

Race and Coerced Labor Part I: How Did People Become Property in the Americas?

By Audra Diptee

Slavery in the Americas is the subject of multiple historical narratives. In the first of two articles on this inhumane practice, we take time to absorb the disturbing fact that it was ever legal to “own” a person.



Introduction

Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, about 12.5 million men, women, and children were forcibly transported from Africa to the Americas, then forced to work. They were taken by slave traders from England, France, Portugal, Spain, Netherlands, Denmark, United States and Brazil. If the enslaved survived the horrendous conditions of the long sea voyage, they were sold at various ports throughout North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

In the centuries that followed the beginning of this commerce in enslaved people, several million more people of African descent were born into slavery in the Americas. The United States received approximately 400,000 enslaved people from Africa. When slavery was finally abolished in 1865, approximately four million enslaved people were freed. That means the U.S. population of enslaved people increased tenfold, through reproduction.

Enslaved populations in the sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean—whether in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) or the former British colonies such as Jamaica— were less likely to increase through reproduction. They relied instead on the continuous importation of new laborers from Africa. This was because sugar plantations had very harsh labor and living conditions. Just look at the numbers. When the British slave trade was abolished in 1807, there were about 750,000 enslaved people in the British Caribbean even though more than three times this number were brought from Africa on slave ships to the British Caribbean.

Although enslaved people had many shared experiences, their lives also varied by a number of factors depending on where and when they lived. The types of labor that they were forced to undertake, their age and sex, whether they were born in the Americas or were forcibly transported from Africa, all affected their experiences as enslaved people. So did the demographic setting they were put into, as well as the specific circumstances of their work and living spaces. Yet, despite the diversity of experiences among the enslaved, the systems of slavery in the Americas shared the three defining characteristics:

1. Enslaved people of African descent were legally defined as property
2. Slavery was organized according to a racial hierarchy
3. Slavery was motivated by economics but justified in religious and scientific terms.

We are going to discuss these three features in this article and the next one.

Defining Characteristic 1:

Enslaved people of African descent were legally defined as property.

Although they were human beings, enslaved people of African descent were legally considered property throughout the Americas. In other words, they were owned by other people and could be bought and sold like farm animals. They were denied any of the rights that came with freedom. The experiences of the enslaved were very different from other people who did labor during this period in several ways. First, enslaved people of African descent were forced to work against their will. They were not paid and could not negotiate the terms of their labor. They had to do what they were told when they were told to do so. If they did not, they could face severe physical abuse. This might include whipping, mutilation, or other forms of torture.

Enslaved labor in the Americas differed from other labor for two other reasons. The first is that enslaved status was inherited. When an enslaved woman had a baby, that baby was considered legally enslaved, and the “property” the mother’s “owner”. This meant enslaved children were always at risk of being sold to someone else and separated from their families. The other difference is that enslaved status was a lifetime sentence. So, most enslaved people were required to perform forced and unpaid labor for the duration of their lives.

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From the point of view of the men, women, and children in enslavement, it was a horrible way to live. They were often searching for ways to obtain their freedom. Some of the enslaved tried to negotiate with their owners to buy their legal freedom. But that was nearly impossible for most enslaved people, who had little or no money. Of course, there were also those enslaved men, women, and children who resisted by trying to escape bondage. This required an incredible amount of courage, as anyone who was caught trying to escape was severely punished, such as extreme physical abuse or death.

People even placed ads to catch enslaved people who “ran away.” This particular ad was in a newspaper for the island of Jamaica in 1780. What does it tell us about the risks enslaved people took to get their freedom?

Advertisement announcing the escape of an enslaved person in Jamaica (1780)

Kingston Run away, a Negro boy, named YORK, he has a scar upon his face, close by his left ear, and marked upon his right shoulder W S; he is a good looking boy, and speaks good English, about 5 ft. 5 in. high, and may attempt to pass for free and get on board some vessel. This is to caution any person from employing him, in particular masters of vessels. If it can be proved he is harbored or employed by anyone, they will be prosecuted to the utmost rigor of the law. Any person that can give information where he is to be found, or will lodge him in any goal, shall receive one Pistole reward by applying to the Printers hereof.

