

# Slavery in the American Colonies



*The Old Plantation*  
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center,  
Williamsburg, Virginia

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## I. Slavery's Early Presence

A. First African-Americans that arrived in Jamestown in 1619 were brought as servants, not slaves.

B. Very small numbers of slaves in the Southern colonies in the early years. Indentured servants were cheaper and available. By 1650, only 300 blacks lived in Virginia

1. After 1660, white servants became harder to obtain as English economy improved.
2. Slaves became seen as a better long-term investment and were more easily recaptured.

C. Slavery formally established by the House of Burgesses in 1670 with law declaring "all servants not being Christians imported into this colony by shipping shall be slaves for their lives."

D. By 1700 there were 25,000 slaves in the American colonies and by 1750 there were 100,000 slaves in Virginia, far outnumbering indentured servants.

1. Breaking of the Royal African Co. monopoly in 1697 opened the slave trade to competition, forcing prices down and increasing the number of slaves
2. In some southern areas, slaves were beginning to outnumber whites.

## II. Slavery, Race & Economics

A. Slavery, though originally adopted for economic reasons, eventually was justified by Southern whites on the basis of race.

1. Whites concluded that extermination of Indians and enslavement of Africans was logical in that whites were civilized and others were barbaric.

2. Language used to describe blacks and Indians was similar: "brutes, heathen, naked, etc." It also was how educated Englishmen described poor members of society.

B. Legal codes gradually made racism the official policy of the colonial governments

1. It was made a crime for a slave to insult any white, regardless of position

2. Slave owners were allowed to punish, maim, or even kill slaves

C. Informal social bargain between wealthy and poor whites sought to prevent class rebellion, which erupted in Bacon's Rebellion (1676).

### III. Plantation Culture

A. Some plantations were enormous (40,000 acres, hundreds of slaves), but most were small, self-contained communities.

B. Over three-fourths of all blacks lived on plantations of at least 10 slaves; over half lived in communities of 50 slaves or more

C. Family relationships

1. Marriage not encouraged among slaves by owners

2. Slaves attempted to construct strong families, though any member could be sold at any time

3. Creation of kinship networks and surrogate "relatives" unrelated to families

D. Language development--Gullah (hybrid of English and African languages) allowed connection with ancestry and conversations that whites could not understand.

E. Work patterns

1. Most slaves (men and women) worked as field hands.

2. House servants lived in better circumstances, but were isolated from other slaves on the plantation.

3. Slaves on larger plantations learned trades and crafts--blacksmithing, carpentry, shoemaking, and midwifery

F. Economically, plantations were often efficient and productive. Socially they achieved stability at the cost of human freedom and dignity