

Comparison of the atlantic slave trade



Although slavery was not a new institution during the 1600 – 1800's however, there were great contrasts in the way slaves were treated in the Atlantic World. Slaves throughout this era were treated in various ways and from having some legal rights to having none, and from having freedom to virtually no chance of freedom. Although it did take over 150 years, slavery finally came to an end in most of the Atlantic regions.

England/America and Slavery

In tracing back slavery in Britain and then the America's one can go back to ancient Rome. However unlike the 1500's – 1800's instead of being slave holders, the British themselves were slaves to the Romans whom they had captured and made prisoners of war and then shipped off for sale in the Roman markets. After the fall of the Roman Empire, which historians disagree on the dates which can be between 476 A. D. to 1453 A. D. or that Rome never fell, but rather adapted (Gill, 2010). Unlike slavery in England or the English colonies there were many stations of slaves in Ancient Rome which included: agaso- which was a groom, atriensis, who were stewards, auri custos- were jewelery attendants, bubulcus- which were ploughman, calator – who were footmen, cantrix – singers, cellarius – storekeepers. Slaves were also classified as cooks, messenger, game fatterners, chain gang, market gardeners, doorkeepers, reapers messengers, nurses, obstetricians, shepherds, chaperons, attendants, pages, planters, even hairdresser, masseurs, and cloths folders. Also under Roman law slaves could gain their freedom in various ways which included: Per censum, when a slave with his master's permission places his name in the censor's roll. Per vindictam, when a master took his slave to the praetor or consul or pro-

praetor or pro-consul and declared “ I desire that this man be free, according to the custom of the Romans”(Roman Slaves, 2008), if then the praetor approved he would then put a rod on the head of the slave and pronounce “ I say that this man is free, after the manner of the Romans” (Roman Slaves, 2008). At this point the master or a lector (bodyguard) would turn him around in circle and give him a blow on the cheek which signified that leave was granted to him to go wherever he wanted. A slave could gain his freedom by Per testamentum which was when a master gave his slaves freedom at his own will. Finally Slaves that fought in the arenas could gain their freedom by fighting well.

Although the English justified slavery during the 1500’s – 1800’s on the reasoning that the Ancient Romans used slavery, the institutes were radically different. The beginning of slavery in England and the English Colonies began with indentured servants who would sign on to leave England and start a new life but to pay their fair they sold themselves to work for a certain time span, usually three to five years. Many of this were criminals, prostitutes, or owed debt and were willing to leave to start a new life rather than going to prison or even put to death with the majority being young men in their teens to early twenties. After their committed time was up they then were free to start their own lives. Due to the growth in the colonies there began to be a lack of indentured servants so there had to be another way to get the labor needed for the plantations. There were various schemes that brought slaves to the New World which included kidnapping and being European did not protect you from being kidnapped and sent into servitude. Many would find themselves on the way to Virginia after having a beer with a

friend in a European city (Hines, 1996). In contrast, most Roman slaves were prisoners of war and were freed on the whims of their masters.

In the beginning slavery in America was neither slavery nor limited to Africans, but was indentured servitude where the servants including Africans were released after serving their time. Africans then would join the community where they were normally farmers and even voters as being equal members of the community. Under indentured servitude if children were born they were considered free which was in contrast to slavery. Under indentured servitude there was no racism. This was to change when under the case of re Negro John Punch in 1640 that made a racial distinction among indentured servants and made blacks indentured servants for a lifetime (Slavery and Indentured Servants). In 1705 the Virginia Slave Code was established that set laws concerning the treatment and legal status of slaves in the English colonies. Under the code a child's status was determined by the status of his mother instead of the father which had been normal in England, if the mother was a free woman then the child was free, but if the woman was a slave the child was considered to be a slave.

Marriages between blacks and whites (the Virginia Code also prohibited marriage between other groups such as Amerindians, Irish, Turks, etc.) were illegal. Under the Virginia code the conversion of slaves to a certain religion was not a top priority, and many masters did not encourage the conversion of their slaves to Christianity since they had such a low opinion of the slaves character that they felt conversion was worthless as well as impractical (Hast, 1969. p. 221). Slaves therefore were made to work on Sunday's and other holy days. Under the Virginia Code a person that was a Christian or

from a Christian nation was not to be sold, however if a slave converted to Christianity they were not allowed to be freed. Also under the code slaves were not to be educated in either religion or a trade since the attitude of the master was the slaves (who were black) were inferior and not capable of learning. Slaves had no rights, a slave was not allowed to hit a Christian, however if a slave was struck and was killed by a white master, the master was not held accountable for murder. Slaves were limited on their contact with slaves from other plantations in order to cut down the chances of rebellion. In the area of family, marriages between slaves were not allowed. The justification of slavery was surprisingly not over race but actually religion due to the notion that black Africans were heathens and would undercut the religion of the Europeans. Thus this ideology was the backbone for justifying lifetime slavery for Africans. Ironically Virginia then enacted laws that allowed Black Christians to serve as slaves and here we see the beginning of a history that dominates racial attitudes to this day.

One may ask why the change in the social make up from indentured servitude to slavery and there are several answers to that question. One is that they were in a New World and plantation owners were adapting to problems as well as opportunities. One of the problems with indentured servitude was indentured servants tended to run away and if they were either Native American or European they were able to blend in easily with the rest of the population. On the other hand the free African-American population was very small so if an African escaped he/she was more noticeable, another problem was under the contract of indentured servitude any European that served out their contract was to be given a weapon and

plot of land. This gave an increase of armed, lower-class whites that lived in the frontier and who had not sympathy for the plantation owners who had enslaved and oppressed them for years. In 1676 under the leadership of Nathaniel Bacon these people banded together and burned Jamestown. As a result the departed elite plantation owners needed a way to ease this situation and that led to the paradox of racial slavery. The Virginia plantation owners/aristocrats then focused on the difference of skin color and were able to present the perception of a colonial society that placed all Caucasians into a category of a master race. Economically it was also easier to keep Africans in servitude and this factor caused a flood of Africans to the Americas over the next 150 years.

