

Among the economic and demographic developments that led to the enslavement of people of African descent in the tobacco colonies was the precedent for enslaving Africans set in the British Caribbean sugar colonies during the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Also, Britain was gaining more control over the Atlantic slave trade at a time when fewer English men and women were willing to indenture themselves in return for passage to the Chesapeake. Poor white people found better opportunities for themselves in other regions of British North America, driving up the price of European indentured servants in the tobacco colonies. Meanwhile, British control of the slave trade made African laborers cheaper in those colonies.

These changing circumstances provide the context for the beginnings of black slavery in British North America. Yet race and class played the crucial role in shaping the *character* of slavery in the British mainland colonies. From the first arrival of Africans in the Chesapeake, those English who exercised authority made decisions that qualified the apparent social mobility the Africans enjoyed. The English had historically made distinctions between how they treated each other and how they treated those who were physically and culturally different from them. Such discrimination had been the basis of their colonial policies toward the Irish, whom the English had been trying to conquer for centuries, and the American Indians. Because they considered Africans even more different from themselves than either the Irish or the Indians, the English assumed from the beginning that Africans were generally inferior to themselves.

Therefore, although black and white servants residing in the Chesapeake during the early seventeenth century had much in common, their masters immediately made distinctions between them based on race. The few women of African descent who arrived in the Chesapeake during those years worked in the tobacco fields with the male servants, whereas most white women were assigned domestic duties. Also, unlike white servants, black servants usually did not have surnames, and early census reports listed them separately from whites. By the 1640s, black people could not bear arms, and during the same decade, local Anglican priests (although not those in England itself) maintained that persons of African descent could not become Christians.

These distinctions suggest that the status of black servants had never been the same as that of white servants. But only starting in the 1640s do records indicate a predilection toward making black people slaves rather than servants. During that decade, courts in Virginia and Maryland began to reflect an assumption that it was permissible for persons of African descent to serve their master for life rather than for a set term.

One court case, which was heard in 1640, involved the escape of three servants from Virginia to Maryland. One of the escapees was Dutch, another was a Scot, and the third—named John Punch—was of African descent. Following their capture and return to Virginia, a court ruled that all three should be whipped, that the Scot and Dutchman should have their terms of service extended for four years, and that Punch “being a


negro . . . serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural life." By mid-decade, black men, women, and children were often sold for higher prices than their white counterparts on the explicit provision that the black people would serve "for their Life tyme," or "for ever."

The Emergence of Chattel Slavery

Legal documents and statute books reveal that, during the 1660s, other aspects of chattel slavery emerged in the Chesapeake colonies. Bills of sale began to stipulate that the children of black female servants would also be servants for life. In 1662 Virginia's **House of Burgesses** decreed that a child's condition—free or unfree—followed that of the mother. This ran counter to English common law, which assumed that a child's status derived from the father. The change permitted masters to exploit their black female servants without having to acknowledge the children who might result from such contacts. Just as significant, by the mid-1660s statutes in the Chesapeake colonies assumed servitude to be the natural condition of black people.

