Chapter 4: Slavery and Empire, 1441–1770

Chapter Review

I. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: Rebellion in Stono, South Carolina

In 1739 a group of 20 slaves killed a storekeeper, armed themselves and began a march toward Spanish Florida where the governor had promised all slaves their freedom. Along the way they gathered scores of other slaves, killed 23 whites, plundered and destroyed plantations, and instilled fear throughout the land. The response was just as swift, as a band of whites encircled the slaves while they rested in a field, killed two dozen and cut off their heads as a warning to future runaways. The colony’s Indian allies hunted down the remaining fugitives over the following weeks and killed them as well. The failed rebellion led to tighter control over slaves, laws that endorsed harsher control, and a legacy of fear. But for blacks, the rebellion was a sign of both their desperation and the success of their community building in the slave-based society.

II. THE BEGINNINGS OF AFRICAN SLAVERY

Slavery has a long history in the Mediterranean and Africa. While the use of Christians as slaves was outlawed, the enslaving of Africans and Muslims was still permitted. The Portuguese established the Atlantic slave trade in 1441. By the mid-fifteenth century a thousand slaves a year went to sugar plantations on the Madeira Islands.

a. Sugar and Slavery

Sugar plantations had their origins in the Mediterranean islands. Columbus established plantations in Hispaniola, turning to African slaves as the native population died off. Portuguese Brazil adopted a similar system, with Dutch merchants playing a major role as financiers and buyers. By the mid-1600s, French (Martinique and Haiti) and British (Barbados and Jamaica) sugar colonies had been established in the Caribbean, making slave plantation sugar production the centerpiece of the European economic system.

b. West Africans

The vast majority of slaves taken to the Americas came from the established farming societies of West Africa where trade in people had been long established. Within Africa, slaves’ status was a little different from free workers’ status, but, as Olaudah Equiano noted, European treatment of slaves was far harsher in the West Indies. African slavery predated and made the European slave trade possible.
III. THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE

Over four centuries, as many as 12.5 million slaves were transported to the New World, outnumbering European immigrants to the Americas six to one. Continuing until 1867, the slave trade was a brutal episode in human history.


a. A Global Enterprise

Ninety percent of the 10.5 million slaves who reached the Americas went to sugar colonies, especially Portuguese Brazil, while fewer than 400,000 made it to British North America. Most were young and men outnumbered women two to one. The Portuguese dominated the trade until the English Royal African Company, chartered in 1672, took over half the trade. Collaboration between Europeans and Africans left Europeans in coastal forts, often marrying African women, while Africans did the slave raiding—a practice denounced as shameful by Equiano.

b. The Shock of Enslavement

Most Africans were captured in warfare. (As many Africans died as were enslaved.) Marched to the coast, they were held in pens, where, divided by ethnic groups, they were inspected and branded, a shocking experience described by both Venture Smith and Equiano, both of whom were haunted by the violence and cruelty of the African slavers and European buyers.

c. The Middle Passage

Once the slaves were boarded onto the ships they began the long “middle passage” of transport to the Americas. Slaves were packed into shelves no more than two and a half feet high, chained, and packed in side-by-side. The voyage itself could be as quick as three weeks or as long as three months depending upon the weather. Slaves would normally be brought above decks during the day, forced to exercise, fed twice, and returned to the hold at night. Sanitation was non-existent and the slaves were often left to lie in their own waste. Frequent illness was common, with dysentery, smallpox, measles, and yellow fever ravaging entire shiploads of slaves. One in seven slaves died en route, a far higher rate than for indentured, convict, and free migrants. Many slaves attempted to rebel under such conditions either by revolting while still near the African coast or by jumping overboard and succumbing to drowning during the voyage.

When the ship neared the Americas, the slaves were prepared for market. They were brought above deck, washed, and sometimes fed. Those who were lucky were presold to a specific buyer. But most had to endure the humility and horrors of the slave market. Here they were, once again, treated like animals, poked and prodded, and inspected in the
most invasive ways. Or they were sold at “scramble” when all the buyers would rush into the holding pen and scramble to grab the slaves they wanted. Most were destined to places where they had no family and would know only hard labor.

