

The Construction of Race in the U.S.

An Early History

Cynthia Peters

“Nature does not create masters and slaves. Nature does not create blacks and whites.”¹

Before Slavery: Poor Whites and Blacks Together

Richard Johnson was one of the first black people to live in the American colonies. He came as an indentured servant and worked as a carpenter. In two years, he earned his freedom and soon after, he was earning his own money and acquiring property and servants.² The system of indentured servitude in early America meant that poor members of both races were “owned” for a period of time during which they worked for their master and received no pay. Life was not easy. Many died from starvation and disease, and many had their terms of servitude unfairly extended.³

But what stands out about this system, says historian Lerone Bennett is the “equality of oppression.” There was little or no distinction between black and white servants, “who were assigned the same tasks and were held in equal contempt.” Working and living together, “the first black and white Americans ... developed strong bonds of sympathy and mutuality... [creating] a racial wonderland that seems somehow un-American in its lack of obsession about race and color.”⁴

THIS TEXT AVAILABLE IN TWO LEVELS

This piece is grade-level 10. A grade-level 6 version is available on p. 22 of the “Talking about Race” issue of *The Change Agent* (issue #42). The level 6 version is also available in audio on our website.

Who Will Be the Slaves? A Decision is Made

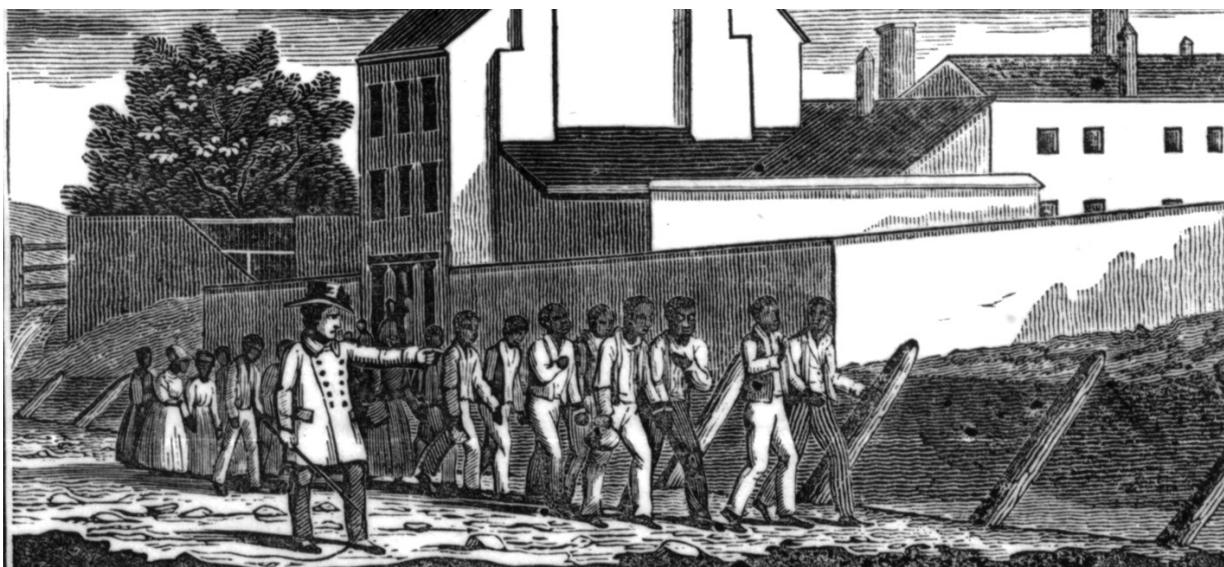
Plantation owners faced a problem, however. They needed more workers to harvest the tobacco, sugar, and cotton that the global market demanded. Slaves would provide cheap labor, but who should be the slaves? According to historians, American Indians would not make good slaves because they knew the territory too well and could easily escape or fight back. European immigrants were in short supply, and they could too easily escape and blend into the non-slave population. Plantation owners decided that Africans would be the ideal slaves.⁵

Teaching Racism to White People

And so it was that in the 1660s, the men who ran the colonies decided on a system of human slavery organized around the “distribution of melanin in human skin.”⁶ But this was easier said than done. Poor whites and blacks had spent the previous couple of generations being part of the same community. White people had to be taught that they were separate from and “better” than black people, and this was no small task. For about 100 years, white indentured servitude had existed alongside black slavery. Blacks and whites were accustomed to being together as laborers and they



White people systematically tortured black slaves and treated them like they were less than human.



