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Origins and Consolidation

I

ALTHOUGH AMERICANS LIKE to think that the United States was "conceived in liberty," the reality is somewhat different. Almost from the beginning, America was heavily dependent on coerced labor, and by the early eighteenth century slavery, legal in all of British America, was the dominant labor system of the Southern colonies. Most of the Founding Fathers were large-scale slave owners, including George Washington, "father of his country," Patrick Henry, author of the stirring cry "Give me liberty or give me death," and Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." Indeed, eight of the United States's first twelve Presidents, in office for forty-nine of the new nation's first sixty-one years, were slaveholders. When, beginning about 1830, a small band of abolitionists boldly proclaimed that slavery was a dreadful sin, the majority of Americans, North as well as South, regarded them as fanatics whose provocative rantings threatened the well-being of the Republic.

During the century and a half between the arrival of twenty blacks in Jamestown in 1619 and the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1776, slavery—nonexistent in England itself—spread through all the English colonies that would soon become the United States (as

well as through those that would not). It grew like a cancer, at first slowly, almost imperceptibly, then inexorably, as colonists eager for material gain imported hundreds of thousands of Africans to toil in their fields. During the eighteenth century, slavery became entrenched as a pervasive—and in many colonies central—component of the social order, the dark underside of the American dream.

II

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND the unfree origins of the United States, it is useful to put American developments in a broader world context, for until the nineteenth century unfree status of one type or another—slavery, serfdom, peonage—was the lot of much of humankind. Scholars have documented a staggering variety of "slaveries" that served a multitude of diverse purposes. To those accustomed to thinking of slaves as agricultural laborers and house servants, it may be startling to learn that slaves have also served as warriors, government officials, wives, concubines, tutors, eunuchs, and victims of ritual sacrifice. In many pre-modern societies there were high-status slaves who exercised considerable authority; such elite slaves ranged from stewards who managed vast agricultural estates in China and early-modern Russia to high government officials in Rome and the Ottoman Empire. Throughout much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, slaves served in the armed forces, at times—especially in the Islamic world—achieving high rank and wielding considerable power.

Slavery has also varied widely in terms of gender and ethnicity. If throughout the Western Hemisphere demand was greatest for young men to serve as physical laborers, in most of Africa and the Near East female slaves were more highly prized than male, both because of their widespread use as wives and concubines and because in many societies women traditionally served as the main agricultural producers. In ancient times, military victors frequently killed some or all of the vanquished adult males but enslaved the women and children.

Often slaves have differed physically from their masters, and racial contrast proved highly useful to American masters in legitimizing their position, but such distinction has by no means been universal. Somehow masters had to create a "we–they" dichotomy necessary

to distinguish those who might legitimately be enslaved from those who could not, but in the absence of racial contrast, other attributes, such as religion and nationality, could serve the same purpose: both Muslims and Christians traditionally believed that only heathens (non-Muslims and non-Christians, respectively) could be enslaved, and numerous groups enslaved those from other countries, tribes, or nationalities while sparing members of their own communities. But even ethnic distinction was not essential to slavery; sociologist Orlando Patterson has found that in about one-quarter of fifty-seven slaveholding societies he studied, at least some masters and slaves shared the same ethnic identity.

Although slavery has exhibited such extraordinary diversity over time and space that it might seem virtually impossible to generalize about its nature, a particular type of slavery, which exhibited certain common features, emerged in the Western (that is, European-derived) world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Most prevalent in the New World (the Americas), although it also existed in other areas of European colonization (such as South Africa), this modern Western slavery was a product of European expansion and was preeminently a system of labor. It emerged to meet the pervasive labor shortage that developed wherever landholders tried to grow staple crops—sugar, coffee, tobacco, rice, and later cotton—for market in areas of population scarcity. Spreading slowly at first, it assumed enormous proportions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and helped propel the economic transformation of the leading colonial powers, especially Great Britain.

This new system of bonded labor was distinguished by both its scope and its ethnic composition. It was closely associated with the spread of the plantation as a productive unit ideally suited for the regimentation of agricultural labor and hence the large-scale cultivation of staple crops; although slaves in the Americas served in diverse capacities, New World slavery was preeminently geared to such commercial agriculture. The Southern United States represented the northernmost outpost of this plantation system, which reached its apogee of organizational development on the large sugar estates of Jamaica, Saint Domingue (later called Haiti), Cuba, and other Caribbean colonies. Equally important was the new ethnic composition of modern Western slavery: despite some exceptions—a small although by no means negligible number of Indian slaves, a smaller number of Indian and black slave owners—most slaves

were Africans and their descendants, whereas most masters were Europeans and their descendants. This ethnic contrast did not totally define the character of New World slavery, for diverse conditions and traditions fostered major variations among slave societies in both slavery and race relations; the very understanding of the terms "white" and "black," for example, differed in Brazil, Jamaica, Louisiana, and Virginia. Nevertheless, at both the global and the individual level, the racial character of New World slavery was significant: that slavery was predicated on new, unequal relationships between Europe and Africa and between white and black.

Whatever the variations among New World slave societies, their orientation around commercial agriculture gave them an essential unity and made them part of an economic order. Slaves were brought to the Americas for their ability to work; slavery there constituted, first and foremost, a system of labor. As such, it had more in common with the serfdom that was emerging in Russia and some other parts of Eastern Europe than with many of the pre-modern slaveries mentioned above. It is within the context of this modern Western slavery that the development of American slavery is best understood.

