



Slavery Comes to Early Maryland: A Brief Look

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THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY some people have forced other people to work against their will and without pay. Though it has appeared in a variety of different forms around the world this sort of arrangement may be referred to as "slavery." Yet, the words "slavery" and "slaves" mean different things based upon the historical context (meaning "when" and "where" something historical took place). Before the sixteenth century, a person enslaved may have played a wide variety of roles in a society: warriors, domestic servants, administrators, farm laborers, miners, nursemaids, and craftsmen. Whether in Mediterranean Europe, Ancient Egypt, Rome, the Asia Minor, Saharan Africa, Islamic Iberia, or Ancient Meso-America, one characteristic of the older forms of slavery was that people enslaved were most often seen as human beings and part of the larger society, not merely property.

What Was Slavery?: Old World and New World Contexts

The advent of the "New World" in the late-fifteenth century brought with it the creation of new forms of slavery. In the fifteenth century, as Europeans explored the world on ocean-going vessels new possibilities to acquire wealth began to present themselves. "Agriculture" (growing crops in the ground) seemed to be especially promising for those Europeans who came from England to North America. The English came to North America after other Europeans had already arrived elsewhere in the "New World." Beginning with Christopher Columbus, the European nation of Spain established settlements known as "colonies" in parts of the New World that we now call the Caribbean Islands, Central America, South America, and North America. Another European nation, Portugal, also established a colony in the New World, in a place called Brazil. Beginning with Columbus, the Spanish forced other people, at first Native Americans, to be slaves. For various reasons, enslaving Native Americans was not satisfactory. So, very quickly, the Spaniards began to demand that people be brought from the Old World to the New World, and that they be brought as slaves. The people most vulnerable to be used this way were found among the many groups of West Africa and Central Africa.

Europeans and Africans had a long history of trading and inter-changing with one another. Sometimes their relationships were peaceful and amicable, other times they were not. By the time that Columbus and the Spaniards reached the New World, Europeans and Africans had developed trade relationships that were nearly a century old based upon traveling the Atlantic Ocean. Europeans came to various points on the African coast and offered a variety of goods, receiving goods from the Africans in return. As Europe's agricultural activities in the New World continued to develop, however, more and more, their traders dealing with Africans only wanted people in exchange for the goods they offered. These people would be enslaved in the New World.

Hoping to continue to benefit from the relationships with their European trading partners, many nations in Africa offered people taken from elsewhere on the continent to the European slave dealers on the African coast. Many of those people who would be enslaved had been kidnapped –

stolen from their homes and families for no other reason than to be sold. Others were prisoners of warfare between different African nations. Europeans too made war on each other during this time. Usually fighting over access to the New World, the Portuguese fought the Spanish, and the Spanish fought the English. Sometimes during the fighting between Europeans prisoners of war were taken. Yet, European prisoners of war were not to be enslaved. Only Africans would be enslaved.

Whether prisoners of war, victims of kidnapping, or any of a number of other ways an African boy or girl, man or woman, might find themselves enslaved, they were all placed in shackles, marched to the coast, and loaded on to huge sailing ships. From there, they were taken to the New World where they would be enslaved.

When England began to establish colonies in the part of the New World called "North America" it was undetermined whether or not slavery would be used. Furthermore, even if slavery was to be instituted, who would serve as slaves? Native Americans? Africans? Poor English people? Shortly after the establishment of England's first successful colony – called Virginia – it was determined that the primary way in which the colony could be profitable was to grow tobacco, a plant. Soon thereafter, another English colony was created just to the north of Virginia, on the other side of the Potomac River. This colony was called Maryland. Maryland, too, would grow tobacco.

Labor in Early Maryland: Why Slavery? Why Africans?

With a few exceptions, most Europeans coming to the New World came in search of some form of economic opportunity. If they were poor and landless back in their European homeland – as most were – they saw the chance to get land for themselves and the families as a wonderful opportunity. If, back in England however, they had been middle class, or even wealthy, they understood the New World to offer a chance to become even more economically secure – perhaps to ensure the families' fortunes for generations to come.

In the Colony of Maryland many of the settlers, or "colonists" began to establish themselves as tobacco growers, or "planters." In order to do this, they need farm workers. In decided how to meet their needs for labor, Maryland planters had good examples of other agricultural colonies in the New World to borrow from. For example, the Spanish and French were growing sugar cane in the Caribbean. Other English colonists lived in the Caribbean too, tens of thousands on the islands of Barbados, Nevis and St. Kitts, for example. In all of these places – and even in Virginia by the time Maryland is organized – there was the example of Africans being used as workers, perhaps even as enslaved workers. Their final status was yet to be determined, however.

Even if there was never to be a system of labor called slavery, there was already in place a system that was very hard, often cruel, and sometimes brutal. Called "indentured servitude," this system began to evolve in Virginia at least a decade before Maryland was founded. Under this system, poor people in England could volunteer to sign contracts called "indentures." These indentures required them to come to the New World and work as servants, almost always farm laborers, on someone else's land. After several years of working for someone else, the person would receive freedom and payment, usually a new suit of clothes, farm tools such as an axe or hoe, and perhaps a supply of food products like corn, and the rights to some land. More than three-quarters of the people who came to Maryland in the seventeenth century came as indentured servants. Indentured servitude favored landowners more than the laborers; there are many examples of servants being cheated, over-worked, and physically abused by their "masters." In fact, the harsh conditions on plantations caused many indentured servants to run away from their masters' farms. Yet, while the system was not perfect, it was very successful in meeting the labor needs of colonies like Maryland, at least during the first several decades of its existence.

