

America's Black Eye: The Rise of Slavery and Slave Societies in Colonial America

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There is nothing more shameful in the history of the United States of America than the establishment of slavery. For nearly two hundred fifty years, human beings were exploited for

labor with little care for their wellbeing, all based on skin color. Children were separated from parents and sold into lifetimes of servitude, men and women alike were savagely beaten, and entire societies were structured around the enslavement of others. In 1619, the first shipment of slaves to America arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. Therefore, one could argue that the institution of slavery was both started and was most notably exploited by the South. However, slavery was abused in all of the original thirteen colonies, and it is foolish to mark slavery as a Southern problem rather than an American problem.

Many historians have devoted their entire careers to examining slavery exclusively in the Chesapeake Bay, as the rise to slavery brings many questions along with it. Some of the most pertinent may include: “Why did the colonies move away from indentured servitude?” and “What was the reason slavery arose in the colonies in such large numbers?” as well as “What led to the development of slave societies and what constitutes one?” In order to properly examine slavery in the Chesapeake Bay, we must start at the beginning.

White indentured servants, while not oppressed due to their race, were largely used in the Southern colonies before African slavery became a staple of the economy.¹ Dr. Russell Menard, a professor of economic and social history at the University of Minnesota, contends in his paper “Making a Popular Slave Society in Colonial British America,” that around the 1660s white Europeans had less of a draw to come to the new world as indentured servants. This was primarily due to the fact that the population was declining, causing wages to rise, leading to “...improved opportunities at home,” and therefore no need for Englishmen to sell themselves into indentured servitude in order to cross the Atlantic to a dangerous new world.²

¹ Ran Abramitzky and Fabio Braggion, “Migration and Human Capital: Self-Selection of Indentured Servants to the Americas.” *The Journal of Economic History* 66, vol 4 (December 2006): 882-905.

² Russell Menard, “Making a Popular Slave Society in Colonial British America,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, (Winter 2013): 378-379.

Another scholar who supports the “labor market approach,” as it’s called, is Dr. John C. Coombs. Coombs, a professor of History at Hampden-Sydney College, argues that slavery did not arise because of the preference of slaves over indentured servants, but because the “...decline in the traditional labor supply forced planters to recruit laborers from new sources.”³ In other words, since indentured servitude was now a scarcity, the next logical step in the mind of wealthy elites was to look for the further expansion of the slave market; the slave market had already been active in the colonies for forty years, just in a much smaller scope than we generally conceptualize. Therefore, we can assume that the end of indentured servitude was what directly led to the rise of mass slave exploitation. However, was slavery simply an answer to an economic problem? There was an estimated forty-two trillion dollars made off the practice of slavery in the United States; was the pursuit of profit the reason why slavery was so largely exploited or was there something else that allowed slavery to be implemented as a cornerstone of the American culture before this?⁴

The practice of slavery brought economic gain to the colonies that exploited them. However, slaves that were exploited for economic profitability were not the only reason slavery arose in the Chesapeake Bay and spread throughout the early colonies. As mentioned above, both Menard and Coombs are proponents of the “labor market approach.” The labor market approach is simply the belief that the main reason why the colonies transitioned to exploiting the system of slavery was for solely economic reasons. Menard even goes so far as to say that once the Royal African Company’s monopoly over the slave trade expired, the price of a slave was exponentially cheaper. He states that Virginians responded to this by “buying more Africans.”

³ John C. Coombs, *Building “The Machine”*: *The Development of Slavery and Slave Society in Early Colonial Virginia* (W&M Scholarworks, 2004), 69-71.

⁴ Ann Marsh Daley, “Every Dollar Brought from the Earth: Money, Slavery, and Southern Gold Mining.” *Journal of the Republic* 41, vol 4 (2021): 553-585.