III

COLONIAL AMERICA WAS overwhelmingly agricultural. Although some early migrants hoped to become fabulously wealthy without having to work, by finding gold or discovering the fabled Northwest Passage to the Pacific, it soon became clear to settlers that survival depended on working the land. Colonial Americans, like other people of their time, expended much of their energy feeding themselves, but they also found the land well suited to growing a variety of crops greatly in demand abroad, and it was these crops—the most important of which were tobacco in the upper South and rice in the lower South—that provided the basis for much of their wealth. (Sugar, a still more valued commodity, became the staple crop of the Caribbean islands.) Cultivating these crops, however, required labor; in an environment where land was plentiful and people few, the amount of tobacco or rice one could grow depended on the number of laborers one could command. The desire to develop commercial agriculture under conditions of population scarcity gave

rise in North America—as it did in the Caribbean and in South America—to forced labor.

This development was not so wrenching for the settlers as one might expect, for they were used to a highly stratified world in which the rich and powerful savagely exploited the poor and powerless. "Gentlemen" not only expected to receive the deference of their social inferiors but were willing to expend considerable force to ensure it. Historian Lawrence Stone has aptly noted the pervasive use of physical punishment to maintain order and authority in early-seventeenth-century England: "Whips and stocks were used by the Crown upon its lesser subjects, by the nobleman upon his servants, by the village worthies upon the poor, by the dons upon the undergraduates, by the City Companies upon the apprentices."[1] The contemporary equivalent of a shoplifter might be whipped, branded with the letter "T" (for "thief"), pilloried in the stocks, or transported to America. In many ways the world from which early colonists came was a world of pre-modern values, one that lacked the concepts of "cruel and unusual punishment," equal rights, and exploitation; it was a world that instead took for granted natural human *in*equality and the routine use of force necessary to maintain it. In short, it was a world with few ideological constraints against the use of forced labor.

The precise form that this forced labor took in colonial America, however, was by no means predetermined. The initial demand for labor was precisely that—for labor—and was largely color-blind. In addition to paying freely hired workers wages that were unusually high by European standards, the seventeenth-century colonists experimented with two other sources of unfree labor—Indians and Europeans—before their widespread importation of Africans.

English attitudes toward the native inhabitants of America were complex. Idealization of "noble savages," far less prevalent than it was among the French in Quebec, coexisted with interest in Christianizing "pagans" and the dominant goal of repressing, expelling, or killing "beasts" viewed as threats to civilization. Indians also served as slaves, at first usually victims of military defeat or kidnapping but subsequently also bought and sold on the open market. Such slaves were most numerous in South Carolina, where the governor estimated in 1708 that there were 1,400 Indian slaves in a population of 12,580, but they could be found in all the English colonies. Small numbers of Indian slaves persisted into the nine-

teenth century; others intermarried with Africans, and their descendants blended into the black population.

For a variety of reasons, however, Indian slavery never reached very substantial proportions on the British-controlled American mainland. Colonists complained that Indians were "haughty" and refused to work properly. Behind such complaints lay the very real refusal of many Indian men to perform agricultural labor, traditionally seen by them as women's work, and to engage in disciplined, supervised labor, to which they were unaccustomed. Equally important, the Indians used their familiarity with the terrain to escape and conspire against their captors. Because it has historically been difficult to enslave people on their home turf, the English found it convenient to export Indians captured in battle rather than hold them locally; in 1676, for example, after Massachusetts settlers crushed the bloody Indian uprising they termed King Philip's War, the head of the rebel leader Metacom was exhibited on a pole as an example to other would-be insurrectionists, but many of his followers (including his wife and son) were sold as slaves to the West Indies. Finally, there were simply not enough Indians in the colonies to fill the settlers' labor needs. Many—in some areas most—died in massive epidemics that swept through a population without immunity to such European diseases as smallpox and measles, while others perished in battle. Ultimately, the policy of killing the Indians or driving them away from white settlements proved incompatible with their widespread employment as slaves.

Far more common—indeed, the basis of the seventeenth-century work force in the southern two-thirds of the English mainland colonies—were European laborers. Most came as indentured servants. Indenturing (or apprenticing) children, youths, and less often adults to "masters" was widely practiced in seventeenth-century England and served a variety of functions from poor relief to job training and labor procurement. In the colonies, however, indentured servitude was transformed into an institution whereby Europeans desiring to come to America but unable to afford passage sold themselves into temporary slavery in exchange for free transatlantic transportation; especially in the South, where it served to provide large quantities of cheap labor to eager landowners, it lost much of its protective and educative function and assumed a harsher, more rapacious character. Terms of indenture varied considerably: most servants came voluntarily, but some arrived in America after being

kidnapped or sentenced for criminal behavior; most adults served four or five years, but children often served seven years or more; and both adults and children found their servitude extended for criminal behavior (including disobedience, flight, and childbearing). During their indenture, servants were essentially slaves, under the complete authority of their masters; masters could (and readily did) apply corporal punishment to servants, forbid them to marry, and sell them (for the duration of their terms) to others.

Indentured servitude flourished because it simultaneously met the needs of labor-hungry colonial landowners and those of would-be European migrants. Landowners saw servitude as a gold mine. It not only offered a solution to their labor problem but also enabled them to increase their landholdings further, for most early colonies provided those who paid for people's transatlantic passage with a "headright" or land allotment—often fifty acres—for each person (including oneself) transported. When John Carter imported eighty indentured servants in 1665 to work for him in Virginia, he received a headright of four thousand acres. In short, indentured servitude provided the emerging colonial gentry relatively cheap labor, more land, and the honor that accrued to those with authority over other humans.

