

Racism in history of the united states

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



Prior to the sixteenth century, racism- in the modern sense of that term – was practically unknown. Oppression and slavery had existed, of course, but before the beginning of the African slave-trade, these had never been based on skin color. Racism, like all forms of oppression, is ultimately rooted in a capitalistic economic system that relies on heavy-handed control and oppressive authority in order to maintain itself and concentrate the greatest amount of wealth into as few hands as possible. When there “ legal” controls and sheer force begin to fail, it becomes necessary for the “ ruling class” to create a mythology. In early Virginia, this mythology took the form of what was essentially a “ divide and conquer” strategy.

Those Englishmen who came to the Chesapeake region of their own volition in the early 17th century fell into one of two categories; landless gentry, generally the younger sons of aristocrats – and landless peasants who came as indentured servants in hopes of receiving land of their own land once the term of their service contract had expired. The Portuguese had started the African slave trade over a century earlier. The English had made attempts to enslave the local native Indians, but as the Indians were masters at surviving in their homeenvironment, it was nearly impossible to keep them as slaves. Africans, uprooted and separated from theircultureand isolated in a foreign environment seemed an ideal solution (Zinn, 25-27).

While Eric Fone argues that white Englishmen in Jamestown and the Chesapeake area had varying degrees of “ liberty,” the fact is that true liberty depended on the ownership of land. In Fone’s “ spectrum,” the freest people were those who of course owned their own land. Indentures were somewhere in the middle of this scale, enjoying a “ partial” freedom.

This may have been true, depending on your definition. An indenture agreed to become a virtual “ slave” for a term of seven years – which is what indentured servitude entailed – a peasant could get passage to North America and a land grant of fifty acres once their period of servitude was completed. However in practice, this rarely happened; indentured servitude was so harsh that many died before the terms of their contract was over (Fone). Others ran off to join local Indians (the reverse, significantly, was never true), or gave up their claim to land in exchange for a shorter term.

Despite underlying racism on the part of some English gentry (mostly stemming from cultural associations with the color black), the nature of slavery at that time was different from it was later to become. African slaves during the early history of the colony had many legal rights similar to those of indentured servants. The line between indentured servitude and slaver could often become blurred. There was no real reason to separate black and white during the first seventy years or so, nor deny blacks the status that was extended to any other worker. In fact, Africans slaves and English indentures did the same work, often side-by-side. There is documented evidence of fraternization, socializing and even sexual relations across racial lines (Zinn, 31-32)

By the time the Virginia colony was viable and indentured servants lived long enough to complete their terms, arable land had become unavailable, due to the increasing number of landless gentry who had managed to acquire large estates – often illegally. This led to serious tensions between the growing numbers of indentures who were unable to claim the land to which the law

(in theory) entitled them, and the large estate owners who controlled the best acreage. Eventually, there was an uprising by the landless working class against the landed gentry.

After “ Bacon’s Rebellion,” the ruling class, began to understand the precariousness of their position. One problem was the possibility of further uprisings among disenfranchised Englishmen. The other was that of a slave uprising. The worst case scenario was that in which white indentures and black slaves should join forces. Since these two groups faced many of the same problems, this was a real possibility.

The answer was to pursue a strategy of “ divide and conquer.” Beginning in the 1660’s, a number of increasingly oppressive “ slave codes” were legislated. Eventually, this turned Africans into something less than human from a legal standpoint. Masters could literally beat a slave to death without legal repercussions; a slave could be dismembered as a form of punishment; manumission was made far more difficult. Most significantly, a 1670 law specified that African servants were slaves for life, and children born to slave women were automatically slaves as well.

Next, the gentry began extending privileges to the landless working class, giving them a greater stake in Virginia society. The vote was extended to more white Protestant males than before, and the House of Burgesses – which represented the lower classes – was granted more power. Further action was taken to make western lands available to settlement. The result was that these token privileges reinforced an idea among poor and working class whites that they were somehow “ better” than the Africans. The irony

lies in the fact that if Africans had never been imported to Virginia, indentured white servitude would certainly have become institutionalized. The Virginia colony – and perhaps all of America – may very well have become the feudal society wished for by today's trans-national corporate capitalists and their neo-conservative lap dogs in the current U. S. Administration and Congress.

Works Cited

Foner, Eric. Give Me Liberty! An American History. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006.

Zinn, Howard. A People's History of The United States (3rd ed.) New York: Harper

Collins, 2003.