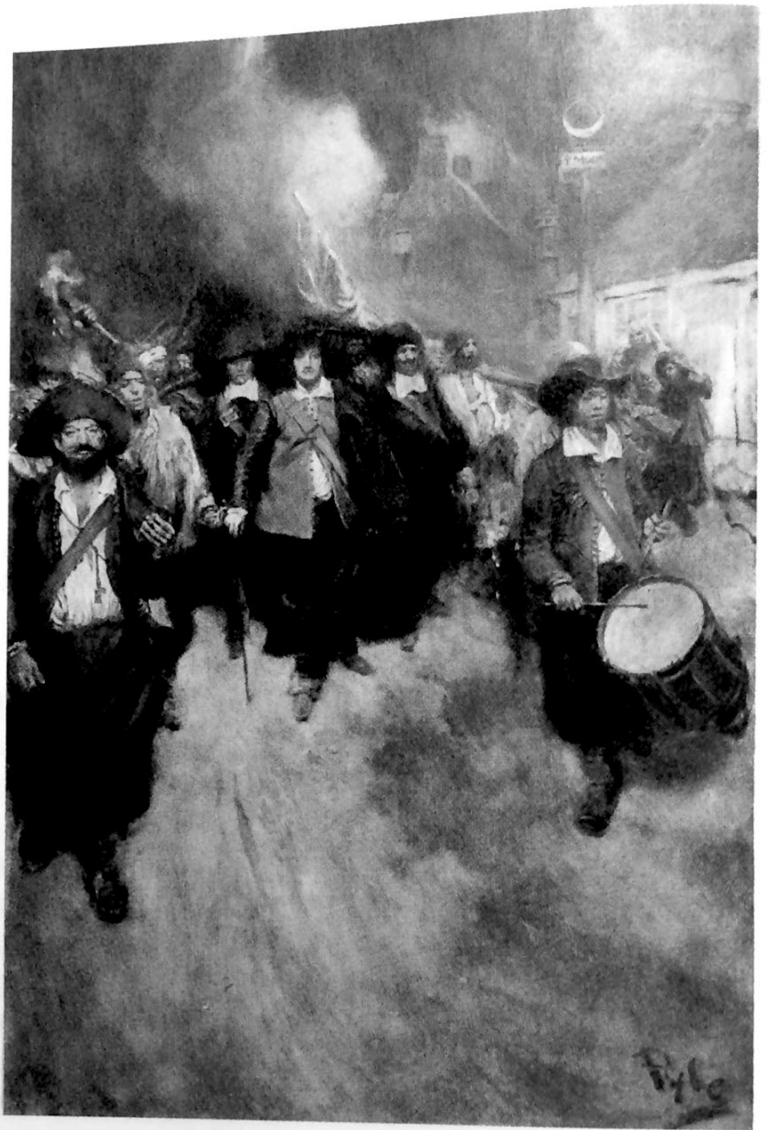
With these laws, slavery in British North America emerged in the form that it retained until the American Civil War: a racially defined system of perpetual involuntary servitude that compelled almost all black people to work as agricultural laborers. Slave codes enacted between 1660 and 1710 further defined American slavery as a system that sought as much to control persons of African descent as to exploit their labor. Slaves could not testify against white people in court, own property, leave their master's estate without a pass, congregate in groups larger than three or four, enter into contracts, marry, or, of course, bear arms. Profession of Christianity no longer protected a black person from enslavement nor was conversion a cause for manumission. In 1669 the House of Burgesses exempted from felony charges masters who killed a slave while administering punishment.

By 1700, just as the slave system began to expand in the southern colonies, enslaved Africans and African Americans had been reduced legally to the status of domestic animals except that, unlike animals (or masters when it came to abusing slaves), the law held slaves to be strictly accountable for their transgressions.

 **Reading Check** How did black servitude develop in the Chesapeake?

Bacon's Rebellion and American Slavery

The series of events that led to the enslavement of black people in the Chesapeake tobacco colonies preceded their emergence as the great majority of laborers in those colonies. The dwindling supply of white indentured servants, the growing availability of Africans, and preexisting white racial biases affected this transformation. But the key event in bringing it about was the rebellion led by Nathaniel Bacon in 1676.



Bacon's Rebellion. Nathaniel Bacon (center) and his followers at the burning of Jamestown, Virginia on 19 September 1676. Illustration by Howard Pyle.

Bacon was an English aristocrat who had recently migrated to Virginia. The immediate cause of **Bacon's rebellion** was a disagreement between him and the colony's royal governor William Berkeley over Indian policy. Bacon's followers were mainly white indentured servants and former indentured servants who resented the control exercised by the tobacco planting elite over the colony's resources and government. That Bacon also appealed to black slaves to join his rebellion indicates that poor white and black people still had a chance to unite against the master class.

Before such a class-based, biracial alliance could be realized, Bacon died of dysentery, and his rebellion collapsed. But the uprising convinced the colony's elite that continuing to rely on white agricultural laborers, who could become free and get guns, was dangerous. By switching from indentured white servants to an enslaved black labor force that would never become free or control firearms, the planters hoped to avoid class conflict among white people. Increasingly thereafter, white Americans perceived that both their freedom from class conflict and their prosperity rested on denying freedom to black Americans.

Section 3

Plantation Slavery, 1700–1750

The reliance of Chesapeake planters on slavery to meet their labor needs was thus the result of racial prejudice, the declining availability of white indentured servants, the increasing availability of Africans, and fear of white class conflict. When the demand for tobacco in Europe increased sharply, the newly dominant slave labor system expanded rapidly.

Tobacco Colonies

Between 1700 and 1770, some 80,000 Africans arrived in the tobacco colonies, and even more African Americans were born into slavery there (see Figure 3–1). Tobacco planting spread from Virginia and Maryland to Delaware and North Carolina and from the coastal plain to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. In the process, American slavery began to assume the form it kept for the next 165 years.