To laborers, servitude held out an equally alluring attraction: the chance to escape hardship—poverty, hunger, unemployment, overpopulation, prison, or political turmoil—and to start anew in a distant, wonderful land. Although in the eighteenth century servant ranks were swelled by emigrants from Ireland and Germany, as well as by convicts transported in lieu of lengthy prison terms or death, most early servants were English, and came voluntarily. Severe economic dislocations in England in the first half of the seventeenth century—combined with the political disruption of the 1640s and 1650s that saw civil war culminate in the beheading of King Charles I, the dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell, and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 under Charles II—produced an abundant supply of would-be servants. They were overwhelmingly composed of young men (male servants outnumbered female by more than three to one) from the bottom half of the social order; although they came from diverse backgrounds, only a shared sense of desperation born of absent opportunity can explain their willingness to leave everything they had ever known for years of uncertain servitude in America.

Once in the colonies, indentured servants had diverse experiences. Some, especially in New England, engaged in (or were taught) skilled trades such as blacksmithing and carpentry; well into the nineteenth century, apprenticing children to artisans remained a way of providing for their education. Others worked as domestics. Most seventeenth-century servants, however, wound up as agricultural laborers, especially in the tobacco fields of Virginia and Maryland. They lived hard lives under the authority of men anxious to get as much work out of them as possible before their terms of service were up. Many ran away, an offense that—if they were apprehended—brought its perpetrators whippings, brandings, bodily mutilations, and extended terms of servitude. Many others succumbed to the new environment; recent evidence suggests that in the mid-seventeenth-century Chesapeake colonies almost half of all servants died while still under indenture. Some of those who survived eventually became independent craftsmen or landowners, but more still never achieved independence: unable to find wives because of the paucity of women, they remained single, continued to work for their better-established neighbors, and often lived in those neighbors' households as well. (Women servants who survived their indentures generally faced a brighter future than men; the surplus of males enabled most women to marry and many to improve their status by marrying "up.") Not all indentured servants were recent immigrants: within the colonies men and women were bound out for indebtedness and crime, and a small floating underclass of laborers lived perpetually in the margins of servitude, serving multiple terms of indenture.

IV

THROUGHOUT MOST of the seventeenth century, indentured servants filled the bulk of the colonies' labor needs. Although a Dutch captain sold twenty Africans in Virginia in 1619, and small numbers of blacks trickled into the mainland colonies over the following decades, until the 1680s the non-Indian population of the British mainland colonies remained overwhelmingly white. So long as a ready supply of indentured labor continued to exist, colonists saw little reason to go to the expense and bother of importing large numbers of Africans, who, unlike English laborers, had to undergo

prolonged adjustment to alien conditions—strange masters had unusual customs and spoke an unintelligible language—before becoming productive members of the work force. Equally important, because the Portuguese and Dutch dominated the African slave trade until the British triumph in the Anglo-Dutch war of 1664–67, the English colonists found slaves expensive and hard to obtain.

Beginning in the 1680s, however, the mainland colonies underwent a massive shift from indentured to slave labor. Some simple statistics drive home the point. Between 1680 and 1750, the estimated proportion of blacks in the population increased from 7 percent to 44 percent in Virginia and from 17 percent to 61 percent in South Carolina (see table 1). "They import so many Negros hither," wrote Virginia planter William Byrd II in 1736, "that I fear this Colony will some time or other be confirmed by the Name of New Guinea."[2]

This shift, which has been documented most carefully for the Chesapeake colonies, was the product of a fundamental change in the relative supply of indentured servants and slaves, in the face of escalating colonial demand for labor. Because servants were held only temporarily and then freed, a rapidly growing colonial population required an equally rapid growth in the number of indentured immigrants for servants to remain a constant proportion of the population. Between 1650 and 1700, the population of Virginia more than tripled; if indentured servants were to continue providing the bulk of the agricultural labor force, servant immigration would have had to triple, or come close to tripling, too.

In fact, at the same time that colonial demand for labor was surging, a sharp *decrease* occurred in the number of English migrants arriving in America under indenture. White immigration into the Chesapeake colonies—most of it indentured—peaked between 1650 and 1680 and then declined sharply. In some areas the decline was dramatic. In York County, Virginia, for example, the ratio of servants to slaves plummeted from 1.9 in 1680–84 to 0.27 in 1685–89 and 0.07 in 1690–94; within a decade, indentured servants had almost totally disappeared from the county. The flow of servants did not entirely end: during the first half of the eighteenth century, transportation of convicts to Maryland increased substantially, Pennsylvania attracted a huge wave of indentured Germans, and some English servants continued to come voluntarily. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, it was clear that indentured Euro-

peans could no longer fill the labor needs of the Southern colonies.

Changing conditions on both sides of the Atlantic were responsible for this development. In England, the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was followed by both political stabilization and an economic upturn. Wages rose, employment opportunities improved, agricultural productivity increased, and the population—which began to grow somewhat more slowly than it had earlier—no longer appeared excessive, as it had to many English observers in the first half of the century. In the colonies, opportunities for unskilled immigrants declined in the late seventeenth century, as land became more densely settled and hence less readily available. (In part for this reason, indentured servants who came to America from England in the eighteenth century tended to be substantially more literate and more skilled than those in the seventeenth.) A downturn in tobacco prices beginning in the early 1680s may also have discouraged merchants from importing servants into the Chesapeake. In short, for a variety of reasons, selling themselves into indentured servitude in America no longer seemed like a very attractive proposition to many English subjects.

In the face of this rather sudden decline in the supply of European servants, labor-hungry Chesapeake landowners looked elsewhere for replacements. Fortunately for them, the late seventeenth century witnessed not only a decline in the availability of European laborers but also an increase in the availability of African. British naval superiority brought with it dominance of the African slave trade, a dominance symbolized by establishment of the slave-trading Royal African Company in 1672 and receipt of the royal *Asiento* (or right to supply the Spanish colonies with slaves) in 1713. Although most British-traded slaves continued to go to the sugar islands in the Caribbean, where demand for them was greatest, mainland colonists found their supply of Africans eased as well. Historian Russell Menard has calculated that between 1674 and 1691, the ratio of slave prices to servant prices (measured in constant British pounds) fell steadily, from 2.88 to 1.83. Under these conditions, colonists who could no longer secure an adequate supply of white indentured servants were quite willing to use black slaves in their place.

