

Black Women in Colonial America

The lives of black women in early North America varied according to the colony in which they lived. The differences between Britain's New England colonies and its southern colonies are particularly clear. In New England, where religion and demographics made the boundary between slavery and freedom permeable, black women distinguished themselves in a variety of ways. The thoroughly acculturated Lucy Terry Prince of Deerfield, Massachusetts, published poetry during the 1740s and had gained her freedom by 1756. Other black women succeeded as bakers and weavers. But in the South, where most black women of the time lived, they had few opportunities for work beyond the tobacco and rice fields and domestic labor in the homes of their masters.

During the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, approximately 90 percent of southern black women worked in the fields, as was customary for women in West Africa. White women sometimes did fieldwork as well, but masters considered black women to be tougher than white women and therefore able to do more hard physical labor. Black women also mothered their children and cooked for their families, a chore that involved lugging firewood and water and tending fires as well as preparing meals. Like other women of their time, colonial black women suffered from inadequate medical attention while giving birth. But because black women worked until the moment they delivered, they were more likely than white women to experience complications in giving birth and to bear low-weight babies.

As the eighteenth century passed, more black women became house servants. Yet most jobs as maids, cooks, and body servants went to the young, the old, or the infirm. Black women also wet-nursed their master's children. None of this was easy work; those who did it were under constant white supervision.

Masters and overseers used their power to force themselves on female slaves. The results were evident in the large mixed-race populations in the colonies and in the psychological damage it inflicted on African-American women and their mates. In particular, the abuse of black women by white men disrupted the emerging black families in North America because black men usually could not protect their wives from it.



Reading Check How did slavery affect black women in colonial America?

Black Resistance and Rebellion

Slavery in America was always a system that relied ultimately on physical force to deny freedom to enslaved Africans. From its start, black men and women responded by resisting their masters as well as they could.

Such resistance ranged from sullen goldbricking (shirking assigned work) to sabotage, escape, and rebellion. Before the late eighteenth century, however, resistance and rebellion were not part of a coherent antislavery effort. Slave resistance and revolt did not aim to destroy slavery as a social system. Africans and African Americans resisted, escaped, and rebelled not as part of an effort to free all slaves. Instead, in the case of resistance, they aimed to force masters to make concessions within the framework of slavery. In the case of escape and rebellion, they aimed to relieve themselves, their friends, and their families from intolerable disgrace and suffering.

African men and women newly arrived in North America were most open in defying their masters. They frequently refused to work and often could not be persuaded by punishment to change their behavior. "You would really be surpris'd at their Perseverance," one frustrated master commented. "They often die before they can be conquered." Africans tended to escape in groups of individuals who shared a common homeland and language. When they succeeded, they usually became **outliers**, living nearby and stealing from their master's estate. Less frequently, they headed west where they found a degree of safety among white frontiersmen, Indians, or interracial banditti. In 1672, Virginia's colonial government began paying bounties to anyone who killed outliers, and six decades later, the governor of South Carolina offered similar rewards. In some instances, escaped slaves, known as **maroons**—a term derived from the Spanish word *cimarron*, meaning wild—established their own settlements in inaccessible regions.

The most durable of such maroon communities in North America existed in the Spanish colony of Florida. In 1693 the Spanish king officially made this colony a refuge for slaves escaping from the British colonies, although he did not free slaves who were already there. Many such escapees joined the Seminole Indian nation and thereby gained protection during the period between 1763 and 1783 when the British ruled Florida and after 1821 when the United States took control. It was in part to destroy this refuge for escaped slaves that the United States fought the Seminole War from 1835 to 1842. Although some continued to head for maroon settlements, most sought safety among relatives, in towns, or in the North Carolina piedmont where there were few slaves.

As slaves became acculturated, forms of slave resistance changed. To avoid punishment, African Americans replaced open defiance with more subtle day-to-day obstructionism. They malingered, broke tools, mistreated domestic animals, destroyed crops, poisoned their masters, and stole. Not every slave who acted this way, of course, was consciously resisting enslavement, but masters assumed that they were. **Acculturation** also brought different escape patterns. Increasingly, it was the more assimilated slaves who escaped. They were predominantly young men who left on their own and relied on their knowledge of American society to pass as free.

Slave Rebellions

Rebellions were far rarer in colonial North America than resistance or escape. More and larger rebellions broke out during the early eighteenth century in Jamaica and Brazil. This discrepancy resulted mainly from demographics: in the sugar-producing colonies, black people outnumbered white people by six or eight to one, whereas in British North America, black people were a majority only in the low country. The more slaves outnumbered white people, the more likely they were to rebel.

Nevertheless, there were waves of rebellion in British North America during the years from 1710 to 1722 and 1730 to 1741. Men born in Africa took the lead in these revolts, and the two most notable ones occurred in New York City in 1712 and near Charleston, South Carolina, in 1739. In New York, twenty-seven Africans, taking revenge for “hard usage,” set fire to an outbuilding. When white men arrived to put out the blaze, the rebels attacked them with muskets, hatchets, and swords. They killed nine of the white men and wounded six. Shortly thereafter, local militia units captured the rebels, six of whom killed themselves. The other twenty-one were executed—some brutally. In 1741 a conspiracy to revolt in the same city led to another mass execution. Authorities put to death thirty black people and four white people, convicted of helping them.

Stono Rebellion

Even more frightening for most white people was the rebellion that began at Stono Bridge within twenty miles of Charleston in September 1739. Under the leadership of a man named Jemmy or Tommy, twenty slaves, who had recently arrived from Angola, broke into a “warehouse, & then plundered it of guns & ammunition.” They killed the warehousemen, left their severed heads on the building’s steps, and fled toward Florida. Other slaves joined the Angolans until their numbers reached one hundred. They sacked plantations and killed approximately thirty more white people. But when they stopped to celebrate their victories and beat drums to attract other slaves, planters on horseback aided by Indians routed them, killing forty-four and dispersing the rest. Many of the rebels, including their leader, remained at large for up to three years, as did the spirit of insurrection. In 1740 Charleston authorities arrested 150 slaves and hanged ten daily to quell that spirit.

In South Carolina and other southern colonies, white people never entirely lost their fear of slave revolt. Whenever slaves rebelled or were rumored to rebel, the fear became intense. As the quotation that begins this chapter indicates, the unwillingness of many Africans and African Americans to submit to enslavement pushed white southerners into a siege mentality that became a determining factor in American history.



Reading Check

How did African Americans resist slavery?