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Chapter 1

Many Thousands Gone: Black Experiences in Colonial America

The Black experience and the struggle against enslavement in colonial America are at the root of European colonization. In the early sixteenth century, people of African descent were present at the earliest moments of Spanish, French, and English exploration. Captured, shipped, and sold in a brutal middle passage recounted by Alexander Falconbridge in “An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa,” African labor was responsible for much of the economic export from the Americas into the Atlantic World. Sometimes free and often enslaved, Africans participated in European colonization as both laborers and interpreters. Most European colonists traveled to the Americas from a common port of origin and shared culture. However, Africans trafficked to the Americas represented a more diverse geographic area. They arrived in groups of varied language, experiences, and beliefs. When combined with European ideas, African ex-

pressions of culture and religion helped create distinctly American regional habits and customs. As the monetary value of enslaved Africans became a vital measurement of colonial success, Africans parlayed their experiences and leveraged their economic value to carve out space for themselves in colonial America. This can be seen in the captivity narratives of men like Olaudah Equiano and Venture Smith.

The Earliest Africans

In 1526 Spanish explorer Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón established a settlement in what is now South Carolina. After only three months, disease claimed many lives, including that of Ayllón. Local Native Americans violently resisted this invasion. The enslaved people who accompanied those Spanish settlers used the conflict as an opportunity to escape, thus becoming some of the first recorded African residents of North America. The fol-

lowing year, an Arabian-born African named Estevanico became perhaps the first North African in America. Valued by the Spanish for his language skills, he served as an interpreter for Spanish expeditions around the Gulf of Mexico and the American Southwest. His tale is found in the “Narratives of Estevanico el Negro in the Southwest,” first published in the 1540s.

Early Laws Regulating Slavery

The experience of enslavement characterizes most people of African descent in colonial America. However, this was not always the case in the early days of English colonization. Free Africans in the colonies of Maryland and Virginia lived as counterparts to European colonists in the early decades of these settlements. As chattel slavery became a popular labor system, however, both colonies passed laws to ensure that slaves and their descendants remained enslaved and without legal rights. This was exemplified in the legislative document “Virginia’s Act XII.” Maryland, whose charter was approved in 1632 and where slavery had existed since at least 1640, enacted similar legislation in 1664. The Maryland law forced all Black people in the colony to serve as slaves for life, regardless of prior free or enslaved status. This law was clarified in 1692’s “An Act Concerning Negro Slaves” to address children of mixed ancestry and their parents. It required white colonists with biracial children to become servants to the church parish for a specified amount of time.

Maryland’s law is an example of the numerous churches in early America that endorsed slavery. By supporting punishments for mixed-race unions, churches signaled a common colonial religious practice of sanctioning slaveholding. Christianity was generally considered a positive influence on slaves, since it reinforced obedience to authority. However, both colonies clarified that religious affiliation did not impact slave status. Once enslaved, “Virginia’s Act III” also made it clear that conversion and baptism in Christianity could not be a path to freedom in that colony. A slave who was a Christian was still a slave. In 1705, “Virginia’s Act Concerning Servants and Slaves XXXIV” further regulated slavery. The legislature declared that all Black slaves who were not Christians in their own land of origin were essentially property. Since no method existed to certify the religious beliefs of slaves before they were shipped to America, most Black people were now sub-

ject to continuous enslavement, as in Maryland. This legislative act also elaborated property rights for those owning slaves, such as the retrieval of runaways. It also guided regulations for trading enslaved people. In sum, the 1705 act created separate legal systems for enslaved people and European colonists, mapping out how people of African descent were excluded from participating in public life. The French colony of Louisiana passed legal measures resembling the English colonies’ attention to mixed marriages. Their “Code Noir” specifically urged enslaved people to be taught the Catholic faith and only be supervised by other Catholics.