With large-scale importation of Africans under way, landowners had additional, if subsidiary, reasons for preferring slaves to servants. Slaves were held permanently rather than for a few years, and female

slaves passed their status on to their children. Thus, although they cost more to purchase than servants, as the ratio of slave prices to servant prices declined slaves increasingly seemed like a better long-term investment, especially to the wealthiest planters, who could most easily afford their initial cost and who therefore led the switch from indentured to slave labor. Basic demographic changes among the black population (discussed more fully in chapter 2, section III) reinforced this preference. Early African residents of the Chesapeake colonies had relatively few children in America and suffered from exceedingly high mortality rates that made them risky investments. A modest decline in those rates by the late seventeenth century was followed by a sharp increase in fertility rates in the early eighteenth; as a result, whereas in the seventeenth century the slave population failed to reproduce itself and had to be replenished in much the same way the servant population did, in the eighteenth century it became a self-perpetuating labor force. An initial investment in slaves bought a lifetime (and more) of labor.

Slaves also offered masters a reduced level of successful flight, an important consideration everywhere but especially in Virginia, where, in the wake of the abortive rebellion led by Nathaniel Bacon in 1676, planters were increasingly concerned about controlling unruly laborers. Both slaves and servants ran away and, when caught, received for their efforts a wide range of nasty punishments, including whippings, bodily mutilations, and—for servants—lengthened servitude. Eighteenth-century colonial newspapers (there were none in the seventeenth century) were filled with advertisements for fugitives, both white and black; a typical notice from the *Pennsylvania Journal* of September 26, 1751, advertised for return of "an Irish Servant Man, Named Christopher Cooney, of Short Stature, pale Complexion, short brown Hair"; the listing noted that he "has a Scarr on his left Cheek, near his Nose, has lost one of his under fore Teeth, has had his Right Leg broke, and walks with his Toes turning outwards."[3] But because of their color, slaves found it much more difficult than servants to escape. Despite brandings and mutilations designed to mark them as bound, once beyond the immediate vicinity of their servitude servants were often able to establish themselves as free; because blacks were presumed to be slaves unless they could show otherwise, they found unauthorized movement more difficult. Racial distinction, in short, facilitated enslavement.

V

THE EARLY RELATIONSHIP between slavery and race has prompted considerable historical debate. Some scholars have stressed the existence of racial prejudice among the English before their resort to African slavery, and have argued that it was this prejudice that led to the enslavement of Africans in America. Others have seen racism largely as a function of slavery, maintaining that people held as slaves came to be seen as slavish by nature. Although in their baldest form these two positions—enunciated most starkly in the 1950s by Carl N. Degler on the one hand and Oscar and Mary F. Handlin on the other—seem to be mutually exclusive, there is considerable evidence to support modified versions of both, and when properly reformulated they are not so incompatible as they first appear; perhaps for this reason, the debate has gradually lost much of its acrimony. Indeed, what we now know suggests that the most appropriate question is not whether slavery caused prejudice or prejudice caused slavery (a false choice, since the evidence sustains neither of these two conjectures) but rather how slavery and prejudice interacted to create the particular set of social relationships that existed in the English mainland colonies.

The initial demand for labor that eventually led to slavery was, as we have seen, color-blind. The colonists came from a hierarchical society that lacked the modern world's clear demarcation between free and unfree status. They saw nothing particularly noteworthy about some people working—even under constraint—for the well-being of others, and they experimented with forced labor of Indians and Europeans before resorting to that of Africans. The turn to Africans came not because of any ideological concerns but because the flow of indentured white labor seemed to be drying up.

Research by scholars such as Winthrop D. Jordan has clearly demonstrated that well before the shift from indentured to slave labor the English already harbored three stereotypes about Africans that facilitated their enslavement by setting them off as different (and hence liable to different treatment). First, they were "black," or so they seemed; it is highly significant that the English saw Africans as black and themselves as white—in both cases inaccurately—for associated with the former term were numerous pejorative meanings ranging from dirty to immoral, whereas the latter carried equally positive connotations of purity, virtue, and godliness. Second, they

were "savage" or "uncivilized"; that is, their culture was very different from that of Europeans and appeared to the English to be manifestly outlandish and inferior. Third, they were "heathens," an attribute that may have been the most important of all, for in an era when being the wrong kind of Christian put one in mortal danger in most of Christendom (including most of the English colonies), being a non-Christian automatically put one beyond the pale.

Clearly, the English were struck by differences between themselves and Africans, and negative stereotypes of Africans helped shape race relations in America during the early years of slavery. The significance of those stereotypes for the introduction and maintenance of slavery must not be exaggerated, however, for none of them proved essential; indeed, it soon became clear that diminution and even removal of the three perceived differences that set Africans apart from Europeans provided little basis for questioning slave status. Thus, the emergence through interracial sexual contact of light-colored slaves who lacked the stigma of blackness did not necessitate their manumission, any more than did the emergence of "acculturated" slaves who lacked the African's "savagery." At first it appeared that religious convergence might prove more of a stumbling block, and some planters withheld Christian instruction from Africans in the belief that their conversion might require their emancipation. Such fears were put to rest during the last third of the seventeenth century, however, when one colony after another passed laws making it clear that "the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or ffreedome"; in other words, Christians could be held as slaves.[4]