MHL document: Olaudah Equiano, The Middle Passage (1788) at www.myhistorylab.com

d. Political and Economic Effects on Africa

Slavery was a destructive force on the economic and political stability of African kingdoms. The depopulation deprived African societies of vital labor, soldiers, and wealth. Even when Africans played a role in the trade, the Europeans still benefited the most. Such exploitation led to political and economic stagnation and prepared the way for the European colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century.

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF NORTH AMERICAN SLAVE SOCIETIES

New World slavery was two centuries old before it reached British North America, and only after 1700 did the system expand, with slaves accounting for 20 percent of the population by 1770.

a. Slavery Comes to North America

The first cargo of “20 and odd Negars” arrived in Virginia in 1619 and while their status is unclear, enslaved blacks did start arriving soon thereafter. But indentured servitude was a cheaper labor option and remained so for some time. Chesapeake slaves lived and worked side-by-side with other laborers and thus Virginia was “a society with slaves,” where the color of one’s skin did not determine the course of one’s life—Anthony Johnson, a free African and former servant, became a slave owner himself. But all of that changed in the last 25 years of the 1600s as the Chesapeake became a “slave society”; land became scarce, slavery more profitable, and indentured servitude less tenable, as Bacon’s Culpeper’s Rebellions showed the violent potential of a land crisis. Direct Royal African Company importation of slaves to the colonies drove down prices and providing more slaves to meet demand. Slavery had no precedent in English law. As the African population of the Chesapeake expanded, laws were passed to increasingly govern the rules of ownership and control of the population, institutionalizing slavery for the colonies just as the slave trade reached flood tide in the early eighteenth century.

b. The Tobacco Colonies

As demand for tobacco grew tenfold in the eighteenth century, both tobacco production and slavery in the Chesapeake grew exponentially. Slaveholding became widespread and the population of slaves grew twice as fast as the population of whites. While “saltwater” slaves imported directly from Africa accounted for some of the growth, natural increase was responsible for most of the growth in numbers, making the Chesapeake the first slave
society to achieve self-sustained growth. By 1780, 80 percent of Chesapeake slaves were “country born” additions to planters’ capital.

**MHL document: Of the Servants and Slaves in Virginia (1705) at www.myhistorylab.com**

c. The Lower South

This region was a slave society from the outset. Originally trading in Indian slaves, South Carolina marked the shift by the beginning of the eighteenth century with the increase in rice production and the introduction of indigo. As export demand grew, so too did the slave population—in numbers and as it expanded into other colonies such as Georgia, where slavery had been banned by the Trustees—reaching nearly 80 percent of the lower South’s coastal population and becoming self sustaining a generation later than in the Chesapeake.

**MHL document: James Oglethorpe, Establishing the Colony of Georgia (1733) at www.myhistorylab.com**

d. Slavery in the Spanish Colonies

Despite opposition from the Catholic Church and the uncertainties expressed by the Crown, slavery took hold in the Spanish colonies. The practice, however, varied widely. Cuban sugar plantation slavery was brutal, while Florida’s system was more similar to the practices employed in Africa. The colony protected runaway British slaves, offering them free land if they helped defend Florida, creating both slave and free African communities at St. Augustine. New Mexico relied upon a robust trade in Indian slave labor, but Spanish officials were more cautious in their treatment of natives after the Pueblo Revolt.

e. Slavery in French Louisiana

In the early years the French Indies Company imported many slaves to Louisiana for planters in Biloxi, Mobile, and New Orleans. But very early on, rebellious slaves paired up with the local Indians and the Natchez Rebellion broke out, killing nearly ten percent of the white population of the colony. Fear of slave-Indian alliances held slavery in check and did not emerge as an important institution in the colony until the end of the 1700s.

f. Slavery in the North

While not “slave societies,” Northern colonies nonetheless did have slaves and relied upon them in important ways, especially in the commercial dairy and farming regions and the urban centers such as Philadelphia and New York. Quakers were among the first British colonists to criticize slavery; while Quaker opposition grew, anti-slavery sentiment did not become widespread in the north until the Revolution.
V. AFRICAN TO AFRICAN AMERICAN

Despite being taken to a new world, many Africans retained their customs and traditions from their homelands even as they were forced to assimilate into American culture. American-born “creole” blacks joined with newly arrived Africans to shape a community influenced by their experiences and by the slave-master relationship.

