

## Slavery: A World-Wide View, Then and Now

Slavery occurs when a person is forced to work, is not paid, and is treated like property. Slaves do not have freedom and must do whatever their master tells them. Slavery has existed since before recorded history and has taken many forms. People have been enslaved on every continent, except Antarctica, and in almost every country. People of every race and gender have been enslaved. While slavery is no longer legal in any country, millions of people, male and female, children and adults, are forced to work, are not paid for their labor, and, through the threat of force or because of tradition, cannot leave and create a new life for themselves.



Roman Era Slave Collar

## Slavery Before the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – A World-Wide Phenomenon

During antiquity, slavery flourished in Rome and Greece. It is estimated that one third of the population of ancient Greece were slaves. In Rome, approximately 30% of the people were slaves. The economies of ancient Greece and Rome depended so heavily on slaves that they are called “slave societies”.



*The Slave Market, Gustave Boulanger, circa 1882*

The Slavs are the largest single ethnic group in Europe, dominating Central and Eastern Europe. Slavic countries include Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria.

From antiquity through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, raiders would seize people from the Slavic countries and take them so far from their homes that they couldn't find their way back. The raiders would then sell their captives as slaves. In fact, the origin of the word slave comes from the Muslims of medieval Spain who purchased so many Slavs from international slave traders that being a Slav became equated with being a slave. From Spain, the term spread to all of Europe.<sup>i</sup>

In the Middle Ages, people were held in bondage in countries such as France, Sweden, Germany, Russia, and England. The Domesday Book of the year 1086 was a tax roll and census compiled by the Norman conquerors of England. It shows that 20% of the people were enslaved in some English communities. Over the whole country, slaves accounted for 10% of the population.<sup>ii</sup> These slaves were almost exclusively white.

But slavery was not just a European phenomenon. Examples of other societies which employed slavery include: ancient Egypt, ancient Assyria, ancient Babylon, many African cultures, China, Persia, India, the Philippines, Nepal, Malaya, Indonesia, Japan, Central Asia, Arabia, and the Native American societies of the New World. Indeed, almost ¼ of the population in some Pacific Northwest tribes were slaves.<sup>iii</sup>



Egyptian Depiction of Slaves

Slavery flourished in all Islamic countries. The Ottoman Empire, centered in what is now Turkey, existed from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some 600 years. At the height of their empire, the Ottomans ruled all of Arabia, the Middle East, most of North Africa, and parts of South Central Europe. It was only in 1922 that the last Ottoman sultan was overthrown and the modern state of Turkey was established. At various times, slaves, primarily Slavs from Europe and blacks from Africa, manned the ships of the Ottoman Empire, served as its soldiers, held administrative posts in its government, generated much of its handicraft products, worked as domestic servants, and staffed its harems.<sup>iv</sup>

Slavery was practiced almost everywhere in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>v</sup> In some parts of Cameroon, Niger, and Angola, half the population consisted of slaves. Among the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Ashanti of Ghana, a third of the people in any village or city were slaves. Slavery in Africa took many forms including: chattel slavery, in which people could be bought and sold and in which their children were also slaves; debt

bondage in which a person was forced to work to pay off a debt; and a condition similar to serfdom in Europe, in which people worked a specific piece of land, gave the fruit of their labor to the master, and could not leave the land.

African slave holders usually favored children who would grow up to be productive workers, or women who would produce more children and work in the fields. Children and women were also considered more docile than adult male captives who were more likely to flee or to resist their bondage. As a result, males captured in war or by African slavers were often killed outright. However, there were some African royal courts that, like the Ottoman Empire, used adult male slaves as administrators, skilled craftsmen, and soldiers.<sup>vi</sup>

"Pawnship" was an African form of debt bondage in which young girls were pledged as security for repayment of a debt. If the obligation was not paid, the girls were kept to work off the debt or to become slaves. The best opportunity for these young women was to marry into the family of their owner. This would cause the debt to be cancelled. Some African societies had a system called "clientage" which was similar to sharecropping. Landless people would work the owner's land and divide the crop with the owner. This differs from slavery because the people who worked the land retained all of their rights as members of the community, while slaves have few, if any, rights.<sup>vii</sup>



A Slave Caravan

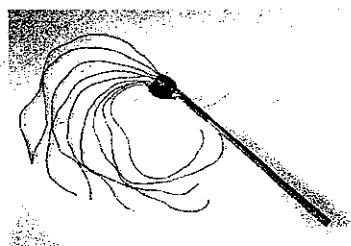
Historically, the international trade in human beings has depended on the existence of “reservoir populations” from which slave traders could seize their victims. Two historic slave “reservoirs” have been identified and at least one other is suspected. The oldest consisted of the Slavs and Iranians who lived in provinces close to Europe. From antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, slavers would raid these populations. Another slave reservoir, existing from the beginning of the Christian Era to the mid-20th century, was the black populations of sub-Saharan Africa. A third possible population reservoir for slavers consisted of the Germanic, Celtic and other tribes who lived in Europe north of the Roman Empire. Over many hundred years, the Vikings would raid England, Germany, France and other territories in Europe, seize individuals and either use them as slaves or sell them at slave markets.<sup>viii</sup>