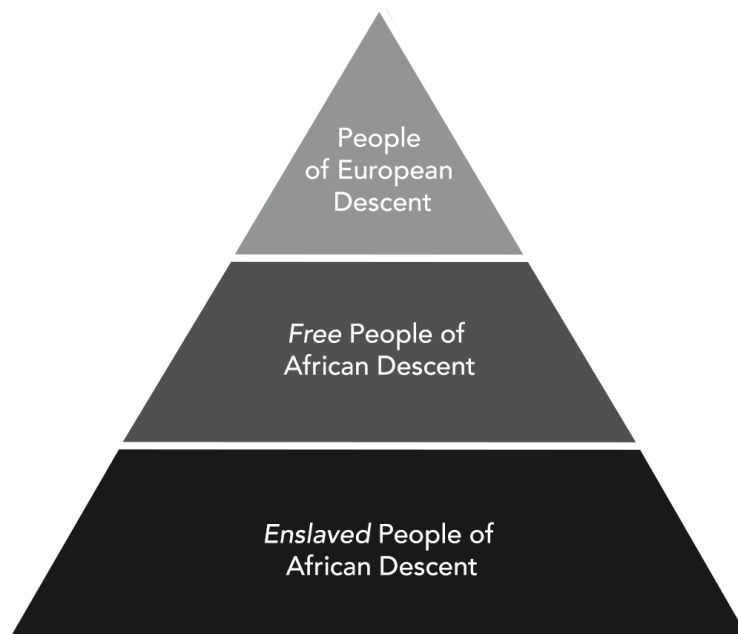
Newspaper: Jamaica Mercury

Date: 22 January 1780

Defining Characteristic 2:

Slavery was organized according to a racial hierarchy.

During the period of slavery, societies in the Americas were organized around a belief in societal inequality. This means it was considered acceptable for some people to have more rights and privileges than others. Rights and privileges were determined, in part, according to a racial hierarchy.



Slavery and racial hierarchy in the Americas

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Those at the top of the hierarchy—people of European descent—, were granted all the privileges associated with freedom. In contrast, the men, women, and children at the bottom that hierarchy—enslaved people of African descent—were denied all the rights and privileges associated with freedom. There was also a middle category for people of African descent who were not enslaved because they had either been granted their freedom or were born free. Free people of African descent had the liberty to make important decisions about their lives and their futures, but they did not have all the rights and privileges of people of European descent.

Very specific laws shaped the lives of the enslaved and free people of African descent, and these varied over time and location. For example, France implemented the Code Noir (Black Code) in 1685, excerpted in the text box below. It was an official proclamation that defined the conditions of slavery and freedom in French colonies that relied on enslaved labor. The British, Spanish, Brazilians, and others also had laws in place throughout the Americas. Despite the differences in these laws, they maintained an idea of inequality grounded in a racial hierarchy. You can use the articles in the Code Noir, for example, to reflect on the ways in which the French defined who was legally enslaved.

Select articles from the Code Noir (1685)

Article XII. Children born from marriages between slaves shall be slaves, and if the husband and wife have different masters, they shall belong to the masters of the female slave, not to the master of her husband.

Article XIII. We desire that if a male slave has married a free woman, their children, either male or female, shall be free as is their mother, regardless of their father's condition of slavery. And if the father is free and the mother a slave, the children shall also be slaves...

Article XV. We forbid slaves from carrying any offensive weapons or large sticks, at the risk of being whipped and having the weapons confiscated. The weapons shall then belong to he who confiscated them. The sole exception shall be made for those who have been sent by their masters to hunt and who are carrying either a letter from their masters or his known mark.

Article XVI. We also forbid slaves who belong to different masters from gathering, either during the day or at night, under the pretext of a wedding or other excuse, either at one of the master's houses or elsewhere, and especially not in major roads or isolated locations. They shall risk corporal punishment (physical beating) that shall not be less than the whip and the fleur de lys...

Article XVIII. We forbid slaves from selling sugar cane, for whatever reason or occasion, even with the permission of their master, at the risk of a whipping for the slaves and a fine of ten pounds for the masters who gave them permission, and an equal fine for the buyer.

Article XIX. We also forbid slaves from selling any type of commodities, even fruit, vegetables, firewood, herbs for cooking and animals either at the market, or at individual houses, without a letter or a known mark from their masters granting express permission. Slaves shall risk the confiscation of goods sold in this way, without their masters receiving restitution for the loss, and a fine of six pounds shall be levied against the buyers.

Conclusion?

So, enslavement in the Americas was a system where human beings were considered property, and status was determined by racial hierarchy. How could this system be justified, especially by the colonizing powers of France and Britain and independent countries like Brazil and the United States—all of whom claimed to be supporters of freedom and liberty? We will discover some of these answers as we study the third defining characteristic of slavery in the article that accompanies this one.

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