By 1750, 144,872 slaves lived in Virginia and Maryland, accounting for 61 percent of all the slaves in British North America. Another 40,000 slaves lived in the rice-producing regions of South Carolina and Georgia, accounting for 17 percent. Unlike the sugar colonies of the Caribbean, where whites were a tiny minority, whites remained a majority in the tobacco colonies and a large minority in the rice

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What were the characteristics of plantation slavery from 1700 to 1750?
- ▶ Under what conditions did enslaved black laborers in the tobacco colonies work before 1750?
- ▶ What were the defining characteristics of low-country slavery?
- ▶ What were the material conditions of slave life in Early America?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ low country, p. 83
- ▶ miscegenation, p. 87
- ▶ creolization, p. 87
- ▶ mulattoes, p. 87

From Servitude to Slavery

- 1619** Thirty-two Africans reported to be living at Jamestown. Twenty more arrive
- 1621** Anthony Johnson arrives at Jamestown
- 1624** First documented birth of a black child occurs at Jamestown
- 1640** John Punch is sentenced to servitude for life
- 1651** Anthony Johnson receives estate of 250 acres
- 1661** House of Burgesses (the Virginia colonial legislature) recognizes that black servants would retain that status throughout their life
- 1662** House of Burgesses affirms that a child's status—slave or free—follows the status of her or his mother

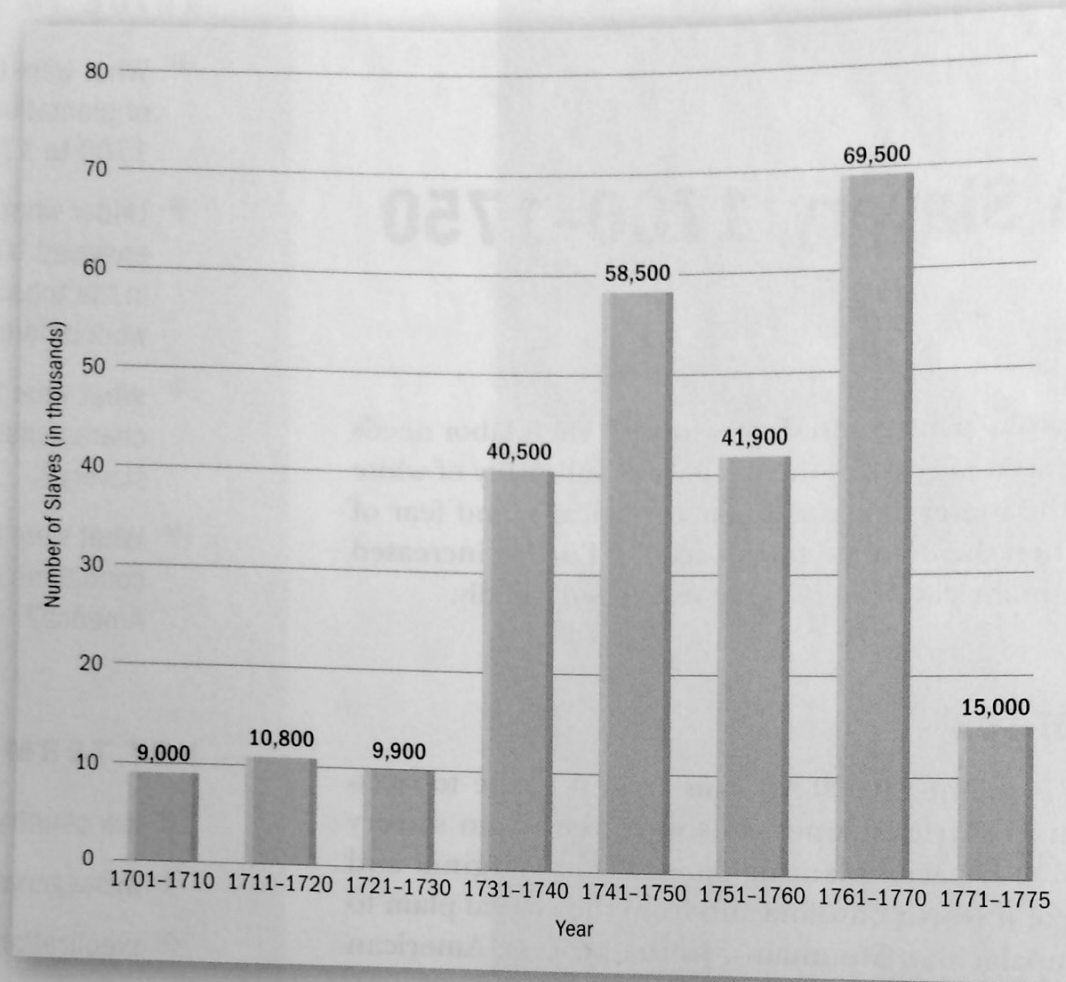


FIGURE 3-1 Africans Brought as Slaves to British North America, 1701-1775.

