

New England Slavers in Colonial America

By James (Jim) Pederson on Nov 6, 2020

Like any other economic exchange, the slave trade developed with a supplier, a consumer, and a trader or merchant that brought the two together. African kingdoms that had access to the western seaboard had a product, people, that they could readily be collected and sold based on labor demand, primarily from the new world during this time period. The English, Dutch, and the American colonists were all involved with the slave trade but the largest participants from the late 1600's to early to mid 1800's, when the slave trade waned and was legally abolished, were the English and New England colonies / states who manufactured the vessels and moved the human cargo. This proved essential to the economic development of New England. Weapons, manufactured goods, and rum would be brought to Africa to be traded in a barter system with African chieftains for people they held as slaves. The return trip would take the slave ships to the Caribbean or South America where slaves would be traded for sugar or molasses which was, in turn, returned to New England to be distilled into rum and the process would repeat itself. (Jarvis 2002)

Slavery has existed throughout human history and has meant slightly different things based on the culture or society. It was typically a result of losing a war (there were significant wars in West Africa during this time period), or inheritance, or poverty where someone would sell themselves into slavery. The term "Slave" was short for Slavic because they frequently wound up in these conditions. (Mitcham 2020, p. 2) Racial slavery originated in the ninth century when Arab-Muslims and Berbers established the trans-Saharan slave routes that eventually brought 10,000,000 Africans to North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Prior to this, the vastness and difficulty in crossing the Sahara kept the two populations apart. Some were captured by Muslim military raids but most were sold by their fellow Africans. This continued until the

[About James \(Jim\) Pederson](#)

1 of 7 pages

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19th century. Slavery was an accepted practice in many African societies even before the arrival of Muslims but grew as many Africans converted to Islam and entered the human trafficking business. Contrary to the popularized image of Europeans hunting down slaves in Africa, it is estimated that 90% of the slaves sold to Europeans and Americans were already living as slaves in Africa. (Mitcham 2020, p. 2)

In the 1400's the Portuguese established trading posts along the west coast of Africa, principally for the purpose of slave trading, and business was expanded to the new world in 1503 by the Spanish. The British became involved in the slave trade starting in 1562 and found it very profitable. By 1713 they came to dominate it after the Treaty of Asiento. (Mitcham 2020, p. 2) England opened the market to all Englishmen in 1749 and New England responded to the opportunity with Boston and Providence becoming the main seaports and New York becoming the financial center of the slave business.

The slave trade was facilitated by an Atlantic Creole population that developed along the west coast of Africa starting with the earliest European traders. Many learned to work as intermediaries, using their linguistic skills and their familiarity with the Atlantic's diverse commercial practices, cultural conventions, and diplomatic etiquette to mediate between African merchants and European sea captains. Some became employed by large European trading companies. (Berlin 1998, p. 17) The Atlantic Creoles were in the business of brokering trade across the Atlantic and many could move easily between different cultures and religions. Some became wealthy and prominent, despite their lack of pure European lineage, and Atlantic Creole communities developed first in Spain and then in other port towns along the trading routes. Others,

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however, might find themselves being sold into slavery themselves as the result of a miscalculation or misstep. (Berlin 1998, p. 17-23)

Of the total number of slaves brought from Africa to the New World and sold to European planters, roughly 90% were sold in the Caribbean and South America and no more than 10% in the American colonies, most of which came later. Many slaves during the colonial period came to the colonies from the Caribbean as opposed to directly from Africa. (Berlin 1998, p. 50-53) By the time the Deep South developed and was populated, the legal slave trade had already ended. American slave traders, who were financed by New York banks, purchased specially made ships that packed as many people as possible into as small a place as possible and the human losses in transit were startling being as high as 20%. (Mitcham 2020, p. 8) These were the same or similar ships to what was used to transfer convicts and other unwilling migrants from England to the colonies (Walsh 2007).

