

Slavery Compared

The South Atlantic system increased prosperity in Europe, but it did so at enormous economic, political, and human cost to West and West-Central Africa. Between 1550 and 1870, the Atlantic slave trade uprooted millions of Africans.

Colonial North America

Following Bacon's Rebellion, planters in Virginia and Maryland took advantage of the increased British trade in African slaves. In a "tobacco revolution," they created a new plantation regime based on African slavery rather than English indentured servitude. By 1720, Africans made up nearly 20% of the Chesapeake population, and slavery had become a central feature of the society, not just one of several forms of unfree labor. Equally important, slavery was now defined in racial terms. Virginia passed a law in 1692 that prohibited sexual intercourse between English and Africans; and a 1705 statute defined virtually all Africans as slaves.

Conditions for slaves in the southern colonies were much less severe than they were in the West Indies, and slaves lived relatively long lives. Sugar, grown in the West Indies, required strenuous labor during the planting and harvesting seasons, whereas tobacco cultivation required steady but undemanding labor. Moreover, diseases did not spread easily among slaves in the Chesapeake colonies, where plantation quarters were smaller and less crowded than those in the West Indies. In addition, because tobacco profits were low, planters could not always afford to buy new slaves and so treated those they had less harshly than West Indian planters did.

In fact, some tobacco planters consciously increased their workforce by buying female slaves and encouraging them to have children. In 1720, women made up one-third of Africans in Maryland, and the black population had begun to increase naturally. The average number of children born to an early 19th century southern slave woman was 9.2 – twice as many as in the West Indies. By midcentury, slaves made up almost a third of the Chesapeake population, and more than three-quarters of them were American born.

The largest difference between slavery in the South and in Latin America was demographic. The slave population in Brazil and the West Indies had a lower proportion of female slaves, a much lower birth rate, and a higher proportion of recent arrivals from Africa. In striking contrast, southern slaves had an equal sex ratio, a high birthrate, and a predominantly American-born population.

Slaves in South Carolina labored under much more oppressive conditions than those in the Chesapeake region. The colony grew slowly until 1700, when Africans from rice-growing societies, who knew how to plant and process the nutritious grain, turned it into a profitable export. To expand production, white planters imported thousands of slaves and changed the face of the colony. By 1705, there were more Africans in South Carolina than there were whites, and slaves made up 80% of the population in rice-growing areas.

Those areas were inland swamps, and the work was dangerous and exhausting. Slaves planted, weeded, and harvested the rice in ankle-deep mud. Pools of putrid water bred mosquitoes, which transmitted disease among the workers, taking hundred of African lives. Other slaves, forced to move tons of dirt to build irrigation works, died from exhaustion. In South Carolina, as in the West Indies and Brazil, there were many deaths and few births, and the importation of new slaves constantly "re-Africanized" the black population.

Slaves who resisted in British North America did so at their peril. Planters resorted to the lash to punish slaves who refused to work; and some would amputate slaves' fingers, toes, or ears. The extent of white violence depended on the size and density of the slave population. In the rural areas of the northern colonies, where there were few slaves, physical violence was sporadic. But assertive black slaves on the sugar and rice plantations in the West Indies and South Carolina were routinely whipped. Because Africans outnumbered Europeans eight to one in these plantation

areas, planters prohibited slaves from leaving the plantation without special passes. In the West Indies, slaves constituted 80 to 90 percent of the population, while in the British southern colonies only about a third of the population were slaves. Plantation size also differed widely. In the Caribbean, slaves were held on much larger units, with many plantations holding 150 slaves or more. In the American South, in contrast, only one slave owner held as many as a thousand slaves, and just 125 had over 250 slaves. Half of all slaves in the United States worked on units of twenty or fewer slaves; three quarters had fewer than fifty.

Smaller plantation size meant that in the American South, slave owners lived on their plantations and slaves dealt with their owners regularly. Most planters placed plantation management, supply purchasing, and supervision in the hands of black drivers and foremen, and at least two thirds of all slaves worked under the supervision of black drivers.

