Beginnings of Slavery in the Americas

MAIN IDEA
Slavery in the Americas began in order to provide cheap labor for the colonies.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW
The effects of slavery, including racism, helped shape attitudes and social conditions in the United States.

TERMS & NAMES
- slavery
- slave codes
- African Diaspora
- racism

ONE AMERICAN’S STORY
In 1546, Diego de Campo was the leader of 7,000 maroons, or runaway slaves on the island of Hispaniola. There were only about 1,000 European men on the island.

The Spanish planters greatly feared de Campo. When the Spanish attacked the maroons, de Campo and his followers defeated the Spanish.

Eventually the Spaniards captured de Campo. He offered to lead the fight against the maroons. The Spanish accepted the offer. With de Campo’s help, the Spanish defeated the maroons, and slavery in Hispaniola grew. In this section, you will read how slave labor expanded in the Americas.

Taking Notes
Use your chart to take notes about the origins of slavery.

The Origins of American Slavery
By the 1600s, slavery, the practice of holding a person in bondage for labor, was firmly established in the Americas. But slavery was not new. Its roots went back to the world’s ancient civilizations.

Slavery took many different forms throughout history. In some societies, slaves were mainly domestic servants in wealthy households. Some slaves also labored in mines and fields.

People were often enslaved when they were captured in battle or sold to pay off debts. Some slaves were treated with respect. Some were allowed to marry and own property. The children of many slaves were allowed to go free.

Slavery began to change, however, with the rise of sugar plantations. Europeans had used slaves to grow sugar in the eastern Mediterranean since the 1100s. Then, in the 1400s and 1500s, Portugal and Spain set up sugar plantations on islands in the eastern Atlantic. To work these plantations, they used African slaves bought from traders in Africa.
When the Spanish and Portuguese founded their colonies in the Americas, they brought the plantation system with them. At first they tried to enslave Native Americans to work in the fields and mines. But the Native Americans quickly died from overwork and disease. In some cases, they rebelled with the help of local allies.

The Spaniards then looked to other sources of slave labor, including Spanish slaves, black Christian slaves, and Asian slaves. But there was not enough of any of these groups to meet demand.

Finally, the Spanish and Portuguese enslaved Africans to provide labor. They enslaved Africans for four basic reasons. First, Africans were immune to most European diseases. Second, Africans had no friends or family in the Americas to help them resist or escape enslavement. Third, enslaved Africans provided a permanent source of cheap labor. Even their children could be held in bondage. Fourth, many Africans had worked on farms in their native lands.

**The Slave Trade**

The slave trade grew slowly at first. In 1509, the Spanish governor of Hispaniola, Diego Colón—Columbus’s son—wrote to King Ferdinand to complain about a labor shortage on the island. In response, the king sent 50 African slaves to Hispaniola. The slave trade increased with the demand for slaves to work in the colonies. Eventually the colonies came to depend on slave labor. As one Spanish official in Peru wrote, “The black slave is the basis of the hacienda and the source of all wealth which this realm produces.”

European slave traders carried out the shipment of Africans to the Americas. The rulers of West African kingdoms participated in the trade, too. On the coast of Africa, local kings gathered captives from inland. The local kings then traded these captives for European goods, such as textiles, ironware, wine, and guns.

This trade made the coastal kingdoms rich while weakening inland African societies. In 1526, King Afonso, a West African ruler, protested against the slave trade in a letter to Portugal’s king. Afonso wrote, “Everyday these [slave] merchants take our people. . . . So great is this corruption and evil that our country is becoming completely depopulated.”
The Middle Passage

Afonso’s protest did not stop the forced removal of people from Africa. This removal has become known as the **African Diaspora**. Before the slave trade ended in the late 1800s, approximately 12 million Africans had been enslaved and shipped to the Western Hemisphere. Of these, perhaps two million died during the voyage.

The voyage from Africa to the Americas was called the **middle passage**. The voyage was given this name because it was the middle leg of the triangular trade. The triangular trade refers to the movement of trade ships between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. You will learn more about the triangular trade in Chapter 4.

Olaudah Equiano (oh•LOW•duh EHK•wee•AHN•oh) was one of these kidnapped Africans. He made this journey in the 1700s. He was about 11 years old when he was taken from his home and sold into slavery. Later, after he bought his freedom, he wrote his life story and told what the middle passage was like.

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast, was the sea, and a slave ship . . . waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board.

Olaudah Equiano, quoted in *Great Slave Narratives*

Equiano saw a row of men shackled together in chains. He also saw a large boiling kettle. He feared that he was going to be cooked and eaten “by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair.”

The scene on the slave deck below was even worse. Several hundred slaves were crammed into a space so small that there was not even enough room to stand up. Foul smells and disease, along with the shrieks and groans of the dying, made the middle passage a terrifying experience. The captives who did not die faced new horrors in the Americas.
Slavery in the Americas

Once the enslaved Africans arrived in the colonies, they were sold at auction. Some were taken to large homes where they worked as servants. Most were forced to do hard labor in *haciendas* or mines. They were also fed and housed poorly.

Many slaves resisted slavery by running away. Across Peru and New Spain, maroons formed communities, often with Native Americans. Sometimes enslaved Africans rebelled. To prevent rebellion, the Spanish government passed *slave codes*, laws to regulate the treatment of slaves. Some of these laws tried to soften the harsh conditions of slavery, but most were designed to punish slaves and keep them in bondage.

Over time, Europeans came to associate slavery with black Africans. To many Europeans, dark skin color became a sign of inferiority. Slavery, which developed to provide a labor force, led to racism. *Racism* is the belief that some people are inferior because of their race.

The slave trade lasted for nearly 400 years, from the early 1500s to the mid-1800s. This contact between Africa and the Americas also formed part of the Columbian Exchange that you read about in Section 3. Africans brought to the Americas a vast knowledge about farming and animals. At the same time, American crops such as sweet potatoes, peanuts, and chilies made their way to Africa.

Enslaved Africans also brought with them a strong artistic heritage of dance, music, and storytelling. The slave trade brought together people from different parts of Africa with different cultural traditions. The experience of slavery helped create a common African-based culture in the Americas. By the 1700s, all the American colonies of European countries had African slaves. As you will read in the next chapter, African culture would be one of the forces that shaped life in the American colonies.