### ALREADY IN RESIDENCE

The presence of explorers such as Verrazano and Cartier and of unknown numbers of anonymous fishermen and part-time traders had several effects on the native population. The Mi’kmaqs, Hurons, and other northeastern Indian groups approached the intruding Europeans in friendship, eager to trade and to learn more about the strangers. In part this response was a sign of natural curiosity, but it also reflected some serious changes taking place in the Native world of North America. Beginning in the mid-fourteenth century, the climate in North America underwent significant cooling. As the climate grew colder, both hunter-gatherers like the Mi’kmaqs and agriculturists like the Iroquois had to expand their subsistence territory, and in doing so they came into conflict with their neighbors. As warfare became more common, groups increasingly formed alliances for mutual defense—systems like the Iroquois League and Powhatan Confederacy. And Indians found it beneficial to welcome European newcomers into their midst—as trading partners bearing new tools, as allies in the evolving conflicts with neighboring Indian groups, and as powerful magicians whose shamans might provide explanations and remedies for the hard times that had befallen the Indians.

"Cerro de Chapultepec": An early European representation of the Aztecs of Mexico from "Historia de la Benida de los Yndios" [The Tovar Codex], (Mexico, ca. 1585), attributed to the Mexican Jesuit Juan de Tovar (John Carter Brown Library; World Digital Library)

The existence of America—and even more the presence of people there—further challenged European provincialism, though as the newcomers came to understand that America was a new land and that the Indians were a new people, they attempted to fit both into the cosmic map outlined in the Bible. To Columbus, for example, Indians represented mankind before the fall of Adam, noble savages of whom he wrote, “Of anything that they possess, if it be asked of them, they never say no; on the contrary, they invite you to share it and show as much love as if their hearts went with it.”[[1]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/essay/americas-1620-0?period=1" \l "_edn1) Vespucci, in contrast, found them to be the most fallen of all mankind, true savages who “marry as many wives as they please,” and among whom the “son cohabits with mother, brother with sister, male cousin with female, and any man with the first woman he meets.”[[2]](http://ap.gilderlehrman.org/essay/americas-1620-0?period=1" \l "_edn2) Such portrayals, which were repeated over and over again by explorers and early settlers, established a sort of dichotomous mythic identity for American Indians that continues to affect non-Native perceptions of them through the present day.

In some ways, the arrival of Europeans may have been easier for American Indians to understand and explain than the existence of Indians was for Europeans. To Indians, the world was alive, animated by a spiritual force that was both universal and intelligent. Social ties based on fictive kinship and reciprocal trade linked all creatures—human and nonhuman—together into a common cosmos. These connections were chronicled in myth and maintained through ritual, which often involved the exchange of ceremonial items believed to have spiritual value. In the pre-Columbian trading world, such prized goods passed from society to society, establishing a spiritual bond even if the two groups never met. Europeans and European goods slipped easily into this ceremonial trading system. The trade items that the Europeans generally offered to American Indians on first contact—glass beads, mirrors, brass bells—resembled closely the items that the Indians traditionally used to establish friendly spiritual and economic relations with strangers. The perceived similarity of the trade goods offered by the Europeans led Indians to accept the newcomers as simply another new group in the complex social cosmos uniting the spiritual and material worlds.

Europeans, to the contrary, perceived such items as worthless trinkets, valuing instead Indian furs and land. This difference in perception became a major source of misunderstanding and conflict. To the Indians, neither furs nor the land was considered “property”; according to their beliefs, all things had innate spirits and belonged to themselves. Beavers, for example, gave their fur to people in exchange for spiritual gifts, and when the Native Americans passed the furs along to Europeans they were simply extending the social connection that had brought the furs into their hands in the first place. Similarly, the land was seen as a living being—a mother—who feeds, clothes, and houses people as long as she receives proper respect. When Europeans offered spiritually significant objects in exchange for land on which to build, farm, or hunt, Indians perceived the offer as an effort to join an already existing social relationship, and not as a contract transferring ownership.

### COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE

Another source of tension stemmed from the fact that the natural environments of the Old and New Worlds were different, and the passage of people, plants, and animals among Europe, Africa, and North America instigated profound changes in all three continents. This long-term process has been labeled the Columbian Exchange.