Colonists Opposing Slavery

Though sanctioned by some colonial churches and codified by law, not all colonists supported the practice of slavery. In addition, not all Africans allowed discriminatory laws to define their actions. Other Christian groups spoke out against the immorality of holding humans in bondage. Among them were the Germantown Quakers, who argued that slaves did not deserve treatment as cattle and that sale into slavery in another country was among the worst experiences a human could have. The Quakers identified those who purchased humans as guilty as those who initially captured the Africans, and they argued for the practice to be abolished in “A Minute Against Slavery, Addressed to Germantown Monthly Meeting, 1688.” Quakers in Germantown would have been opposed to the suggestions of men like John Woolman and Antoine-Simone Le Page du Pratz. In the documents “Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes” and *The History of Louisiana*, respectively, Woolman and du Pratz argued that human property could be managed in a responsible way.

Early Slave Rebellions

The strictest laws and most comprehensive slave management practices could not wholly control slave populations. Throughout the colonial period, resourceful Africans continued working to gain some level of freedom in the Americas. Violent uprisings like the Stono Rebellion of 1739, described in “An Account of the Negroe Insurrection in South Carolina,” are examples of African attempts to free themselves from bondage. Regardless of the time or place, Africans in colonial America continuously adapted to their surroundings, even as they struggled against oppressive laws and practices designed to both dehumanize them and profit from their existence.

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Narratives of Estevanico el Negro in the Southwest

Author

Unknown

Date

1540s

Type

Essays, Reports, Manifestos

Significance

Related the travels of possibly the first North African to explore North America

Overview

Born Mustafa Azemmouri in present-day Morocco, Estevanico was sold into slavery in 1522 by the Portuguese. A Muslim by birth, he was forced to convert to Catholicism by his new enslaver, Spanish explorer Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, due to a Spanish law that did not allow non-Catholics to travel to the Americas. When he converted he took on the Spanish name Esteban and was referred to as Estevanico, or Little Steven.

In the Americas he was part of the Navarez Expedition in Florida and later went to Mexico City and New Mexico. In New Mexico he was, according to this account, killed by indigenous people after he had traveled ahead of the white members of his party.

Document Text

At that time, it happened that three Spaniards, named Cabeza de Vaca, Dorantes, and Castillo Maldonado, and a Black arrived in [the Ciudad de] Mexico. They had been shipwrecked during the expedition that Panfilo de Narvaez took to La Florida. . . . They informed the good don Antonio de Mendoza how, in traversing those lands, they used an interpreter and obtained marvelous news of some wealthy, four- and five-storied *pueblos* and other things very different from what was found to be true. . . .

He hurried and left [unfinished] the *visita* he had under way. Then he departed for the seat of his government, taking with him the

Black (whom [the viceroy] had bought), as well as the three friars of the Franciscan order, . . . then bid farewell to the three friars already named and the Black, who was named Esteban, so that they could go in search of that land. . . .

When the aforesaid friars and the Black, Esteban, had gone, it seems that the Black was not going with the support of the friars because he [was in the habit of] taking the women [the Indians] gave him, collecting turquoises, and amassing a quantity of both. Still, the Indians of those settlements through which they were going understood the Black better, because they had already seen him before. For this reason [the friars] had sent him ahead, to reconnoiter and pacify [the land], so that when they arrived they would have nothing to think about other than collecting reports about what they were searching for.

When Esteban parted from the aforesaid friars, he anticipated that in all of this he would win renown and honor and that the daring and boldness of having alone discovered those multistoried settlements, so famous throughout that land, would be ascribed to him. [discovered] . . . He tried to cross the unsettled areas there are between Cibola and the settled land, which he had walked through [before]. . . .

As I say, when the Black, Esteban, reached Cibola, he came loaded with numerous turquoises and some beautiful women, [all of which the Indians] had given him. . . .

The [Indians], traveling under his protection, believed they could traverse the whole land without any risk. However, because the people of that land [Cibola] may have been more intelligent than those who were following Esteban, they lodged him in a certain small shelter they had outside the *pueblo*. . . .

Because of the report the Black gave them, that behind [him] were coming two white men, sent by a great lord, [men] who were well versed in the things of heaven, and that they were coming to instruct them about things divine, . . . concluded that he must be a spy or guide for some people who were trying to come to conquer them. . . . After [he had offered] other explanations, they resolved to kill him because he asked them for turquoises and women, [which] to them seemed offensive. So they did it, without killing any of those who came with him. . . .

