities, demography, and cultures contributed to the creation of distinct regional variants of slavery within colonial America. However, no matter where racial slavery existed, freedom in colonial society was determined along lines of color. Whenever enslaved people attempted to assert their liberty, white colonists responded quickly.

Slavery was not as widespread in northern colonies because of the absence of cash crops like tobacco. Nevertheless, slavery was legal and practiced in the region, and the northern colonies played a key role in the maintenance of the institution elsewhere.

The transatlantic slave trade was central to New England's maritime economy. All of the region's major port cities traded with ships that were active in transporting slaves. For example, Newport, Rhode Island served as a port for as many as 150 ships active in the slave trade by 1740. New England also provided food and manufactured goods to plantations in the southern colonies and the West Indies.

Slavery was widespread in the cities of the northern and middle colonies. By the early 18th century, about

three-quarters of the colonial urban elite owned at least one enslaved person. Philadelphia and New York City were key points where transatlantic slave ships disembarked with human cargo. By 1746, one-fifth of the inhabitants of New York City were trapped in slavery.

Enslaved people who lived in northern colonial cities engaged in work across all economic sectors. In Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia, many enslaved people were sailors and dockworkers. Others worked in domestic service, or earned wages as artisans.

Although the transatlantic slave trade was a vital component of the economy of New York City and other northern cities during the 18th century, the practice of owning enslaved individuals in northern urban areas gradually declined as populations grew and the contracts of indentured servants expired. Facing a surplus of labor and continued demand for their products, many northern urban employers preferred to hire and fire workers at will, rather than make the longer-term investments associated with owning an enslaved person.

Where enslaved Black people constituted a smaller part of the overall population and seemed to pose little threat to the White population, laws regulating slavery were less harsh than those in the South.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In New England, marriages between enslaved men and women were recognized by law, and enslaved individuals could bring a suit in court, testify against White people, own property, and pass it on to their children. These rights did not exist in the southern colonies.

Taken together, these few recognized rights did not equal racial equality. But such laws, combined with the kinds of work that many enslaved people did in northern cities, produced a form of racial slavery that was different from that which occurred on plantations in the Chesapeake region or in the Carolinas.

2. The Southern Colonies: "A Slave Society"

The overwhelming majority of enslaved people in British North America lived in the southern colonies, all of which had established cash crop, plantation economies reliant on enslaved labor by the mid-18th century.

Tobacco cultivation was prevalent in Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay region. By the 1750s, the socioeconomic order that tobacco-growing elites initiated in the wake of Bacon's Rebellion was firmly in place. Under the **gang system of labor**, groups of enslaved workers toiled from sunup to sundown on large tobacco plantations, under the careful watch of White overseers who used intimidation and force to compel maximum production. The work was highly regimented and repetitive and continued throughout the growing season.



TERM TO KNOW

Gang System of Labor

Preferred method of labor organization on tobacco plantations in the Chesapeake, where large groups of enslaved workers toiled in the fields under the close watch of an overseer.

At harvest time, overseers drove the enslaved workers to their physical limits to maximize the harvest. Nevertheless, the gang system of labor provided opportunities for the workers to cooperate with each other and resist their enslavers.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Enslaved people who were capable of working faster in the fields often set a slower pace to protect those who could not work as quickly.



The gang system of labor was prevalent in societies built on a foundation of enslaved labor throughout the Atlantic World. For example, the above image from 1823 (originally published in William Clark's "Ten Views in the Island of Antigua") shows that plantation owners on the Caribbean island of Antigua relied on the gang system to cultivate and harvest sugar cane.

A different system emerged in South Carolina and Georgia as a result of rice cultivation. Rice was also grown in West Africa and, as a result, rice planters in South Carolina and Georgia requested and purchased enslaved Africans who were familiar with the process. These enslaved Africans taught the colonists how to grow a crop that helped to build the wealthiest planter class in the colonies.

Rice cultivation required the draining of swamps and the building of extensive irrigation systems. The local climate fostered diseases such as malaria because mosquitoes lived and reproduced in the irrigated rice fields. Many plantation owners lived in Charles Town or Savannah to avoid disease. Enslaved workers, however, lived on the plantation and, as a result, experienced less direct oversight than those on tobacco plantations in Chesapeake.



DID YOU KNOW

Enslaved Africans possessed a genetic trait that made them less susceptible to malaria, but the same trait contributed to higher risks for sickle cell anemia. Immunity to malaria also reinforced the planters' racist belief that Africans were best suited for labor in tropical climates.

Rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia employed the **task system of labor**. Under this system, enslaved workers received specific tasks to complete during the day. Once their work was done, they had free time for leisure, or to cultivate their own crops. As a result, the task system gave individuals more opportunities to sustain themselves. For example, some hunted and fished to supplement the food produced

in their agricultural plots.



TERM TO KNOW

Task System of Labor

Preferred method of labor organization on rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia, in which enslaved workers received specific tasks to complete during the day, and experienced little oversight after their work was completed.

The immense size of the rice plantations and the amount of labor required to cultivate the plant contributed to significant growth in the enslaved population in these areas and enabled those who lived and worked on rice plantations to gain a degree of cultural autonomy under the task system. Many enslaved people in South Carolina and Georgia retained elements of their native languages and continued traditional customs like basket weaving and others.



The Old Plantation (Slaves Dancing on a South Carolina Plantation), ca. 1785–1795. The image depicts enslaved men and women dancing outside their quarters, perhaps celebrating a wedding. Note that much of their clothing appears to be European, while the musical instruments and pottery are of African origin.

Regardless of where one lived in the southern colonies, racial slavery provided the foundation for a plantation-owning elite that dominated regional politics. Merchants who handled the sale of southern cash crops, along with lawyers who defended the interests of plantation owners, reinforced their influence and power. Wealth and land ownership were concentrated among a handful of families. Below them on the social pyramid were lesser planters and landowning, independent farmers. Convicts, indentured servants, tenant farmers (who comprised half of all White colonial households by 1770) and, finally, Black enslaved people, occupied the bottom levels.

Accot of Sale of 1825 Charges & Net Proceed of 118 new Negroes Slaves. Received by the Schooner Polly Edward Lloyd Commander from the Highward Coast of Africa. in Oct. of 1825. William Davisport & Co. Owners of said Schooner Merchants in Liverpool

Purchaser.	Men	Women	Children	Terms of Payment.	Amount
July. A. Robert Napier	1.		1.	paid	1275. . .
George Cooper	1.	1.	1.	Sept. 12 th paid. Rem. next January.	450. . .
Stephen Townsend	1.			next January.	200. . .
Elizabeth Chandler	1.			ditto	220. . .
Edward Heyman	1.			paid	200. . .
John Amory & Co					
Rich. Goldwin	2.			next January.	300. . .
Samuel Peronneau	1.	1.		paid	510. . .
Paul Doussaint	1.	1.		next September.	120. . .
Samuel Scriven	1.	1.		next January.	300. . .
Sam. Wainwright	2.			next December.	510. . .
Elizabeth Dean	1.			paid	100. . .
Charles Lewis	6.			next January.	1500. . .
J. Rothmablen	6.			ditto	1500. . .
Estate of Royal Spyr.	1.			paid	1000. . .
Paul Spizier	2.			next January.	350. . .
Nathan Miller	1.	1.		paid	270. . .
Benjamin Velebrook	1.			next November.	200. . .
Richard Doude	1.	1.		paid	500. . .
John Mifflin	3.			next January.	750. . .
Capt. Gibson	1.			paid	240. . .
John Perkins	2.			In next September. In next January.	500. . .
Thomas Hargrave	1.			in 2 or 3 months.	200. . .
Abraham Spillitt	1.			paid	105. . .
Samuel Scriven	3.			next January.	795. . .
William Mosdroff	1.			next January.	100. . .
William Walker	2.			next January.	170. . .
Daniel Horry	9.	0.		in 12 months.	2700. . .
J. William Vannelsin & Co	2.			next January.	450. . .
William Matthews	1.			next September.	225. . .
Andrew Lane Blocock	3.	2.		next January.	950. . .
David Adams	15.	19.		next January.	5725. . .
William Dampford & Co	2.			very small sick. next January.	100. . .
George Appleby					
John Molten					
Men.	56.	20.	10.		
Women.	20.				
Boys.	24.				
Girls.	14.				
118 Slaves.				Carried forward	729575. . .

Bookkeeping entry from the firm of Austin & Laurens, Charleston, South Carolina, ca. 1754–1755. It includes accounts related to the sale of enslaved individuals. The original copy of this document is housed in Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library.



THINK ABOUT IT

How might daily life for an enslaved person in the northern colonies and an enslaved person in the southern colonies differ? In what ways might their lives be similar?

3. Enslavers and the Enslaved

The most important relationship within the hierarchy of racial slavery in the American colonies was the one between enslavers and those they enslaved. Enslavers believed that one of the chief purposes of government was to maintain this relationship and to protect it at all costs. They went to great lengths to preserve their position of power and control over what they considered to be their property, as well as the social order that developed around this relationship.