The newfound cheap labor combined with the fall of indentured servitude led to "...slaves outnumbering servants in most regions of Virginia..." by the 1690s.⁵ Hence, as soon as slaves became the more economically feasible option, there was a huge dramatic rise in its usage. By this definition, it appears that slavery was used purely as an economically viable answer to meet the demand for cheap labor. While this is the most universally accepted explanation for why slavery was rapidly adopted in such a short period of time, there are scholars who take a different approach to construe the roots of slavery in America.

Dr. Rebecca Anne Goetz, Associate Professor of History at New York University, contends that the rise of slavery was not originally perpetrated as a solution to an economic problem, but rather became widespread as a political tool used against not Africans, but Native Americans. In her article "The Nanziatlicos and the Violence of the Archive: Land and Native Enslavement in Colonial Virginia," Goetz argues that beginning in the 1640s, twenty years before the widespread transition from indentured servants to African slaves, that Native prisoners who were seen as "combative" were "sold to other English colonies to prevent their returning to... their respective tribes."⁶ The forcible removal of people from their tribes was the beginning of the systematic enslavement of Native Americans as not economic slaves, but political slaves. The political enslavement of Natives allowed for further colonial expansion without fear of being attacked by specific tribes. Goetz goes on to indicate that Native people forced into slavery were "thus not useful... for their labor," but rather as a "...mechanism for removal of inconvenient people and an assertion of control over convenient land."⁷ Political enslavement was not for

⁵ Menard, "Making a Popular Slave Society", 379.

⁶ Rebecca Anne Goetz, "The Nanziatlicos and the Violence of the Archive: Land and Native Enslavement in Colonial Virginia", *The Journal of Southern History* 85, vol. 1 (February 2019): 39.

⁷ Goetz, "The Nanziatlicos and the Violence of the Archive", 36-37.

economic gain, but rather was simply a means to achieve control. Goetz argues that to discuss the enslavement of simply African slaves is a complete oversight of a whole other world of human enslavement.

Goetz's theory of slavery completely contradicts the works of Coombs and Menard. Coombs and Menard preserve the commonly accepted position that slavery was the solution to slavery was simply the solution to the loss of access to indentured servitude, and therefore was a means to access cheap labor. However, their labor market approach holds little weight considering they chose to completely ignore the significance of Native American slavery, an institution that existed even longer than African slavery. I argue that we must divide the study of slavery into two separate but equally important categories, economic and political slavery. Political enslavement of Native Americans caused the practice to become an inseparable part of American culture and identity, allowing economic enslavement of Africans to develop and eventually thrive once indentured servitude was no longer monetarily beneficial. The assimilation of slavery into the original colonies, starting with the Native Americans, led to not just its acceptance, but its dominance. The magnitude of slavery, particularly in the early Chesapeake Bay, led to specific communities becoming so dominated by slavery that they require their own categorization. These communities are what historians now refer to as "slave societies."

Slave societies are described as areas, particularly in the South, that arose during colonial times. They can simply be characterized as regions that embraced the practice of slavery as well as maintaining an extensive percentage of the population that was represented by the enslaved. had a huge percentage of the population represented by those who were enslaved. However, what exactly makes a region a "slave society?" According to Coombs, since shipments of slaves were

dispersed throughout the colonies seemingly at random, a slave society was characterized by the culture of where the Africans were taken to. A slave society is defined by the culture of the Africans in a community, rather than the colonists that enslaved them. In a slave society the distinctive African culture that was created "...extended beyond their own plantations into the surrounding neighborhood."⁸ In other words, according to John Coombs, it is a place that had become so dominated by the presence of African slavery that it has its own unique culture which extends past the reaches of one individual plantation to the whole surrounding community. By his definition, a slave taken from one plantation to another while remaining within the same slave society would experience very similar cultural values.

Anthony Parent, a professor of History at Wake Forest University, corroborates Coomb's definition of a slave society. He does so by arguing that the independent nature of living within a slave society encouraged its residents "to think of themselves as autonomous provincials rather than dependant colonials."⁹ Slave owners lived in an area that had a distinctive culture to such an extent that they viewed themselves as being a sovereign region, rather than being tied to their colony. Hence, a slave society was an area where slavery was so widespread it had developed not only its own culture amongst those who are oppressed, but also a feeling of independence and sovereignty within that specific region.

