

“Racism and Christianity in America (Part 2: 1620-1750)”

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We’re taking a look back at our history – American history, Christian history, and the ways the church has at times helped black people ... and at other times has hurt them, deeply. We have some sins we need to confess. We also all need a solid understanding of how we got to where we are now.

The good ship *Mayflower* dropped anchor in Cape Cod in 1620. The passengers on board were Puritans – Christians who strictly followed the teachings of John Calvin. They established Plymouth Colony, the second successful English settlement in the New World. They brought some indentured servants with them, poor children and homeless laborers from the streets of London, who worked to earn their freedom. At first nobody in the colony was from Africa, but within 50 years, a small handful of wealthy Puritans in Plymouth Colony owned a small handful of African slaves.

In 1624, the colony of New Amsterdam was founded by the Dutch on Manhattan Island, at the mouth of the Hudson River. Eleven slaves from Africa were brought to New Amsterdam in 1625, and many more arrived later on as the colony expanded up the river. These black slaves worked as farmers, fur traders, and builders. They had some legal rights and could even bring civil complaints against whites. They were admitted as members into the Dutch Reformed Church; they were allowed to marry, and their children were baptized. In 1665, the colony came under British control, and was renamed New York. During that transition, many of the Dutch colonists decided to free their black slaves.

In 1628 a second group of Puritans landed in Massachusetts Bay; this group founded the towns of Boston and Salem. These Puritans enslaved some native Americans; they also acquired some slaves from Africa. In 1641 the colony adopted the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, a set of laws that were based upon laws and teachings in the Bible. They said: “There shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or Captivitie amongst us unles it be lawfull Captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of god established in Israell concerning such persons doeth morally require.” So slavery was legal in Massachusetts Bay – but only in ways that were very consistent with what the Bible actually said.

Down in Virginia, there was a black man who had earned his freedom and became a wealthy plantation owner – Anthony Johnson; I mentioned him last week. His story has a second chapter. Johnson had five indentured servants – four white and one black. The black servant filed a complaint, saying that his time of indenture had long since expired, but he was still being made to work. A legal case ensued, which was initially settled in the servant’s favor. But Johnson, who was in jeopardy of losing some land, appealed the ruling. The court decided that Johnson had the legal right to hold the servant “for the duration of his life” – *even though the servant had committed no crime*. This is the first time anywhere in the thirteen colonies where a court decided that a person *not guilty of any crime* could be held in bondage for life. The weird irony is that *both the master and the servant were black!*

That story also has a *third* chapter. Anthony Johnson, the plantation owner, died in 1670. A judge ruled that Johnson “was not a citizen of the colony” because he was black, and so his plantation *could not* be passed down to his children. The plantation was given to a white colonist instead!

As slave ships brought more Africans to the colonies by the hundreds and thousands, more and more mixed-race children were being born. The question emerged: if a child is born to a free white man and an enslaved black woman, is that child slave – or free? In 1656, a mixed-race woman in Virginia named Elizabeth Key Grinstead won her freedom, because her father was white and because he had had her baptized in the Church of England. But just six years later, Virginia passed a law saying that a child of an enslaved mother would be born into slavery, even if her father was a free, white, Christian man. This was a 180-degree reversal of the common law in England, which said that children took the status of their *father*, not their mother. The law in Virginia meant that white men could impregnate their female slaves and *not worry about the consequences*. It also formally legalized *hereditary slavery* in Virginia.

In Maryland, which was a Christian colony with a mix of Catholics and Protestants, a law was passed in 1664 saying that Christian baptism had *no bearing* on legal status of a slave. For several hundred years, the Church’s position had been that enslavement of Christians was not permissible. Now, in Maryland, you could be a Christian *and* a slave. Three years later, Virginia passed a similar law.

Further to the south, in 1670, Charles Town was founded in the Province of Carolina. These colonists came mostly from the island of Barbados in the Caribbean, which had become overpopulated. Charles Town was built on the Barbados model: a small number of white plantation owners owned large quantities of black slaves. In time Charleston became the busiest slave port in North America.