Slaves dealt with their plight in several ways. Some newly arrived Africans fled to the frontier, where they established traditional villages or married into Indian tribes. Blacks who were fluent in English fled to towns, where they tried to pass as free men and women. Most African Americans remained enslaved and bargained continually with their masters over the terms of their bondage. Some blacks bartered extra work for better food and clothes; others seized a small privilege and dared the master to revoke it. That is how Sundays gradually became a day of rest – and a right rather than a privilege. When bargaining failed, slaves would protest silently, working slowly or stealing. Others, provoked beyond endurance, killed their owners or overseers. A few blacks even plotted rebellion, despite white superiority in guns and, in most regions, in numbers as well.

Colonial Latin America

For a long time it was widely assumed that southern slavery was harsher and crueler than slavery in Latin America, where the Catholic church insisted that slaves had a right to marry, to seek relief from a cruel master, and to purchase their freedom. Spanish and Portuguese colonists were thought to be less tainted by racial prejudice than North Americans and Latin American slavery was believed to be less subject to the pressures of a competitive capitalist economy.

In practice, neither the Church nor the courts offered much protection to Latin American slaves. Access to freedom was greater in Latin America, but in many cases masters freed sick, elderly, crippled, or simply unneeded slaves in order to relieve themselves of financial responsibilities.

Death rates among slaves in the Caribbean were one third higher than in the American South, and suicide appears to have been much more common. Unlike slaves in the South, West Indian slaves were expected to produce their own food in their "free time," and care for the elderly and the infirm.

Slave resistance took many forms, including sabotage, malingering, running away, and rebellion. Although many slave rebellions occurred, colonial authorities were always able to reestablish control. Groups of runaway slaves, however, were sometimes able to defend themselves for years. In both Spanish America and Brazil, communities of runaways (called quilombos in Brazil and palenques in Spanish colonies) were common. The largest quilombo was Palmares, where thousands of slaves defended themselves against Brazilian authorities for sixty years until they were finally overrun in 1694.

Slaves were skilled artisans, musicians, servants, artists, cowboys, and even soldiers. However, the vast majority worked in agriculture. Conditions for slaves were worst on the sugar plantations of Brazil and the Caribbean, where harsh discipline, brutal punishments, and backbreaking labor were common. Because planters preferred to buy male slaves, there was always a gender imbalance on plantations. As a result, neither the traditional marriage and family patterns of Africa nor those of Europe developed. The disease environment of the tropics, as well as the poor housing, diet, hygiene, and medical care offered to slaves, also weakened slave families.

In the Caribbean, slaves were held on much larger units than in British North America, with many plantations holding 150 slaves or more. As a result, absentee ownership was far more common in the West Indies, where planters relied heavily on paid managers and relied on a distinct class of free blacks and mulattos to serve as intermediaries with the slave population.

Both Spanish and Portuguese law provided for manumission, the granting of freedom to individual slaves. The majority of those gaining their liberty had saved money and purchased their won freedom. This was easiest to do in cities, where slave artisans and market women had the opportunity to earn and save money. Only a tiny minority of owners freed slaves without demanding compensation. Household servants were the most likely beneficiaries of this form of manumission. Only about 1% of the slave population gained freedom each year through manumission. However, because slave women received the majority of manumissions and because children born subsequently were considered free, the free black population grew rapidly.

Another important difference between Latin America and the United States involved conceptions of race. In Spanish and Portuguese America, an intricate system of racial classification emerged. Compared with the British and French, the Spanish and Portuguese were much more tolerant of racial mixing, an attitude encouraged by a shortage of European women, and recognized a wide range of racial gradations, including black, mestizo, mulatto, etc. The American South, in contrast, adopted a two-category system of racial categorization in which any person with a black mother was automatically considered to be black.

Within a century of settlement, groups of mixed descent were in the majority in many regions within Latin America. Individuals of mixed European and African descent – called mulattos – came to occupy intermediate position in the tropics similar to the social position of mestizos (mixed European and Amerindian descent) in Mesoamerica and the Andean region. In Spanish Mexico and in Brazil, mixtures of Amerindians and Africans were also common.

Excerpts from:

Bulliet, Richard W., et al. *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History*. 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 441-445.

Henretta, James A., et al. *America's History*. 6th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 80-89.

University of Houston. "American Slavery in Perspective." Digital History. Accessed August 27, 2017. http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3044.