

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 044 341

SO 000 350

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TITLE How Slavery Came and How It Developed in the British Mainland Colonies and in the West Indies.  
INSTITUTION Smith Coll., Northampton, Mass.  
SPONS AGENCY Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Bureau of Educational Research and Development.  
PUB DATE 8 Aug 69  
NOTE 19p.; Developed at the EPDA History Institute "The Black Experience. A Comparative Study: The United States and Latin America," Smith College, June 23-August 8, 1969

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC-\$1.05  
DESCRIPTORS African History, \*American History, Colonial History (United States), Cross Cultural Studies, \*Curriculum Guides, Latin American Culture, \*Negro History, Racial Attitudes, Racial Discrimination, Resource Materials, \*Secondary Grades, \*Slavery, Social Studies Units, Socioeconomic Influences

ABSTRACT

The story of slavery is told beginning with its earliest roots in ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, Ethiopia, and western Africa. The slave trade in the British colonies is contrasted with that of Latin America, but it is concluded that, for the slave, destination mattered little in his destiny. (The author notes that this edition is in first draft stage and has not undergone classroom trial.) Several general objectives and a bibliography are also included. (DJ3)

EPDA History Institute  
Smith College

August 1969  
Curriculum Workshop

V United States History

HOW SLAVERY CAME AND HOW IT DEVELOPED IN THE BRITISH MAINLAND  
COLONIES AND IN THE WEST INDIES

By

Richard P. Sandberg

This curricular unit was developed as a part of the work in the EPDA History Institute, "The Black Experience. A Comparative Study: The United States and Latin America," held at Smith College from June 23 to August 8, 1969. It is a first draft and has as yet not undergone classroom trial.

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### General Objectives

1. To give the student a brief look at historic slavery and early Africa, especially West Africa, its people and their cultural environment.
2. To explain the coming of the European to Africa in his search for slaves following the acquisition of Caribbean islands, especially by Great Britain and France, in the 17th century.
3. To look briefly at the logistics and economic ramifications of the slave trade.
4. To compare the evolution of slavery and the special characteristics of the institution in British America with its development in the West Indies.

The following quotes provide a framework for the discussion of the institution of slavery.

To different degrees every colonizer is privileged, at least comparatively so, ultimately to the detriment of the colonized. If the privileges of the masters of colonization are striking, the lesser privileges of the small colonizer, even the smallest, are very numerous. Every act of his daily life places him in a relationship with the colonized, and with each act his fundamental advantage is demonstrated. If he is in trouble with the law, the police and even justice will be more lenient toward him. If he needs assistance from the government, it will not be difficult; red tape will be cut; a window will be reserved for him where there is a shorter line so he will have a shorter wait. Does he need a job? Must he take an examination for it? Jobs and positions will be reserved for him in advance; the tests will be given in his language, causing disqualifying difficulties for the colonized. Can he be so blind or so blinded that he can never see that, given equal material circumstances, economic class or capabilities, he always receives preferred treatment? 1.

"Racism... is the highest expression of the colonial system and one of the most significant features of the colonialist. 2.

The colonizer denies the colonized the most precious right granted to most men: liberty. The colonized in the end is dehumanized and if denied assimilation has but the terribly hazardous route of revolt and revolution. 3.

Slavery in the United States is the granting of that power by which one man exercises and enforces a right of property in the body and soul of another.

1. Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized, New York, The Orion Press, 1965, pp. 11-12.

2. Ibid., p. 74.

3. Ibid., p. 82.

The condition of a slave is simply that of the brute beast. He is a piece of property - a marketable commodity, in the language of the law, to be bought and sold at the will and caprice of the master who claims him to be his property; he is spoken of, thought of, and treated as property. His own good, his conscience, his intellect, his affections, are all set aside by the master. The will and the wishes of the master are the law of the slave. 4.