With the approach of the American Revolution there was a mixed blessing by both free African-Americans as well as slaves. The principles of the revolution had implied the end of slavery but the revolutionaries were never able to deliver that promise. It had been the desire of Thomas Jefferson to end slavery with the formation of the new nation, yet it was ironic that he never freed his slaves. Jefferson was not the only person of his day that wanted to see slaves free but there were men like Samuel Sewall who advocated freedom for African-Americans and even had pamphlets published and distributed that countered the arguments that the men of his time used to promote slavery. Sewall stated in his pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* “ ‘Tis pity there should be more Caution used in buying a Horse, or a little lifeless dust; than there is in purchasing Men and Women: Whenas they are the Offspring of GOD, and their Liberty is, ...” (Sewall, 1700). Here he basically stated that men took more time and caution in buying horses

and gold than they did in buying people. Despite its promise of freedom and rights to all men, the revolution did not grant African-Americans that freedom. This double standard was not lost on African-Americans who had fought on both sides of the war believing one side or the other would have been more likely to grant slaves the freedom they desired.

The American Revolution started with an African-American named Crispus Attucks, who happened to also be the first martyr. On Sunday March 5, 1770, which is the date given as the start of the Revolution, was a day full of problems in the city of Boston. The relationship between the colonist and British Soldiers and become strained and filled with frequent violence. The days before this Sunday there had been numerous tavern brawls and street fights between the British soldiers and the colonist. In one incident three British soldiers were beaten and ran out of town but returned with reinforcements. On this day a group of soldiers had just emerged from their barracks and were confronted by a gang of boys that include African-Americans, Irish, and others. After trading insults the two groups began to fight. Lead by Crispus, the Americans were able to drive the soldiers back to their barracks. After much confusion and angry by the citizens of Boston a British sentry ended up being attacked and then called for backup. A British soldier happened to be hit in the head with a stick and as a result his musket fired and killed Crispus. Several more shots ended up being fired and after the smoke cleared five people had been shot to death. This incident, which became known as the Boston Massacre, was the turning point in the relationship between America and the British with everyone realizing that the bonds between England and America had been irreparably severed. It is

a great irony of history that the first battle of the revolution was not planned and the first hero of the war was an African- American who had been a former slave and whose courage and passion led the angry crowd to stand up against the British and whose death was the first in a long struggle for freedom and independence. However it would be another seven years before the first state, Vermont, would abolish slavery and then another 88 years before slavery was abolished in the United States.

In 1791 as the United States was beginning as the first republic in the Western hemisphere, on the French Island of Haiti events began to unfold for another American revolution. Unlike the revolution in the British Colonies, the revolution in Haiti was driven by slaves who outnumbered their French plantation owners. August 22nd of 1791 was the day that the Haitian fight for independence began under the leadership of Dutty Boukman when over one hundred thousand slaves began their revolt against the much hated French. These men and women had been slaves all their lives and they not only wanted freedom, but revenge for the harsh treatments they had endured under the French. Over the next three weeks the Haitian slaves executed any Frenchman they found and burned every plantation in the fertile regions of Haiti. Other leaders for Haiti's fight for independence were François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. It would not be until November 28, 1803 that Haiti would become the second republic in the Western hemisphere.

Africa and Slavery

Although the majority of slaves that came to America were from Africa, there was a vast contrast in how slaves were treated on both continents. Slavery had been a part of African cultures from the Sahara to the Kalahari long before colonialism thus they were not much different from other parts of the world. Like everywhere else in the world, slaves in Africa were considered legal property of their owners. However, slavery in Africa differed in practice from its European counterpart in practice. African slaves would normally be integrated into the home of the owner and it was not unusual for former slaves to rise to positions of trust within the family of his former owner or even to authoritative positions within their society. Another difference between African slavery and that of European slavery was the treatment of slaves. Under African masters slaves were not subjected to continual inhuman and brutal treatment as was the case under European ownership of slaves.

Portugal was the first European nation to make a sustained contact with sub-Saharan Africa, and the slaves they obtained were originally used in domestic capacities and with the limited demand at the time slaves were just a part of trade that involved other commodities, however this would change with the discovery of the Americas and the colonization that would soon follow. By the end of the 16th century over 13, 000 slaves were imported to the America's per year and as more of the Americas and Caribbean Islands were conquered and the demand for slaves increased it is believed that between 1800 and 1865 around four million slaves were imported to the America's (The African Slave Trade – Slaves in Africa, 2006).

With the growing realization of the negative impact that the slave trade was having on their population there began to be a growing opposition to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The kings of Congo and Benin, which is now a part of Nigeria, were among the first rulers that came to oppose the slave trade. Around 1865 these factors are what lead to the end of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is thought that 15-50 million Africans were taken as slaves from Africa to the slave plantations in the Americas, with half dying on the journey (The African Slave Trade - Slaves in Africa, 2006). Although this paper focused on just the two continents of America and Africa, the slave trade had left a legacy on the continents of Asia and Europe as well. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was also a pointer to the way men can be inhuman to fellow men.

Conclusion

Where and when slaves served in servitude determined their way of life, from having rights and a chance of freedom to virtually having no rights or chance of freedom. Although slavery was not a new idea during this time period, the way slaves were treated did vary, not only by continent and differing civilizations, but by time as well.