

The Construction of Race in the U.S. An Early History

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BEFORE YOU READ, consider this vocabulary: construction, American colony, servant, slave, bribe, rebel/rebellion. Consider the title and the quote below. What will this essay be about?

*"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. This means he had to work for free for two years. After two years, he was free. He started to make money. He bought property and he had his own servants.²

During this time, whites and blacks were indentured servants. Poor members of both races were "owned" for a period of time and they received no pay. Life was not easy. Many died because they were sick or did not have enough to eat. Sometimes, their "owner" made them work extra years.³

It is interesting that there was very little difference between white and black servants. They worked together and lived together. "The first black and white Americans ... developed strong bonds of sympathy." They did not think about race too much.⁴

Who Will Be the Slaves? A Decision is Made

However, the owners of the big farms had a problem. They needed more workers to work in their tobacco, sugar, and cotton fields. Slaves are the cheapest workers. But who will be the slaves? American Indians would not make good slaves because they knew the area too well. They could easily escape or fight back. There were not enough white people, and they had the same skin color as

the big owners. The owners decided that Africans would be the ideal slaves.⁵

And so in the 1660s, the owners decided to create a system of human slavery based on skin color.⁶ But this was not easy. Poor whites and blacks were part of the same community. They were close to each other. They were in families together. They liked and loved each other. White owners had to break these connections.

Teaching Racism to White People

Poor white people had to learn that they were "better" than black people. Rich whites had to create a system of racism, and they had to convince poor whites to be racist. They used both the carrot (also known as the "racial bribe") and the stick to create racist attitudes.

- New laws said that free black men and mixed race men could not vote.
- White women and men were whipped for marrying blacks.⁷
- Those who rebelled against these laws were punished, tortured, and killed. They cut off the heads of black and white rebels and put them on poles along the road as warnings to black people and to white people.⁸
- Poor whites acted in brutal ways toward blacks. They received rewards for returning runaway slaves.⁹



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

- The Virginia Assembly passed a law in 1705 that said the masters of white indentured servants had to give their servants food, money, and a gun, as well as 50 acres of land. This was an example of a “racial bribe.” These new white farmers were not rich, but they had more than blacks did. They started to believe that they had more in common with rich whites than they did with poor blacks.¹⁰
- Black slaves were not allowed to learn skills that would give them better jobs. Skilled jobs were for whites only.
- The colonies were worried that there were too many black people, so they passed Deficiency Acts. These were laws requiring plantation owners to hire white workers and pay them enough so that they felt more connected to the white plantation owner than to the black slave.

This system hurt black people and gave small benefits to white people. It turned poor whites against blacks. Poor whites started to believe that blacks were less than human. Even the poorest whites felt “pride” in their “race.” Thus, “whiteness” was born. The rich white people could relax a little. They knew that poor whites and blacks would not join together to fight against the rich whites.

Rich Whites Motivated by Fear

Rich whites had a reason to be afraid of poor blacks and whites uniting. In the past, poor blacks and white rebelled against rich whites. For example, Nathaniel Bacon, led a rebellion of poor people and slaves. Bacon’s rebellion did not succeed, and afterwards both blacks and whites were hanged. But the rebellion was alarming to the rich white people. They were afraid of what blacks and whites could do if they united against them.¹¹

The Good News Is...

This early history of race is tragic. Racism taught whites to hate blacks. But there is some good news too: *it was not easy* for rich white people to teach poor white people to be racist. They had to



Poor whites acted as guards and overseers of slaves. From the Library of Congress.

pass laws, give brutal punishments, and provide “bribes” to white people to convince them to be racist. Racism did not come naturally or even easily to white people. If it took so much work to “construct race” and teach racism to white people, then we know it is possible to *deconstruct* it and *unteach* it.

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. <memory.loc.gov/ammem/awhhtml/awlaw3/slavery.html>
8. Bennett, *Shaping of Black America*, Op. Cit. p. 74.
9. Alexander, Michelle, *The New Jim Crow*, New York: The New Press, 2010, pp. 22-26.
10. <www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncolorline.html>
11. Alexander, Op. Cit. pp. 22-26.

Cynthia Peters is the editor of The Change Agent.

AFTER YOU READ: Explain “racial bribe.” Explain what the author means by saying there is “good news” within this tragedy.

NOTE: A higher level version of this piece is available at <changeagent.nelrc.org/issues/issue-42>.