

## Section 3

# Plantation Slavery, 1700–1750

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

## Tobacco Colonies

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

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

### From Servitude to Slavery

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

### GUIDE TO READING

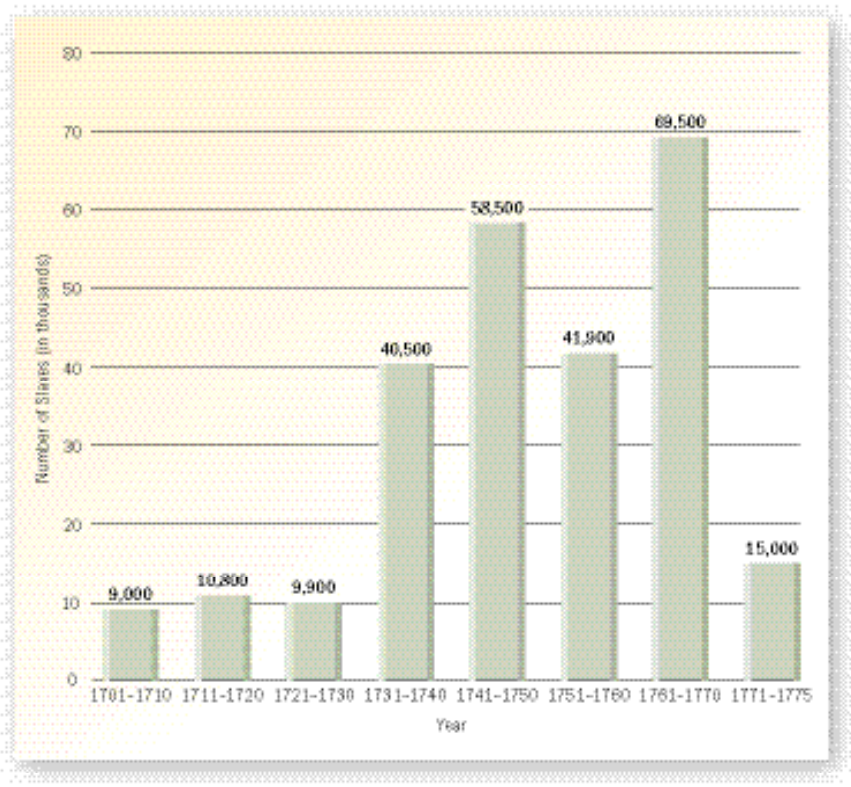
- What were the characteristics of plantation slavery from 1700 to 1750?
- Under what conditions did enslaved black laborers in the tobacco colonies work before 1750?
- What were the defining characteristics of low-country slavery?
- What were the material conditions of slave life in Early America?

### KEY TERMS

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

### Guide to Reading/Key Terms

For answers, see the *Teacher's Resource Manual*.



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

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

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

**Map 3-1**

The French and Spanish slaves had easier routes to freedom than slaves in the British colonies, which provided African Americans in the British colonies with examples of hope for future freedoms.

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

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

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

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

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

## Low-Country Slavery

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

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

## Carolina Low Country

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



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

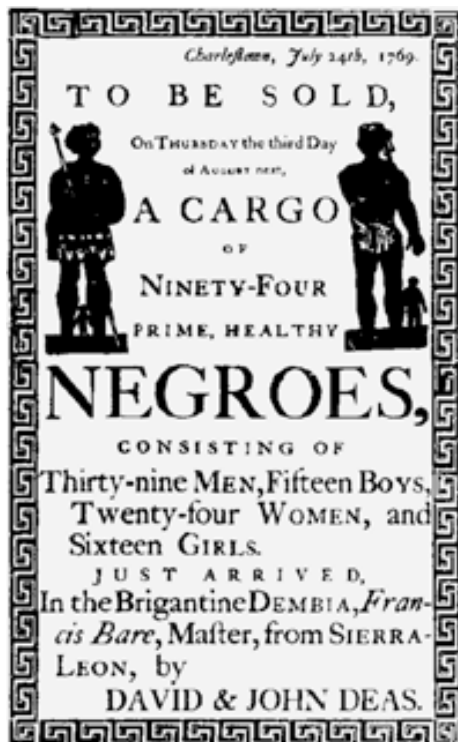
The British colonies on the North American mainland were divided into four regions. They were bordered on the south by Spanish Florida and to the west by regions claimed by France.



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



Explore this map online at [www.prenhall.com/aah/map3.1](http://www.prenhall.com/aah/map3.1)



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

### Teaching Notes

White Carolinians also enslaved more Indians than other British colonists did, and during the early 1700s approximately one-quarter of the colony's slave population was Indian. Carolina was also the center of an Indian slave trade. Although official colonial policy was to keep Africans and Indians apart, black slaves sometimes helped acquire and transport Indian slaves. Carolina exported Indian slaves to the West Indies and to other mainland British colonies.

### Recommended Readings

Peter H. Wood. *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*. New York: Norton, 1974. This is the best account available of slavery and the origins of African-American culture in the colonial low country.

Alan Galloway. *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

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

## Georgia Low Country

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

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

## Slave Society

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

Of equal significance was the appearance in Carolina and to some extent in Georgia of distinct classes among people of color. Like the low-country society itself, such classes were more similar to those in the Caribbean sugar islands than in the mainland colonies to the north. A creole population that had absorbed European values lived in close proximity to white people in Charleston and Savannah. Members of this creole population were frequently mixed-race relatives of their masters and enjoyed social and economic privileges denied to slaves who labored on the nearby rice plantations. Yet this urban mixed-race class was under constant white supervision.

