

The Treatment of Native Americans
and Africans during the
pre-Revolutionary Era

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March 5, 2007

Society of Colonial Wars scholarship essay

From 1492 to 1776, many momentous changes occurred in the world. The Europeans discovered the New World of North and South America, tons of gold were dumped into the world economy, and huge cities were founded and wiped out. There was one constant among this change, however: minority groups, especially Native Americans and Africans, were killed and abused by the conquering white Europeans.

The first wave of mistreatment came with the waves of diseases the colonists brought with them. Along with domesticated large animals, and cereal grains like wheat, oats, and rye, the Europeans brought a host of microbes to the New World. Even though American Indians had developed a few diseases, the colonizing whites brought with them more infectious ones such as “smallpox, malaria, yellow fever, measles, cholera, typhoid, and bubonic plague.” (Alfred W. Crosby). Although these still caused horrible epidemics on the European continent, its inhabitants had been accumulating resistance to these disease-causing organisms for hundreds of years; the Native populations had had no such opportunity. As *DIScovering Modern America* writes, “Between 1500 and 1800, the Native population fell from over five million to less than a million people.” Mandans living in the Missouri River Valley in the Dakotas suffered near total extinction due to smallpox; total population of Indians in that region went from 17,000 to about 150 individuals (Timeline).

However, disease was not the only European invention killing Native Americans: regular fighting favoring the more technologically advanced Europeans also tended to kill a large number of natives. Indians were also sucked into conflict between different European factions. The most memorable example of this was the French and Indian war. Both the British and French governments were interested in the American territories and both had established military forts, trade routes, and settlements to further that goal. However, conflict over control of the area that makes up most of modern-day Ohio, a region rich in the valuable commodity of furs, initiated armed conflict between the two groups. Both sides enjoyed trade contact with local natives, but “the Natives west of the Appalachian Mountains feared that the number of English colonists would continue to grow” (Ohio History Central) and thus force them off of their land. Because of this fear, the majority of the Indian population sided with the French and helped them attack the British Fort Necessity, and other settlements. It’s unknown exactly how many American Indians were killed in actual fighting; however, the war certainly resulted in persecution of Native peoples due to the perception that they were savages intent on killing innocent citizens. As noted American patriot Benjamin Franklin wrote in his essay “Concerning a Massacre of Friendly Indians,” “fifty-seven men from some of our frontier townships who had projected the destruction of this little commonwealth came, all well mounted and armed with firelocks, hangers, and hatchets” and killed a number of Indians who had been living side-by-side with the settlers. This illustrates a common misperception furthered by the war: Indians, regardless of personal behavior or tribal affiliation, were thought to be dangerous.

However, Native Americans were not the only group that was mistreated under European domination. Africans were imported from coastal areas of the continent, captured at first by members of warring tribes during warfare, and later by people hired and sent on expeditions specifically to capture slaves. Their labor was first utilized on plantations in the Caribbean region to farm sugarcane, but as the importance of cotton

grew and farming developed in the Chesapeake region the importation grew exponentially. By 1776, about half of the population of Africans in America were living in modern-day Maryland and Virginia, which were known as the Chesapeake region. According to Professor Eric Foner of Columbia University, “three centuries after Columbus's voyage, about ten million of the first twelve million people who crossed from the Old World to the New were African slaves.” This is not to say, however, that all Africans were brought to the United States were enslaved; a black man accompanied Christopher Columbus in 1492, and a few free blacks came with European explorers such as Ponce de Leon and Hernán Cortés in the exploration of the “new” continent.

Because of the fact that Africans greatly outnumbered their captors, the white minority needed a method of imposing their authority over the Africans, and they did so with a systematic degradation of the inherent worth and dignity of the Africans. The slavers arguing that enslaving blacks was all right in the eyes of God because the Africans were inherently inferior. A more important justification that the rich planter class convinced itself of was that owning slaves was an economic necessity. In a letter to a Northerner, Peter Fontaine writes that “to live in Virginia without slaves is morally impossible.” He goes on to state that for “£ 7 or £ 8 more (than the salary and board of a “common laborer”) and you have a slave for life.”

