

Slavery in the Colonies

Sarah Collinge

A **paradox** is a statement that contradicts or goes against one's beliefs. American slavery is known as the great paradox of American history. It seems impossible that a nation founded on independence and individual freedom was also a nation that allowed the enslavement of others. Even the founding fathers owned slaves. George Washington owned at least 216 slaves, and Thomas Jefferson was said to have been one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia.

American slavery began in Virginia in 1619 and continued long after the American Civil War. At the beginning of the American Revolution, 20 percent of the population of the thirteen colonies was of African descent—the majority of whom were slaves. At this time, slavery was legal in every British colony.

Most slaves were prisoners captured in African wars or raids. These prisoners were then sold to traders who brought them across the Atlantic. This slave trade route was known as the Middle Passage. Slave ships were known for their horrible conditions. Many slaves tried to commit suicide by jumping overboard.

Once in America, slaves were auctioned to the highest bidder. Slaves were considered a person's property and therefore had no freedoms or rights. There were many things slaves were not allowed to do. For example, a slave was not allowed to leave his or her owner's property without a pass. They were not allowed to speak without permission, or stare at a white person. Learning to read or write was forbidden. The law provided no protection for slaves. Slaves endured terrible punishments because they were not allowed to defend themselves. Slaves lived in fear of brutal punishments.

Some slaves worked on tobacco plantations and large farms. Work on these plantation farms was difficult. The slaves' workday began at sunrise and ended at sunset. They worked in the fields and tended the livestock. Other slaves—usually young girls and women—lived in urban households. They slept in kitchens, laundries, or stables. They worked seven days a week doing household chores such as cleaning, cooking, mending, and serving. Men worked in shipyards, brickyards, and warehouses. No matter where they lived, slaves always feared being separated from family members and loved ones. Children could be sold from their mothers as early as age one.

Freedom—this was what the Patriots were fighting for during the American Revolution. But not for all people—for the white man alone. The need for slaves on plantations, and the prejudice against African Americans, would keep slavery in existence long past the Revolution. Slaves in the 1700s knew they, and their children, would spend their entire lives enslaved.

Resources:

Academic American. (2010). Slavery in the colonial world. Online article retrieved from <http://www.academicamerican.com/colonial/topics/slavery.htm>.

Colonial Williamsburg. Introduction to colonial African American life. Online article retrieved on 1/2/2012 from <http://www.history.org/almanack/people/african/aaintro.cfm>.

PBS. The problem of slavery. Online article retrieved on 1/2/2012 from <http://www.pbs.org/teachers/connect/resources/2909/preview/>.

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