In contrast, slaves who lived in the country retained considerable autonomy in their daily routines. The intense cultivation required to produce rice encouraged the evolution of a “task system” of labor on the low-country plantations. Rather than working in gangs as in the tobacco colonies, slaves on rice plantations had daily tasks. When they completed these tasks, they could work on plots of land assigned to them or do what they pleased without white supervision. Because black people were the great majority in the low-country plantations, they also preserved more of their African heritage than did black people who lived in the region’s cities or in the more northerly British mainland colonies.



**Reading Check** What were the characteristics of plantation slavery from 1700 to 1750?

## Slave Life in Early America

Little evidence survives of the everyday lives of enslaved Africans and African Americans in colonial North America. This is because they, along with Indians and most white people of that era, were poor. They had few possessions, lived in flimsy housing, and kept no records. Yet recent studies provide a glimpse of their material culture.

Eighteenth-century housing for slaves was minimal and often temporary. In the Chesapeake, small log cabins with dirt floors, brick fireplaces, wooden chimneys, and few, if any, windows were typical. African styles of architecture were more common in coastal South Carolina and Georgia. In these regions, slaves built the walls of their houses with tabby—a mixture of lime, oyster shells, and sand—or, occasionally, mud. In either case, the houses had thatched roofs. Early in the eighteenth century, when single African men made up the mass of the slave population, these structures were used as dormitories. Later they housed generations of black families.

The amount of furniture and cooking utensils the cabins contained varied from place to place and according to how long the cabins were occupied. In some cabins, the only furniture consisted of wooden boxes for both storage and seating and planks for beds. But a 1697 inventory of items contained in a slave cabin in Virginia includes chairs, a bed, a large iron kettle, a brass kettle, an iron pot, a frying pan, and a “beer barrel.”

### Reading Check

Before the mid-eighteenth century, nearly all slaves worked in the fields. On smaller farms, they worked with their master. On larger farms, they worked under an overseer. African-American slaves worked from sunup to sundown with breaks for food and rest.



Slave quarters and the master's house at Mulberry Plantation, located near Charleston, South Carolina.

Enslaved black people, like contemporary Indians and white people, used hollowed-out gourds for cups and carted water in wooden buckets for drinking, cooking, and washing. As the eighteenth century progressed, slave housing on large plantations became more substantial, and slaves acquired tables, linens, chamber pots, and oil lamps. Yet primitive, poorly furnished log cabins persisted in many regions even after the abolition of slavery in 1865.

At first, slave dress was minimal during summer. Men wore breechcloths, women wore skirts, leaving their upper bodies bare, and children went naked until puberty. Later men wore shirts, trousers, and hats while working in the fields. Women wore shifts (loose, simple dresses) and covered their heads with handkerchiefs. In winter, masters provided more substantial cotton and woolen clothing and cheap leather shoes. In the early years, much of the clothing, or at least the cloth used to make it, came from England. Later, as the account of George Mason's Gunston Hall plantation indicates, homespun made by slaves replaced English cloth. From the seventeenth century onward, slave women brightened clothing with dyes made from bark, decorated clothing with ornaments, and created African-style headwraps, hats, and hairstyles. In this manner, African Americans retained a sense of personal style compatible with West African culture.

Food consisted of corn, yams, salt pork, and occasionally salt beef and salt fish. Slaves also caught fish and raised chickens and rabbits. When farmers in the Chesapeake began planting wheat during the eighteenth century, slaves baked biscuits. In the South Carolina low country, rice became an important part of African-American diets. During colonial times, slaves occasionally supplemented this limited diet with vegetables that they raised in their own gardens.

## Miscegenation and Creolization

When Africans first arrived in the Chesapeake during the early seventeenth century, they interacted culturally and physically with white indentured servants and with American Indians. This mixing of peoples changed all three groups. Interracial sexual contacts—**miscegenation**—produced people of mixed race. Meanwhile, cultural exchanges became an essential part of the process of **creolization** that led African parents to produce African-American children. When, as often happened, miscegenation and creolization occurred together, the change was both physical and cultural. However, the dominant British minority in North America during the colonial period defined persons of mixed race as black. Although enslaved **mulattoes**—those of mixed African and European ancestry—enjoyed some advantages over slaves who had a purely African ancestry, mulattoes as a group did not receive enhanced legal status.

### Miscegenation

Miscegenation between blacks and whites and blacks and Indians was extensive throughout British North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it was less extensive and accepted than it was in the European sugar colonies in the Caribbean, in Latin America, or in French Canada, where many French men married Indian women. British North America was exceptional because many more white women migrated there than to Canada or the Caribbean, so that white men did not have to take black or Indian wives and concubines.

Miscegenation between blacks and Indians was extensive, and striking examples of black-white marriage also occurred in seventeenth-century Virginia. For example, in 1656 in Northumberland County, a mulatto woman named Elizabeth Kay successfully sued for her freedom and immediately thereafter married her white lawyer. In Norfolk County in 1671, Francis Skipper had to pay a tax on his wife Anne because she was black. In Westmoreland County in 1691, Hester Tate, a white indentured servant, and her husband James Tate, a black slave, had four children; one was apprenticed to her master, and the other three to his.

Colonial assemblies banned such interracial marriages mainly to keep white women from bearing mulatto children. The assemblies feared that having free white mothers might allow persons of mixed race to sue and gain their freedom, thereby creating a legally recognized mixed-race class. Such a class, wealthy white people feared, would blur the distinction between the dominant and subordinate races and weaken white supremacy. The assemblies did little to prevent white male masters from exploiting their black female slaves—although they considered such exploitation immoral—because the children of such liaisons would be slaves.