Section 1

The Peoples of North America

In the North American colonies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, African immigrants gave birth to a new African-American people. Born in North America and forever separated from their ancestral homeland, they preserved a surprisingly large core of their African cultural heritage. Meanwhile, a new natural environment and contacts with people of American Indian and European descent helped African Americans shape a way of life within the circumstances that slavery forced on them. To understand the early history of African Americans, we must first briefly discuss the other peoples of colonial North America.

American Indians

Historians and anthropologists group the original inhabitants of North America together as American Indians. But when the British began to colonize the coastal portion of this huge region during the early seventeenth century, the **indigenous peoples** who lived there had no such all-inclusive name. They spoke many different languages, lived in diverse environments, and considered themselves distinct from one another. Europeans called them **Indians** as a result of Christopher Columbus's mistaken assumption in 1492 that he had landed on islands near the "Indies," by which he meant near Southeast Asia.

In Mexico, Central America, and Peru, American Indian peoples developed complex, densely populated civilizations with hereditary monarchies, formal religions, armies, and social classes. The peoples of what is today the United States were influenced by cultural developments in Mexico and by the northerly spread of the cultivation of maize (corn). In what is today the American Southwest, the Anasazi, Hopi, and later Pueblo peoples developed sophisticated farming communities. In the region east of the Mississippi River, known as the Eastern Woodlands, the Adena culture, which flourished in the Ohio River valley as early as 1000 BCE, had attained the social organization required to construct large burial mounds. Between the tenth and fourteenth centuries CE, what is known as the Mississippian culture established a sophisticated civilization, marked by extensive trade routes, division of labor, and urban centers. The largest such center was **Cahokia**—located near modern St. Louis—which at its peak had a population of about thirty thousand.

GUIDE TO READING

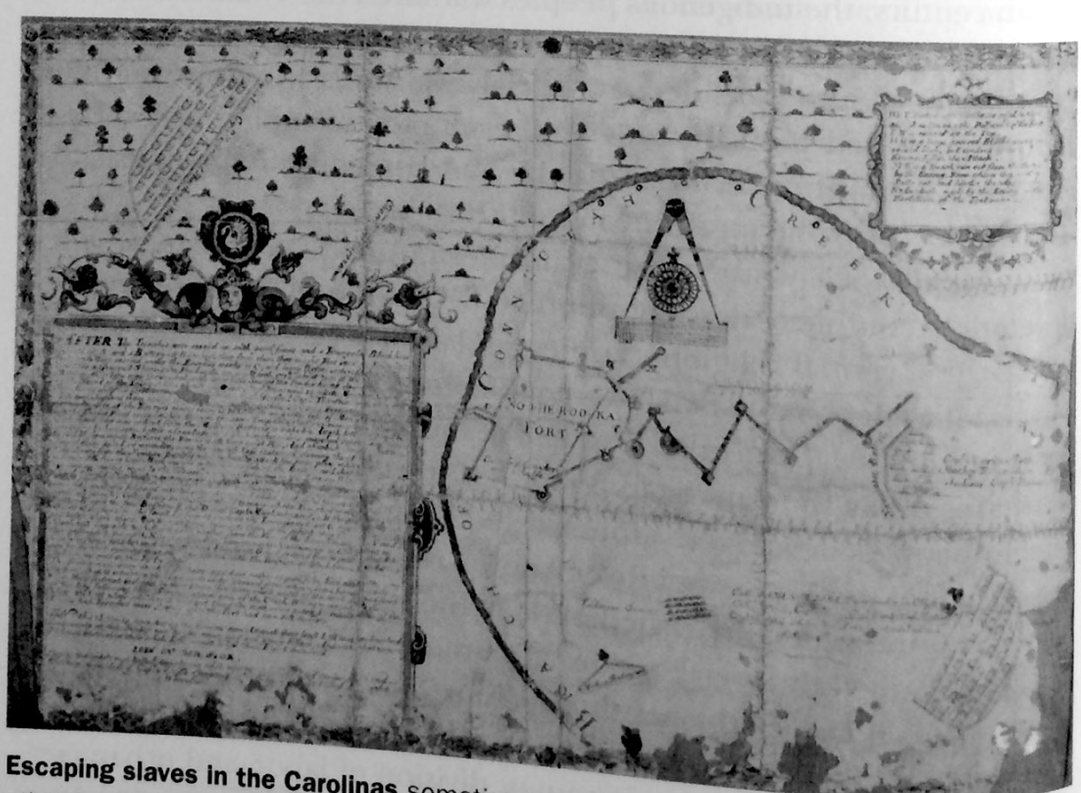
- Who were the peoples of colonial North America?
- What was the relationship between black people and Indians during the colonial period?
- Why did white labor produce most of the tobacco in the Chesapeake colonies until 1700?