Furthermore, if Africans appeared to be fundamentally different, throughout much of the seventeenth century they received treatment only marginally different from that afforded other members of the "lower ranks." Brutal repression of "rowdy" elements in Britain as well as savage colonization of Ireland preceded the English assault on Native Americans and enslavement of Africans, and demonstrate the insufficiency of race as an explanation of policy toward blacks. If the English regarded Africans as inferior by nature, members of the English gentry regarded their own lower classes—and the Irish—in much the same way: they were ignorant and "brutish" and required physical repression to keep them in line. The Irish were widely perceived as wild, degraded, and of questionable Christianity, "more uncivill, more uncleanly, more barbarous and more

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brutish in their customs and demeanures, then in any other part of the world that is known."[5]

Within the colonies, there was often little clear demarcation between blacks and lower-class whites during the first decades of settlement. Indentured servants were subject to many of the same constraints as slaves, and the two groups often lived together, worked together, played together, and sometimes slept together and ran away together. Landowning Virginians feared the "giddy multitude" (or rabble), but this was a rather heterogeneous lower-class group of servants and slaves, whites and blacks that seemed to threaten the social order. Until the very end of the seventeenth century, blacks remained too few in number to constitute a distinct threat of their own.

In all the mainland colonies, seventeenth-century race relations showed a flexibility that would later seem astonishing. This flexibility was evident in Massachusetts, where slaves never formed more than a tiny fraction of the population and most blacks were house servants or skilled workers, but it also existed in the mainland colony with the highest proportion of slaves, South Carolina, where blacks served as trappers, hunters, guides, and fishermen, and, as historian Peter Wood put it, "servants and masters shared the crude and egalitarian intimacies inevitable on a frontier."[6] Historians T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes have demonstrated that "in seventeenth-century Northampton County, Virginia . . . Englishmen and Africans could interact with one another on terms of relative equality for two generations." Between 1664 and 1677, at least 13 (out of 101) blacks became free landowners, most through self-purchase; in 1668, some 29 percent of blacks in the county were free.[7] In short, there was not yet an impenetrable barrier separating the races. Although almost all blacks came to the colonies as slaves, most whites came as unfree laborers, too, and there was much that united them.

Even in these early years, however, the treatment of black laborers differed from that of white in important respects. They required more "breaking in"—in terms of language, customs, work habits, and simple obedience—especially by the late seventeenth century, when most came directly from Africa without undergoing "seasoning" in the West Indies, as had previously been common. Although some Africans seem to have served, like whites, as temporary indentured servants during the first half century of English settlement in America, most, unlike whites, already served for life. But most

important, whereas the great majority of European migrants came to America voluntarily, none of the Africans did.

More than anything else, it was the involuntary nature of blacks' migration to America that dictated their growing separation from the white labor force. As historian Edmund S. Morgan pointed out, desire to attract continued white immigration imposed limits on the severity of treatment of indentured servants, especially with the slackening of European arrivals after the 1670s, and prevented those servants from being reduced to the ranks of slaves. Gradually, the status and treatment of European migrants improved. An increasing proportion were literate and possessed skills that enabled them to take advantage of opportunities offered by the burgeoning colonial economies; in the eighteenth century, unlike the seventeenth, few white servants in the South (and virtually no women) engaged in agricultural labor. That was now the lot of blacks, who as involuntary migrants did not have to be lured to America by attractive conditions.

As the status of white migrants gradually improved, that of blacks in America became more clearly defined as well. Whereas the legal status of the few blacks who resided in the colonies remained uncertain prior to the 1660s, a spate of legislation passed during the subsequent century regulated the condition of the growing population of black slaves and set them off from white settlers. These acts established that slaves—and the children of slave women—would serve for life; limited the rights of slaves and even of free blacks (they could not vote, testify in court against whites, or marry whites); prohibited slaves from carrying arms or leaving home without written permission; discouraged masters from freeing slaves by a variety of provisions including requiring legislative approval for each act of manumission and requiring manumitted slaves to leave their home colony within six months; and mandated severe corporal punishment for those who dared challenge white authority. Because slavery was absent in England, the slave law that developed in her overseas possessions was (unlike that of the Spanish empire) entirely a product of colonial legislation, with each colony passing its own slave laws. The timing and substance of these laws consequently varied somewhat. Virginia's first major slave code, enacted in 1680, was strengthened in 1705; South Carolina's perfunctory code of 1690 was superseded by that of 1696 and then overhauled in more comprehensive legislation of 1712, which in turn was substantially revised in 1740. Both colonies, like others, continued to enact new

legislation on a piecemeal basis. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, slavery was solidly entrenched, both in fact and in law, as the labor system of the Southern colonies and was legally established in the Northern colonies as well.

Ironically, racial lines hardened despite a growing convergence between white and black. Over the generations, interaction between Africans and their descendants on the one hand and Europeans and their descendants on the other sharply reduced the cultural—and sometimes the physical—gap between the races (see chapter 2). But even as this process occurred, most white Americans came to assume that blacks were so different from whites that slavery was their natural state. (Such sentiment would receive far more detailed expression in the nineteenth century when the abolitionist onslaught provoked an elaborate justification of slavery.) As Virginia planter Landon Carter put it in 1770, "Kindness to a Negroe by way of reward for having done well is the surest way to spoil him although according to the general observation of the world most men are spurred on to diligence by rewards."[8] Whereas a century earlier, freedom was a vague concept and the lot of most laborers, white and black, was to one extent or another unfree, now the assumption among whites was practically universal that blacks were slave and whites free.

