

# Colonial America

## Slavery

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Slavery was common throughout the [thirteen colonies](#) during the 1700s. Most slaves were people of African descent. In the years following the American Revolution, many northern states outlawed slavery. By 1840 most slaves who lived north of the Mason-Dixon Line were set free. Slavery continued, however, to be legal in the Southern states until after the [American Civil War](#).

### Indentured Servants

The roots of slavery in America began with indentured servants. These were people brought over from Britain as laborers. Many of these people agreed to work for seven years in return for their passage to the Americas. Others were in debt or were criminals and were forced to work as indentured servants to pay for their debts or crimes.



*Slaves working on a farm* by Henry P. Moore

The first Africans in the colonies arrived in Virginia in 1619. They were sold as indentured servants and were likely set free after they served their seven years.

### How did slavery begin?

As the need for manual labor grew in the colonies, indentured servants became harder to get and more expensive. The first slaves were African indentured servants who were forced to be indentured servants for the rest of their lives. By the late 1600s, slavery of Africans became common in the colonies. New laws called "slave codes" were passed in the early 1700s that formalized the legal rights of slave owners and the status of slaves.

## **What jobs did slaves have?**

Slaves worked all sorts of jobs. Many slaves were field hands who worked the tobacco fields in the southern colonies. These slaves worked extremely hard and were often treated poorly. Other slaves were house servants. These slaves did chores around the house or helped out in the master's trade shop.

## **Where did slaves live?**

Slaves who worked on farms and plantations lived in small houses near the fields. Although these houses were small and cramped, they had some level of privacy from the master. Small families and communities were able to develop around these quarters. House slaves had less privacy, sometimes living by themselves in a loft above the kitchen or the stables.

## **What did they wear?**

Field slaves were generally given one set of clothes that had to last them a year. These clothes were similar in style to what any colonial farmer would wear when working. Women slaves wore long dresses and men slaves wore pants and loose shirts. Slaves working in the house usually dressed nicer, often wearing their master's old clothing.

## **How were slaves treated?**

Slaves were treated differently depending on their masters. In general, field slaves were treated worse than house slaves. Field slaves were sometimes beaten and whipped. They were forced to work long hours with little rest.

Even for slaves who were treated nicely by their master, being a slave was an awful life. Slaves had no rights and were under the orders of their masters 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They could be bought or sold at any time and were seldom able to live together for long as a family. Children were often sold as soon as they could work, never to see their parents again.

## **Interesting Facts about Slavery During Colonial Times**

- Many Native Americans were also captured and forced into slavery during the 1600s.
- Slaves became symbols of wealth and social status to plantation owners in the South.
- Not all Africans living in the American colonies were slaves. As of 1790, around eight percent of African Americans were free.
- By the middle of the 1700s, around half of the people living in the southern colonies were slaves.
- When John Oglethorpe founded the colony of Georgia he made slavery illegal. However, this law was overturned in 1751.