In 1676, in Virginia, there was a revolt: Bacon’s Rebellion. It was not a revolt of blacks against whites; it was more a revolt of the *poor* against the *rich*. White indentured servants *and* black slaves both participated. This had an unfortunate result: the wealthy elite took steps to separate those two groups from one another. They began to soften laws pertaining to the white indentured servants, and harden laws pertaining to black slaves. Four years later, a Christian minister named Morgan Godwyn lamented that the terms “Negro” and “slave” were now, for all intents and purposes, interchangeable. In 1688, an African woman named Sarah Driggus protested to a Maryland court that she had been born free, but was now being treated as a slave. If you were black, then people assumed you *must* be a slave.

But in 1680, in Florida, which was a Spanish colony, the government began to make an offer to African slaves: if you can escape to Florida, and convert to Catholicism, we will guarantee your freedom.

In 1681, the Pennsylvania Colony was founded by Quaker Christians. Just seven years later, Quaker congregations began writing petitions protesting slavery. These were the first *anti-slavery* documents written in the American colonies. They gave birth to the concept of *universal human rights*.

But in the south, strict laws were being passed. Virginia outlawed interracial marriage and abolished black people’s rights to vote, hold office, and bear arms. In 1696 South Carolina adopted the first full slave code in the English colonies. Virginia adopted a similar code in 1705. The first slave revolt happened in 1712 – but it wasn’t in the south. It was in New York City, where 20% of the population were black slaves. When the Dutch had governed the city, the slaves had some civil rights. When the English took over, many of those rights were removed. Slaves were required to carry a pass when traveling, marriages were discouraged, gatherings of more than three were prohibited, and slaves had

to sit in a different section in church. One night, 23 black slaves set fire to a building, then attacked the white people who came to stop them. 70 blacks were arrested; 21 were convicted and executed. The colony began cracking down on black slaves, removing even more of their rights. (If you're trying to prevent a slave revolt, wouldn't it make more sense to *give back* the rights that had been *taken away*?)

Presbyterians from Scotland and Ireland began arriving in the middle colonies in the early 1700s. Rev. Francis Makemie, who is considered the founder of American Presbyterianism, owned black slaves.

Meanwhile, way down in the Louisiana Territory, which was controlled by the French, there was a set of slave laws in place, the Code Noir, or "Black Code." These laws gave slaves some rights, including the right to marry. It forbade the torture of slaves, and required that slaves be taught the Catholic faith, but it also allowed harsh corporal punishment for certain offenses.

In 1730 there was another slave revolt, this time in Virginia. There was a rumor going around among the slaves that King George II had issued an order to free all baptized slaves in the English colonies. Unfortunately this wasn't true, but the slaves *thought* it was. They grew increasingly agitated when nothing was changing, and 200 of them gathered together and demanded their freedom. Some were arrested; others were forced to flee; most of them were captured and sent back into slavery.

In 1733 Georgia was established, the last of the original 13 English colonies. Its founder, George Oglethorpe, was a devout Anglican, a social reformer, and a philanthropist. He wanted to create a safe haven for England's poor. He forbade slavery in the colony on moral grounds and for practical reasons. Georgia was the *only* English colony where slavery was not legal. But that only lasted for 18 years.

In 1739 there was another slave rebellion, this time in South Carolina. About 20 African slaves began a march to Florida, towards freedom. As they traveled south they grew in numbers. They also became violent, burning plantations and killing some white people. There was a confrontation; about 23 whites and 50 slaves were killed. The heads of the deceased slaves were mounted on stakes on roadways, as a warning to other slaves considering rebellion. The following year, the South Carolina legislature passed the Negro Act of 1740, which restricted slave movement and assembly, made it illegal for slaves to learn to write, and granted slaveowners permission to kill their slaves if necessary.

In 1741 there was yet another slave revolt in New York City. Details are fuzzy, but there were a series of fires in lower Manhattan, which were blamed on the slaves. 200 slaves were arrested and tried for conspiracy to burn the town and murder the white inhabitants. More than 100 were executed.

That same year, the Catholic Pope issued a declaration opposing the enslavement of native Americans in Brazil. But the Pope said not a word about African slaves, or the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Yet some Christians were becoming increasingly concerned. Foremost among them were the Quakers, who started calling for the end of the slave trade, and started pressuring other Quakers to cut their own ties with slavery. In time, Quakers would become leaders in the movement to abolish slavery.

But by 1750, almost no other Christians were raising concerns. More and more blacks were suffering under increasingly harsh conditions. Many were owned by Christians. Some Christians were helping to write and pass laws making life even harder for blacks. Slavery was now firmly associated with race. And ... most white Christians were just simply *silent* while all this was going on.

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