

# Background Essay: American Slavery in the Colonies

## How did enslaved and free Blacks resist the injustice of slavery during the colonial era?

- I can articulate how slavery was at odds with the principle of justice.
- I can explain how enslaved men and women resisted the institution of slavery.
- I can create an argument supported by evidence from primary sources.
- I can succinctly summarize the main ideas of historic texts.

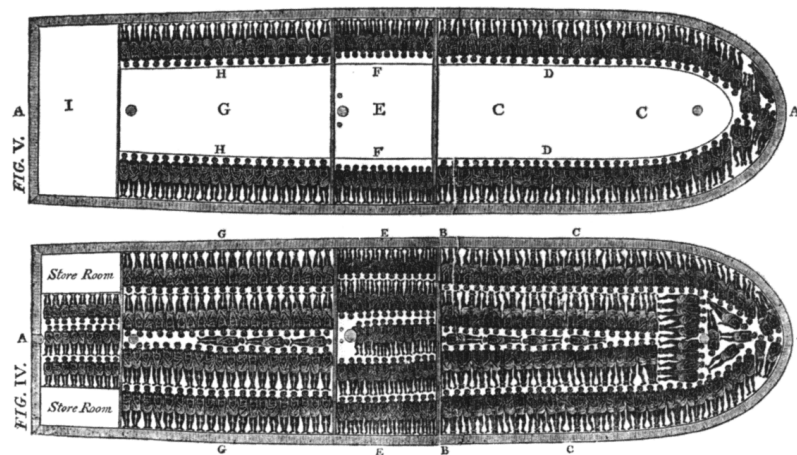
### Essential Vocabulary

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Coerced         | Forced   |
| Atlantic System | System of trade during the 18th and 19th centuries that involved Western Europe, West Africa and Central Africa, and North and South America. Major goods that were traded involved manufactured goods such as firearms and alcohol, slaves, and commodities such as sugar, molasses, tobacco, and cotton. |
| Execrable       | Horrific   |
| Middle Passage  | The part of the Atlantic slave trade where Africans were densely packed onto ships and transported across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World.   |
| Natural rights  | Rights which belong to humans by nature and can only be justly abridged through due process. Examples are life, liberty, and property.   |
| Gang system     | A way of managing enslaved work on plantations in which planters or their overseers drove groups of enslaved persons, closely watched their work, and applied physical coercion to compel them to work faster.   |
| Task system     | A way of managing enslaved work on plantations where enslaved persons were often assigned specific tasks and allowed to stop working when they reached their goals.  |
| Paternalistic   | Making decisions for another person as if a parent, rather than allowing that person the freedom to make their own decisions and choices.  |

Throughout the colonial era, many white colonists in British North America gradually imposed a system of unfree and **coerced** labor upon Africans in all the colonies. Throughout the colonies, enslavement of Africans became a racial, lifelong, and hereditary condition. The institution was bound up with the larger **Atlantic System** of trade and slavery yet developed a unique and diverse character in British North America.

Europeans forcibly brought Africans to the New World in the international slave trade. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth century, European slave ships carried 12.5 million Africans, mostly to the New World. Because of the crowded ships, diseases, and mistreatment, only 10.7 million enslaved Africans landed at their destinations. Almost 2 million souls perished in what a draft of the Declaration of Independence later called an “**execrable commerce**.”

Europeans primarily acquired the enslaved Africans from African slave traders along the western coast of the continent by exchanging guns, alcohol, textiles, and a broad range of goods demanded by the African traders. The enslaved were alone, having been separated from their families and embarked on the harrowing journey called the “**Middle Passage**” in chains. They were frightened and confused by their tragic predicament. Some refused to eat or jumped overboard to commit suicide rather than await their fate.



This diagram depicts the layout of a slave ship.

(Unknown author - an Abstract of Evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of Commons in 1790 and 1791, reprinted in Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara (eds.) (1995). *Africa* third edition. Indiana University Press and James Currey.)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle\\_Passage#/media/File:Slave\\_ship\\_diagram.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_Passage#/media/File:Slave_ship_diagram.png)

Most Africans in the international trade were bound for the European colonial possessions in the Caribbean and South America. The sugar plantations there were places where disease, climate, and work conditions produced a horrifying death rate for enslaved Africans. The sugar crop was so valuable that it was cheaper to work slaves to death and import replacements. About 5 percent of the human cargo in the slave trade landed in British North America.

The African-American experience in the 13 colonies varied widely and is characterized by great complexity. The climate, geography, agriculture, laws, and culture shaped the diverse nature of enslavement.

Enslaved Africans in the British North American colonies did share many things in common, however. Slavery was a racial, lifetime, and hereditary condition. White supremacy was rooted in slavery as its victims were almost exclusively Africans. It was a system of unfree and coerced labor that violated the enslaved person's **natural rights** of liberty and consent. While the treatment of slaves might vary depending on region or the disposition of the slaveholder, slavery was at its core a violent and brutal system that stripped away human dignity from the enslaved. In all the colonies, slaves were considered legal property. In other words, slavery was a great injustice.