### Historic Roots

To come to grips with mid-twentieth-century racial strife, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the historic roots of slavery in the ancient world of Greece and Rome and in the historical record of Africa before as well as after its penetration by Europeans. Slavery has involved roots. The thinking of the British colonists of the New World concerning the legal and moral bases of slavery was rooted in the British common law, in Christian teachings and in the natural rights philosophy. The ethical attitude and usage of slavery of previous civilizations also was part of that background. Ultimately, however, the Christian religion was basically incompatible with slavery.

In seeking to appraise the significance of the historic roots of slavery the student is led to inquire about the relationship between slavery under ancient civilizations and its development as an American institution. As for Greece, slavery had been firmly embedded in the social order by the Hellenic Age and the main philosophical schools accepted it. Plato's ideal society

4. Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 1960, Belknap, p. 28.

was a caste system in which those who worked with their hands were excluded from citizenship. The Platonic justification of slavery was the natural inferiority of most men. Aristotle reached conclusions similar to those of Plato. Most slaves came to that state as the result of defeat in the Greek internecine wars.

Roman slaves were the captives and spoils of war, the abler elements of which were absorbed into the Roman bureaucracy. A slave could purchase his freedom and bondage did not prevent men from rising to positions of power. The influence of Christianity alleviated classical slavery and further restricted its scope. The Church emphasized the moral value of manumission. The issuance of Justinian's (A.D. 483-565) Code incorporated major reforms in the status of slaves, for example, a free woman might marry a slave if his owner consented and that men might marry their own slaves after emancipating them the children of such unions to be heirs of their free-born fathers. 5.

#### African Heritage

Africa has long been called the "cradle of civilization," and Egypt represents an early beginning of western civilization. Historians are uncertain of the physical appearance of the ordinary Egyptian but there is evidence that he was both Caucasoid and Negroid and that the hospitality of the Nile River

5. G. M. Beardley, The Negro in Greek and Roman Civilization, New York, Russell and Russell, 1968, pp. 191 ff.

basin saw the emergence of a mixed society. 6.

In the first millennium B.C. during Egypt's 25th Dynasty, the ancient Ethiopians of the Sudan gained control of the country. In 751 B.C. the mighty Piankhi fell upon Egypt from Ethiopia and subdued the country. His reign was followed by that of his brother, Shabaka. For more than one hundred years Ethiopians ruled Egypt. The greatest of the rulers of this period was Taharka who came to the throne of the Pharaoh in 688 B.C.

By the year 670 B.C. the ancient Ethiopians were driven out of Egypt only to retreat to their own highly civilized land in the region of the Sudan. At the Ethiopian capitals of Napata and Meroe black kings reigned in splendor. One of the outstanding Ethiopian rulers was Metekozane who built monuments to himself at many places along the Nile. Before 600 B.C. Napata was sacked by the Assyrians who were then overrunning the Fertile Crescent that gave ancient Egypt its vitality.

Centuries after the decline of ancient Ethiopia in the Sudan, another civilization of black men rose on a broad stretch of land south of the Sahara. Here flourished ancient Ghana, Mali and Songhay.

Possessing a history traceable to the fourth century A.D., Ghana reached its apogee in the eleventh century under one Tenamenin. When Ghana began to decline in

6. John H. Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1961, pp. 9 ff.

the twelfth century, Mali, a Mandingo empire, rose to prominence and achieved its zenith under Kankan-Mussa who ruled it from 1307-1332. Mali's influence extended from the Atlantic ocean on the west to lake Chad on the east. The fabled empire of Songhay took its place in the fifteenth century. 7.

Enshrouded in myth and legend, the old African empires of Ghana, Mali and Timbuctu are little known to the world today. Yet between the 11th and 16th centuries, they rivalled Europe both in size and sophistication. Their capital cities of Gao, Jenne and Timbuctu were centers of trade, commerce and learning. Of all the Mellestine and Songhaese rulers, Sonni Ali, in the words of W. E. B. Du Bois, was among the "last and the greatest." Beginning his career as a common soldier, by 1454 A.D. Sonni Ali found himself master of all the territory "from Timbuctu to the blue waters of the Atlantic." 8.

