

Topic 2.6

Slavery in the British Colonies

*In every human Breast, God has implanted a Principle,
which we call Love of Freedom.*

Phillis Wheatley, "A Principle Which We Call Love of Freedom," 1774

Learning Objective 1: Explain the causes and effects of slavery in the various British colonial regions.

Learning Objective 2: Explain how enslaved people responded to slavery.

With the colonial emphasis on agriculture came a demand for labor. Since the Native Americans could escape too easily and the supply of indentured servants was too small, landowners looked for another source of workers. They turned to the labor of enslaved Africans, especially in the southern colonies. The transatlantic slave trade (see Topic 2.4) was important to the economy, and much of the trade was financed or conducted by people in the northern colonies.

Demand for Labor

In Maryland and Virginia, landowners saw great opportunities for profit because of the European demand for tobacco. They could get land by taking it or trading for it from the American Indians. But they could not find enough laborers willing to work for low wages. The high death rate from disease, food shortages, and battles with American Indians meant that the population of colonists grew slowly. Landowners tried several ways to find the workers they wanted.

Indentured Servants The early colonists of the Virginia Company were struggling to survive and too poor to purchase enslaved Africans as the owners of sugar plantations in the West Indies did. Instead, the Virginia Company hoped to meet the desire for labor using indentured servants. Under contract with a master or landowner who paid for their passage, those from the British Isles agreed to work for a specified period—usually four to seven years—in return for room and board. Indentured servants were under the absolute rule of their masters until the end of their work period. At the end of that period, they gained their freedom and could work for wages or obtain land of their own. For landowners, the system provided laborers, but only temporarily.

Headright System Virginia attempted to attract immigrants through offers of land. It offered 50 acres of land to each immigrant who paid for his own passage and to any plantation owner who paid for an immigrant's passage.

The Institution of Slavery

In 1619, an English ship serving the Dutch government sold an unusual group of about 25 **indentured servants** to Virginia: the servants were Black Africans. These first Africans in Virginia were not in life bondage, and children born to them were free. However, this soon changed. By the end of the 1660s, the Virginia House of Burgesses enacted laws that kept Africans and their offspring in permanent bondage. They were enslaved.

By the early 18th century, the number of enslaved people and laws to control them had greatly expanded. All British colonies included at least some enslaved laborers. The fewest were in New England, where small farmers had little demand for additional workers. More were in the Middle Colonies, particularly in the port cities, where African Americans often worked loading and unloading ships and as sailors. Most were in the southern colonies, working on plantations. By 1750, half of Virginia's population and two-thirds of South Carolina's population were enslaved.

The British colonies with the highest number of enslaved people were the West Indian sugar islands. During the course of American **slavery**, about 95 percent of enslaved Africans were delivered to the West Indies or Brazil. Less than 5 percent went to the British colonies in North America.

Increased Demand for Enslaved Africans Several factors explain why slavery became increasingly important, especially in the southern colonies:

- *Reduced migration:* Increases in wages in England reduced the supply of immigrants to the colonies.
- *Dependable workforce:* Large plantation owners were disturbed by the political demands of small farmers and indentured servants and by the disorders of Bacon's Rebellion (see Topic 2.5). They thought that slavery would provide a stable labor force totally under their control.
- *Low-cost labor:* As tobacco prices fell (see Topic 2.4), rice and indigo became the most profitable crops. To grow such crops required a large land area and many inexpensive, relatively unskilled field hands.

This increased demand also supported the active, profitable, and ruthless triangular trade (see Topic 2.4).

Slave Laws As the number of enslaved workers increased, White colonists adopted laws to ensure that they would be held in bondage for life and that slave status would be inherited. In 1641, Massachusetts became the first colony to recognize the enslavement of "lawful" captives. Virginia in 1661 enacted legislation that children automatically inherited their mother's enslaved status for life. By 1664, the English law that people baptized as Christians could not be enslaved was being overturned. Maryland declared that baptism did not affect

the enslaved person's status and that White women could not marry African American men. As slavery became common, Whites began to regard all Blacks as inferior. Racism and slavery evolved into integral parts of colonial society.

Resistance to Slavery Although very difficult, many Africans challenged enslavement. They struggled to maintain family ties, even though slaveowners could break up a family by selling off a husband or a wife or a child at any time. Even as many adopted Christianity, they kept elements of the African religious practices they had brought with them. They used songs and storytelling to maintain traditions and customs. They resisted slavery through direct action such as going on hunger strikes, breaking tools, refusing to work, or fleeing—even if they knew they would likely be caught and punished harshly. The owners' concern over slave resistance was reflected over the years in the enactment of new laws to control them.

REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain the reasons for slavery in the various British colonies and its impact on them.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

Labor (WXT)
indentured servants

headright system
slavery

Middle Passage

MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

Questions 1–2 refer to the following excerpt.

“These are the reasons we are against the traffic of mens-body. . . . Now, though they are black, we cannot conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves as it is to have other white ones [slaves]. There is a saying that we shall do to all men like as we will be done ourselves, making no difference of what generation, descent, or color they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not alike. . . .

In Europe there are many oppressed for conscience sake; and here there are those oppressed which are of a black color . . . This makes an ill report in all those countries of Europe, where they hear of that the Quakers do here handle men like they handle there the cattle. And for that reason some have no mind or Inclination to come hither.”

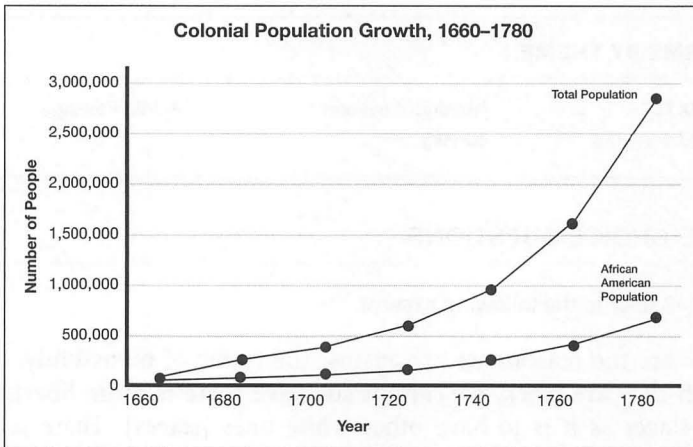
Mennonite Community, Germantown, Pennsylvania, 1688

- The most direct cause of the practice objected to in the source was that
 - landowners wanted more workers than were arriving from Europe
 - investors thought English settlers were unwilling to work hard
 - settlers wanted Africans to come to Virginia to learn Christianity
 - colonists from European spoke too many different languages
- Which of the following reasons does the excerpt suggest best explains why the group took the stance it did?
 - They were defending their economic interests.
 - They were opposed to increasing the colony's population.
 - They felt that the colony should accept only settlers from England.
 - They were motivated by their religion beliefs.

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970

Using the graph above, answer (a), (b), and (c).

- Briefly explain ONE specific historical development or circumstance between 1660 and 1780 that led to the changes in the African American population as depicted in the graph.
- Briefly explain ONE specific effort made by the British authorities during the 17th and early 18th centuries to increase the population levels as depicted in the graph.
- Briefly explain ONE specific cause for the periodic shortages of labor in the colonies during the period between 1660 and 1780.