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## British North America

### I. Introduction

Whether they came as servants, slaves, free farmers, religious refugees, or powerful planters, the men and women of the American colonies created new worlds. Native Americans saw fledgling settlements grow into unstoppable beachheads of vast new populations that increasingly monopolized resources and remade the land into something else entirely. Meanwhile, as colonial societies developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fluid labor arrangements and racial categories solidified into the race-based, chattel slavery that increasingly defined the economy of the British Empire. The North American mainland originally occupied a small and marginal place in that broad empire, as even the output of its most prosperous colonies paled before the tremendous wealth of Caribbean sugar islands. And yet the colonial backwaters on the North American mainland, ignored by many imperial officials, were nevertheless deeply tied into these larger Atlantic networks. A new and increasingly complex Atlantic World connected the continents of Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

Unidentified artist, *The Old Plantation*, c. 1790–1800, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Museum. Wikimedia.

Events across the ocean continued to influence the lives of American colonists. Civil war, religious conflict, and nation building transformed seventeenth-century Britain and remade societies on both sides of the ocean. At the same time, colonial settlements grew and matured, developing into powerful societies capable of warring against Native Americans and subduing internal upheaval. Patterns and systems established during the colonial era would continue to shape American society for centuries. And none, perhaps, would be as brutal and destructive as the institution of slavery.

## II. Slavery and the Making of Race

After his arrival as a missionary in Charles Town, Carolina, in 1706, Reverend Francis Le Jau quickly grew disillusioned by the horrors of American slavery. He met enslaved Africans ravaged by the Middle Passage, Indians traveling south to enslave enemy villages, and colonists terrified of invasions from French Louisiana and Spanish Florida. Slavery and death surrounded him.

Le Jau's strongest complaints were reserved for his own countrymen, the English. English traders encouraged wars with Indians in order to purchase and enslave captives, and planters justified the use of an enslaved workforce by claiming white servants were "good for nothing at all." Although the minister thought otherwise and baptized and educated a substantial number of slaves, he was unable to overcome masters' fear that Christian baptism would lead to slave emancipation.<sup>1</sup>

The 1660s marked a turning point for black men and women in English colonies like Virginia in North America and Barbados in the West Indies. New laws gave legal sanction to the enslavement of people of African descent for life. The permanent deprivation of freedom and the separate legal status of enslaved Africans facilitated the maintenance of strict racial barriers. Skin color became more than a superficial difference; it became the marker of a transcendent, all-encompassing division between two distinct peoples, two races, white and black.<sup>2</sup>

All seventeenth-century racial thought did not point directly toward modern classifications of racial hierarchy. Captain Thomas Phillips, master of a slave ship in 1694, did not justify his work with any such creed: "I can't think there is any intrinsic value in one color more than another, nor that white is better than black, only we think it so because we are so."<sup>3</sup> For Phillips, the profitability of slavery was the only justification he needed.

Wars offered the most common means for colonists to acquire Native American slaves. Seventeenth-century European legal thought held that enslaving prisoners of war was not only legal but more merciful than killing the captives outright. After the Pequot War (1636–1637), Massachusetts Bay colonists sold hundreds of North American Indians into slavery in the West Indies. A few years later, Dutch colonists in New Netherland (New York and New Jersey) enslaved Algonquian Indians during both Governor Kieft's War (1641–1645) and the two Esopus Wars (1659–1663). The Dutch sent these war captives to English-settled Bermuda as well as Curaçao, a Dutch plantation colony in the southern Caribbean. An even larger number of Indian slaves were captured during King Philip's War (1675–1676), a pan-Indian uprising against the encroachments of the New England colonies. Hundreds of Indians were bound and shipped into slavery. The New England colonists also tried to send Indian slaves to Barbados, but the Barbados Assembly refused to import the New England Indians for fear they would encourage rebellion.