Sonni Ali was a native of Songhay. When he found himself in the army of the Mellestine king as a man, he cleverly rallied his fellow soldiers in a revolt against the Mohammedian Mansa Musa and overthrew him. He consolidated his revolt by intermarriage between the people of Mali and those of Songhay. He then set upon the task of breaking the grip of the Moslem faith, especially the lucrative trade with Mecca and the priestly control over the University of Sankore, the center for Sudanese

7. Ibid. p. 12.

8. W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, New York, Blue Heron Press, 1953, p. 47.



and Arabian scholars.

One further point about West Africa needs to be made; namely the widespread existence of slavery. While the mainstay of the economy might be in salt, gold, woods and hides, the capture and sale of slaves accounted for a good deal of the wealth of these kingdoms. With the advent of the Europeans, the chiefs had their agents scurry far and wide for slaves in exchange for guns. But the slaves had many rights, recognized in the law, among them they could marry, possess property, own slaves themselves and even become heirs to their masters.

#### The Slave Trade

Negro slavery in the New World began in the early 16th century, with Portugal and Spain in the lead. The institution spread rapidly as the plantation system, first in sugar then in tobacco and cotton, fastened itself upon the land. Its appetite for "Black Gold" was soon of voracious proportions. By the end of the century and beyond the profits from the slave trade were enormous.

The reason for Negro slavery was economic, not racial; it had to do not with the color of the laborer, but the cheapness of the labor. As compared with Indian and white labor, Negro slavery was eminently superior. The colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest and best.<sup>9</sup>

9. Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, New York, Putnam's, 1966, p. 20.

In the inland kingdoms of West Africa the slaves often started their trip. They were brought out to the coastal trading stations or forts in land convoys called "coffles" and guarded by men hired by kings and chiefs who had sold them. Their journey was long and severe - it could take up to three months - and attrition was high; as many as 60% of them died. Women and docile males traveled lightest, secured only by thongs on their necks, but the strong rebellious men were so fettered that they scarcely could walk. Some were linked neck-to-neck by heavy wooden poles; others were restrained by timbers which yoked the leg of one man to the leg of his neighbor. Those who fell and were too weak to respond to the beatings were cut out of the coffle and abandoned to die.

European and later American traders were waiting to buy them from the agents of the kings and chiefs. For a healthy man or a woman between 18 and 35 years the price was about 150 gallons of rum, then worth perhaps \$90. Having purchased a full cargo, the traders branded the slaves and sailed for the West Indies. 10

The usual American vessels engaged in the slave trade were

10. Excellent and well-documented accounts of this and the subsequent journey are to be found in D. Mannix & M. Cowley, Black Cargoes, New York, Viking Press, 1962.

usually smaller sloop or schooner-rigged ships with crews of but 10 or 12 men and only 90 feet long. "It is not uncommon to read of a vessel of 90 tons carrying 390 slaves or one of 100 tons carrying 414." 11. But by using the shallow 'tween decks, they were able to carry about 250 slaves, with some of the larger vessels holding up to 500. The space allotted to each slave on the Atlantic crossing measured five and a half feet in length by 16 inches in breadth. Packed like "rows of books on shelves," chained two by two, right leg and left leg, right hand and left hand, each slave had less room than a man in a coffin. Their only ventilation came from a dozen small portholes. The heat and the stench became frightful, especially during bad weather when the portholes had to be closed. While the total of the numbers transported is subject to dispute, varying as high as 65 million who at least began the trip, as many as 15 million probably arrived in the Western Hemisphere.

Shipowners and ship captains took some pains to keep the slave mortality low because insurance companies would not compensate them for those who died of disease. However, many slaves died at sea of dysentery, smallpox, general weakness or despair. There were also losses from mutiny. One of the best known involved Joseph Cinque.