KEY TERMS

- indigenous peoples, p. 71
- Indians, p. 71
- Cahokia, p. 71

Climatic change and warfare destroyed the Mississippian culture during the fourteenth century, and only remnants of it existed when Europeans and Africans arrived in North America. By that time, a diverse variety of Indian cultures existed in what is today the eastern portion of the United States. People resided in towns and villages, supplementing their agricultural economies with fishing and hunting. They held land communally, generally allowed women a voice in ruling councils, and—although warlike—regarded battle as an opportunity for young men to prove their bravery rather than as a means of conquest. Gravely weakened by diseases that settlers unwittingly brought from Europe, the woodlands Indians of North America's coastal regions were ineffective in resisting British settlers during the seventeenth century. Particularly in the Southeast, the British developed an extensive trade in Indian slaves.

But because the Indians were experts at living harmoniously with the natural resources of North America, they influenced the way people of African and European descent came to live there as well. Indian crops, such as corn, potatoes, pumpkins, beans, and squash, became staples of the newcomers' diets. On the continent's southeastern coast, British cultivation of tobacco, an Indian crop, secured the economic survival of the Chesapeake colonies and led directly to the enslavement in them of Africans. The Indian canoe became a means of river transportation for black and white people, and Indian moccasins became common footwear for everyone.



Escaping slaves in the Carolinas sometimes found shelter with the Tuscaroras and other Indian tribes. This map shows a Tuscarora fort that escaped slaves probably helped design and build.

The relationships between black people and Indians during colonial times were complex. Although Indian nations often provided refuge to escaping black slaves, Indians sometimes became slaveholders and on occasion helped crush black revolts. Some black men assisted in the Indian slave trade and sometimes helped defend European colonists against Indian attacks. Nevertheless, people of African and Indian descent frequently found themselves in similarly oppressive circumstances in Britain's American colonies.

The Spanish Empire

Following Christopher Columbus's voyage in 1492, the Spanish rapidly built a colonial empire in the Americas. Mining of gold and silver, as well as the production of sugar, tobacco, and leather goods, provided a firm economic foundation. Spain's colonial economy rested on the forced labor of the Indian population. When the Indian population declined from disease and overwork, they turned to enslaved Africans. Overseers in the mines and fields often brutally worked Africans and Indians to death. But because the Spanish were few, some of the Africans and Indians who survived were able to gain freedom and become tradesmen, small landholders, and militiamen. Often they were of mixed race and identified with their former masters rather than with the oppressed people beneath them in society. African, Indian, and Spanish customs intermingled in what became a multicultural colonial society. Its center was in the West Indian islands of Cuba and Santo Domingo, Mexico, and northern South America. On its northern periphery were lands that are now part of the United States: Florida, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California.

Africans came early to these borderlands. In 1526 Luis Vasquez de Ayllon brought one hundred African slaves with him from Hispaniola (modern Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in an attempt to establish a Spanish colony near what is now Georgetown, South Carolina. A decade later, slaves, who were either African or of African descent, accompanied Hernando de Soto on a Spanish expedition from Florida to the Mississippi River. In 1565 Africans helped construct the Spanish settlement of St. Augustine in Florida, which is now the oldest city in the continental United States. In 1528 a Spanish expedition that departed Cuba to search for gold in western Florida and the Gulf Coast included a slave of African descent named Esteban. Following a shipwreck, Esteban reached the coast of Texas. After a brief captivity among the local Indians, he and other survivors made their way southward to Mexico City.

The British and Jamestown

The British, like the Africans and the American Indians, were not a single nation. The British Isles—consisting principally of Britain and Ireland and located off the northwest coast of Europe—were the homeland

of the English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish. At that time, the Kingdom of England was, compared to Spain, a poor country notable mainly for producing wool.

England's claim to the east coast of North America rested on the voyage of John Cabot, who sailed in 1497, just five years after Columbus's first westward voyage. But, unlike the Spanish who rapidly created an empire in the Americas, the English were slow to establish themselves in the region Cabot had discovered. This was partly because of the harsher North American climate, with winters much colder than in England, but also because the English monarchy was too poor to finance colonizing expeditions and because the turmoil associated with the Protestant Reformation absorbed the nation's energies.