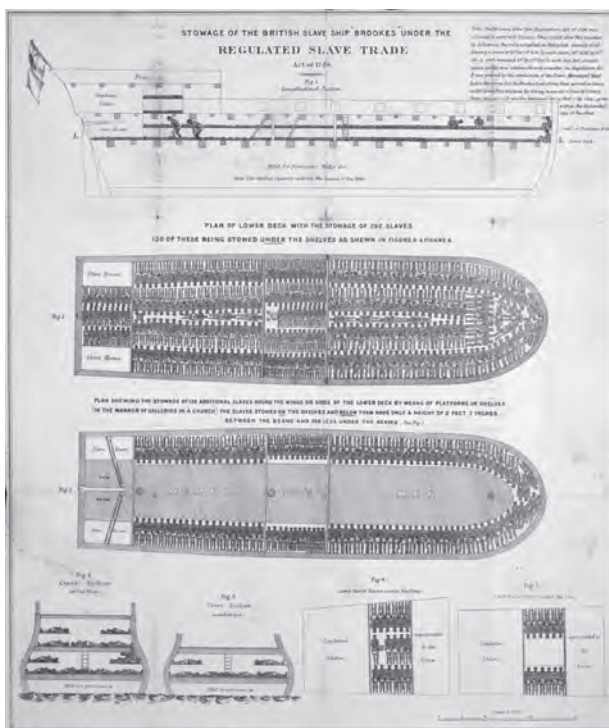
In the eighteenth century, wars in Florida, South Carolina, and the Mississippi Valley produced even more Indian slaves. Some wars emerged from contests between Indians and colonists for land, while others were manufactured as pretenses for acquiring captives. Some were not wars at all but merely illegal raids performed by slave traders. Historians estimate that between 24,000 and 51,000 Native Americans were forced into slavery throughout the southern colonies between 1670 and 1715.<sup>4</sup> While some of the enslaved Indians remained in the region, many were exported through Charles Town, South Carolina, to other ports in the British Atlantic—most likely to Barbados, Jamaica, and Bermuda. Many of the English colonists who wished to claim land in frontier territories were threatened by the violence inherent in the Indian slave trade. By the eighteenth century, colonial governments often discouraged the practice, although it never ceased entirely as long as slavery was, in general, a legal institution.

Native American slaves died quickly, mostly from disease, but others were murdered or died from starvation. The demands of growing plantation economies required a more reliable labor force, and the transatlantic slave trade provided such a workforce. European slavers transported millions of Africans across the ocean in a terrifying journey known as the Middle Passage. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Olaudah Equiano recalled the fearsomeness of the crew, the filth and gloom of the hold, the inadequate provisions allotted for the captives, and the despera-



tion that drove some slaves to suicide. (Equiano claimed to have been born in Igboland in modern-day Nigeria, but he may have been born in colonial South Carolina, where he collected memories of the Middle Passage from African-born slaves.) In the same time period, Alexander Falconbridge, a slave ship surgeon, described the sufferings of slaves from shipboard infections and close quarters in the hold. Dysentery, known as “the bloody flux,” left captives lying in pools of excrement. Chained in small spaces in the hold, slaves could lose so much skin and flesh from chafing against metal and timber that their bones protruded. Other sources detailed rapes, whippings, and diseases like smallpox and conjunctivitis aboard slave ships.<sup>5</sup>

“Middle” had various meanings in the Atlantic slave trade. For the captains and crews of slave ships, the Middle Passage was one leg in the maritime trade in sugar and other semifinished American goods, manufactured European commodities, and African slaves. For the enslaved Africans, the Middle Passage was the middle leg of three distinct journeys from Africa to the Americas. First was an overland journey in Africa to a coastal slave-trading factory, often a trek of hundreds of miles. Second—and middle—was an oceanic trip lasting from one to six months in a



Slave ships transported 11–12 million Africans to destinations in North and South America, but it was not until the end of the 18th century that any regulation was introduced. The Brookes print dates to after the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788, but still shows enslaved Africans chained in rows using iron leg shackles. The slave ship Brookes was allowed to carry up to 454 slaves, allotting 6 feet (1.8 m) by 1 foot 4 inches (0.41 m) to each man; 5 feet 10 inches (1.78 m) by 1 foot 4 inches (0.41 m) to each woman, and 5 feet (1.5 m) by 1 foot 2 inches (0.36 m) to each child, but one slave trader alleged that before 1788, the ship carried as many as 609 slaves. *Stowage of the British slave ship Brookes under the regulated slave trade act of 1788, 1789.* Wikimedia.

slaver. Third was acculturation (known as “seasoning”) and transportation to the American mine, plantation, or other location where new slaves were forced to labor.

The impact of the Middle Passage on the cultures of the Americas remains evident today. Many foods associated with Africans, such as cassava, were originally imported to West Africa as part of the slave trade and were then adopted by African cooks before being brought to the Americas, where they are still consumed. West African rhythms and melodies live in new forms today in music as varied as religious spirituals and synthesized drumbeats. African influences appear in the basket making and language of the Gullah people on the Carolina coastal islands.

Recent estimates count between eleven and twelve million Africans forced across the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, with about two million deaths at sea as well as an additional several million dying in the trade’s overland African leg or during seasoning.<sup>6</sup> Conditions in all three legs of the slave trade were horrible, but the first abolitionists focused especially on the abuses of the Middle Passage.