Race was the important line of division within colonial society, as White colonists increasingly considered enslaved and even free Black people as potentially dangerous. Colonial legal codes denied enslaved or free Black people the right to bear arms. Violence and intimidation were also integral to maintaining order. For example, although enslavers publicly prided themselves on their care for the well-being of those they enslaved, they also noted in their diaries that whippings and other severe physical and psychological punishments were appropriate forms of punishment for transgressions. Planters and colonial governments sponsored patrols to police the movement of enslaved people and colluded to capture those who sought to gain their freedom.

Runaway advertisements that enslavers published in the *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg) during the mid-18th century reflected a colonial social order defined by racial slavery, as in the following example:

Runaway Advertisement, the *Virginia Gazette*

Williamsburg, May 24, 1751

May 18, 1751. RAN away on the 14th Instant, from Pocomoke River, in Accomack County, Two Negroe Men, belonging to Robert King, of the said County, one named Dollar, about 21 Years old; had on when he went away, a Grey Fearnought Wastecoate, Virginia-Cloth Breeches, Stockings, Shoes and Hat; the other a short well-set Fellow, named Greenock, about 23 Years old; had a grey Frize Coat, Breeches of the same Cloth of the other Fellow's with Shoes, Stockings and Hat: They are Brothers. Whoever apprehends and conveys them to their said Master, shall have Two Pistoles Reward for each, if taken in Virginia, and Three if in Carolina, besides what the Law allows. Also ran away from the same place, at the same Time, and suspected to be in Company with them, a **Mulatto** Man and Woman, belonging to James Pettigrew, of the said County; the Fellow is about 25 Years old, has a large Scar over his right Eye, in the Shape of a half Moon he is a strong active Fellow named James: the Wench is young, and named Tabitha. Whoever apprehends and conveys them to their Master, shall have a Reward of Three Pistoles for the Fellow and half a Pistole for the Wench, besides what the Law allows. Likewise, ran away from the said Place, at the same Time, and suspected to be in Company with them, a Mulatto Boy and a Negroe Woman, belonging to William Andrews, of the said County, the Boy is about 7 Years old, named Hamlet Robertson, the Wench is small, about 35 Years old, named Pleasant. Whoever apprehends and conveys them to their Master, shall have a Reward

of Two Pistoles, besides what the Law allows. They are armed with Guns...and have broke open several Houses in the said County, committed Felonies, have taken a Canoe, and 'tis imagined will take the first larger Vessel they meet with, in order to cross the [Chesapeake] Bay.

[Signed] Robert King. James Pettigrew. William Andrews.



TERM TO KNOW

Mulatto

Individual of mixed African and European descent; use of this term is considered outdated and offensive.



DID YOU KNOW

A pistole was a Spanish gold coin also known as a doubloon. The colonies were not allowed to coin their own money, which meant that foreign coins such as the pistole became a preferred means of currency exchange in America prior to the Revolution.



THINK ABOUT IT

What evidence of violence or coercion on the part of enslavers does the advertisement provide? What evidence of independence and cooperation on the part of the enslaved does the advertisement provide? Runaways challenged the very foundations of the relationship that enslavers believed they had with those they enslaved. While calling for the return of their perceived property, runaway advertisements provide a glimpse of the extent to which enslavers thought that they knew the individuals they enslaved.

The advertisement also provides evidence of slavery's violent and coercive nature. Note the "large Scar" over the "right Eye" of James, which could have come from a work accident—or from an overseer's whip. Also note the "Mulatto Boy" alongside a woman (possibly his mother), which may indicate sexual violence against an enslaved woman by a White planter. The advertisement provides evidence that enslaved people—in this case two brothers, a man and a woman, and a woman and child—were able to maintain relationships and communicate with each other despite their enslavers' attempts to control their lives.

On one hand, runaway advertisements display the legal and social apparatus that enslavers used to control other human beings. On the other hand, the ads reveal that enslaved people actively attempted to undermine and escape this control.



SUMMARY

By the mid-18th century, racial slavery permeated the American colonies. Although the economy of the northern colonies was not based on cash crops, New Englanders participated in the transatlantic slave trade, and cities including New York City and Philadelphia were important centers for the sale of human beings.

The majority of enslaved Africans lived in the southern colonies. The gang system of labor flourished on tobacco plantations in Chesapeake, while the task system of labor was better suited to rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia. Regardless of which system was used, racial slavery supported a White colonial elite that went to great lengths to preserve its power. As a result of these

efforts, whiteness became increasingly associated with freedom and privilege, while blackness was associated with enslavement and inferiority.

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