Glossary

Cibola: Spanish transliteration of a native name for a pueblo conquered by Francisco Vázquez de Coronado; one of the Seven Cities of Gold that Coronado was searching for

friar: a member of a religious order of men, usually Christian

Panfilo de Navarez: Spanish explorer and soldier who helped invade and conquer Cuba in 1511 and led a Spanish expedition to North America in 1527

viceroy: a ruler exercising authority in a colony on behalf of a sovereign

Short-Answer Questions

1. What were Estevanico and the others on his expedition searching for?
2. Why did the indigenous people murder Estevanico?
3. How was Estevanico treated differently because he was Black?

Sojourner Truth: “Ain’t I a Woman?”

Author

Sojourner Truth

Date

1851

Type

Speeches/Addresses

Significance

Fused women’s rights and abolitionist arguments to forcefully condemn the second-class treatment of both women and Blacks in the United States

Overview

The acknowledged formal beginning of the feminist movement took place in the summer of 1848 at a gathering of women’s rights advocates in Seneca Falls, New York. It was at this convention that the Declaration of Sentiments, written by the activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, was first presented. The motivation behind the writing of the document, which is modeled on the Declaration of Independence, was Mott’s being refused permission to speak at the world antislavery convention in London, England, despite the fact that she was an official delegate to the convention. Sixty-eight women and thirty-two men signed the document, which stated that women, as human beings with the same “unalienable rights” as men and as citizens of the United States of America, should have those rights recognized and respected.

After this conference came others, and support—from men and women, both Black and white—began to grow. Although some women wanted their movement to be recognized on its own, entirely separate from that of abolition, the majority of women’s rights supporters viewed the movements as equally important calls for reform.

Sojourner Truth, as both a woman and a former slave, turned her efforts to the twin causes of women’s rights and abolition, serving as a living symbol of both. As slavery in the 1840s and 1850s became a distinctly southern institution, Truth was often characterized in articles and reports as speaking with a southern dialect; she objected to this stereotypical depiction, as her experience was not of southern slavery but of *American* slavery, and her accent reflected

her Dutch heritage. Because she had been a slave in the notionally free North, Truth felt it was her duty to agitate for abolition across the whole United States. Her memorable speech before the Women's Rights Convention in 1851 demonstrates her commitment to equality in all areas and marries her outrage over Black oppression with her anger over the second-class status of American women in the mid-nineteenth century.



Sojourner Truth, shown in 1864
(Library of Congress)

Document Text

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that?

There is some controversy regarding Truth's famous speech. There are, in fact, different versions of the speech. The most popular version of the speech was first published by Frances Gage in 1863, twelve years after it was delivered. Another version was published by the *Anti-Slavery Bugle* a month after the speech was delivered. This speech was transcribed by the Rev. Marius Robinson. In Robinson's version, which is presented here, the phrase "Ain't I a Woman" is not present.

I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart—why can't she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,—for we can't take more than our pint'll hold.

The poor men seems to be all in confusion, and don't know what to do. Why children, if you have woman's rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won't be so much trouble.

I can't read, but I can hear. I have heard the Bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept—and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part?

But the women are coming up blessed be God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

Glossary

woman have a pint: “pint” and “quart” are used here to mean capacity for knowledge

Lazarus: Lazarus of Bethany, the subject of a prominent sign of Jesus in the Gospel of John, in which Jesus restores him to life four days after his death

between a hawk and a buzzard: idiom meaning that one is caught between two extremes or two factions

Short-Answer Questions

1. Summarize the central argument Sojourner Truth presents in this speech and evaluate the effectiveness of her argument.
2. How does Sojourner Truth support her claim that men shouldn't fear women getting rights? Explain why you think she included this claim in her speech.
3. In the second paragraph of this speech, Sojourner Truth points out that there is no connection between rights and intellect. What purpose does this claim serve in the context of her overall argument?