Elizabeth Key: Crash Course Black American History #3

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Hi, I'm Clint Smith, and this is Crash Course Black American History.

Today we're talking about slavery in the American colonies. In your high school U.S. History class, there's a decent chance you learned about mercantilism: a system in which home countries, or "mother" countries, in Western Europe established extensions of themselves in far off places around the world to produce highly sought-after raw materials. One of the basic premises is that exports must always be greater than imports to make a profit.

Simple enough. And as is the case with most businesses, one must consider how to maximize their profit. And one of the ways to do that is to minimize production costs.

Basic Econ 101, right? (For what it's worth, I never did too well in Economics, but I think I understand this). But how do you reduce production costs, when those costs rely almost entirely on manual labor? For British colonists, the answer was to have laborers who you didn't pay.

Which is to say, slavery. In high school, many of our history textbooks provide a broad, though not always deep, overview of the role that slavery played in early American economy; but they don't always make clear how slavery became a legally accepted practice in the first place, and how it contributed to the colony's early economic success. INTRO In the future United States, in what is now the state of South Carolina, a Spanish Magistrate, Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón, founded the colony of San Miguel de Gualdape in 1526 with an unknown number of enslaved Africans.

But the colony was a failure. Though some historians suggest the Africans fled to the Guale Indians and set up their own colony. Nearly a century later, 20-30 captured Africans, or the "20 and odd Negroes" as they were referred to, arrived at Point Comfort, Virginia, in 1619.

It is the arrival of this group that has come to represent the origins of chattel slavery in the United States, because they were the first to arrive to an English colony, a colony that would, a century and a half later, become the United States. These captives would become instrumental to the success of the Jamestown colony, which succeeded where previous colonies had failed. We might imagine the first group of African captives to be foreign to the new world, but they had already had significant contact with Europeans--particularly those from Spain and.

Portugal. They were part of a group historian Ira Berlin describes as "Atlantic Creoles." They were versed in many languages, had some familiarity with Christianity, and sometimes even worked alongside white indentured servants. Europeans did attempt to utilize other sources of labor before turning to enslaved Africans.

But the indentured servitude of European immigrants posed issues that prevented colonists from extracting long term systematic labor from them. For one, European indentured servants could only legally be indentured for a contracted period of time, usually somewhere between 4-7 years. When their contracts expired, new indentured laborers had to be found and trained, which resulted in inconsistent levels of production.

Secondly, well... European indentured servants...were white. And Europeans, regardless of their origin, still viewed other Europeans as fully human.

Some Europeans were reticent to discipline other Europeans with the same harsh punishments that Africans received. Historical evidence suggests that, when mixed groups of African and European servants ran away, the Africans within the group would receive the harshest punishment. Settlers also attempted to enslave indigenous people but this didn't satisfy their labor needs.

And while Europeans did not immediately give up on indigenous labor, and while it continued in some places, ongoing conflict with Native Americans made imported Africans a much more desirable source of labor. Slavery, however, had not yet been defined and codified by law. But that wouldn't last.

The colonists would soon discover that in order to effectively govern this emerging society, uniform policies would have to be established in order to clearly demarcate the social and political hierarchy. Before any legislation had passed to solidify the parameters of slavery as an institution, there were some allowances that enslaved men and women experienced that would be unfathomable just 20 years down the line. Anthony Johnson, a man who lived in captivity, and eventually worked his way out of bondage, illustrates some of the possibilities for Black people in Jamestown, Virginia before blanketed restrictions were placed on them.

While Johnson's story is not representative of all free black people in this region, it is helpful in understanding the process by which slavery evolved into something more concrete. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. Only a year after his arrival in 1621, Antonio, who later anglicized his name, experienced one of the many bloody conflicts between the indigenous communities and colonists.

That year, the Powhatan launched an attack on the Bennett family plantation. Antonio was owned by the Bennetts and was one of the few survivors of the attack. He was later commended for his "hard labor and known service." The Bennetts then granted Antonio, who would change his name to /Anthony/ Johnson, permission to farm independently on his own land even though he was still enslaved.

He was also allowed to get married, which he did, to a woman named Mary, and to baptize their children. Eventually, Johnson and his family became free. Though it's unclear exactly how, which reflects the scarcity of documentation that plagues scholars of early African American history.

Records show that Johnson's land holdings and property were recognized as legitimate by the local government. And, after he lost much of his home in a fire, the county court forgave his taxes. He even defended his ownership of an enslaved African in court, stating that the African,.

John Casor, was not an indentured servant. Casor alleged that Johnson had violated an indenture contract between the two, but Johnson claimed that he'd actually purchased Casor as an enslaved worker. [1] Thanks, Thought Bubble. Sometimes Johnson's story is used in bad faith, to say "look there were Black slaveholders" in an attempt to portray slavery as something that people of both races participated in, but those claims ignore the nuances of how the very notion of slavery changed and evolved over time.

This point is significant because, in the coming years, even the right to speak in court would be stripped from enslaved persons. Johnson himself exemplified the shift between race and enslavement as a social status. According to scholar Henry Louis Gates, following Johnson's death a court ruled he was "a negro, and by consequence, an alien." Subsequently, his family's land was seized and his descendants faded from the historical record. [2] Between 1640 and 1660, the rules around who could or could not be enslaved became more formalized by the legal system.

The John Punch case, one of the most significant during this period, illustrates how courts would begin to differentiate the two. In 1640, three indentured servants--two white and one black--all fed up with

brutal abuse, escaped from Hugh Gwyn's plantation. But once they reached Maryland, they were caught, and were made to stand trial in court.

The Dutchman and the Scot received thirty lashes, an additional year indentured to Gwyn, and three additional years of manual labor in service to the colony. But John Punch, the only African, was sentenced to serve for the /rest of his life/ as a laborer. Following the John Punch case, planters in Virginia enacted measures that would expressly establish the connections between race and social status.

These ideas would help shape future generations of slavery in the United States. The new laws only further cemented the subordinate status of black people. In 1662, the Virginia General Assembly adopted the rule of "partus sequitur ventrem." The rule stated that the /mother's/ race would determine a child's slave or free status.

This policy would ensure that there would be no question of the status of black women's children; even if the father happened to be white. Unfortunately, but quite intentionally, this set a precedent for how black women's bodies could be used for years to come. These legal codifications were often justified using religious arguments.

Many Christians often equated darkness or Blackness with sin. Several biblical passages served as the backbone for the negative and superior attitudes of. Europeans towards Africans.

They were described as savages, incapable of governing themselves. And as such, they needed white rule in order for Christ to accept them. The essence of the argument was that God intended for white men to rule over black men.

Religious doctrine would continue to be used by many over the course of centuries in order to justify the forced labor, subjugation, and violence Black people experienced at the hands of their enslavers. Understanding the conditions and development of slave societies in America is crucial to recognizing the racial and economic disparities that have long persisted throughout US history. Grounding ourselves in the origins of how captured Africans arrived in what would eventually become the United States, provides us with an important opportunity to explore how the relationship between race, servitude, and bondage evolved over time.

The institution of slavery developed and changed over the course of decades, becoming increasingly codified in the law, and more central to the economic infrastructure of certain regions in the young colonies. Reviewing the court cases of early Africans in the Americas provides an outlook on the specific rights and liberties denied to Africans compared to the land-owning white men who had a voice in early colonial society. As we dive deeper into Black American history, we will see just how vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation someone can be when the law does not see them as a full person.

The implications of who is and is not seen by the law as fully human, will have wide-reaching implications as we move forward through American history. There’s a long way to go, and a lot more to try and make sense of. Thanks for watching, I’ll see you next time.

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