Southern European trading empires like the Catalans and Aragonese were brought into contact with a Levantine commerce in sugar and slaves in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Europeans made the first steps toward an Atlantic slave trade in the 1440s when Portuguese sailors landed in West Africa in search of gold, spices, and allies against the Muslims who dominated Mediterranean trade. Beginning in the 1440s, ship captains carried African slaves to Portugal. These Africans were valued primarily as domestic servants, as peasants provided the primary agricultural labor force in Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> European expansion into the Americas introduced both settlers and European authorities to a new situation—an abundance of land and a scarcity of labor. Portuguese, Dutch, and English ships became the conduits for Africans forced to America. The western coast of Africa, the Gulf of Guinea, and the west-central coast were the sources of African captives. Wars of expansion and raiding parties produced captives who could be sold in coastal factories. African slave traders bartered for European finished goods such as beads, cloth, rum, firearms, and metal wares.

Slavers often landed in the British West Indies, where slaves were seasoned in places like Barbados. Charleston, South Carolina, became the leading entry point for the slave trade on the mainland. The founding of Charleston (“Charles Town” until the 1780s) in 1670 was viewed as a serious threat by the Spanish in neighboring Florida, who began construc-







The first trading post built on the Gulf of Guinea and the oldest European building southern of the Sahara, Elmina Castle was established as a trade settlement by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. The fort became one of the largest and most important markets for African slaves along the Atlantic slave trade. “View of the castle of Elmina on the north-west side, seen from the river. Located on the gold coast in Guinea,” in *Atlas Blaeu van der Hem*, c. 1665–1668. Wikimedia.

tion of Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine as a response. In 1693 the Spanish king issued the Decree of Sanctuary, which granted freedom to slaves fleeing the English colonies if they converted to Catholicism and swore an oath of loyalty to Spain.<sup>8</sup> The presence of Africans who bore arms and served in the Spanish militia testifies to the different conceptions of race among the English and Spanish in America.

About 450,000 Africans landed in British North America, a relatively small portion of the eleven to twelve million victims of the trade.<sup>9</sup> As a proportion of the enslaved population, there were more enslaved women in North America than in other colonial slave populations. Enslaved African women also bore more children than their counterparts in the Caribbean or South America, facilitating the natural reproduction of slaves on the North American continent.<sup>10</sup> A 1662 Virginia law stated that an enslaved woman’s children inherited the “condition” of their mother;

other colonies soon passed similar statutes.<sup>11</sup> This economic strategy on the part of planters created a legal system in which all children born to slave women would be slaves for life, whether the father was white or black, enslaved or free.

Most fundamentally, the emergence of modern notions of race was closely related to the colonization of the Americas and the slave trade. African slave traders lacked a firm category of race that might have led them to think that they were selling their own people, in much the same way that Native Americans did not view other Indian groups as part of the same “race.” Similarly, most English citizens felt no racial identification with the Irish or the even the Welsh. The modern idea of race as an inherited physical difference (most often skin color) that is used to support systems of oppression was new in the early modern Atlantic world.

In the early years of slavery, especially in the South, the distinction between indentured servants and slaves was initially unclear. In 1643, however, a law was passed in Virginia that made African women “tithable.”<sup>12</sup> This, in effect, associated African women’s work with difficult agricultural labor. There was no similar tax levied on white women; the law was an attempt to distinguish white women from African women. The English ideal was to have enough hired hands and servants working on a farm so that wives and daughters did not have to partake in manual labor. Instead, white women were expected to labor in dairy sheds, small gardens, and kitchens. Of course, because of the labor shortage in early America, white women did participate in field labor. But this idealized gendered division of labor contributed to the English conceiving of themselves as better than other groups who did not divide labor in this fashion, including the West Africans arriving in slave ships to the colonies. For many white colonists, the association of a gendered division of labor with Englishness provided a further justification for the enslavement and subordination of Africans.

Ideas about the rule of the household were informed by legal and customary understandings of marriage and the home in England. A man was expected to hold “paternal dominion” over his household, which included his wife, children, servants, and slaves. In contrast, slaves were not legally masters of a household and were therefore subject to the authority of the white master. Slave marriages were not recognized in colonial law. Some enslaved men and women married “abroad”; that is, they married individuals who were not owned by the same master and did not live on the same plantation. These husbands and wives had to travel miles at a time, typically only once a week on Sundays, to visit their spouses. Legal