The most tragic trade among the three continents was literally invisible: bacteria and viruses wreaked havoc among populations that had never been exposed to them before. It appears that Europeans acquired a New World bacterium that evolved into syphilis, infecting thousands. And, it would appear, Africans brought various bacteria to the New World that developed into different strains of malaria. Africa, itself, was largely spared from new diseases because most contact with Europeans was sporadic in the early days. But in the Americas, where sustained contact occurred from the very beginning, the impact of both European and African diseases was devastating. There is no way of knowing the full impact of imported diseases among Native Americans, though some studies have found that the death rate during the first century of contact was over 90 percent.

The ecological changes and the creation of markets brought about by the Columbian Exchange would drive Atlantic enterprise for nearly three hundred years following Columbus’s geographical blunder. While exchanged diseases were killing many millions of Indians and lesser numbers of Africans and Europeans, the transplantation of North American plants significantly expanded food production in what had been marginal areas of Europe and Africa. At the same time, the environmental changes that Europeans wrought along the Atlantic shore of North America permitted the region to support many more people than it had sustained under Native cultivation. The overall result in Europe and Africa was a population explosion that eventually spilled over to repopulate a devastated North America.

### RISE OF THE SLAVE TRADE

As Europeans struggled to wrest a profit from a rugged, and now underpopulated, New World, they found the prospect of enslaved African labor irresistible. Europeans equipped aggressive tribes on Africa’s western coast with firearms and encouraged large-scale raiding deep into the Niger and Congo river regions. These raiders captured millions of prisoners, whom they herded back to the coast and sold to European traders to supply labor for mines and plantations in the New World. In exchange, they received more firearms and other weapons as well as manufactured goods from Europe crafted largely from raw materials imported from the Americas. They also received rum made from the sugar grown by Africans for Europeans in the Caribbean, converted into alcohol in both North America and Europe, and then exchanged for more slaves to be fed into the cane plantations.

The manufacture of sugar in the West Indies from Histoire Generale des Antilles, by Jean Baptiste du Tertre (Paris: T. Iolly, 1667) (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Tobacco followed the same route with the same results. This never-ending circle of trade followed the natural course of wind and ocean currents that, until steam power revolutionized shipping in the mid-nineteenth century, dictated patterns of motion and commerce in the Atlantic World.

At any given location in this great wheel of activity, conditions on the ground could vary significantly. The Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch, British, and other exploiters of the newly emerged Atlantic World each had their own style and strategies for extracting resources, exploiting natives, and making profits. Indigenous peoples from Africa to the Atlantic archipelagos to the Caribbean and all the Americas also adopted unique strategies for dealing with these invaders. But for more than half a millennium, the great wheel itself continued to spin and the patterns set down in the first era of American history continued to drive it.

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**Indian Slavery in the Americas**

Summary of a debate on the subjugation of the Indians between Bartolomeo de Las Casas and Juan Gines Sepulveda in 1550. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The story of European colonialism in the Americas and its victimization of Africans and Indians follows a central paradigm in most textbooks. The African “role” encompasses the transportation, exploitation, and suffering of many millions in New World slavery, while Indians are described in terms of their succumbing in large numbers to disease, with the survivors facing dispossession of their land. This paradigm—a basic one in the history of colonialism—omits a crucial aspect of the story: the indigenous peoples of the Americas were enslaved in large numbers. This exclusion distorts not only what happened to American Indians under colonialism, but also points to the need for a reassessment of the foundation and nature of European overseas expansion.

Without slavery, slave trading, and other forms of unfree labor, European colonization would have remained extremely limited in the New World. The Spanish were almost totally dependent on Indian labor in most of their colonies, and even where unfree labor did not predominate, as in the New England colonies, colonial production was geared toward supporting the slave plantation complex of the West Indies. Thus, we must take a closer look at the scope of unfree labor—the central means by which Europeans generated the wealth that fostered the growth of colonies.