Differing climates and economies led to very different agricultural systems and patterns of enslavement across the colonies. The North had mostly self-sufficient farms. Few had slaves, and those that did, had one or two enslaved persons. While the North had some important pockets of large landowners who held larger numbers of slaves such as the Hudson Valley, its farms were generally incompatible with large slaveholding. Moreover, the nature of wheat and corn crops generally did not support slaveholding the same way that labor-intensive tobacco and rice did. Cities such as New York and Philadelphia also had the largest Black populations.

On the other hand, the Chesapeake (Maryland and Virginia) and low country of the Carolinas had planters and farmers who raised tobacco, rice, and indigo. Small farms only had one or two slaves (and often none), but the majority of the southern enslaved population lived on plantations. Large plantations frequently held more than 20 enslaved people, and some had hundreds. Virginian Robert “King” Carter held more than 1,000 people in bondage. As a result, in the areas where plantations predominated areas of the South (especially South Carolina), enslaved people outnumbered white colonists and sometimes by large percentages. This led to great fear of slave rebellions and measures by whites, including slave patrols and travel restrictions, to prevent them.



Robert "King" Carter was one of the richest men in all of the American colonies. He owned more than 1,000 slaves on his Virginia plantation.

Anonymous. Portrait of Robert "King" Carter. Circa 1720. Painting.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Carter\\_I#/media/File:Robert\\_Carter\\_I.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Carter_I#/media/File:Robert_Carter_I.JPG)

The regional differences of slavery led to variations in work patterns for enslaved people. A few Northern enslaved people worked and lived on farms alongside slaveholders and their families. Many worked in urban areas as workers, domestic servants, and sailors and generally had more freedom of movement than on southern plantations.

Blacks developed their own cultures in North and South. Despite different cultures and languages brought from Africa and regional differences within the colonies, a strong sense of community developed especially in areas where they had greater autonomy. Slave quarters on large plantations and urban communities of free blacks were notable for the development of Black culture through resistance, preservation of traditions, and expression. The free and enslaved Black communities kept in conversation with each other to transmit news and to hide runaways.

Different systems of work developed on Southern plantations. One was a “**gang system**” of labor in which planters or their overseers drove groups of enslaved people, closely watched their work, and applied physical coercion to compel them to work faster. They also worked in the homes, laundries, kitchens, and stables on larger plantations.

On the massive rice plantations of the Carolinas, enslaved people were often assigned tasks and allowed to stop working when they reached their goals. The “**task system**” could foster cooperation and provide incentives to complete their work quicker. Plantation slaves completed other tasks including cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, and worked as skilled artisans.

The treatment and experience of enslaved people was rooted in a brutal system but could vary widely. Many slaveholders were violent and cruel, liberally applying severe beatings that were at times limited by law or shunned by society. Others were guided by their Christian beliefs or humanitarian impulses and treated their slaves more **paternalistically**. Domestic work was often easier but under much closer scrutiny than fieldhands who at times enjoyed more autonomy and community with other enslaved people. Slaveholders in New England were more likely to teach slaves to read or encourage religious worship, but enslaved people were commonly restricted from learning to read, especially in the South.

Enslaved people did not passively accept their condition. They found a variety of ways to resist in order to preserve their humanity and autonomy. Some of the common daily forms of resistance included slowing down their pace of work, breaking a tool, or pretending to be sick. Some stole food and drink to supplement their inadequate diets or simply to enjoy it as an act of rebellion. Young male slaves were especially likely to run away for a few days and hide out locally to protest work or mistreatment. Enslaved people secretly learned to read and that allowed them to forge passes to escape to freedom. They sang spirituals out of religious conviction, but also in part to express their hatred of the system and their hope for freedom.





Slaves developed their own culture as a way to bond together in their hardships and show defiance to their owners. This image depicts slaves on a plantation dancing and playing music.

Anonymous. The Old Plantation. Circa. 1790. Painting. Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States#/media/File:Slave\\_dance\\_to\\_banjo,\\_1780s.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_the_United_States#/media/File:Slave_dance_to_banjo,_1780s.jpg)

The enslavement of Africans in British colonies in North America developed differently in individual colonies and among regions. But, the common thread running throughout the experience of slavery was injustice. Blacks were denied their humanity and natural rights as they could not keep the fruits of their labor, lived under a brutal system of coercion, and could not live their lives freely. However, a few white colonists questioned the institution before the Revolutionary War.

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. How did slavery violate an enslaved person's natural rights?

2. How did slavery vary across the 13 British colonies in North America?

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3. How did Blacks resist their enslavement?

A large, empty rectangular box with an orange border, intended for the student's answer to question 3.