It is fair to say, the African American population of the English colonies suffered numerous atrocities, violations, and degradations throughout the life span of colonial life. However, to many it is unknown that African American slaves weren’t the only non-free people throughout the colonies who were degraded and treated with such indignity that the aftershock is still felt through the United States today. Indentured servants of Irish, English, and other European descent as well as Native American captives were confronted with many of the same inhumane conditions that African American slaves were exposed to in the tumultuous time period. African American slaves and indentured servants alike were stripped of their humanity through various methods such as being treated as a man’s property, being compared to wild animals, and by a lack of material wealth to a point in which starvation was a constant threat.

To begin, African American slaves and indentured servants both were reduced to a social standing no higher than the goods and property his or her owner had collected. Through numerous runaway advertisements this commonality can be clearly seen. “A common feature of colonial newspapers from Massachusetts to Georgia were advertisements for runaway servants and slaves, which numbered in the thousands. The ads could be found among other notices for lost or stolen goods, for debt collections and foreclosures, or for the sale of real estate, servants, slaves, or animals.” (Colonial America’s Most Wanted). The primary source clearly references both slaves and servants alike not only attempting to flee their inhumane bondage which asserts a degree to assume their conditions in their captivity was more alike than previously assumed. But this evidence also demonstrates slaves and servants were degraded to the point of no longer being recognized as a human being by their holders. They were reduced to a product, a good which had been misplaced. Not only were slaves and indentured servants reduced to be nothing more than a trade good to the English colonists. They also endured the same grueling physical labor and hefty punishments provided to them by their English owners.

While indentured servants and African American slaves eventually were separated into two groups due to growing racial prejudice. In the beginning they were both subjected to the same rigorous work detail and harsh punishments. “Black slaves and white servants toiled in the swamps of Georgia, in the tobacco fields of Virginia, in the iron shops of Pennsylvania, and in the homes and on the docks of Boston. Both called their bosses “master” and endured whippings as the most common form of discipline.” (Colonial America’s Most Wanted). In this time, slaves and servants were not so distinguishable, they could be white, black, Indian, or another nationality and yet their work was the same body breaking toil and their punishments severe. Servants were allowed to be punished like slaves to the fact where the grand assembly of Virginia enacted a law which allowed servants to be punished after running away. “It is declared and enacted by this Assembly that moderate corporal punishment inflicted by master or magistrate upon a runaway servant shall not derivate the master of the satisfaction allowed by the law.” (Virginia Slave Laws). While the work and punishments for both parties involved were severe, the English employed other tactics of ensuring their slaves and servants alike maintained the mindset that they were subhuman.

To expand upon the English colonial mindset, they intended to present slaves and servants as something that was below human. Likening them to animals this was another tactic to influence others to see slaves and servants as such. As well as instill the mindset to the slaves and servants that they were subhuman. “And forasmuch as the said negroes and other slaves brought unto the people of this province for that purpose, are of barbarous, wild, savage natures.” (Slavery and Prejudice). This provides a foundation that slaves and servants alike were reduced to nothing but wild animals in the mind of the colonists. These claims that servants and slaves were wild animals only draws the fact closer that slaves and servants were not treated as differently as so many people have come to believe so. The article continues of the temperaments and natural inclinations of slaves and servants. “…should in this Providence be made and enacted, for the good regulating and ordering of them, as may restrain the disorders, rapines, and inhumanity, to which they are naturally prone and inclined.” (Slavery and Prejudice). Clearly through the evidence provided slaves and servants alike were likened to animals. However, these similarities span to their material wealth they were able to accrue, if any at all.

An indentured servant’s letter to his father describes the conditions in which his indentured servitude forced him into. “For since I came out of the ship, I never ate anything but peas, and loblollie. As for deer or venison I never saw any since I came into this land.” (Richard Frethorne). These were the conditions for all slaves or servants. While many stole from one another to stay alive they faced starvation and death on a daily basis. Hunger and starvation weren’t all that they faced. The slaves and servants alike had no decent clothes to keep them warm or decent homes in which they could brave the cruel conditions of the colonies after a long day in their respective labor roles. “I have nothing at all- no, not a shirt to my back but two rags, nor but one pair of shoes… but one cap.” (Richard Frethorne). These were the economic conditions for all servants and some slaves. Albeit, these conditions gradually degraded for slaves of an African American descent these harsh conditions were what slaves and servants alike experienced when they first arrived in the colonies.

It’s always difficult to determine whether one man’s plight is worse than another’s. However, brought forth by the evidence it is fair to say that slaves and servants both shared many similarities in terms of how they were treated, punished, and lived in the English colonies. Through these documents presented and the evidence provided servants and slaves lived more similar than different throughout their time in the English colonies. While there were vast differences between the two many of their experiences shared multiple commonalities.

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