At some point in history, every major Western religion has condoned, slavery. Over three millennia, untold millions of Slavs were enslaved by Romans (pagan and

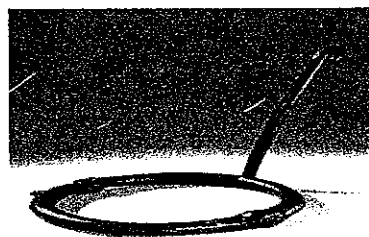
Christian) and by Muslims. It is estimated by historians that between 650 and 1905, trans-Saharan Islamic slave traders and Indian Ocean slavers processed approximately 18,000,000 African slaves<sup>x</sup>. The Middle Passage saw the transport of an estimated 6,000,000 enslaved Africans by Christians.<sup>x</sup> Jews, after their release from bondage in Egypt were also involved, at times, in owning slaves and transporting them. Jews, along with Christians, owned slaves in the American South.

### Slavery in the New World

Slavery was an important component of the colonization of the New World, whether by the British, the French, the Portuguese, or the Spanish. Slaves worked in the gold and silver mines in Spanish colonies in South America. The Portuguese used slaves in Brazil. The French imported slaves to Haiti. English tobacco and sugar plantations in the Caribbean and in the Southern colonies of North America relied on slave labor. Initially, efforts were made to enslave the indigenous peoples of the New World. But their death rates were very high. Blacks imported from the slave reservoir of sub-Saharan Africa proved a better investment. They worked harder and lived longer under the extreme conditions of New World slavery. Being an ocean away from their homes made them less likely to flee.



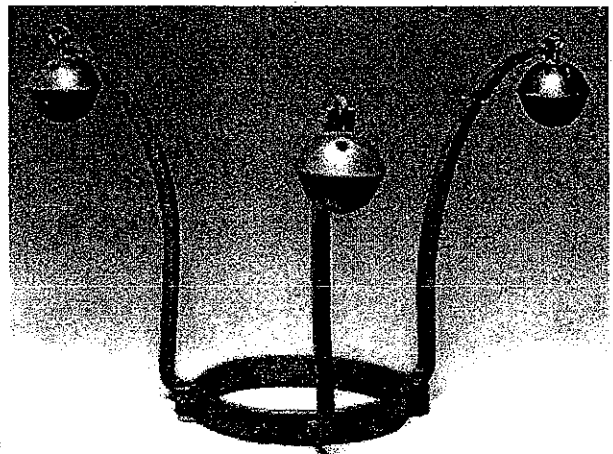
Cat O' Nine Tails



Slave Collar

Slavery in the Americas existed from around 1619 to 1865. At first, colonists also used indentured servants. These were whites from Western Europe who had purchased their passage to the New World by agreeing to work for a period of four to seven years. Indentured servitude was a form of debt bondage, but it was time limited. Eventually, the colonists found that it was more profitable to own their slaves outright and import them from Africa.

The focus on black slaves reinforced white racial prejudice against blacks. Many slaves in the ancient world had served their masters as physicians, educators, skilled artisans, and scholars. However, in the New World, it was a crime to teach a slave to read because it was thought that educated blacks would be more difficult to control. Only a few black slaves were allowed to learn a trade or acquire a skill.

