

Slavery in the north american colonies



When the Dutch settled in their North American colonies, they brought with them slaves to do the manual labor on their farms.

These Africans arrived from the Caribbean in 1625 or 1626 as slaves to the Dutch West India Company . The slaves were required to build the new settlement, but rules regarding their servitude were not as harsh as they would become in the future under British rule. There were freed slaves in what would become New York City as early as 1630, but these freed men were forced to settle on land that no one else wanted, on the swampy predecessor to Greenwich Village. (Greenwich Village) remained a black neighborhood for almost 200 years . " Their freedom was not total either, but was considered to be conditional.

This meant money to the Dutch. If a slave could pay enough for a portion of crops, he could earn conditional freedom. The children of those who were conditionally freed, though, remained the property of the Company. Slaves in this early period when New York City was just a small settlement built the wall that is now Wall Street to defend the settlement from Native Americans. Although they built this wall, in a situation that seems from the perspective of hindsight to be bitterly ironic, for some time the slaves were not permitted to live within it. They worked as farmers and in the fur trade of the Company, and saved up enough to buy their conditional freedom and their land grants for homes on the swampy marshes.

Between 1650 and 1660, the Dutch imported hundreds of new slaves to the growing settlement of New Amsterdam . They did not, however, enforce any stricter laws against the conditional freedom arrangement, so these slaves

continued as heir predecessors had to build lower Manhattan, farm and trap for the Dutch West India Company, and optimally, buy their freedom and settle with land in what is now Greenwich Village as physically but not hereditarily free men and women. The Dutch did impose a 10% tax on human cargo that was sold outside of the colony, alternately called New Amsterdam and New Netherlands. The name became New York in 1664 or 1665, when the British took over the colony from the Dutch.

For the Europeans living in the settlement, it was business as usual, but “ For African New Yorkers, both enslaved and freed, British occupation meant evere change ”. Under British rule, the rules regarding slavery changed for the worse. Africans who before had been differentiated into categories of freed people and slaves by the Dutch were now considered to be all slaves by the British. New and stricter laws were implemented as more slaves were brought in through a direct trade route with Africa, instead of coming from the West Indies as previously.

Under these new and harsher conditions, the settled slaves in Greenwich Village were probably shocked and offended when their comparatively lax, albeit inherently limiting, treatment under theDutch turned into the callous and often unnecessarily violent realities of a new kind of imposed universal slavery under the rule of the British empire. Under the new British sovereignty, masters were allowed to whip their slaves for any or no reason without first contacting an organized council. This demeaned Africans, to a great extent denying their viability as recognized human beings, albeit some of them slaves, building a new colony. This debasement of African humanity manifested itself in other ways. Free and enslaved Africans also suffered

severe restrictions on their hitherto revalent legal and social rights, which had been advocated under Dutch rule.

Historian Edgar McManus compares Dutch and British rule: “ From the start of the English occupation, the creation of a commercially profitable slave system became a joint project of both government and private interests. Unlike the Dutch West India Company which used slavery to implement colonial policy, the (British) Royal African Company used the colony to implement slavery ”. That is to say, the British regarded slavery more as a capitalist venture than as a way to build up its colony. New York’s first slave market under the British opened in 1709 onWall Street. As aforementioned, no differentiation was officially made by the British between freed Africans and slaves: in their records, all Africans were considered to be slaves. Instead of looking at Africans as people with legal rights who could potentially buy their freedom and have land, and whose punishment was relegated by a council, as the Dutch did, the British looked at them as economically valuable automatons for use in labor, whose freedom was to be curtailed rather than encouraged.

These acts undoubtedly angered Africans who had been living as free landowners under the Dutch system. This is not to say that there weren’t free Africans under British rule, but rather that the British implementation of intricate laws regarding freed slaves and their delayed recognition of them as free people added great complexity to the relatively simple established Dutch system of freedom for money. Fifteen percent of the total population of New York in the early 1700s was African , but the British did not recognize this population as anything but slaves until almost half a decade later, and <https://assignbuster.com/slavery-in-the-north-american-colonies/>

established many laws and codes regarding their employment, punishing freed Africans for harboring runaway slaves, and complicating the ways in which existing slaves could be freed. As mentioned, this was probably an unpleasant and unwelcome encroachment, to say the least, into the lives of existing Africans in New York, especially those who enjoyed freedoms under Dutch rule that were curtailed, eliminated, and complicated by the British. Still, many of the slaves and freed slaves lived together in a community in Greenwich Village where they could express their feelings about (and, obviously, against) the new British laws openly with their neighbors.

This was different from the situation in many southern plantations, where slaves were kept separate from their surrounding society. That is to say, the presence of an outside society doesn't necessarily promote rebellion, but enhances its scope. The ensuing revolt of 1712 was inevitable: the new British rules were too harsh and too much of a change from the unequal but hopeful and comparatively non-violent status quo previously organized in New Amsterdam. After meeting in a tavern, twenty-three Africans armed themselves with hatchets, clubs, and guns and set fire to a centrally-located building in New York. When Europeans came to combat the blaze, several of them were killed and wounded.

Local militias rounded up twenty-seven slaves in retribution, six of whom committed suicide under capture. The rest of the rounded-up slaves were cruelly killed. In further reaction against this rebellion, a series of strict new laws were soon passed: "No longer could more than three black slaves meet... any slave handling a firearm would receive twenty lashes. Anyone

caught gambling would be whipped in public. Involvement in a conspiracy to kill would result in execution, as would a rape.

There was even a law which discouraged masters from freeing a slave: the master could free a slave, but only after posting a bond of 200 pounds ". The non-conciliatory nature of these new laws did not bode well for the future. Instead of advancing their cause through violence, the rebels of 1712 helped to create a new atmosphere of distrust and paranoia in New York. Within this atmosphere, further rebellion simmered for thirty years before surfacing again in 1741.

During these thirty years, the population of Africans in New York swelled from eight hundred to over two thousand. The fact that the rebellion of 1741 occurred in a paranoid atmosphere in which a teenaged servant woman was called before the people to name names caused some historians to liken it to a witch-hunt. Looking at the facts, this metaphor requires no large stretch of the imagination. It is still unclear, and historians disagree upon, what really happened to trigger the events of 1741. A number of buildings were burned down over a span of months, causing widespread public panic.

The authorities responded to the threat by offering a large reward, which was claimed by Mary Burton, a white indentured servant who began naming her employers and those with whom they associated as the guilty parties. It is unclear whether or not Africans were even involved in a conspiracy and arson; some sources take it for granted that, given the tensions of the era, it was likely. Guilty or not, almost fifty Africans were hanged, burned, or deported for the crime. " To this day it remains a topic of debate among

historians whether this episode involved paranoid white fears, an organized conspiracy, or both” .

The results of the trials are not open to such debate.