MHL audio: On Being Brought from Africa to America at www.myhistorylab.com

a. The Daily Life of Slaves

The vast majority of American slaves were used in agricultural labor. On small plantations slaves and masters worked side-by-side and had similar living standards. On large plantations, despite harsher working conditions, greater separation made for more resilient African American communities.

b. Families and Communities

Despite the efforts of the white masters to stifle the emergence of an African American community, slaves did their best to create a sense of family and community. Planters often separated slave families by sale or bequest. Africans developed their own forms of marriage and extended kinship. These relationships held the community together, as Africans themselves humanized the institution through their own social customs.

c. African American Culture

An American culture emerged among slaves as more of them were born and raised entirely within the colonies. Together, with their African legacy, they forged new traditions, a new culture, and a unique religious tradition to sustain them throughout their lives of bondage. This culture was most easily discerned in African American customs surrounding the burial of the dead, the development of music, and the creation of their own languages. The two most notable slave dialects were Gullah and Geechee, elements of which persisted into the twentieth century in black English.

MHL audio: “Ghana: Ewe-Atsiagbekor” from Roots of Black Music in America at www.myhistorylab.com

d. The Africanization of the South

Mutual acculturation took place throughout the South where large numbers of blacks and whites lived together and black cooks and nursemaids were in constant contact with the master’s family. African customs worked their way into white society through foods, folk practices and beliefs, material culture, architecture, labor and agricultural practices, and even crossover language, from “goobers” and the banjo to the Southern “drawl” of African intonations.
e. Violence and Resistance

The slave system was predicated on the threat of violence. Slaves, resisted by malingering and breaking tools, running away, and forming “maroon” (from the Spanish “Cimarron,” wild or untamed) colonies or merging with the Florida Seminoles. Others, however, engaged in revolt. There were some notably violent and alarming revolts throughout the colonial period, from New York in the 1720s and 1740s to repeated rebellions in the Chesapeake and Lower South. But they were quickly put down, the perpetrators executed or sold into other slave societies, and laws passed to curtail future revolts. But the American colonies were not rife with revolts precisely because slaves were creating a community through family and kinship, resulting in a slave community often unwilling to risk the consequences of a failed revolt.

MHL document: Runaway Notices from the South Carolina Gazette 1732 and 1737 at www.myhistorylab.com
MHL document: James Oglethorpe, The Stono Rebellion (1739) at www.myhistorylab.com

VI. SLAVERY AND THE ECONOMICS OF EMPIRE

Slavery was the keystone of British economic success, with its slave colonies accounting for 95 percent of all of its imports, even though they held less than half of the colonial population. The slave trade itself represented one of the most prosperous economic ventures in English society.

a. Slavery: Foundation of the British Economy

Slavery supported the British economy in three main ways. First, profits from slavery provided capital for investment throughout the Empire, often with a 10–15 percent rate of return. Expanding banks, insurance companies, and investment houses funded by the profits of slave-related trade supported new businesses and improvements in transportation infrastructure. Secondly, slavery supplied the raw materials for industrial manufacturing, providing nearly 70 percent of the cotton for British textile mills. Finally, slavery created colonial markets for British manufactured goods and exports. The multiplier effect led to even greater economic growth, as seen by the growth of Bristol and Liverpool, ports dependent the Atlantic economy.

b. The Politics of Mercantilism

In keeping with ideas developed in seventeenth-century France, the British mercantile system of laws, regulations, and trade barriers helped ensure that the wealth of the colonies flowed back to England. Mercantilists believed that there was a fixed amount of wealth, mainly measured in gold and silver, to be had. To assure that they amassed more of that wealth and the power that went with it, they structured their economic system to capture and hord that wealth.
c. British Colonial Regulation

Following the model of Spain’s Casa de Contratación, England established state-sponsored trading monopolies with exclusive rights and privileges through laws known as the Navigation Acts, which excluded foreign competitors and restricted the extent to which colonial enterprises could compete with England’s. Enumerated commodities such as furs, naval stores, sugar, and tobacco could be shipped only to England, while the colonies were prohibited from producing wool and iron, products that might compete with home manufactures, nor could colonies tax or regulate trade. Prime Minister Robert Walpole introduced what became known as “salutary neglect,” overlooking those laws that were detrimental to economic prosperity. Lax regulation encouraged exploding colonial trade beneficial to England and its colonies alike. But the whole system was dependent upon the unaddressed issue of slave labor in the colonies.