Modern perceptions of early modern slavery associate the institution almost solely with Africans and their descendants. Yet slavery was a ubiquitous institution in the early modern world. Africans, Asians, Europeans, and Native Americans kept slaves before and after Columbus reached America. Enslavement meant a denial of freedom for the enslaved, but slavery varied greatly from place to place, as did the lives of slaves. The life of a *genizaro* (slave soldier) of the Ottoman Empire, who enjoyed numerous privileges and benefits, immensely differed from an American Indian who worked in the silver mines of Peru or an African who produced sugar cane in Barbados. People could be kept as slaves for religious purposes (Aztecs and Pacific Northwest Indians) or as a by-product of warfare, where they made little contribution to the economy or basic social structure (Eastern Woodlands). In other societies, slaves were central to the economy. In many areas of West Africa, for instance, slaves were the predominant form of property and the main producers of wealth.

As it expanded under European colonialism to the New World in the late fifteenth through nineteenth centuries, slavery took on a new, racialized form involving the movement of millions of peoples from one continent to another based on skin color, and the creation of a vast slave-plantation complex that was an important cog in the modernization and globalization of the world economy. Africans provided the bulk of labor in this new system of slavery, but American Indians were compelled to labor in large numbers as well.

In the wake of the deaths of indigenous Americans from European-conveyed microbes from which they had no immunity, the Spanish colonists turned to importing Africans. A racist and gross misinterpretation of this event posited that most Indians could not be enslaved because of their love for freedom, while Africans were used to having their labor controlled by “big men” in Africa. This dangerous view obscured a basic fact of early modern history: Anyone could be enslaved. Over a million Europeans were held as slaves from the 1530s through the 1780s in Africa, and hundreds of thousands were kept as slaves by the Ottomans in eastern Europe and Asia. (John Smith, for instance, had been a slave of the Ottomans before he obtained freedom and helped colonize Virginia.) In 1650, more English were enslaved in Africa than Africans enslaved in English colonies. Even as late as the early nineteenth century, United States citizens were enslaved in North Africa. As the pro-slavery ideologue George Fitzhugh noted in his book, *Cannibals All* (1857), in the history of world slavery, Europeans were commonly the ones held as slaves, and the enslavement of Africans was a relatively new historical development. Not until the eighteenth century did the words “slave” and “African” become nearly synonymous in the minds of Europeans and Euro-Americans.

With labor at a premium in the colonial American economy, there was no shortage of people seeking to purchase slaves. Both before and during African enslavement in the Americas, American Indians were forced to labor as slaves and in various other forms of unfree servitude. They worked in mines, on plantations, as apprentices for artisans, and as domestics—just like African slaves and European indentured servants. As with Africans shipped to America, Indians were transported from their natal communities to labor elsewhere as slaves. Many Indians from Central America were shipped to the West Indies, also a common destination for Indians transported out of Charleston, South Carolina, and Boston, Massachusetts. Many other Indians were moved hundreds or thousands of miles within the Americas. Sioux Indians from the Minnesota region could be found enslaved in Quebec, and Choctaws from Mississippi in New England. A longstanding line of transportation of Indian slaves led from modern-day Utah and Colorado south into Mexico.

The European trade in American Indians was initiated by Columbus in 1493. Needing money to pay for his New World expeditions, he shipped Indians to Spain, where there already existed slave markets dealing in the buying and selling of Africans. Within a few decades, the Spanish expanded the slave trade in American Indians from the island of Hispaniola to Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Cuba, and the Bahamas. The great decline in the indigenous island populations which largely owed to disease, slaving, and warfare, led the Spanish to then raid Indian communities in Central America and many of the islands just off the continent, such as Curacao, Trinidad, and Aruba. About 650,000 Indians in coastal Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras were enslaved in the sixteenth century. Conquistadors then entered the inland American continents and continued the process. Hernando de Soto, for instance, brought with him iron implements to enslave the people of La Florida on his infamous expedition through the American southeast into the Carolinas and west to the Mississippi Valley. Indians were used by the conquistadors as *tamemes* to carry their goods on these distant forays. Another form of Spanish enslavement of Indians in the Americas was *yanaconaje*, which was similar to European serfdom, whereby Indians were tied to specific lands to labor rather than lords. And under the *encomienda* system, Indians were forced to labor or pay tribute to an *encomendero*, who, in exchange, was supposed to provide protection and conversion to Christianity. The encomenderos’ power survived longest in frontier areas, particularly in Venezuela, Chile, Paraguay, and in the Mexican Yucatan into the nineteenth century.