It took the English naval victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588 and money raised by joint-stock companies to produce in 1607 at Jamestown the first permanent British colony in North America. This settlement was located in the Chesapeake region the British called Virginia—after Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), the so-called Virgin Queen of England. The company hoped to make a profit at Jamestown by finding gold, trading with the Indians, cutting lumber, or raising crops, such as rice, sugar, or silk, that could not be produced in Britain.

None of these schemes was economically viable. There was no gold, and the climate was unsuitable for rice, sugar, and silk. Because of disease, hostility with the Indians, and especially economic failure, the settlement barely survived into the 1620s. By then, however, the experiments begun in 1612 by the English settler John Rolfe to cultivate a mild strain of tobacco that could be grown on the North American mainland began to pay off. Tobacco was in great demand in Europe where smoking was becoming popular. Soon growing tobacco became the economic mainstay in Virginia and the neighboring colony of Maryland.

The sowing, cultivating, harvesting, and curing of tobacco were labor intensive. Yet colonists in the Chesapeake could not follow the Spanish example and enslave the Indians to produce the crop. Rampant disease had reduced the local Indian population, and those who survived eluded British conquest by retreating westward.

Unlike the West Indian sugar planters, however, the North American tobacco planters did not immediately turn to Africa for laborers. British advocates of colonizing North America had always promoted it as a solution to unemployment, poverty, and crime in England. The idea was to send England's undesirables to America, where they could provide the cheap labor tobacco planters needed. Consequently, until 1700, white labor produced most of the tobacco in the Chesapeake colonies.

Reading Check Who were the peoples of colonial North America?

Section 2

Africans Arrive in the Chesapeake

Africans in Jamestown

By the early months of 1619, there were thirty-two people of African descent—fifteen men and seventeen women—living in the English colony at Jamestown. Nothing is known concerning when they had arrived or from where they had come. They were all "in the service of sev[er]all planters." The following August a Dutch warship, carrying seventeen African men and three African women from Angola, moored at Hampton Roads at the mouth of the James River. The Dutch warship, with the help of an English ship, had attacked a Portuguese slaver, taken most of its human cargo, and brought these twenty Angolans to Jamestown. The Dutch captain traded them to local officials in return for provisions.

The Angolans became servants to the Jamestown officials and to favored planters. The colony's inhabitants, for two reasons, regarded the new arrivals and those black people who had been in Jamestown earlier to be *unfree*, but not slaves. First, unlike the Portuguese and the Spanish, the English had no law for slavery. Second, at least the Angolans, who bore such names as Pedro, Isabella, Antoney, and Angelo, had been converted by the Portuguese to Christianity. According to English custom and morality in 1619, Christians could not be enslaved. So, once these individuals had worked off their purchase price, they could regain their freedom. In 1623, Antoney and Isabella married. The next year they became parents of William, whom their master had baptized in the local Church of England. William may have been the first black person born in English America. He was almost certainly born free.

During the following years, people of African descent remained a small minority in the expanding Virginia colony. A 1625 census reported only twenty-three black people living in the colony, compared with a combined total of 1,275 white people and Indians. This suggests that many of the first black inhabitants had either died or moved away. By 1649 the total Virginia population of about 18,500 included only 300 black people. The English, following the Spanish example, called them **negroes**. (The word "negro" means black in Spanish.) In neighboring Maryland, which was established as a haven

GUIDE TO READING

- How did black servitude develop in the Chesapeake?
- What role did indentured servitude play in the early economy of the Chesapeake colonies?
- What economic and demographic developments led to the enslavement of people of African descent in the British tobacco colonies?

KEY TERMS

- negroes, p. 75
- indentured servants, p. 76
- chattel slavery, p. 76
- House of Burgesses, p. 79
- Bacon's rebellion, p. 80

in 1632 for persecuted English Catholics, the black population also remained small. In 1658 only 3 percent of Maryland's population was of African descent.

Black Servitude in the Chesapeake

During the early years of the Chesapeake colonies, black people represented a small part of a labor force composed mainly of white **indentured servants**. From the 1620s to the 1670s, black and white people worked in the tobacco fields together, lived together, and slept together (and also did these things with American Indians). As members of an oppressed working class, they were all unfree indentured servants.