The slave trade, which peaked in the American colonies around 1760, proved to be extremely profitable creating an economic ripple effect across New England helping the region develop both in trade and manufacturing capability. In the context of American history and economic development, this can be seen as at least as significant as the slave as a part of an agricultural work force. The wealth of many of the aristocratic families in New England and New York can be traced to the slave trade and then was gradually diversified into other areas. As the saying goes, "First you obtain money and then you obtain morals." While a vast and profitable slave trade developed during the mid-seventeenth century, it largely bypassed the English mainland colonies. The twenty some Africans sold in Point Comfort in 1619 were sold as indentured servants and were no more or less free than the indentured

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3 of 7 pages

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free willers and convicts they would have encountered. The common modern image is that the Africans were from the outset treated worse than the European workforce, the victims of English racism, but there is no real evidence that these initial Africans were treated any different from the English indentured servants. Racism may have existed but economic motivations were paramount. (Walsh 2007, p. 169-71) According to the African-American historian Audrey Smedley: 'Early references to blacks reveal little clear evidence of general or widespread social antipathy on account of their color.'" From this time forward, English privateers would periodically arrive in the Virginia with Africans for sale brought for the Dutch territories and the West Indies but by mid-century there was only a population of about 300 from a total population of 11,000. For the first 40 years, African immigrants, although fairly small in number, were integrated into a forced labor system where Black men and women worked side by side with the European counterparts. This was true not only in Virginia but also in New England and New York. (Walsh 2007, p. 169-71)

The development of permanent slavery in the colonies was something that happened gradually and had some strange twists. One of the Africans initially sold as a servant, Anthony Johnson as he came to be known who was an Atlantic Creole, played a significant role. Johnson not only survived his time of indenture but became a successful planter buying his own black and white servants. Johnson spent a dozen years as a servant before being freed and acquired a tract of land to farm on the Pungoteague River. Over the next three decades, he built a sizeable plantation, which he named Angola, and imported more than a dozen servants which helped Johnson accumulate 1,000 acres. In the 1650's, Johnson got into a dispute with an African servant, John Casor, who

New England Slavers in Colonial America

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demanded his freedom and Johnson persuaded a court to enslave the man for life. (Walsh 2007, p. 171-72)

The neighboring planter, Robert Parker, believed Casor had earned his freedom and kept him on his own plantation. Johnson, intent on getting his property back, initiated a legal battle that saw Robert Parker representing the runaway Casor in court. The case dragged on for years with a white planter fighting a black planter to save a black servant from perpetual slavery. The Northampton County Court eventually ruled that Casor had been a slave all along and he was returned immediately to Johnson. Parker was further ordered to pay Johnson two years' worth of damages for the time Casor had been free. This acted as a legal precedent gradually enabling perpetual slavery. Massachusetts also legalized perpetual slavery around the same time (Walsh 2007, p. 174-75).

From around this point forward for the next several decades the status of blacks relative to whites steadily deteriorated although specific historical records are spotty. There are instances of mixed groups of runaways being caught with the white escapees receiving somewhat lesser punishments while some of their black counterparts wound up as permanent slaves or received extensions to their terms that would have the same effect. The numerical imbalance between planters and laborers also led to increasing harsh treatment at any sign of insurrection. In 1671, a measure was passed in Virginia that made all 'non-Christian servants' newly shipped into Virginia slaves for life. Black freedman were no longer treated as equals to White planters under the law as Black planters were barred from owning white servants. (Walsh 2007, p. 170-75)

The growth of an enslaved Black labor force in relation to white laborers happened gradually. Initially whites outnumbered blacks 20 to 1. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the ratio had narrowed to three to one with 2000 black slaves compared to 6,000 white servants. By the early

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5 of 7 pages

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1700's, the balance was roughly 60% to 40%. Both economics and demographics played a role in this. (Walsh 2007, p. 176) The Caribbean plantations were showing much larger profits with an openly enslaved workforce. As mortality rates began to fall and life spans lengthened, the permanent slave started to become a better investment than the indentured servant even at twice the initial cost. Comparing this to the early decades of settlement, the difference between a permanent and temporary slave in a practical sense due to life expectancy, may have been nominal. Also the African death rate in Virginia and the along the Southern seaboard was significantly lower as a result of resistance to tropical diseases (Fischer 1989, p. 42-50).

By the later colonial period, slaveholding became common through the colonies including in New England.(Melish 1998, p. 15) In New England about a quarter of the families owned slaves in 1760 which is roughly the same as in the South in 1860. The difference in overall population ratios was the result of a small number of people owning large numbers of slaves to support large agricultural enterprises which weren't economical in the North.

As the slave population grew, principally through birthrate, and became more deeply engrained in the rapidly expanding economy, it became increasingly difficult to address. Late in his life Thomas Jefferson observed "As it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go." (Mitcham 2020, p. 42)

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