The rise in the number of captive Africans shipped to British North America during the early eighteenth century reflects the increasing dependence of British planters on African slave labor.

Source: R. C. Simmons, *The American Colonies: From Settlement to Independence* (New York: David McKay, 1976).

colonies. Also, most southern whites did not own slaves. Nevertheless, the economic development of the region depended on enslaved black laborers.

The conditions under which those laborers lived varied. Most slaveholders farmed small tracts of land and owned fewer than five slaves. These masters and their slaves worked together and developed close personal relationships. Other masters owned thousands of acres of land and rarely saw most of their slaves. During the early eighteenth century, the great planters divided their slaves among several small holdings. They did this to avoid concentrating potentially rebellious Africans in one area. As the proportion of newly arrived Africans in the slave population declined later in the century, larger concentrations of slaves became more common.

Before the mid-eighteenth century, nearly all slaves—both men and women—worked in the fields. On the smaller farms, they worked with their master. On larger estates, they worked for an overseer, who was usually white. Like other agricultural workers, enslaved African Americans normally worked from sunup to sundown with breaks for food and rest. Even during colonial times, they usually had Sunday off.

From the beginnings of slavery in North America, masters tried to make slaves work harder and faster while the slaves sought to conserve their energy, take breaks, and socialize with each other. African men regarded field labor as women's work and tried to avoid it if possible. But, especially if they had incentives, enslaved Africans could be efficient workers.

Not until after 1750 did some black men begin to hold such skilled occupations on plantations as carpenter, smith, carter, cooper, miller, sawyer, tanner, and shoemaker. Black women had less access to such occupations. When they did not work in the fields, they were domestic servants in the homes of their masters, cooking, washing, cleaning, and caring for children. Such duties could be extremely taxing, because, unlike field-work, they did not end when the sun went down.

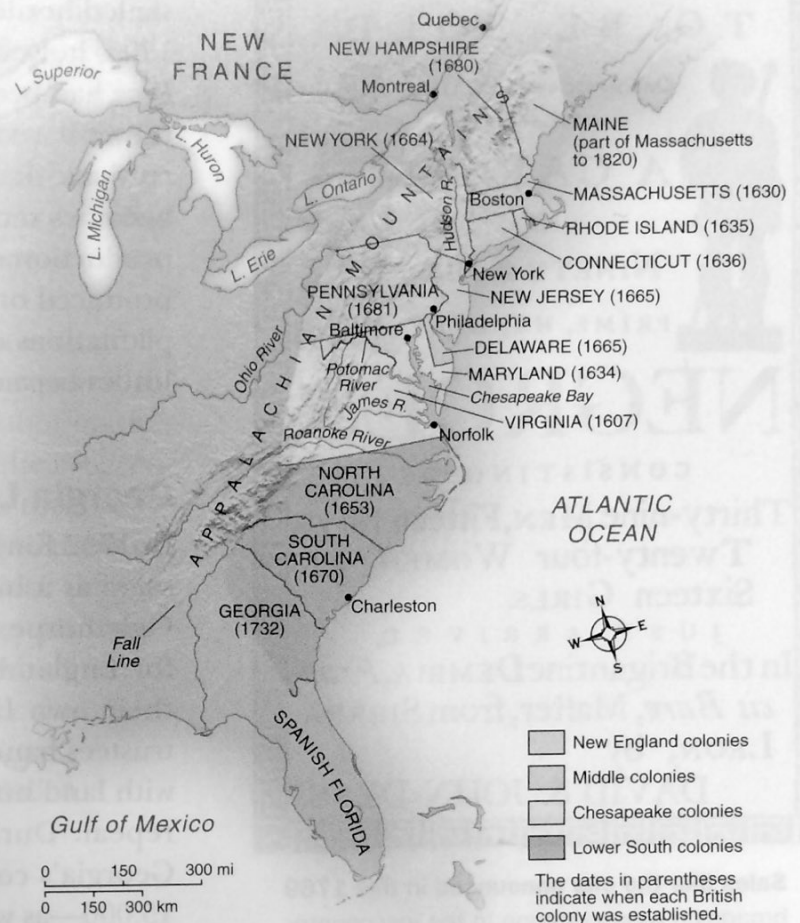
Low-Country Slavery

South of the tobacco colonies, on the coastal plain, or **low country**, of Carolina and Georgia a distinctive slave society developed (see Map 3-1). The influence of the West Indian plantation system was much stronger here than in the Chesapeake, and rice, not tobacco, became the staple crop.

