

CHAPTER FOUR: SLAVERY AND EMPIRE, 1441–1770

THE BEGINNINGS OF AFRICAN SLAVERY

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West Africans

THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH AMERICAN SLAVE SOCIETIES

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SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS

- *The development of the slavery system
- *The history of the slave trade and the Middle Passage
- *Community development among African Americans in the eighteenth century
- *The connections between the institution of slavery and the imperial system of the eighteenth century
- *The early history of racism in America

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: AFRICAN SLAVES BUILD THEIR OWN

COMMUNITY IN COASTAL GEORGIA In the rice belt of coastal Georgia, planters lacked

experience in rice cultivation and turned to slaves who brought in African methods. Africans struggled to make a place for themselves in the brutal world. They forced masters to operate on the task system which gave slaves more control over their time. Some ran away or directly attacked their masters. But most remained on the plantations and built a community that created and sustained an African-American culture. The vignette illustrates how slaves had become in the words of one contemporary, a “nation within a nation.”

THE BEGINNINGS OF AFRICAN SLAVERY Africans had been a source of slaves long before the arrival of Europeans. Moors of northern Africa controlled an extensive slave trading network that sent slaves to the Islamic world. In 1441 Portugal entered the trade by bringing slaves to work on sugar plantations on the island colony of Madeira. Sugar production spread to the Caribbean as Portugal, Holland, Spain, and England established colonies to produce the crop, which dominated the New World economy. This in turn led to a heavy demand for slave laborers. Slaves taken from West Africa came from polygamous societies based on sophisticated systems of agriculture and metalworking. Wide networks of trade enriched the powerful Muslim kingdoms that developed along the upper Niger River. Slavery was an established institution in Africa, but not necessarily a permanent condition.

THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE The movement of African across the Atlantic was the largest forced migration in history. The typical immigrant to the New World came from Africa not Europe. Before 1800 African immigrants to the Western Hemisphere outnumbered Europeans by a six-to-one margin. Ten to eleven million African slaves came to the New World, though only about one-in-twenty came to what became the United States. Traders from various European nations tried to ply the lucrative slave trade. Europeans rarely went inland into Africa. Instead they worked out arrangements with local headmen and chiefs and bought slaves from local African traders. Most slaves were taken by African armies or small bands of Africans who raided villages and took prisoners. As the demand for slaves increased, raiders went deeper into the African interior. Once captured, slaves were marched hundreds of miles to the coast, many dying along the way. Slaves were collected in *barracoons*, separated from families, branded, and systematically dehumanized. Slaves were crammed into ships with poor food and no sanitation. One in every six slaves died in the Middle Passage. Some slaves revolted or tried to jump overboard, others refused to eat. Upon arrival in the Americas, Africans experienced the humiliation of being sold. The slave trade devastated the interior African kingdoms that became dependent on the European trade.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH AMERICAN SLAVE SOCIETIES The first Africans arrived in 1619 but only a small number followed over the next fifty years. Slavery did not establish itself as an institution until the last quarter of the seventeenth century. After Bacon's Rebellion and other social conflicts of the 1670s many colonial leaders saw slavery as a way of insuring social peace. Increased life spans also made slavery economical. By 1700 the number of African slaves surpassed the number of indentured servants. As slavery became more important the legal status of slaves became more clearly defined. In the Chesapeake, a tobacco economy grew on a mixture of large plantations and small farms. Unlike other slave areas, by 1730 the Chesapeake slave population had achieved self-sustained growth. In the lower South, initially the Indian slave and buckskin trade was important. By the early 1700s, the economy revolved around rice and indigo. Large plantations dominated the region. Although the Spaniards had

doubts about slavery's morality, their Cuban sugar plantations were as brutal as any. But elsewhere the system was more benign. Slavery in Florida was more like household slavery than plantation slavery. In New Mexico, the Spanish employed forced Indian labor. French settlers used slaves in their Gulf Coast colonies, but slaves made up only one-third of the population. North of the Chesapeake slavery was less important. Slavery there was more of an urban phenomena.

AFRICAN TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN Increasingly the North American slave population became “Creole”—native-born—and created an African-American culture. African slaves also built the South. Most slaves were agricultural laborers, who received a meager subsistence, which they supplemented. When large plantations developed, labor specialization arose. Despite having no legal sanction, slaves built stable families. The eighteenth century was the formative period in the development of an African-American culture. African slaves replicated some African customs in marriage and naming customs. Naming practices allowed them to establish a system of kinship. There was no large-scale effort to Christianize slaves until after the 1760s. Slaves maintained African traditions in various parts of life, especially in their burial ceremonies. Slaves’ music, dance, and language indicate an emerging hybrid culture as European and African patterns merged. The slaves' common language facilitated communication between American born and African slaves. As the English were shaping African culture, so was English culture being shaped both by the Africans and Indians. New foods, words, accents, musical and dance forms became a part of white culture. Slavery was based upon the use of force and violence, but slaves found ways of resisting. Through day-to-day acts of resistance like malingering, breaking tools or running away as individuals or into maroon colonies, they maintained a rebellious spirit. Several full-scale revolts broke out, but revolts were rare, compared with other New World slave societies.