Indentured servitude had existed in Europe for centuries. In England, parents indentured—or, in other words, apprenticed—their children to "masters," who controlled their lives and had the right to their labor for a set number of years. In return, the masters supported the children and taught them a trade or profession.

As the demand for labor to produce tobacco in the Chesapeake expanded, indentured servitude came to include adults who sold their freedom for two to seven years in return for the cost of their voyage to North America. Instead of training in a profession, the servants could improve their economic standing by remaining as free persons in America after completing their period of servitude.

When Africans first arrived in Virginia and Maryland, they entered into similar contracts, agreeing to work for their masters until the proceeds of their labor recouped the cost of their purchase. Such indentured servitude could be harsh in the tobacco colonies because masters sought to get as much labor as they could from their servants before the indenture ended. Most indentured servants died from overwork or disease before regaining their freedom. But those who survived, black people as well as white people, could expect eventually to leave their masters and seek their fortunes as free persons.

During the seventeenth century, free black men living in the Chesapeake participated fully in the commercial and legal life of the colony. They owned land, farmed, lent money, sued in the courts, served as jurors and as minor officials, and at times voted.

Prior to the 1670s the English in the Chesapeake did not draw a strict line between white freedom and black slavery. Yet the ruling elite had from the early 1600s treated black servants differently from white servants. Over the decades, the region's British population gradually came to assume that persons of African descent were alien. This sentiment did not become universal among the white poor during the colonial period. It was a foundation for what historian Winthrop D. Jordan calls the "unthinking decision" among the British in the Chesapeake to establish **chattel slavery**, in which slaves were legally private property on a level with livestock, as the proper condition for Africans and those of African descent.

Race and the Origins of Black Slavery

Between 1640 and 1700, the British tobacco-producing colonies stretching from Delaware to northern Carolina underwent a social and demographic revolution. An economy based primarily on the labor of white indentured servants became an economy based on the labor of black slaves. In Virginia, for example, the slave population in 1671 was less than 5 percent of the colony's total non-Indian population. White indentured servants outnumbered black slaves by three to one. By 1700, however, slaves constituted at least 20 percent of Virginia's population. Probably most agricultural laborers were now slaves.

Although historians still debate how this extraordinary change occurred, several interrelated factors brought it about. Some of these factors are easily understood. Others are more complicated and profound, because they involve basic assumptions about the American nation.

PROFILE ❖ Anthony Johnson

Little is known of the individual Africans and African Americans who lived in North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In rare instances, however, black people emerge from the bits and pieces of information preserved in court records. This is the case for Anthony Johnson and his family.

Anthony Johnson arrived at Jamestown in 1621 from England, but his original home may have been Angola. On the Bennett plantation, where he labored, he was one of four out of fifty-six inhabitants to survive. He was also lucky to wed "Mary a Negro Woman," who in 1625 was the only woman residing at Bennett's.

In 1635 Johnson's master, Nathaniel Littleton, released him from further service. He received his own 250-acre plantation in 1651 under the "headright system" by which the colonial government encouraged population growth by awarding fifty acres of land for every new servant a settler brought to Virginia.

This meant that Johnson had become the master of five servants, some of them white. His estate was in Northampton County. A few years later, his relatives, John and Richard Johnson, also acquired land in this area.

The Johnson estates existed among white-owned properties in the same area. Like their white neighbors, the Johnsons were not part of the planting elite, but they owned their own land, farmed, and had social, economic, and legal relations with other colonists. Anthony Johnson in particular engaged in litigation that tells us much about black life in early Virginia.

In 1654 his lawsuit against his black servant John Casor and a white neighbor set a precedent in favor of black slavery but also revealed Johnson's legal rights. Casor claimed that Johnson "had kept him his serv[an]t seven years longer than hee should or ought." Johnson momentarily relented when he realized that if he persisted in his suit, Casor could win damages against him. Shortly thereafter, however, Johnson brought suit against his white neighbor Robert Parker, whom Johnson charged had detained Casor "under pretense [that] the s[ai]d John Casor is a freeman." This time the court ruled in Johnson's favor. It returned Casor to him and required Parker to pay court costs.

During the 1660s, the extended Johnson family moved to Somerset, Maryland. They were still prospering as planters during the early eighteenth century. Some family members moved on to New Jersey and others to Delaware, where some of them intermarried with the Nanticoke Indians.

Johnson