In early Maryland, as it was in Virginia, people of African descent (though small in number) could be found working side-by-side with folks of European descent as indentured servants. Black or white, many of them went on to complete their indentures, gain land, and live as successful landowners. Yet, indentured servitude was no enviable status. As time went on and news of its harsh realities reached back to England it became more difficult to get people to volunteer to become indentured servants. What landowners needed, then, was an alternative form of labor that would provide workers for a longer period of time than indentures did (usually 4 – 7 years) and keep the supply of workers constant. As the English landowning colonists could see, elsewhere in the New World there was a group of people who were being made to work for their entire lives, and who were being brought against their will from a seemingly endless supply. These were the Africans being enslaved throughout the rest of the New World. Soon, they would be enslaved in Maryland too.

Landowners justified using Africans as slaves in Maryland because the Africans were “different.” They had different skin color and hair texture. They spoke different languages than English. They worshipped a different god. And, since they were being taken from their homeland and brought to a foreign environment in Maryland, the Africans had nowhere to go and no one to protect them. Historians think that the first attempts to use a form of slavery in Maryland likely involved Native Americans more so than Africans. Native American slavery in Maryland, however, appears to have been very limited. People taken as slaves from Susquehannock, Seneca, and the Piscataway were familiar with the landscape, they could escape or be retrieved by their tribesmen easily. More generally, Native Americans were also susceptible to foreign diseases and capable of banding together to attack the colonists. Thus, more than anything during the earliest decades of the colony, Marylanders needed peaceful, cooperative relationships with the natives, in particular the Piscataway. Thus, with the Africans, it seemed the landowners had solved their labor problem by switching from indentured servitude to slavery. And, by designating slavery for people of African descent only, they ensured an endless supply of workers because they could be brought to Maryland against their will. Maryland and Virginia were the first English colonies in North America to create systems of slavery. Soon all thirteen colonies would allow slavery.

Slaves who came to Maryland and other colonies were forced to work against their will to grow crops such as tobacco and rice, to work as carpenters, blacksmiths, and metallurgists. They were made to do domestic work, and to work with farm animals. Unlike indentured servants, enslaved people would almost never be free. Also, unlike indentured servants, babies would be born into slavery if their parents were enslaved. It would never end. Enslavement of Africans and their descendants, African-Americans, continued in Maryland, for more than two hundred years.

What Was Life Like For A Person Enslaved In Maryland?

The journey to slavery in Maryland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries usually began in Africa, where men and women, boys and girls, were taken from their homes and homeland. Some people brought to Maryland to be slaves had been taken as prisoners of war by others and sold to slave dealers. Others were simply kidnapped and sold to the dealers. Since many were taken hundreds of miles away from the coast, they had to first endure long and painful walks from the interior parts of the African Continent to the coast. Many people died just on this first leg of the journey. Those that reached the coast were herded into dark, dank, and unsanitary dungeons until sailing ships came to take them away. When the ships arrived, the captured people were packed so tightly that they could barely move. Many were chained below deck with little light or fresh air. Even more people died on this part of the journey to the New World. Once in the strange surroundings of the New World, Africans were sold like sheep, horses, or cattle. Families and friends were separated from each other and sold to different buyers, never to see each other again. The buyers of these Africans put them to work as slaves. They performed numerous tasks, from clearing the forest to serving as trappers, craftsmen, nurses, and house servants. But in Maryland, their most crucial job was to work on tobacco farms.

Africans who arrived as slaves in Maryland after the 1660's were to be slaves for life. Their owners considered them personal property. As personal property, the Africans could be bought, sold, and punished. Enslaved Africans were not generally recognized as people by Maryland laws – certainly not as citizens. And, as time went on during the 1600s, Maryland law made it increasingly difficult for Africans to be anything else but slaves in the colony. Whereas, for example, newly baptized slaves were at one time able to win their freedom, later laws took that right away. Other laws said enslaved persons could not marry, own property, carry weapons, assemble in groups or leave their masters' plantations without signed passes from their owners. If enslaved people ran away, they could be hunted and, if necessary, killed. Rewards were given to those who found and returned runaway slaves. Maryland slaveowners punished their slaves severely for refusing to work, learning to read, or trying to escape. Court documents describe masters who literally abused their slaves to death.

Despite the harsh conditions, enslaved Africans were able to build families and construct a sense of community. During the seventeenth century there was a strong community made up European indentured servants and African slaves. Indentured servants greatly outnumber slaves throughout this time and so the two groups intermingled, often marrying one another and building families together. After 1700, Africans began to be brought to Maryland by the hundreds, sometimes thousands, each year, and laws made it illegal for people of different races to marry each other. With increased and constant numbers, Africans were able to transplant their cultural traditions and to carry on their African roots. By the 1720's, Maryland's enslaved population became increasing "African-American" as more and more babies were born to enslaved mothers and fathers.