

Slavery and Indentured Servitude in the American Colonies

In colonial New England, two-thirds of adult males owned their own farm. A large landed estate worked by tenant farmers and servants was rare; the typical New England farm was modest in size and the owner's family typically provided the labor to work it. Such farm families were often subsistence-based—primarily raising grain and livestock for themselves and only selling at local markets whatever was not consumed.

In the Middle Colonies however, well placed individuals acquired extensive estates by receiving land grants from proprietors or their appointed governors due to ties of friendship or family. In New York, for example, families like the Schuylers and the Livingstons acquired large estates in this manner. Owners of these large estates relied on tenants and indentured servants to work their estates, but the estate owners often lost tenants and indentured servants when these laborers bought their own land or ended their contracted terms of service.

Consequently, wealthy landowners in the 18th century recruited new German and Scots-Irish indentured servants from economically depressed areas, such as Northern Ireland and the Rhine River valley in Western Germany, when the supply of English servants could not meet demand. Over time, landowners also became more reliant on African slaves to meet their labor needs. Since Africans became the private property of their owners once acquired, they could never leave their employers. By the 18th century, Africans comprised as much as five percent of the population in the Middle Colonies.

In the South, however, the demand for labor on large estates was much greater, which resulted in a heavy reliance on slave labor to maintain economic growth. The growth of slavery in the South most distinguished this region from the other two. The rich alluvial soil and warm climate of the Chesapeake and the Low Country of South Carolina and Georgia allowed for the cultivation of the profitable cash crops of tobacco, rice, and indigo for export to England. Due to the shortage of labor, planters had to rely on indentured servants and slaves to meet their labor needs.

Throughout the 17th century, planters made use primarily of indentured servants from England and (in the case of Carolina) enslaved Native Americans since their cost to the planters was less expensive than that of African slaves. Yet by the early 18th century, with the growth of the African slave trade, prices for African slaves declined as their supply increased. Planters also came to prefer African slaves to indentured servants and Native Americans since Africans did not have to be released from bondage after a certain period, like indentured servants, nor could they escape servitude by fleeing to their homeland, as could Native Americans. Also, former indentured servants could create problems for the wealthy planter elite.

The expansion of Virginia toward the end of the 17th century brought settlers, many of whom were former indentured servants, into conflict with the Native Americans of the interior. This confrontation precipitated a political and social crisis in the colony, which is known as Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. As these former indentured servants migrated westward and founded new settlements, they soon were in conflict with the Susquehannocks by 1675. The royal governor William Berkeley, however, did not

support the settlers in this conflict since he did not wish to alienate Native American tribes with whom he enjoyed a monopoly in the local fur trade.

Disgusted by the self-serving Indian policy of the governor and his wealthy supporters, the settlers organized a militia and elected one of their own, Nathaniel Bacon, an Oxford-educated English gentleman, as their captain. After brutally crushing the Susquehannocks, Bacon led his army against Jamestown to overthrow the "corrupt" governor and his venal favorites, and Bacon's forces captured and burned the town to the ground. Bacon soon after died due to illness, and his army dispersed. Berkeley, who had earlier fled Jamestown after Bacon's victory over his army, quickly regained control of the situation, arresting and executing Bacon's leading followers for treason. This rebellion may have encouraged planters to purchase more slaves for their labor needs rather than rely on troublesome indentured servants since runaway and former indentured servants had comprised the bulk of Bacon's army. Between 1680 and 1704 the black labor force in Virginia more than doubled, increasing from 3000 to 10,000.