



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE: Slavery in the Americas	
AUTHOR: Jennifer Orr	GRADE LEVEL & SUBJECT US History to 1865 – grade 5/6

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** –
How did site and situation affect the slave experience in the Americas? (Mainland, Caribbean, Brazil)
2. **Contextual Essay** –
From 1626 until 1866, the Transatlantic Slave Trade took more than 12 million Africans out of their native country, transported them to various locations in the Americas, and sold them into slavery. In Virginia, students are taught that slavery existed in the colonies, but we gloss over the way in which they arrived in North America. So, did slavery exist prior to the United States? What led to the desire for enslaved Africans, rather than other forms of free labor? Were slaves treated differently based on their location and circumstance?

Most scholars now date slavery's origin for Western society in the centuries immediately prior to the Christian era in the Greek city-states and the emerging Roman empire of the period (Klein, 2). In Ancient Greece, slaves were often white men, women, and children. These slaves had no rights. They couldn't choose or change jobs, marry or have children without permission from their master. Slaves could perform any job other than politics. While most historians agree that is the original development of the institution of slavery, Herbert Klein adds, "the concentration of slaves in urban areas, their limited use in rural production, and other constraints on slave production meant that Greek slavery would not be as fully elaborated an economic institution as that which developed in the Roman empire (3)."

During the expansion of the Roman Empire, slaves were often taken as conquests from battle (as prisoners of war). These slaves were taken to the Mediterranean where they were used on plantations, large farms, and in households. Others served as amusement for their master and the country as a whole, such as gladiators and prostitutes. It has been suggested that as much as ten percent of the male peasant work force in Italy came from such conquests (Klein, 3). During this time of land growth, and with limited amounts of free labor readily available, it seemed natural to turn to slave labor. Their economy became dependent upon this free labor to meet the demands of the market. Laws regarding slaves in the Roman Empire were inconsistent to say the least. While slaves were seen as property of their master, they were still allowed the rights of personal property and security. This meant that slaves in the Roman Empire could be emancipated at their master's desire, or they could buy their freedom from their master.

Slavery existed within the continent of Africa as well, but it was a relatively small percentage. There was no “all-embracing religious or political unity (Klein, 10)” in Africa so each state or Kingdom could buy or sell slaves, or even import them to other countries. The arrival of Islamic merchants in the late 8th century caused an international slave trade predominately for women and children to begin. This Trans-Sahara trade route formed caravans through the Sahara desert to the Indian Ocean. It was through this trade that Ghana, Mali and Songhai became the most powerful African nations. They had plentiful amounts of gold, salt, gold, ivory, spices and other goods to sell to Europeans. Though the large-scale use of slaves was limited to North Africa, the use of slaves within most African societies was extensive. This internal slave trade allowed all African Kingdoms to satisfy their domestic needs, therefore becoming biased toward women.

In the early 1400’s, Portuguese explorers arrived on the sub-Saharan African coast. They wanted to open new trade routes to Africa – this time from the sea. The majority of slaves the Portuguese bought ended up in Europe as domestic servants and in other urban occupations (Schwartz, 6). The Portuguese also contributed to the internal African slave trade, by moving slaves from one African state to another and selling them for gold. They were more interested in the gold than slaves, because of the scarcity of precious metals in Europe and their decreasing debt to Asia.

Sugar cane cultivation began in Iberian Peninsula (Asia), and was carried by Arab conquerors to the eastern Mediterranean. European aristocrats grew fond of this new “spice” which was used the only sweetener available other than honey. It was only with the introduction of sugar production to the Atlantic islands and the opening up of the Western Hemisphere to European conquest at the end of the 15th century that a new and important use was found for slaves (Klein, 14).

In the early 1500’s the Portuguese introduced sugarcane in Brazil, having successfully grown it in Madeira and other Atlantic Islands in the 14th century. For over a century, Indians made up the main labor source on sugar plantations. They provided a readily available inexpensive labor force. The first black slaves in Brazil came as body servants or skilled laborers, not as field hands (Schwartz, 66). It wasn’t until diseases, and the Portuguese perception of the abilities of Indians as compared to Africans, that a shift gradually began to happen.

Senzalas, or slave quarters, were usually composed of mud-walled and thatched huts, or of row houses divided into rooms, each of which was occupied by a family or residence unit (Schwartz, 136). These buildings were the least important of any on the plantation. The clothing issued to them was also minimal. It was common for slaves only to have a couple shirts, pants or skirts of cotton and a few yards of baeta (baize) for bedding (Schwartz, 136). Images of that period indicate a clear distinction amongst the occupations and hierarchy of the slaves. As for food, it was evident that Brazilian slaves were not given enough food for their survival. Slaves ate whatever they could find. In addition to what they were given as rations, they beg and stole for food.