Briefly, Cinque was an African prince who was kidnapped

11. Williams, op. cit., p. 35.

and sold into slavery and duly arrived in Cuba about 1839. He and 38 others were packed into the hold of the schooner AMISTAD bound for the Island of Principe. Two days out, in the midst of a violent storm, Cinque and his fellow voyagers plotted their escape, seized the vessel, killed all but two of their jailers and ordered these two to guide them back to Africa. The two Spaniards instead cleverly brought the vessel instead to Long Island, New York. Through a maze of claims and arguments, the case of the AMISTAD revolt began its journey through the courts to the United States Supreme Court, which heeded the advice of defense council, John Quincy Adams, that freedom was the inherent right of all men. They were freed by the court. 12.

When a slave ship arrived at its port of sale in the West Indies or the United States., it was usually found that the slaves were covered with sores and abrasions from chains. To increase their marketability they were forced to smear their bodies with oil, which covered their sores and gave their skins a healthy appearance. Once the slaves were disposed of, the vessel took on a load of molasses, made for home port, usually in New England, and the molasses was distilled into rum. Loading on the rum, the ship sailed back to Africa for more slaves.

In this triangular trade England - France and Colonial America equally - supplied the exports

12. A good account of the AMISTAD rebellion may be found in the American Heritage, Feb. 1957, pp. 60-64, 104-6. Also, diagram for slave packing in the Feb. 1962 issue, p. 104.

and the ships; Africa the human merchandise, the plantations the colonial raw materials. The slave ship sailed from the home country with a cargo of manufactured goods. These were exchanged at a profit on the coast of Africa for Negroes, who were traded on the plantations, at another profit, in exchange for a cargo of colonial produce to be taken back to the home country. 13

Countless fortunes were built by this triangular trade.

In the eleven years between 1783 and 1793 Liverpool put 878 ships into trade, shipped 303,737 Negroes from Africa, at a value of 15,186,850 pds. Deductions for various commissions, and other charges, gave Liverpool a gross return of \$12,294,116, or 1,700,000 pds. per year. After all necessary expenses in transporting and insurance were calculated, it was estimated that there was a gain of 30 per cent on every slave sold....Almost everyone in Liverpool had some share in the trade. It is well known that many of the smaller vessels that imported about a hundred were fitted out by attorneys, drapers, grocers, tallow-chandlers, bankers, tailors, and so on. Some had one eighth, some a sixteenth, and some a thirty-second share in the undertaking. 14.

Eric Williams maintains that the enormous profits from the slave trade "...provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution." 15.

#### Evolution of Slavery in British America and Latin America

Were there differences in the development of slavery in

13. Williams, op. cit., pp. 51-2.

14. Frank Tannenbaum, Slave & Citizen, New York, Vintage, 1946, pps. 17-18.

15. Williams, op. cit., p. 52.

the British Mainland Colonies from its development in Latin America? According to Tannenbaum, there were at least three traditions or historical forces in Latin America which prevented the definition of the slave there only as property; namely, the continuance of the Roman law of slavery as it came down through the Justinian Code, the influence of the Catholic Church, and the long familiarity of the Spanish and Portuguese with Moors and Negroes. 16.

Tannenbaum writes, "The law accepted the doctrine of the moral personality of the slave and made possible the gradual achievement of freedom implicit in such a doctrine" and on a universal religion - Catholicism - in preventing the definition of the slave solely as property. 17.

In the Mainland Colonies of North America slavery developed in a legal and moral setting in which the doctrine of the moral personality of the slave did not affect the definition of his status in the society. "Legally he was chattel under the law, and in practice an animal to be bred for market." 18.