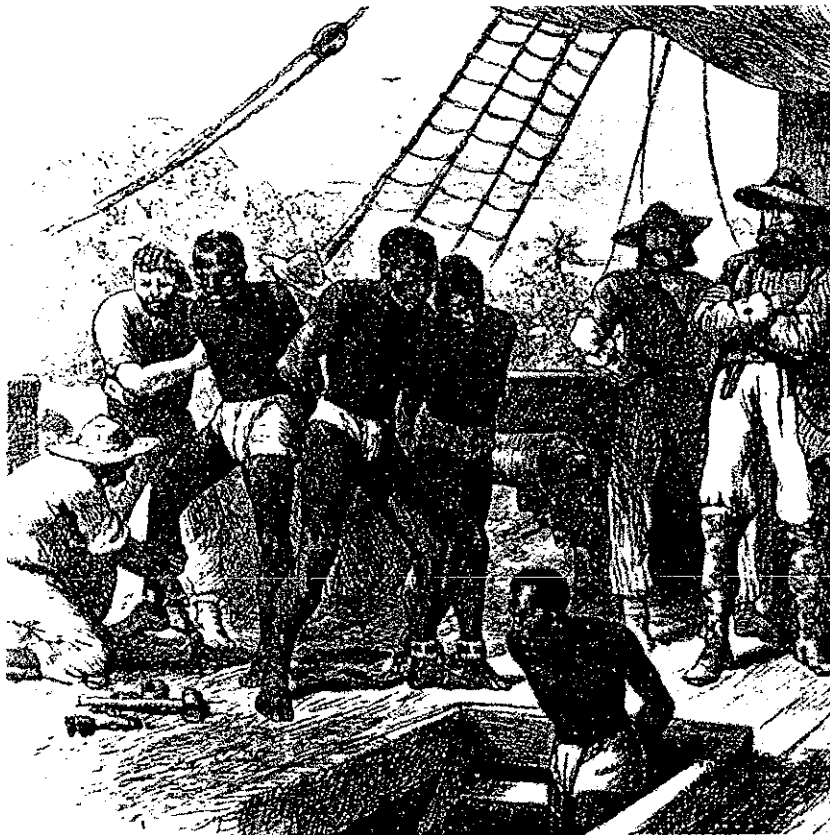


Southern U.S. Slave Collar

Slavery in the New World was also different because it thrived in a highly competitive capitalist system in which slaves were used primarily for work on large plantations, raising labor intensive crops such as tobacco, sugar, coffee, cacao, or cotton. This often led to rigorous exploitation and harsh living conditions. It also meant that New World slavers preferred male slaves to perform hard labor in the fields.

It's interesting to note that, initially, slavery in the New World had a complementary relationship with domestic African slavery. African slave owners

preferred women and children as slaves. Before New World slavery created a demand for male captives, African slavers often simply killed their adult male captives. When the transatlantic slave trade began, African slavers could sell their adult male captives to the Europeans for transport to the New World.



**“Boarding” for the Middle Passage**

Thus, for a time, New World slavery saved the lives of many African men.<sup>xi</sup> (This is one of the many ironic twists in the history of slavery.) However, before slaves arrived in the New World, they had to survive the horror of the Atlantic crossing in the fetid hold of a slave ship. Later, as the demand for male slaves in the New World increased, African slavers hunted for men. Although exact figures will never be known, estimates are that between six and eleven million Africans were transported across the Atlantic to slavery in the New World.<sup>xii</sup>



Despite the preference of American slave owners for male field hands, enough female Africans were transported to the Americas for the population of American born blacks to increase. In the U.S. alone, according to the 1790 Census, there were approximately 697,600 slaves. By 1860, the slave population had exploded to nearly 4 million people.<sup>xiii</sup>

Slavery in the New World, as elsewhere, inflicted tremendous hardships on people. They were ripped from their families and their villages. They were denied their cultural heritage. They were forced to endure a horrendous trip to a place far from



Slave Collar and Muzzle (Brazil)

home. Slaves were required to toil long hours and their living conditions were often terrible. They were almost always denied self-fulfillment. When slave families became established in the New World, many children were sold to distant plantations. Over a third of the children born to slaves grew up without one of their parents and 20% of adult slaves never married. In a slave marriage in the United States, the vow was not the traditional "until death do us part". In recognition that

slave marriages were subject to the whims of the master, phrases such as "till death or distance do you part" were used instead.<sup>xiv</sup>

The murder of slaves by their masters and overseers was restrained because slaves were valuable property. However, the sexual abuse of female slaves was

rampant. Many became impregnated by their white overlords. As a result, few modern-day black Americans are without white ancestors. In fact, many have more white ancestors than African ancestors. They are considered black only because, during slavery and the times of segregation, white society applied the "one drop rule", treating people with any black ancestors as something less than white.<sup>xv</sup> It is another irony of history that although prejudiced whites considered themselves racially superior to blacks, they believed that the genes of the allegedly inferior race were so strong that a few of those genes could overcome the genes of the race that claimed superiority.



Scars from Being Whipped

### **The World-Wide Attempt to Abolish Slavery**

The abolition of slavery in a society usually comes from economic forces or through social reform movements. Often it is a combination of both. Sometimes, as in India and parts of Africa, the end of slavery was imposed by the military force of a conquering power.

By the 1750s, substantial numbers of Europeans and Americans in the Northern colonies realized that slavery was wrong. This sentiment gained strong support in the United Kingdom (Great Britain), which officially outlawed slavery within its borders in 1772. However slavery was allowed to continue in the colonies of the British Empire, including parts of Canada, until it was outlawed by the British Parliament in 1834.