In 1627, a small group of Englishmen arrived on the island of Barbados, bringing with them a handful of Africans captured during their voyage to form England’s second colony in the Caribbean. Its initial cash crops were tobacco, cotton, ginger and indigo. They were grown on farms cultivated by free and indentured servants, and were assisted by the African slaves. Barbados became the first British procession in the Caribbean to cultivate sugar on a large

scale, and during the 1640s its economy began to be based on plantation production and slave labor (Handler & Lange, 16). As the plantation system expanded, the number of small farms and landowners declined. This caused a number of Europeans, including some now freed indentured servants, to seek new opportunities and land in other colonies, thus increasing the need for more slaves. By 1650 the plantation slave system was firmly entrenched and the island's flourishing sugar-based economy made it the richest of England's Caribbean possession (until Jamaica surpassed it in the 18th century).

In Barbados the social life of slaves centered around compact villages in the center of the plantation. These villages were often near the mill yard, and close to the plantation owner or manager's house (Handler & Lange, 30). In addition to the slave houses, which often held a number of people who were related, were the plots in which they could raise livestock, poultry, gardens, and occasionally cash crops. In addition there were ponds that provided water, and a communal burial ground for all to us nearby. The plantation settlement was the center of their social and cultural life. They enjoyed music, dance, religion, and curing. There were laws that limited slaves movements, but they did at times travel off the plantation to meet other slaves for weekend dances. At times, they even sold good they had produced, or stolen from their masters.

The transformation from a society with slaves to a slave society began when in 1676 planters smashed Nathaniel Bacon's motley army of small holders and indentured servants, black and white (Berlin, 55). Following that, planters began replacing indentured servants with slaves, including Indians. When the Native population began to rapidly decrease, tobacco planters began purchasing slaves – almost all of them black. For a period, European Americans were frightened by the African languages, African drumming, and the overall lack of interest in Christianity. Planters often determined to break the spirits of their new slaves by renaming them, giving them the most backbreaking jobs, and tearing them away from their family. They also made minimal attempts to provide adequate food, clothing or shelter, because the open slave trade made "new negroes" cheap, and the new disease environment inflated the morality rate no matter how well tended they were (Berlin, 58). Planters wanted their slaves to rely totally upon them. Laws required slaves to carry a pass if they wanted to leave the plantation. They also denied them the right to meet in groups larger than four. Evidence that slaves were immortalized was everywhere, but rather than surrender to it, many slaves chose to continually protest or challenge their master.

As you can see, slavery existed in various forms long before the colonization of the Americas. The desire of the European countries to maintain wealth, and become a global power led to the expansion of sugar cultivation in the Atlantic Islands. The desire to produce cheaply and quickly led to the use of enslaved Africans. It was also evident that the material lives of slaves also varied depending on their location and circumstances within the Americas. However, in no other location, does slavery become as racially segregated as it does in North America.

3. Annotated Bibliography –

Berlin, Ira. *Generations of Captivity*. (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2003). Alderman E441.B47 2003

This source focuses on slavery in North America. It divides slavery into five generations (or time periods) the one I focused on was Plantation. Within the chapter, he further categorizes by location making it easy to locate information sought.

Degler, Carl. *Neither Black nor White – Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1971). ISBN# 0-299-10914-3

This book primarily focused on how different the racial segregation becomes in the United States, and why it isn't such an issue in Brazil. It provides a large number of quotes, charts and songs that emphasize the points they are making. At times it even challenges the differences in the ways we teach history within the two countries.

Handler, Jerome & Lange, Frederick. *Plantation Slavery in Barbados – An Archaeological and Historical Investigation*. (Harvard University Press, 1978). Alderman HT1105.B3 H34

This book gives basic historical, geographical, and cultural information about Barbados in colonial times. In addition, it focuses on the archeological project at Newton Plantation, and provides a large amount of information from the dig.

Klein, Herbert. *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*. (Oxford University Press, 1986). Alderman HT1052.5.K54 1986

This source provides an overview of slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean. I primarily used the first three chapters for my research. Chapter 1 focuses on the origin of the American Slave Trade, and how it affects the Americas. Chapter 2 highlights sugar and slavery in the 16th century, while Chapter 3 hits the 17th century.

Various Authors. *Slaves, Subjects, and Subversives – Blacks in Colonial Latin America*. (University of New Mexico Press, 2006). Alderman F1419.N4S53 2006

This book is composed of a number of essays written by different authors on Latin America. In addition to the information in the essay, each is followed with an appendix of additional resources. I primarily used the information in Chapters 1 and 2 as background information for my research.

Schwartz, Stuart. *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society*. (Cambridge University Press, 1985). Alderman HD9114.B7B347 1985

This source is packed with maps, charts, quotes, tables, pictures, and information regarding sugar plantations in Brazil. It is broken up logically into eras, beginning with the arrival of sugar plantations into the New World. It also highlights Indians being used as slaves, and the differences between indigenous slavery and African slavery.