Looking at the expense involved in transporting slaves from Africa, one wonders why, if the need for forced labor was so great, the people already living on the continent weren't enslaved. They were, in small numbers, but never on the scale that Africans were. The reasons for this were numerous; however, two important factors were that “the Indian population declined rapidly and because it was easy for Indians, familiar with their native countryside, to run away” (Foner).

This was not to say, however, that Africans passively accepted their lot. There were numerous instances of lone slaves escaping, killing their masters, or even rising up in large numbers and slaughtering the whites who kept them oppressed. This constant threat of rebellion was a recurring fear of the whites, who realized at some level of consciousness that a unified rebellion would be nearly impossible to suppress, not in the least because the slaves had greater numbers and years of anger fueling them. This tension was especially present in South Carolina, where slaves outnumbered whites two to one and were only loosely supervised in the field, slaves formed their own societies (complete with a distinct dialect) melding African and American traditions (“Southern Slavery”). This led to a more unified group ready to revolt. In 1739, blacks rose up and succeeded in killing thirty whites. This terrified slave owners all over the South, who knew such a rebellion was possible in their home areas.

As tensions between the British and American colonists grew during the 1760's and 1770's, the British government in the colonies used this threat of slave rebellion to keep angry colonists in check. Due to a rumor of an impending slave rebellion, the Royal Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, seized the local supply of gunpowder, which enraged the white population. As threats to the British grew, Lord Dunmore declared that if the colonists injured any British official, he would “declare Freedom to the Slaves, and reduce the city of Williamsburg to Ashes.” (Raphael, 151). This pronouncement actually helped fuel the beginning of the American Revolution in Virginia: the angry colonists formed militias, including one headed by noted Patriot Patrick Henry. As mentioned

earlier in this essay, the perception of Native Americans as violent savages was furthered by the British-American conflict. In the Declaration of Independence, the King of England was accused of having “endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers the merciless Indian savages.”

The conditions of Africans in the colonies changed significantly from the first time of their emigration. The first African-American born in North America, William Tucker of Jamestown, Virginia, “enjoyed the same freedoms as his white neighbors” (African-American History). However, as more mixed-race children were born (often as a result of forced sexual intercourse between white men and young black women), English common law was re-written to facilitate slavery. In the past, the condition (free or slave) followed the father; slave owners changed this so to benefit themselves. The children would follow the condition of the mother, which would reward the slave owners for forcing themselves on slaves by producing more valuable slaves and aiding the process of natural increase that was already boosting numbers of blacks in the colonies.

However, this practice resulted in significant numbers of lighter-skinned blacks, which in some areas led to class divisions between African born, dark-skinned field hands and the lighter American-born Creoles. The children of liaisons between owners and slaves were occasionally granted special favors and opportunities, and in cities such as New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston were able to obtain freedom and establish a separate Creole society. It appears that skin color was a major factor in determining the inferiority of other peoples. In the same letter quoted earlier, Peter Fontaine explains his theory on a better method of acquiring land:

Now, if, instead of this abominable practice (of white men “tak[ing] up with Negro women”) which has polluted the blood of many among us, we had taken Indian wives in the first place, it would have made them some compensation for their lands. They are a free people, and the offspring would not be born in a state of slavery...The Indian children when born are as white as Spaniards or Portuguese.

It is clear from reading this quote the importance of skin color to this racist man, who was following the common reasoning of his time. It thus seems we have uncovered another reason Indians were not enslaved on the same scale as Africans: they were perceived as somehow superior to them due to skin color.

However, it seems obvious in retrospect that whatever the relative position on the totem pole of social class, both groups were taken advantage of and mistreated by Europeans whenever doing so would aid them. Some of the catastrophes weren't intentional, such as the killing of millions of Natives by European diseases, but others, such as the importation of African slaves, certainly were. Although there were undoubtedly many examples of whites behaving kindly towards members of these minority groups, the overwhelming trend was one of Europeans taking what they wanted from Native Americans and Africans, whether that something was land that had been the ancestral home of tribes for generations, or labor forced by the threat of death.

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