VI

IN FULL SWING by the late seventeenth century, the British-operated slave trade was a big business in the eighteenth. Many of the foremost families in England (and New England) grew rich off it. Leaving a home port such as Liverpool or Boston with a cargo of weapons, manufactured goods, and rum, a slaving ship would proceed to the west coast of Africa, where these items were exchanged for slaves to be sold in the mainland or island colonies (or elsewhere; in the eighteenth century, the British provided slaves to much of the New World). Successful voyages brought large profits, but the risks were also great: sea travel was hazardous under the best of circumstances, and on most ships between 5 and 20 percent of the slaves (and crew) died in transit. (Mortality rates gradually declined over the course of the eighteenth century.) Exceptional circumstances—attack by pirates, bad weather—could jeopardize

an entire cargo. Even insurance, which during the eighteenth century covered an increasing proportion of traders against unforeseen losses, provided uncertain protection; in 1781, running short on water, the captain of the *Zong* ordered 132 Africans thrown overboard, because his insurance covered death from drowning but not from starvation.

Most American slaves came from the coastal region of West Africa. European and American traders dubbed this region "Guinea" and assigned various portions of it descriptive designations such as Ivory Coast, Gold Coast, and Slave Coast that suggested the nature of their appeal. A much smaller number of American slaves—although perhaps as many as 40 percent of those brought to South Carolina—came from the Congo/Angola region farther south. Enslaved Africans belonged to a multiplicity of nationalities with diverse languages, customs, and political structures, although the bulk of slaves came from three distinct geographic zones—upper Guinea, lower Guinea, and Congo/Angola—each of which was marked by loose cultural and linguistic commonality. As historian Daniel C. Littlefield has shown, both the slave traders and their American customers were (unlike their nineteenth-century descendants) conscious of the slaves' diverse ethnic origins, and showed marked preferences—based in part on perceived physical distinctions and in part on ethnic stereotyping that could vary from place to place—for certain nationalities. Among South Carolina slave owners, for example, big, strong, dark slaves from Gambia and the Gold Coast were most in demand; "Coromantes and Whydahs, because of their greater hardiness, were supposed to be especially desirable as field hands, whereas Ibos, Congos, and Angolas, allegedly weaker, were said to be more effective as house servants."[9]

More mundane considerations, however, of which the most important was simple availability, determined the geographic origins and ethnic composition of slaves shipped across the Atlantic. Seeking to avoid contact with the inhospitable African environment, European traders operated from a series of "factories" or forts along the coast, each headed by a "factor." They received, especially in the early years of the slave trade, considerable cooperation from African rulers and merchants; although ultimately traffic in slaves was based on force, and the transatlantic trade led to increasing disruption of African societies, Africans—no strangers themselves to slavery—joined Europeans in buying and selling human property. The African

slave trade involved considerable partnership, albeit of an increasingly unequal nature, between white and black traders. Over time, as the growing demand for slaves put increasing strains on established sources of supply, the trade's center shifted southward and reached deeper into the African interior.

Africans became slaves in a variety of ways, all of which had existed before European contact but became more prevalent under the stimulus of the transatlantic trade. Some were sentenced into slavery for criminal activity or indebtedness. Others were kidnapped, either by whites or more often by Africans who sold them to whites. The largest number, however, were prisoners of war, victims of military conflicts among African nations and, increasingly, objects of such conflicts, which approached at the crudest level pure slave-raiding ventures. Whatever their route to slavery, however, slaves sold to Europeans faced a different future from those held by Africans. Although it is important not to romanticize African slavery or gloss over the suffering it imposed on its victims, slaves sent to America faced particular hardships. Slaves in Africa served in diverse roles from wives and concubines to household servants, agricultural laborers, and victims of ritual sacrifice, but plantation slavery was rare in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West Africa. Slaves there usually lived within the immediate households of their owners in an environment that was not altogether foreign to them; they—and especially their children—could hope gradually to lose their marginal status and be absorbed into the families and society of their masters. Slaves destined for America, by contrast, lost everything they knew—possessions, home, loved ones—and embarked on a strange new life in an alien world.

The transit to this new world was a frightful experience. Marched in chains to points of embarkation, sold to strange-looking men who spoke an incomprehensible language, branded, dragged struggling into long canoes that took them to ships waiting offshore, Africans began their voyage to America in despondency and often in panic. Some had never before seen giant ships, the ocean, or white men; "I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me," recalled Olaudah Equiano, one of the very few victims of the slave trade later able to describe their experiences in writing.[10] Like many other captives, Equiano, anticipating the worst he could imagine, feared he was about to be eaten. (Europeans, too, often imagined Africans as cannibals.)

Next came the transatlantic voyage, or "Middle Passage." Men were usually kept in chains, in holds; women and children, fewer in number, were sometimes allowed greater freedom of movement. In ships run by "tight packers," who deplored the waste of space provided by holds five feet high and who consequently installed middle shelves, creating two levels of two and a half feet, slaves were often crammed together so closely they could barely move. If the weather was good, slaves would be taken on deck daily and "danced," a painful exercise for those in chains thought to combat scurvy (caused, unbeknownst to anyone at the time, by a deficiency of vitamin C).

Conditions on slaving ships reached their worst when poor weather prolonged travel and forced slaves to remain belowdecks for extended periods. A particularly graphic account of such conditions is provided in a book published in 1788 by Alexander Falconbridge, a doctor on numerous slaving voyages:

> Some wet and blowing weather having occasioned the port-holes to be shut and the grating to be covered, fluxes and fevers among the negroes ensued. While they were in this situation, I frequently went down among them till at length their rooms became so extremely hot as to be only bearable for a very short time . . . The floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house . . . Numbers of the slaves having fainted they were carried upon deck where several of them died and the rest with great difficulty were restored.[11]

Traders noted that the African captives were especially prone to a disease they labeled "fixed melancholy," whose sufferers became morose, moody, and unresponsive, staring into space, refusing food, and in extreme cases committing suicide, usually by jumping overboard.