The first British settlers who arrived in 1670 at Charleston (in what would later become South Carolina) were mainly immigrants from Barbados, rather than England. Many of them had been slaveholders on that island and brought slaves with them. In the low country, black people were chattel from the start. The region's subtropical climate discouraged white settlement and encouraged dependence on black labor the way it did in the sugar islands. During the early years of settlement, nearly one-third of the immigrants were African, most of them males. By the early eighteenth century, more Africans were arriving than white people.

Carolina Low Country

By 1740 the Carolina low country had 40,000 slaves, who constituted 90 percent of the population in the region around Charleston. In all, 94,000 Africans arrived at Charleston between 1706 and 1776, which made it North America's leading port of entry for Africans during the eighteenth century. A Swiss immigrant commented in 1737 that the region "looks more like a negro country than like a country settled by white people."



MAP 3-1 Regions of Colonial North America, 1683-1763.

The British colonies on the North American mainland were divided into four regions. They were bordered on the south by Spanish Florida and to the west by regions claimed by France.

? How did African Americans in the British colonies benefit from the close proximity of regions controlled by France and Spain?

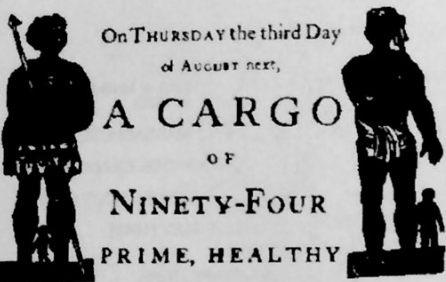
Explore this map online at www.prenhall.com/aah/map3.1

Charleston, July 24th, 1769.

TO BE SOLD,

On THURSDAY the third Day
of AUGUST next,

A CARGO
OF
NINETY-FOUR
PRIME, HEALTHY



NEGROES,

CONSISTING OF

Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen BOYS,
Twenty-four WOMEN, and
Sixteen GIRLS.

JUST ARRIVED,
In the Brigantine *DEMBIA*, *Francis Bare*, Master, from SIERRA-
LEON, by
DAVID & JOHN DEAS.

Sales like the one announced in this 1769
broadside were common in the low country.

During its first three decades, Carolina supplied Barbados with beef and lumber. Because West Africans from the Gambia River region were skilled herders, white settlers sought them out as slaves. Starting around 1700, however, the low-country planters concentrated on growing rice. Rice had been grown in West Africa for thousands of years, and many of the enslaved Africans who reached Carolina had the skill required to cultivate it in America. Economies of scale, in which an industry becomes more efficient as it grows larger, were more important in the production of rice than tobacco. Although tobacco could be profitably produced on small farms, rice required large acreages. Therefore, large plantations on a scale similar to those on the sugar islands of the West Indies became the rule in the low country.

Georgia Low Country

In 1732 King George II of England chartered the colony of Georgia to serve as a buffer between South Carolina and Spanish Florida. James Oglethorpe, who received the royal charter, wanted to establish a refuge for England's poor, who were expected to become virtuous through their own labor. Consequently, in 1734 he and the colony's other trustees banned slavery in Georgia. But economic difficulties combined with land hunger among white South Carolinians soon led to the ban's repeal. During the 1750s, rice cultivation and slavery spread into Georgia's coastal plain. By 1773 Georgia had as many black people—15,000—as white people.

As on Barbados, absentee plantation owners became the rule in South Carolina and Georgia because planters preferred to live in Charleston or Savannah where sea breezes provided relief from the heat. Enslaved Africans on low-country plantations suffered from a high mortality rate from diseases, overwork, and poor treatment just as did their counterparts on Barbados and other sugar islands. Therefore, unlike the slave population in the Chesapeake colonies, the slave population in the low country did not grow by reproducing itself—rather than through continued arrivals from Africa—until shortly before the American Revolution.

Slave Society

This low-country slave society produced striking paradoxes in race relations during the eighteenth century. As the region's black population grew, white people became increasingly fearful of revolt, and by 1698 Carolina had the strictest slave code in North America. In 1721, Charleston organized a "Negro watch" to enforce a curfew on its black population, and watchmen could shoot Africans and African Americans on sight. Black people in Carolina faced the quandary of being both feared and needed by white people. Even as persons of European descent grew fearful of black revolt, the colony in 1704 authorized the arming of enslaved black men when needed for defense against Indian and Spanish raids.