

The Colonial Period (from an African-American's Perspective)

The Colonial Period was a very important time in the history of the United States. It's a time when things as we know them today began to take shape. This time period in history was similar in some ways, but also very different in the lifestyle of Blacks and Whites. Hopefully after reading this essay you will gain a better insight on what life in the Colonial period was like, including everything from sports, recreation, plantation life, labor, and general day-to-day life. All these things, leading up to the Revolutionary War, will be portrayed from a black person's perspective during the Colonial period.

Many religious groups saw recreation as shameful, immoral, and a waste of valuable time. The Elizabethan idea of fun didn't translate in the American environment. Most people came to the colonies to acquire land or pursue a trade or practice so consequently there was little time for fun and games. In New England, where village life existed, the Puritans would not permit the promotion of recreation. In 1644 Christmas was officially abolished by English Parliament, and controlled by the Puritans. New Englanders made it a point to work on the traditional Christian holy days. A puritan would no longer celebrate Christmas either for fear of damaging his chances of salvation. In 1640, Massachusetts imposed a fine of five shillings upon anyone who observed Christmas by fasting, feasting, or refusing to work. Yet for the Puritans not all was gloomy, they gave thanks also. Despite their antipathy toward pagan holidays, over time Thanksgiving eventually became a harvest feast. Surprisingly births and marriages in the Puritan community brought about little celebration, but a funeral was a social and religious event. They were often a mere gathering of friends and a way to also show off wealth.

Before the English Puritans came to power in the 1640's Englishmen had been allowed to dance on the maypole, bowl on the green, eat, or play sports after attending church. This all stopped because the Puritans believed that God made his day to be kept holy which meant church, prayer, and meditation of the Bible. From Saturday night until

sundown Sunday nothing recreational was done. In New London, Connecticut a couple was even charged in court for “sitting together on the Lords day, under an apple tree in Goodman Chapman’s Orchard.” Early Virginia was not far behind Massachusetts in making laws against any form of recreation on the Sabbath. Of the African Americans that were around, none of them dared to go against the Puritan lifestyle. They were looked at as opinion less slaves whose feelings did not matter. I got the impression that the Puritans had a huge influence on how things are done and their views on recreation and the Sabbath were widespread.

Tobacco provided the economic foundation for America, which was in constant competition with Great Britain. Negro slavery, upon which the Southern economy and social structure were built, provided a good life for those on the top. Southern planters were given the sense of power that comes along with owning another human being. The upper class usually gathered at royal birthdays, Governor’ balls, weddings and funerals while cockfighting became one of the most popular pastimes among the common people in the south. In South Carolina riding horseback was so normal that you rarely saw anyone on foot, except for Negroes. The Negro slaves were also often posted along the road with instructions to invite travelers to stop for refreshment and lodging. Among all classes in the Chesapeake area, horse racing was a popular past time, both men and women gambled with cards. Basically it comes down to the fact that life for the plantation owners was easy when compared to the slaves working for them.

Most of the people who came to America from Great Britain paid their way across the ocean by agreeing to sell their labor for a term of four to seven years. Each of these “indentured servants” was contractually obligated to his work, but the method of gaining freedom was very different from blacks and whites. The white man, especially if he was skilled, could be sure of receiving a job with good wages. Many of the black slaves, while mostly concentrated in the south, were spread out over all of the colonies. As early as 1715, of Boston’s 12,000 inhabitants, about 2,000 were Negro slaves. In 1740 almost one fourth of New York City’s population was colored. For the black “servants” living conditions were harsh. Black field hands wore the cheapest cloth available, the so-called Negro cloth, and they were only provided with a new blanket once every three years. Their diet consisted of rice, corn, beans, pork, and meat on special occasions. Slaves were

often times expected to grow and sell their own crops on top of what their master was expecting from them. Unlike a white servant, a Negro slave was bound for life, his children inherited his status and he was looked upon as inferior. Colored house servants were usually treated better than the field hands, but neither job was anything to strive for. A slave could be arrested, tried, and condemned upon the testimony of only one witness. Although law permitting, Negroes could not bear witness against a white man. Many states followed a slave code based on the principle that Negroes "are of barbarous, wild, savage natures, and such as renders them wholly unqualified to be governed by the laws of this province." The killing of a Negro by a white man was not a punishable offense. Things were better in the north however, Negroes didn't compete with the white man and outside of the seaport towns there was no danger of a slave insurrection or racial strife. The origins of slavery in the U.S. are fairly common knowledge and the Colonial period seems to be the start of it all.

The question of arming blacks, slave and free, consistently plagued the patriots. In May 1775 the Committee on Safety came to the conclusion that only freemen should be used since the use of slaves would be "inconsistent with the principle that are to be supported." Despite this conclusion many blacks, slave and free, fought in the war and played an essential part in the success of battles such as Bunker Hill. Even after the success of blacks in early battles, things again changed shortly after General Washington took command. The Council of War was held on July 9, 1775, and an order was given to recruiters to deny Negroes from joining. On November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia issued a proclamation saying that all slaves could join his army. This caused Washington to panic and think quickly so on December 31 he partially reversed his policy saying that free blacks could now enlist. By 1778 blacks began to enlist in large numbers with Georgia and South Carolina being the only two states opposed to enlisting black soldiers. The majority of black soldiers served in fighting groups made up of primarily white men, but the integration was making progress. "No regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance", hardly a military action between 1775 and 1781 was without some black participants. The main goals of black patriots were human freedom and political independence, they also wanted the question of how America could seek independence from Britain, yet give no

consideration to the slaves' pleas for freedom to be answered. The war victory and struggles of a new growing country would soon bring answers to this question.

The Colonial period was an exciting yet trying time for our country as well as the African-American race. While the country was fighting for its independence from Britain, the blacks were fighting for that same independence from slavery and inequality. As the United States began to venture out on its own so did black community as a whole by fighting for essential rights such as the ability to own land and vote. Whether they get credit or not, the success of the Colonial period was assisted by a few bright minds who refused to give in to the oppression. As a result of this determination we now have a respectable, thriving country and a race that has come an extremely long way since this time period.

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