d. Wars for Empire

After a period of war from 1689 to 1713, Walpole kept England profitably at peace until disputes with Spain sparked the 1739 War of Jenkins’ Ear, which grew into a wider King George’s War in 1744. Although the war led to considerable destruction in the colonies, and short-term British gains against the French in America, overall it ended in an indecisive stalemate with little profit or advantage for any European state.

e. The Colonial Economy

Despite the wars, American generally benefited economically, as especially Northern merchants and Southern planters enjoyed a profitable protected market within the mercantile system. Northern shippers and merchants entered the slave trade and supplied foodstuffs and rum to the Caribbean colonies in exchange for sugar, ignoring mercantile regulations, and Southern planters saw expanding and profitable trade in tobacco, rice and indigo. The middle colonies became major producers of grain with a profitable carrying trade. As colonial economies became more integrated, slavery and its products remained an engine of economic growth essential even to the less directly slave-dependent North.

VII. SLAVERY, PROSPERITY, AND FREEDOM

The prosperity and freedoms amassed by the colonists during this period were only possible by restricting the same for African and African American slaves—a glaring contradiction.

a. The Social Structure of the Slave Colonies

Slavery produced a highly stratified society. The landed elite controlled more than 60 percent of the colonial wealth and collaborated to secure their position as the unofficial aristocracy of the British colonies. They lived on estates, held political and religious power, owned hundreds of slaves, and became the leading “first families” of the colonies. The patterns of aristocracy varied by region, but the end result was the same: control of
land, wealth, and power. The gap between the elite and the middle and lower classes continued to grow throughout the eighteenth century. While slaveholding increased, it did not always lead to wealth, particularly among the small farmers and middling class. While poorer farmers might have a slave or two, many landless men were impoverished and the disparity between rich and poor was much greater in Virginia than New England.

b. White Skin Privilege

Skin color rather than class was the most significant social and legal distinction as laws were passed to separate whites from blacks and limits the rights of free blacks. Despite restrictions on interracial sex, planters freely exploited their female slaves, and mulatto slaves were even relatives of their masters, including Thomas Jefferson, who likely fathered children with Sally Hemings, his wife’s unacknowledged slave half sister. Slavery created social contradictions seldom addressed by the masters who evaded and denied responsibility for their physical and psychological cruelty.


VIII. CONCLUSION

African slavery helped make colonies wealthy and productive, and as long as the mercantile system profited Americans and Britons alike, few were willing to address the contradictions, as slavery remained fundamental to the imperial economy.

Learning Objectives

1. How did the modern system of slavery develop?
2. What is the history of the slave trade and the Middle Passage?
3. How did Africans manage to create communities under the brutal slave system?
4. What were the connections between the institution of slavery and the imperial system of the eighteenth century?
5. How and why did racism develop in America?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. How did the system of slavery develop and become entrenched in the Americas? How was the slave system that emerged in North America different from that which emerged elsewhere in the Atlantic world?

Answer: The system developed slowly as labor pools of indentured servants and Indians dried up and as the costs of trading in slaves decreased. North American slavery became the only self-sufficient system, relying more and more on the internal growth of the slave population through gentler treatment and natural growth while other slave systems became
increasingly repressive and harsh. Only 5 percent of the total number of slave imports ever went to the British colonies.

2. What were the effects of the slave trade both on enslaved Africans and on the economic and political life of Africa?

Answer: The slave trade was extremely disruptive and punishing. It physically and mentally abused Africans and forced them into a world previously unknown and from which there was little hope of escape. By depleting Africa of its peoples the continent’s tribes and peoples were politically, economically, and militarily weakened to the point that European powers were able to colonize virtually the whole of the continent in the nineteenth century.

3. What was the process of acculturation involved in becoming an African American? In what ways did slaves “Africanize” the South?