Arrival in America brought an end to the Middle Passage, but also brought its own terror: sale. Whether subjected to a "scramble," whereby prospective purchasers rushed on board seeking the likeliest slaves at a fixed price, or to a public auction, the Africans found themselves examined, poked, and prodded by eager customers. Once again, anger, humiliation, and fear of impending doom gripped them.

It is almost with relief that one turns from gruesome descriptions to cold statistics of the slave trade. Scholars have long debated the number of Africans brought to the New World. The first scholarly "census," by Philip Curtin in 1969, yielded a preliminary estimate of 9.5 million, a figure that has since gradually inched upward as researchers have continued to discover new evidence. Although precise figures must remain elusive, according to the best current estimates a total of 10 to 11 million living slaves crossed the Atlantic Ocean from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century. (Since others died in wars and in transit, Africa's total population loss was much greater.) As David Eltis has shown, the forced migration of slaves to the Americas significantly exceeded the voluntary immigration there of free persons until the 1830s, and the cumulative total of African migrants exceeded that of Europeans until the 1880s.

America absorbed relatively few of these Africans. The great bulk—more than 85 percent of the total—went to Brazil and the various Caribbean colonies of the British, French, Spanish, and Dutch. Others went to the Spanish mainland. The United States, or more accurately for most of the slave-trade years the colonies that would later become the United States, imported only 600,000 to 650,000 Africans, some 6 percent of all the slaves brought from Africa to the New World.

From this small beginning, however, emerged by far the largest slave population in the Western Hemisphere. The key to this apparent paradox lies in the self-reproducing nature of the slave population in the United States, where well before the importation of slaves was legally ended in 1808 an excess of births over deaths produced what demographers refer to as "natural population growth." Virtually everywhere else in the Americas—Brazil, Jamaica, Cuba, Saint Domingue—slavery was dependent on continued importation of Africans; once that importation ended, the slave population declined. Thus, in 1810, the 1.1 million slaves in the United States constituted almost twice the total number it had imported from Africa during the preceding two centuries; during the next fifty years, the slave population more than tripled again, to almost 4 million in 1860. By contrast, Brazil and the Caribbean were graveyards for Africans and their descendants; Jamaica, for example, imported a total of more than three-quarters of a million Africans, but at the time of emancipation in 1834, its slave population stood at only 311,000. In short, in the United States, the slave population

at emancipation was more than six times as large as the number of slaves it had imported; in Jamaica, the slave population was less than half as large as the number it had imported.

Scholars do not fully agree on the reasons for the unusual natural growth of the American slave population. Some stress factors largely extraneous to slavery, such as America's self-sufficiency in food, which made it possible for masters to provide slaves with a comparatively healthy diet, and the absence of many tropical diseases that proved deadly to large numbers of slaves in the Caribbean and Brazil. Other scholars point to variations in crops, noting that most slaves in America raised tobacco and cotton rather than sugar, which typically imposed exceptionally harsh conditions and an exhausting pace of labor on its cultivators. (The slave population in the Bahamas did grow naturally; significantly, those islands both enjoyed a temperate climate and lacked substantial sugar cultivation.) Still others emphasize the unusually high fertility of American slaves. Not only did women form a higher proportion of the slave population in America than in the Caribbean and Brazil (which continued to import large number of Africans) but a higher proportion of American slave women bore children and those who did so bore on the average more children.

Although historians continue to debate the factors responsible for the atypical growth of the American slave population, their disagreements are less over the existence of these factors than over their relative importance. It is clear that for a variety of reasons American slaves had both higher birth rates and lower mortality rates than those elsewhere in the Americas. Among most New World slaves, deaths consistently exceeded births; in America, as we shall see in chapter 2, births came to exceed deaths during the eighteenth century. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the slave population grew naturally at an annual rate of about 2 percent.

The consequences of this demographic contrast are highly significant and will receive attention throughout this volume. Elsewhere in the New World, absence of natural population growth meant that the majority of adult slaves were African-born and—since traders imported almost twice as many men as women—male. In the United States, however, American-born (or creole) slaves came to outnumber Africans well before the War for Independence, and during the following decades the proportion of Africans became tiny. The largely creole character of the slave population profoundly

shaped the nature of American slavery, especially during its last century, affecting both relations between masters and slaves and those among the slaves themselves.

VII

ALTHOUGH THE CENTURY preceding the American Revolution saw slavery spread throughout all of the colonies that would soon constitute the United States, significant variations emerged, based on differing regional economies. Wherever there was widespread agricultural production for market, slavery became entrenched as the basis of the labor system. Elsewhere, it existed more as a "luxury" than as the fundamental underpinning of the economy. (For statistics documenting this section, see table 1.)

Slavery on the North American mainland emerged first in the tidewater region of the Chesapeake colonies—Virginia, Maryland, and the northeast corner of North Carolina. Here rich land, a moderate climate, and, most important of all, abundant waterways (necessary for transportation) provided the perfect conditions for tobacco cultivation. Annual exports of tobacco (almost all from the Chesapeake colonies) surged from 20,000 pounds in 1619 to 38 million pounds in 1700, as growers sought to take advantage of the seemingly insatiable European demand, and then stabilized at a fluctuating level of 25 to 60 million pounds in the eighteenth century.

