

The Forgotten Story of American Indian Slavery

When Americans think of slavery, our minds create images of Africans inhumanely crowded aboard ships plying the middle passage from Africa, or of blacks stooped to pick cotton in Southern fields. We don't conjure images of American Indians chained in coffles and marched to ports like Boston and Charleston, and then shipped to other ports in the Atlantic world. Yet Indian slavery and an Indian slave trade were ubiquitous in early America.

From the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, tens of thousands of America's native peoples were enslaved, many of them transported to lands distant from their homes. Our historical mythology posits that American Indians could not be enslaved in large numbers because they too readily succumbed to disease when exposed to Europeans and they were too wedded to freedom to allow anyone to own them.

Yet many indigenous people developed resistance to European diseases after being exposed to the newcomers for well over a century. And it is a racist conception that "inferior" Africans accepted their debased position as slaves - a status that American Indians and Europeans presumably could never have accepted. This is a gross misconception of history. We are just scratching the surface of what this all means. For the enslavement of Indians forces us to rethink not only the institution of slavery, but the evolution of racism and racist ideologies in America. In the 17th century, Europeans, Africans and American Indians all accepted slavery as a legitimate social institution.

Treatment and status of the enslaved varied greatly from group to group. War captives provided most slaves, though the Europeans made slavery inheritable. Africans and Indians did exchange slaves as commodities, but Europeans introduced an international market economy for labor, as colonial plantation societies developed an insatiable demand for workers, spurring the African slave trade as well as various forms of bond labor for impoverished Europeans. In the American South, European traders, mostly British colonists operating out of Charleston, South Carolina, engaged local and distant American Indian tribes to undertake slaving against their neighbors, who could be made to walk to ships that would carry them to Barbados, New York, Antigua and other ports in the Atlantic world, where they would work as slaves.

The South Carolinians used some of these slaves to work their own plantations, but because of the ability of captives to escape over familiar territory among familiar peoples, their captors preferred to export most of them elsewhere. Capital from selling Indian slaves was used to fund plantations and purchase Africans. It was as if one could create capital out of thin air: The only effort lay in capturing the prey and transporting it to market. Native peoples engaged in slaving for a variety of reasons. In exchange for captives, they received European trade goods. Many also hoped to forge closer relations with the British. To refuse to become slave raiders, they risked becoming categorized as potential victims, with their enemies then filling the role of slavers. The result: A frenzy of slaving infected the region, as natives captured not only their enemies, but people they had never met. Some went farther and captured their friends and allies. Small-scale raids with attacks on fewer than a dozen people evolved into large-scale wars, with the British and their American-Indian allies seeking captives in the thousands. Extending southward from Charleston, British and native raiders followed attacks upon the native peoples of Georgia with a massive onslaught against Indians on Spanish missions in northern Florida. Systematically, the raiders extended all the way to the Florida Keys. Simultaneously, the English established important ties with the Chickasaw, who became the key slavers of the lower Mississippi Valley, extending their attacks west of the Mississippi and south to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Chickasaw, surrounded by enemies on all sides, used slaving as a way to strengthen themselves at their enemies' expense, but great losses in slaving wars weakened them immensely. The numbers are difficult to calculate, but I estimate that 30,000 to 50,000, perhaps more, American Indians were exported from Charleston. Thousands more were exported from ports like Boston and Salem, and, on a much smaller scale, by the French from New Orleans. Untold numbers, which scholars are just beginning to calculate, will ultimately include the thousands who were not exported from their region but lived out their lives as slaves on plantations in Virginia, as farm laborers in Connecticut and as domestics in New France.

Although the scale of enslavement pales in comparison to the African slave trade, it is notable, for instance, that from 1670 to 1717, far more American Indians were exported from Charleston than Africans were brought in. Scholars long have known about the Indian slave trade, but the scattered nature of the sources deterred a systematic examination. No one had any conception of the trade's massive extent and that it played such a central role in the lives of early Americans and in the colonial economy.

Indian slavery complicates the narrative we have created of a white-black world, with Indians residing outside on a vaguely defined frontier. The Indian slave trade connects native and European history, so that plantations and American Indian communities become entwined. We find planters making more money from slave trading than planting, and if we look more closely we find Indians not only enslaved on plantations but working as police forces to maintain those plantations and receiving substantial rewards for returning runaway slaves. We are also learning a great deal more about American-Indian peoples.

Most importantly we can now tell the stories - the tragedies - that befell so many who were killed in slaving wars or spent their days as slaves far from their homes. They and their peoples have been largely forgotten. The Natchez, Westo, Yamasee, Euchee, Yazoo and Tawasa are among the dozens of Indian peoples who fell victims to the slaving wars, with the survivors forced to join other native communities. These are tales that Indians themselves have not told: Just as the story of Indian slavery was excluded from the European past, it was largely forgotten in American-Indian traditions. Americans often wish the past would just go away, save for those symbols we celebrate: Pocahontas saving John Smith, the "noble savage," and the first Thanksgiving. The image of Pilgrims and Indians sharing a meal is one of the most cogent images we have of American Indians and of the colonization of this continent.