In comparing North American and Latin American slavery, Stanley Elkins adds to Tannenbaum's earlier analysis. The legal status of the slave in "the liberal, Protestant, secularized, capitalist culture of America" is contrasted with

16. Tannenbaum, op. cit., pp. 43-65.

17. Ibid., p. 8.

18. Ibid., p. 82.

that of the slave in "the conservative, paternalistic, Catholic, quasi-medieval culture of Spain and Portugal and their New World colonies." 19. Elkins concludes that in the absence of such restraining institutions in North America the search for private gain and profit was unlimited, and the law of slavery developed in such a way as to eliminate the slightest hindrance to the authority of the slaveholder over his slaves. The legal status of the slave developed exclusively in terms of property as the result of the demands of an emerging capitalism. Slavery on the continent was "a system conceived and evolved exclusively on the grounds of property." 20.

For Tannenbaum and Elkins the decisive feature of the legal status of the slave was the view of him as property. His personality was suppressed, the "Sambo" image, subject always to the whims of the master, parentage, kinship, marriage and other private rights were denied, and the power of punishment and discipline was developed to such a degree as to make slavery in the United States a unique system.

In The Peculiar Institution Kenneth Stampp takes up the social organization of slavery as well as its legal structure. His interpretation of the legal status of the slave is mainly in terms of economic values, and stresses the property

19. Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959, p.37.

20. Ibid., p. 55.

component also. However, he finds that the status also contained a personal element, which made for a certain degree of ambiguity in the status. 21.

The status of the Negro as a slave and his status as a member of a racial minority apparently developed concurrently and were to play an important role in future race relations. Slavery in the United States meant Negro slavery. In contrast to Latin America, slavery in North America involved "caste," "by law of nature," or "innate inferiority." 22.

The two slavery systems can be distinguished in terms of the ease and availability of manumission and the status of the freedman in Latin America, his acceptance by the Church as one of its own, his ability to hold property, to marry, to provide for his heirs, and to be free of the ever-present color, racial, or caste consciousness that characterized his existence in British America.

One of the most careful, able and exhaustively researched books in this field is by David B. Davis, Problem of Slavery in Western Culture. He comments:

The slave trade itself was a powerful agent of acculturation - one might say, of Americanization - which tended to blur distinctions in custom and give a more uniform character to Negro slavery than would have been found among

21. Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution; Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1956, pp. 192-3.

22. Tannenbaum, op. cit., pp. 55-6.



earlier forms of European serfdom and villenage. With the acquisition of important Caribbean islands by Holland, Britain, and France, and with the development of sugar planting in the 1640's, the mounting demand for slaves made it impossible for mercantilist governments to prevent the growth of a vast system of smuggling and illicit trade. The same slave ships brought cargoes to mainland and island colonies, and competed with one another in supplying the Spanish. 23.

Most of the trading nations of Europe were thrown together in a common endeavor of supplying Negro slaves from their African possessions to their colonial enterprises in the New World and this produced some blending of customs and attitude toward the Negro slave. Methods and techniques of production using slave labor within the framework of the plantation system were doubtless known to most of the colonies in both North and Latin America and the islands of the Caribbean.

While much is yet to be learned of this cultural exchange and its effect upon systems of slavery, Davis feels that some evidence is now available to suggest that the mainland colonists adopted from Barbados the view that Negroes were especially suited for perpetual slavery. 24. Some Negroes came in a position similar to white indentured servants but an increasingly degraded position was both a

23. David B. Davis, Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1966, p. 244.

24. Ibid., p. 246.

source and result of racial prejudice. The white servant came, however, largely on his own initiative. The fact that stands out in this whole area of slavery, especially as it developed in the United States, is the cumulative debasement of the Negro, he was the property of his owner, and he and his progeny, if they were born of a slave woman, were condemned to perpetual bondage.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that slavery wherever it existed was a denial of the innate dignity and worth of man - a denial of what Memmi characterizes as "...the most precious right granted to most men: liberty!" - and that illustrations abound of individual and institutional cruelty in both North and Latin America and one must be cautious in comparing the relative severity of slave systems.

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