However, not all historians agree with John Coombs' definition of slave societies. One of the most prominent is fellow labor market theorist Russell Menard. While Coomb's supports the theory that the culture of the enslaved define slave societies, Menard relies solely on statistical data. He argues that a slave society is not necessarily dependant on the culture developed by the

⁸ Coombs, *Building "The Machine"*, 135.

⁹ Anthony Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

slaves that lived within a specific region; rather, the South developed very rapidly from a “...slave-owning society to a society that had become fully defined by slavery – that is, a slave society...” by the early eighteenth century.¹⁰ [7] According to Menard, slave societies can be analyzed as regions that have high percentages of an enslaved population. They are not necessarily reliant on immeasurable factors, which leads them to be a largely subjective concept. Instead, there are specific requirements that must be met when comparing the ratio of slaves to non-slaves in a region to determine if a community qualifies as a slave society.

In order to qualify his approach, Menard focuses specifically on St. Mary’s County, Maryland. Based on his data, he contends that slave societies can be broken down into two different categories rather than simply using it as one blanket term. In the first, an “elite slave society,” about “...one third of households headed by free men contained slaves, most slave owners were wealthy older men with political influence...” In an elite slave society, slaves generally made up anywhere from ten to twenty five percent of the population.

The second type of slave society was a “popular slave society.” Here, more than half of the free households owned slaves and as much as forty percent of the region’s population was comprised of slaves. However, the largest factor that primarily sets a popular slave society apart from an elite slave society is that “...young men of middling wealth with no political power...” were generally the prime demographic of slave owners.¹¹ Popular slave societies exhibited popularity in more rural regions, as a higher percentage of the population utilized slave labor for field work, while elite slave societies used slavery as a symbol of status. Regardless of if a slave society is defined by the culture of those who were enslaved or the statistical patterns of the slave owner, slave societies expanded rapidly throughout the South during the eighteenth

¹⁰ Menard, “Making a Popular Slave Society”, 380.

¹¹ Ibid., 394.

century. Before America had even gained its independence, the South had already cemented its legacy as the primary abuser of slavery in the United States.

One of the most infuriating aspects of American history is studying its connection to the bondage of other humans. Slavery was an institution in the United States for two hundred fifty-eight years, and was only abolished one hundred fifty-six years ago. It has unquestionably affected every person who lived during the time period in one way or another, regardless of skin color. Slavery ruined the lives of the tens of millions who were put in chains their entire life, as well as the lives of the hundreds of thousands who died trying to either secede from or hold together a divided nation. All this over slavery. America cannot be defined without its history of enslavement, and it is so interconnected to such an extent that “pre 1900s American history” is almost synonymous with the study of the causes or effects of slavery.

Of course, the story of African slaves does not end in the year 1865. Slavery, whether of Africans or Native Americans, led to the formation of Jim Crow laws that lasted for one hundred years after slavery was formally abolished by the thirteenth amendment. Slavery was so significant that it is undoubtably one of the most important events to ever transpire in American history. As John Coombs offers, once America had committed to “...the private tyranny of slaveholding, they had little choice but to support the public tyranny of racism.”¹² In other words, the adoption of racial enslavement in early American history will forever plague the nation’s race relations, as it continues to do today over a hundred and fifty years after the formal end of slavery.

The rise of slavery, beginning with the Native Americans for political purposes and eventually leading to the economic enslavement of Africans, led to slavery being embeded as a

¹² Coombs, *Building “The Machine”*, 250.

fundamentally inseparable aspect of colonial America. The admission of slavery into everyday life directly led to the rapid expansion of slave societies throughout the South. Even though slavery was undisputedly exploited throughout the original thirteen American colonies, why is it largely viewed as a Southern issue? The South became completely dependant on their slave societies, which simply did not exist to the same extent in the North, and as a result will forever be charged as the primary exploiter of slavery.

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