Indian slavery is an important part of South Carolina's history that many know nothing about. No other state has as many historic documents that chronicle Native American slavery as South Carolina. As the historian Lauber concludes American Indian slaves were most numerous in South Carolina and the number of Indians exported was larger than that from any other colony. Indian slavery intermingles with every aspect of the colonial record of South Carolina. Indian slavery began soon after settlers arrived, and persisted through the colonial period. Knowing about the Indian enslavement is important, impressive, and persistent role in the history of South Carolina and because it has affected the Native American citizens of the State. Indian slavery contributed to the development of the colony economically, agriculturally, politically, and legally. Indian slavery in colonial South Carolina made a large and indelible mark upon the tribal histories of the American Indians not only of South Carolina, but of the southeastern United States. In short, the destiny of many of the American Indian tribes of the region was influenced and determined by Indian Affairs which centered in Charleston.

It was slavery more than war or disease that destroyed the small coastal tribes. As early as 1683 the Proprietors had heard that the settlers were making war on Indians around Winyah Bay in order to obtain slaves. Since the Proprietors had given permission to sell Indian captives in the West Indies, the trade in slaves was stimulated and soon the colonists could not distinguish between Indians taken in war and those acquired in other ways.

Indian slave trade was expanded when a Scottish colony was started at Port Royal in 1684. The first law relating solely to slavery was passed in 1691. This law was operative for almost two decades. The Assembly passed a regulation for slaves so comprehensive that it deserves to be called South Carolina's first slave code. Much of the verbiage for this slave code was borrowed, in large part, from the Barbados Slave code of 1688. The South Carolina statute defined any Negro, Mulatto or Indian who had been bought or sold as such, to be a slave, and the status was extended to the children of such persons.

Although the laws of 1712, 1722, and 1735 recognized the children of Indian slaves to be slaves, they also recognized as free those Indians in friendship and amity with the provincial government. The presumption of the law of 1740, which continued Indian slavery, was in favor of freedom and placed the burden of proof upon those who claimed Indians as slaves.

In the colonial records from 1683-1699, seventeen Indian slaves were mentioned, undoubtedly there were more. A total of one hundred Indian slaves by 1700 is a conservative estimate. By 1703, there were approximately 7,000 persons living in Carolina (these estimates do not include any of the isolated Native communities who were not counted, but focuses on the heavily populated areas.), of whom 3,000 were African slaves. In addition, there were 350 Indian slaves; 100 men, 150 women and 100 children. Indians constituted over ten percent of the total number of slaves. Five years later, the population totaled approximately 8,100. Over one-half were African slaves and an additional 1,400 Indian slaves. There had been an increase of over 400 percent in the number of Indian slaves since 1703. From 1704 to 1708, there is documented four bills of sale and three Wills which involve a minimum of 19 Indian slaves. Within this period, the number of Indian slaves increased by 1,050. Many changed hands for ready sums of money with no paperwork required. This is partially explained by the fact that the Indians were not as expensive as the African slaves and at that time, were in reasonably good supply. Some planters used them in their rice fields, until they could afford the Africans.

In 1704, the General Assembly passed a law making their trusty slaves available in time of war. A list of all able-bodied Negro, Mulatto and Indian slaves was prepared. Consequently, Indian slaves fought for the Colony long before the American Revolution. If the slave was maimed or killed in action the owner would receive compensation from the public treasurer. Ultimately, there was extensive slave trafficking of Indian captives during the Tuscarora War of 1711 and Yamasee War of 1715-1716.

The slave trade even deployed that assistance of other American Indian groups, and therefore, encouraged many intertribal wars, unrests and disagreements among American Indian peoples.

Interestingly enough, the European colonial powers recognized the diplomatic potential of American Indian slaves. Some time these countries returned American Indian slaves to their respective tribes to gain peace, friendship and military alliances. The British practiced this along with the French and Spanish. Although some historians contend that Indian slavery dwindled after the Yamasee War, but quite the opposite is true. There were more Indians to be slaves and their labor was in demand. There was an estimate of more 2,000 Indian slaves in South Carolina in 1724. Indian slaves were branded like cattle. The most common spot for branding men was the right or left breast, with the first of last initials of the owner.

The slave code of 1740, which determined the legal destiny of slaves, was to endure to the end of the eighteenth century. This code dated May 10, 1740, defined slaves and Chattel property, thereby abandoning the definition of slaves continued since 1696. Slavery was thus based upon this law and its comprehensive definition, and not upon custom as it was in the past. Children of slaves were to follow the condition of the Mother. This was the most comprehensive slave code of the colonial period, it regulated the slave from cradle to grave. After the enactment of the 1740 slave code, Indians and descendants of Indians were regarded as free Indians or Free People of Color in amity with the government until the contrary could be shown to differentiate between the enslaved Indians. It is this phrasing in that code of 1740 which was later interrupted by the courts as the ending of Indian slavery in South Carolina. However, at least 25 Indian slaves are recorded during the 1770s, with 12 of them as runaways and 3 included as a part of the inventory of estates. The concluding phase of Indian slavery in South Carolina was incorporated in a series of laws enacted in the 1790s. A statute enacted on December 21, 1792, two years after first United States census, was to prohibit further importation of slaves in the State which included Indian, Mulatto or Mestizo. As late as 1838, Native Americans were in South Carolina fighting for their rights and re-evaluating the interpretation of the slave code of 1740. During the course of Indian slavery in South Carolina, Indians were used in a variety of ways. They were employed in the same ways that Negro slaves were utilized.

This article is one of many in the educational Teachers Guide South Carolina Indians Today edited by William Moreau Goins, Ph.D.