Tobacco provided the basis for a highly commercial, increasingly prosperous, and almost totally rural society in the upper South. Throughout the colonial period, Virginia was the most populous of Britain's mainland colonies; more important, Virginia and Maryland not only led all other mainland colonies in the value of their exports to Britain but together provided more than half the value of those exports. The upper South was a society of people on the make: market-oriented farmers (both large and small), traders, and land speculators. It was also a society with an intense demand for labor, which was met by European indentured servants until the 1680s and by African slaves thereafter. Demand for new slaves remained strong through the first half of the eighteenth century but weakened markedly after that as soil exhaustion and overproduction turned tobacco boom into tobacco crisis; in the second half of the century, planters cut back their tobacco acreage, increased their cultivation

of wheat, and sharply curtailed their purchase of Africans. Slavery, however, remained firmly entrenched. On the eve of the American Revolution, slaves constituted about one-third the population in Maryland and North Carolina and two-fifths in Virginia, but these figures mask significant intra-colonial variation: in the backcountry, largely self-sufficient farming precluded the use of many slaves, but in most of the tobacco-producing areas along the Chesapeake, at least half the inhabitants were slaves.

A second regional slave economy emerged along the coast of the lower South, in South Carolina, Georgia, and the southeastern portion of North Carolina. First settled by the English half a century later than the Chesapeake, South Carolina had a small, struggling population until rice was introduced as a staple crop in the 1690s. Rice soon became as central to the economy of the lower South as tobacco was to that of the upper South; rice exports (almost all from South Carolina and, after the mid-eighteenth century, Georgia) soared from 12,000 pounds in 1698 to 18 million pounds in 1730 and 83 million in 1770. From the middle of the eighteenth century, Carolinians also began producing indigo (unlike rice, grown on dry land) for export, but rice remained the lower South's most important and profitable crop, and the economy, as in the Chesapeake colonies, remained oriented almost exclusively to commercial farming. (Unlike Virginia, however, South Carolina had an urban center, Charleston, whose 1770 population of 12,000 placed it fourth—after Philadelphia, New York, and Boston—in Britain's mainland colonies; many wealthy planters kept city homes where they lived in the "sickly" summer months to avoid the malarial rice swamps.)

Two satellite settlements bordered South Carolina. To the south lay Georgia, originally founded by James Oglethorpe in 1733 as a refuge for debtors; by mid-century, this philanthropic purpose lay abandoned as landowners rushed to emulate their Carolina neighbors and grow rice. To the north was the lower Cape Fear River valley in southeastern North Carolina, where migrants from South Carolina appropriated the choicest land in the 1720s and 1730s; the area quickly became a prime source of naval stores—tar, pitch, turpentine, and lumber.

Commercial agriculture produced in the lower South an economy even more heavily dependent on slave labor than was that of the upper South. Because a number of South Carolina's founders recruited from the West Indies and brought their slaves with them,

the colony had from an early date a higher proportion of slaves in its population than any other British colony on the American mainland. This lead persisted, for unlike the colonies to its north, South Carolina did not experience a reduction in demand for (or delivery of) slaves in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Throughout the pre-Revolutionary period, slaves constituted a majority of the colony's population—a large majority in the coastal rice-producing parishes. In Georgia, too, the allure of profits proved impossible to resist. Although the idealistic founders of the colony originally banned slavery altogether, indignant planters forced the abandonment of this policy in 1750; within a few years, slaves constituted close to half the colony's population.

Still a third slave society emerged in a part of the South not under British control: Louisiana. First settled by the French at the end of the seventeenth century, ceded to Spain in 1763, and briefly reacquired by Napoleon in 1800 before being sold to the United States in 1803, colonial Louisiana lacked the overwhelming staple-crop domination of Britain's plantation colonies. Settlers grew tobacco, indigo, and rice, but sugar did not become a major crop until the very end of the eighteenth century, and Louisiana's rulers valued the colony more for strategic than for economic reasons. Most of the small population in French Louisiana arrived involuntarily, as soldiers, criminals sent to garrison France's American empire, and slaves (who engaged in a wide range of occupations, from agricultural labor to skilled crafts and domestic service); a census taken in 1766, shortly after Louisiana came under Spanish control, revealed that slaves slightly outnumbered free whites.

Louisiana never prospered under the French, and although conditions improved somewhat during Spanish rule—cultivation of sugar spread rapidly in the 1790s, and the trading city of New Orleans numbered some 8,000 inhabitants at the turn of the century—the territory remained a sparsely populated land of vast untapped potential when purchased by the United States. During the next half century, it would become a leading producer of sugar and cotton, the heart of the new Southwest—and site of the largest slave market in the United States. Its acquisition also introduced into the United States a significant population, both white and black, under French cultural influence; that influence would continue to lend a distinctive quality to race relations in southern Louisiana.

A final regional pattern is evident in the Northern colonies, where

slavery, although legal everywhere, assumed much smaller proportions than in the South. In most of the North, lack of substantial commercial agriculture precluded a demand for large-scale forced labor; slaves served in a variety of capacities, from house service to skilled crafts and day labor, but slavery did not serve as the basis for the economy. In a few areas—often where water transportation provided ready access to market—commercial agriculture flourished, although on a much smaller scale than in the South, and created a demand for more widespread use of slave labor. In New York, for example, slaves cultivated wheat on farms along the Hudson River and on Long Island; and in the Narragansett country of Rhode Island, they helped raise dairy cows and racehorses. In such areas, slaves could exceed 20 percent of the population, although the colony-wide proportion of slaves in New York and Rhode Island was much smaller.

Nowhere in the Northern colonies, however, did the concentration of slaves approach that in the South. What is more, after the middle of the eighteenth century Northern demand for slaves slackened, and on the eve of the Revolution slaves constituted a declining proportion of the population. As a consequence, despite regional variations within the South, the division that became most essential was between the South, where slavery was solidly entrenched as a system of labor, and the North, where it was not. The peripheral nature of Northern slavery meant that when it came under attack—as it would during the last third of the eighteenth century—it would be relatively easy to abolish. The result would be very different in the South, where slavery stood at the heart of the economic and social system. In the antebellum period, the line would be clearly drawn between the slave South and the free North; although not so clear as it would later become, that line was already evident on the eve of the Revolution.