By 1542 the Spanish had outlawed outright enslavement of some, but not all, Indians. People labeled cannibals could still be enslaved, as could Indians purchased from other Europeans or from Indians. The Spanish also created new forms of servitude for Indians. This usually involved compelling mission Indians to labor for a period of time each year that varied from weeks to months with little or no pay. *Repartimiento*, as it was called, was widespread in Peru and Mexico, though it faded quickly in the latter. It persisted for hundreds of years as the main system for organizing Indian labor in Colombia, Ecuador, and Florida, and survived into the early 1820s in Peru and Bolivia. Indian laborers worked in the silver mines and built forts, roads, and housing for the army, church, and government. They performed agriculture and domestic labor in support of civilians, government contractors, and other elements of Spanish society. Even in regions where African slavery predominated, such as the sugar plantations in Portuguese Brazil and in the West Indies, Indian labor continued to be used. And in many Spanish colonies, where the plantations did not flourish, Indians provided the bulk of unfree labor through the colonial era. In other words, the growth of African slavery in the New World did not diminish the use of unfree Indian labor, particularly outside of the plantation system.

Whereas in South America and the islands of the West Indies, Europeans conducted the bulk of slaving raids against Indians, (except in Brazil, where *bandeirantes* of mixed blood were employed for slaving), much of the enslavement of Indians in North America above Mexico was done by Indians. North American Europeans did enslave Indians during wars, especially in New England (the Pequot War, King Philip’s War) and the southeast (the Tuscarora War, the Yamasee War, the Natchez War, just to name a few), but ordinarily Europeans, especially the English and French, purchased their Indian slaves from Indians. Colonists lured Indians to supply Indian slaves in exchange for trade goods and to obtain alliances with the Europeans and their Indian allies. Indians slaved against not only their enemies, but Indians they had never met. Many Indians recognized they had little choice but to become slavers. If they did not do the Europeans’ bidding they could easily become victimized themselves. It was not unusual for peoples victimized by slaving to become slavers, and for those who had been slavers to become the object of raids.

Colonists participated in Indian slave trading to obtain capital. It was as if capital could be created out of thin air: one merely had to capture an Indian or find an Indian to capture another. In South Carolina, and to a lesser extent in North Carolina, Virginia, and Louisiana, Indian slavery was a central means by which early colonists funded economic expansion. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a frenzy of enslaving occurred in what is now the eastern United States. English and allied Indian raiders nearly depopulated Florida of its American Indian population. From 1670 to 1720 more Indians were shipped out of Charleston, South Carolina, than Africans were imported as slaves—and Charleston was a major port for bringing in Africans. The populous Choctaws in Mississippi were repeatedly battered by raiders, and many of their neighboring lower Mississippi Valley Indians also wound up spending their lives as slaves on West Indies plantations. Simultaneously, the New England colonies nearly eliminated the Native population from southern New England through warfare, slaving, and forced removal. The French in Canada and in Louisiana purchased many Indian slaves from their allies who swept through the Great Lakes region, the Missouri Country, and up into Minnesota. All the colonies engaged in slaving and in the purchase of Indian slaves. Only in the colonial region of New York and Pennsylvania was slaving limited, in large part because the neighboring Iroquois assimilated into their societies many of those they captured instead of selling them to the Europeans—but the Europeans of those colonies purchased Indian slaves from other regions.

Slaving against Indians did begin to decline in the east in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, largely a result of Indians’ refusal to participate in large-scale slaving raids, but the trade moved westward where Apaches, Sioux, and others continued to be victimized by Comanche and others. From Louisiana to New Mexico, large-scale enslavement of American Indians persisted well into the nineteenth century. Slave markets were held monthly in New Mexico, for instance, to facilitate the sale of Indians from the American West to northern Mexico. After the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson sent federal troops into the West to put an end to Indian slavery, but it continued to proliferate in California.

The paradigm of “what happened” to American Indians under European colonialism must be revised. Instead of viewing victimization of Africans and Indians as two entirely separate processes, they should be compared and contrasted. This will shed more light on the consequences of colonialism in the Americas, and how racism became one of the dominant ideologies of the modern world. It is time to assess the impact of slave trading and slavery on American Indian peoples, slave and free.

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