SLAVERY AND THE ECONOMICS OF EMPIRE Slavery helped create the conditions for industrialization. The European New World empires grew rich off of the great profits earned in the slave trade and plantation agriculture. In the Americas, slavery stimulated a tremendous growth in commerce and commercial towns, as well as helping finance the rise of modern banks, insurance companies, and the textile industry. With such great profits, Europeans sought controls over their imperial system. They governed their empires through the principles of mercantilism. Trade had to be regulated to insure maximum accumulation of wealth. These goals put them in conflict with other empires. England, France, and Spain struggled for control over North America and the Caribbean in a series of wars that had their European counterparts. In an effort to control trade the British chartered state trading monopolies and enacted a series of regulations known as the Navigation Acts. Merchants from other nations were forbidden to trade in the colonies. Certain enterprises could not be conducted in the colonies. The British did not enforce their restrictions to the detriment of trade, pursuing a policy of “salutary neglect.” Within this system, the colonial economy grew rapidly as American products were sold throughout Europe and the port cities expanded their trade. The port cities became part of an expanding trade network, linking slave plantations with Atlantic markets.

SLAVERY AND FREEDOM Slavery produced a society with a small elite of wealthy planters and a mass of unfree men and women. By the 1770s, most of the wealthiest Virginians had inherited their fortunes and emerged as a self-perpetuating governing class that was active in

politics. A similar elite ruled the lower South, though the planters resided in fashionable Charleston. About half of the white males were small farmers and the gap between them and the wealthy planters steadily grew. In the plantation regions, about 40% of the population owned no land. Yet however poor a white might be, having white skin was a tremendous advantage. Laws stated that the mother determined the race of the child, meaning many white men's children were raised as slaves. Laws also insured that privileges of citizenship were restricted to whites, helping to insure a sense of distance between the races and a sense of superiority among the white population.

CONCLUSION In large part, it was the labor of unfree African slaves which produced the goods that made the New World economies grow.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Students typically think of Africa as a place of stone age hunters and gatherers. A lecture that examines the nature of African civilizations would help eliminate those assumptions. A readable classic on this subject is, Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Little, Brown, 1959).
2. One might give a lecture that traces the role of sugar in the developing New World economy and its impact on European society. Sugar, rum, coffee, tobacco—all slave produced staples—became key parts of the diets of working class Europeans. Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (Viking, 1985) examines the role of sugar in history. Make the connection between the material in previous chapters on the economic motives for settlement with the material in this chapter.
3. A central theme in the text is that African-American culture was “made” by the collective experiences of Africans, acting as a community, in the American environment. A lecture might trace this process of transforming Wolof, Ashanti, Yoruba, etc. peoples into African-Americans.
4. A more conventional approach is to examine the economic growth of the colonies and to look at the role slavery played in that growth. You might stress that by the eve of the American Revolution, whites in the United States had the highest standard of living in the world and try to explain why this was the case. Make the connection between the economic patterns described in the previous chapter and how the New World economy developed in the eighteenth century.

Discussion Questions

1. What characteristics of Africa made it vulnerable to being a source for slaves? Was the slave trade something Europeans did to Africans or did Africans actively participate in it?
2. Prior to 1500 slavery was rarely found in Europe. Why did Europeans suddenly start trying to get slaves? How did the changing economy affect the slave trade?
3. The text refers to the “shock of enslavement.” Why was this so great? How did slaves respond to it?
4. How did slavery vary in different places. Compare slavery in the Chesapeake with slavery in the Lower South, North, New Spain, New France.
5. The authors refer to the emergence of African-American culture. What do they mean by this? By what process did this take place?
6. What was the nature of the conflict between the English and French empires. How did slavery play into this? What other factors led to the nearly century of warfare between the two nations?
7. How would you characterize the white place in slave societies? Were all whites members of the elite class?

Out of Class Activity

Students could research as groups or individuals the issue of how African cultural patterns were continued in America. Students might examine music, family patterns, language, art, dance, folk tales, etc. and try to see how African-American culture grows out of the African background. For suggestions on where to find information on African patterns, see the bibliography below.

If You're Going to Read One Book on the Subject

There are tons of good materials—but if you're looking for some way of getting a quick handle on the subject, try Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (New York, 1993).

Audio-Visual Aids

“Ancient Africans” Uses animation, maps, time line, art, and actual locations to show the growth and development of African civilizations, communities and empires. (Color, 27 minutes, 1970)

“Black on White” From *The Story of English* series. Shows how black English developed from African languages. Explores how white English influenced black English and how black English influenced white English. (Color, 60 minutes, 1986)

“Africa Before the Europeans: 100-1500” Describes the great civilizations and empires that rose and fell in Africa, leaving a great cultural heritage. (Color, 26 minutes, 1986)