Detail from an 1836 image, showing a white guard at a slave prison in Virginia. From the Library of Congress.

experienced solidarity with each other. To change this, wealthy whites had to *create* a system of racism and convince poor whites to buy into it. They used both the carrot (also known as the “racial bribe”) and the stick to create racist attitudes.

- In every colony, new laws prohibited free black men and mixed race men from voting. The goal of the white ruling class was to elevate poor white men over men of color, to give them marginally more rights than the black man, and to punish inter-marriage by labeling *all offspring* of cross-race parents *black*.
- Those who rebelled against these restrictions were punished, tortured, and killed. “The severed heads of black and white rebels were impaled on poles along the road as warnings to black people and to white people. Some rebels were branded; others castrated. This exemplary cruelty ... was carried out as a deliberate process of mass education.”⁷
- Poor whites policed blacks and acted as brutal overseers; they received rewards for returning runaway slaves.⁸
- White women and men were whipped and banished for marrying blacks.⁹
- The Virginia Assembly passed a law in 1705 requiring the masters of white indentured servants to give their servants ten bushels of corn, 30 shillings, and a gun, as well as 50 acres of land. This helped to start a new class of white planters. They weren’t rich, but they had more than blacks did, and they started to believe that their interests lay with the rich whites rather than the poor blacks.¹⁰
- Black slaves were by law forbidden to learn skilled trades, so that these trades could be preserved for whites only.
- Worried about being outnumbered by black slaves, colonies passed Deficiency Acts. These were laws that required plantation owners to hire white workers and pay them enough so that they felt more allegiance to the plantation owner than to the slave.

This system of separation, subordination, and racial bribery turned poor whites against blacks. With the full weight of the legal system, the media, and churches backing the idea that blacks were savages, even the poorest whites could feel “pride” in their “race.” Thus, “whiteness” was born, and the white ruling class could relax, know-

ing that their greatest fear — that whites and blacks would join together to improve their circumstances — would not come to pass.

Rich Whites Motivated by Fear

This was not a baseless fear. There had been incidents of blacks and whites bonding together and fighting back against the oppression they experienced from the owning class. One such rebellion was led by Nathaniel Bacon, who “openly condemned the rich for their oppression of the poor and inspired an alliance of white and black bond laborers, as well as slaves, who demanded an end to their servitude.” Bacon’s rebellion did not succeed and both blacks and whites were hanged in the aftermath. But the rebellion was “alarming to the planter elite, who were deeply fearful of the multiracial alliance of bond workers and slaves.”¹¹

The Good News Is...

The good news that we can rescue from the overwhelming tragedy of this part of U.S. history is that *it was not easy* for the white ruling class to break the “multiracial alliance of bond workers and slaves.” It took the methodical use of laws, brutal punishments, and racial bribery to convince white people to be racist. Racism did not

come naturally or even easily to white people. By looking back at history and seeing how racism and “whiteness” were constructed and, in fact, violently imposed, we learn that it can therefore be *unlearned* and extracted from our culture, our laws, our institutions, and our personal relationships. If the concept of race was made by certain people in whose interest it was to divide people, it can also be *unmade* by those of us who have no use for such divisions.

Endnotes

1. Bennett, Lerone, *The Shaping of Black America*, New York: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 68.
2. Bennett, Lerone, *Before the Mayflower*, New York: Penguin Books, 1988, p. 39.
3. <www.ushistory.org/us/5b.asp>
4. Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, Op. Cit. pp. 39-40.
5. Zinn, *A People’s History*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1995, p. 25.
6. Bennett, *Before the Mayflower*, Op. Cit. p. 45.
7. Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, Op. Cit. p. 74.
8. Alexander, Michelle, *The New Jim Crow*, New York: The New Press, 2010, pp. 22-26.
9. <memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/slavery.html>
10. <www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncolorline.html>
11. Alexander, Op. Cit. pp. 22-26.

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After You Read

Check your comprehension:

Write one-sentence summaries of each subsection.

Explain the difference between indentured servitude and slavery.

What is “racial bribe”?

What does the author mean when she says there is “good news” to be rescued from this tragedy.

Practice Critical Thinking:

Share what you know about what happened to Native Americans in this country. Is their history part of the “construction of race”? Why or why not?

Other groups (for example, Latinos and Asians) experience racism in the U.S. Why does this article focus on black people?