Answer: African slaves had to find a way to exist in American society. Through the development of families and extended kinship networks they created a community. Since the American colonial slave system was mostly dependent upon natural growth (as opposed to growth through imports) those slaves who were born here often set the tone for the slave culture. But Africans provided much needed influence on all facets as well, resulting in a blended or “creole” culture. This happened in all facets of life, family, community, religion, music, culture, and even death rituals. The South was Africanized through the constant intermixing of the black and white cultures. Slaves introduced new words, foods, customs, and practices that were assimilated into white culture.

4. What was the connection between the institution of slavery and the building of a commercial empire?

Answer: Slavery was the “stolen” and, therefore, free labor that underpinned all of the economic development and the amassing of wealth. It provided the raw materials for industrialization, it was central to the shipping interests, it allowed England to establish fixed capital and capital projects, and had a multiplying effect on the wealth and growth of the English and colonial economies.

5. In what ways did colonial policy encourage the growth of racism?

Answer: By separating the two races through a series of laws designed to ensure white privilege and uphold the emerging class system. Even the poorest whites were given status above blacks of any wealth and status. Because the entire economic system rested on the success of slavery, the separation had to be codified and secured.
Lecture Outline

American Communities—the Stono Rebellion

Origins of the Slave System
  Portuguese Atlantic Slave Trade
  Caribbean Sugar and Slaves
  Morality, Religion, and the Slave Trade

Africa in the Slave Era
  West African Slavery
  Slave Trade Networks
  Slave Castles
  The Atlantic Slave Trade in Facts and Figures
  The Impact on Africa

Olaudah Equiano
  The Shock of Enslavement
  The Middle Passage
  Equiano’s Autobiography: Fact or Fiction?

Slavery in North America
  The Tobacco Colonies and the Lower South
  Spanish and French Slavery
  The British North

From African to African American
  The Daily Life of Slaves
  Slave Families and Communities
  African American Culture
  The Africanization of the South
  Violence and Resistance

Slavery and the Economics of Empire
  Mercantilism
  The Colonial Economy
  Colonial Wars

Slavery, Prosperity and Freedom
  Social Structure of Slavery
  Whites, Blacks and the Contradictions of Slavery
Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Web
Africans in America: http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html. Part 1, “The Terrible Transformation” documents the lives of slaves in America between 1450 and 1750 as the institution grows from one of many labor systems into the labor system and evolves from a temporary state of servitude to perpetual servitude through the generations.

Slaves and the Courts, 1740–1860: http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/sthtml/ is part of the American Memory Historical Collections of the Library of Congress. It documents the experiences of African and African American slaves in the American colonies through the use of pamphlets and court records. There are case reports, examinations of cases, works concerning slaves, fugitive slaves, slave revolts, and the African slave trade.

The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record: http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php is a treasure trove of more than a thousand searchable images on slavery, the slave trade, and slave life in America.

Films/Video
Africans in America, Part 1, “The Terrible Transformation” (60 minutes). WGBH/PBS, 1998. Using maps, narratives, and images from the period, this documentary details the lives of slaves as they confront the institution and its rapidly changing aspects.

MY HISTORY LAB CONNECTIONS

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review:

Read the Documents
Alexander Falconbridge, The African Slave Trade (1788)
Olaudah Equiano, The Middle Passage (1788)
Of the Servants and Slaves in Virginia (1705)
James Oglethorpe, Establishing the Colony of Georgia (1733)
Runaway Notices from the South Carolina Gazette, (1732 and 1737)
James Oglethorpe, The Stono Rebellion (1739)

See the Maps
African Slave Trade, 1500–1870

Hear the Audio
On Being Brought from Africa to America
“Ghana: Ewe-Atsiagbekor” from Roots of Black Music in America
Research and Explore

Read the Documents
Exploring America: Racism in American History
Whose History Is It?: The Living Legacy of Slavery

Read the Biographies
Olaudah Equiano
John Woolman

History Bookshelf
Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1791)
Watson and the Shark: Reading the Representation of Race

Hear the Audio
“Ghana: Ewe-Atsiagbekor” from Roots of Black Music in America
Phillis Wheatley, On Being Brought from Africa to America

Critical Thinking Exercises

Students should explore the ways in which slavery was similar or different across the various countries and regions of the Americas—in its institutionalization, laws, customs, and labor practices.