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## Black Enslavement

The early American colonies largely developed under the gradual establishment of a complex social and political stratification in which the institution of Black enslavement would play no small part. The year 1619 is often marked as the starting point, when the first Africans arrived in the Jamestown colony of Virginia, initiating what would prove to be a continuing and systematized institution of chattel slavery. The development of slavery in the colonial period was both an economic necessity and a political and social process, structured through conflicts over power, politics, and race. This essay will explain how and why Black enslavement started during the colonial era; it looks at the period between 1619 and Bacon's Rebellion of 1676–77 and examines how this practice came about in this deeply stratified society. Key sources to inform this discussion will include power conflict theory, lectures, and historical texts that will contextualize race, politics, and power at this time.

### **The Beginnings of Black Enslavement (1619)**

The arrival of Africans into Jamestown in 1619 marks the all-important juncture in the emerging contours of the American colonial economy and system of labor. While early records indicate these people were initially treated much like their white European counterparts as indentured servants, this would soon devolve into permanent bondage. Indentured servitude was the early labor system within the colonies, where Europeans—Irish and English—would work for a predetermined amount of time in return for passage to the New World. Obviously, this system could not keep pace with the increased colonies' need—particularly in the tobacco fields—for workers. As the colonies expanded, landowners

felt the increasing need for a permanent and controllable supply of labor. Racialized chattel slavery became established, based on the principle that Africans were enslaved for life and transmitted their status to their offspring.

In light of such development, the power conflict theory can be related, which purports that social structures, such as labor systems, evolve from conflict over power and control. For instance, during the early colonial period, aspects of political and economic power rested in the hands of the European settlers, especially among the elites. However, there were issues of labor shortages and complications within the group as the number of European indentured servants grew, many of whom typically gained their freedom and land, which often threatened the established social order. Thus, Africans were held as a more reliable and permanent means of labor because of the prevalent racist view of their perceived inferiority. This would mean that they could be deprived of their liberties as well as property, entrenching a social order in which Europeans were placed at the very top and Africans at the bottom, whatever the particular circumstances.

### **The development of a politically stratified society**

With the growth of enslavement of Africans, so too did the legal and social world that justified it. The gradual codification of slave laws between the 1640s and 1660s institutionalized the racial divide between whites and blacks. It was during this time that laws were passed that made slavery an inherited status based on race—a way to guarantee Africans and their descendants a lifetime in bondage. For example, the Virginia 1662 law that children of enslaved mothers would be considered enslaved themselves, regardless of who the father was, solidified a very pivotal moment in the crystallization of racial slavery. This legal framework established not only the perpetuity of slavery but ascribed it to racially inferior beings; in this sense, it signaled a clear boundary between what whites and non-whites were entitled to.

A racialized hierarchy was inextricably linked with political power. Political power largely remained with wealthy landowners during the early colonial period, most of whom were interested in extensive agriculture, especially tobacco farming. These wealthy landowners moved colonial laws and governance to safeguard their economic interests, increasingly being tied up with the exploitation of enslaved labor. An important consequence of that marginalization is that it joined white colonists of different economic statuses through the theme of racial superiority, helping the social controller to maintain social order. Poor white settlers, having little in common with land-rich owners, found themselves with social status and privileges due to membership in the same race, serving as a buffer between the wealthy and the lower classes. This racial solidarity among whites helped to temper potential class conflicts by diverting social tensions away from economic inequality onto racial divisions.

### **Bacon's Rebellion: A Turning Point**

The stratification of colonial society was taken to an extreme during the Bacon Rebellion in 1676–77. Based upon a combination of factors, from economic hardship and tensions between frontier settlers and the colonial government to conflicts with Native Americans, the uprising was led by Nathaniel Bacon. Poor white settlers made up a majority of Bacon's followers, those who resented the monopoly the colonial elite held over land and resources. Although the rebellion at first seemed a battle between lower classes and colonial elite, it indeed had serious racial ramifications as well.

Deep fractures within the colonial social structure were exposed, but potential solidarity between poor whites and either enslaved or free Blacks was also revealed. The forces of Bacon included white indentured servants and enslaved Africans, and thus economic poverty and loss of rights could provide a common cause among these unlikely allies against the colonist elite. The possibility of cross-racial alliances was profoundly

troubling to the colonial ruling elite. Since the rebellion, colonial leaders consciously sought to avoid such events by further solidifying racial divisions. New laws were enacted that clearly racialized the institution of slavery. It was through such legislation that Black people lost nearly all rights and privileges, while poor whites enjoyed such benefits as access to land. Such policies had the effect of aligning the interests of poor whites with those of the colonial elite in order to avoid any alliance of lower-class whites with Blacks in the future.

### **Power and Politics in Colonial Society**

From 1619 to the time of Bacon's Rebellion somehow illustrated how the establishment of slavery and racial hierarchy were not economic imperatives but created part of a political mechanism that was essential for the perpetuation of power and social control. As described by the power conflict theory, within any given society, the dominant group shall, through whatever means possible, pursue the maintenance of authority. On the part of colonial America, it was the institution of slavery through which the ruling elite—landowning and predominantly white—realized the principle of divide and conquer. They made sure that a rigid racial hierarchy would make lower-class whites consider themselves superior to Blacks and thereby defuse any potential class-based challenge to their power.

This system of racialized politics established the pattern for a socially stratified society that was to last for several centuries. The legal codification of slavery, along with the political manipulation of racial tensions, ensured that race was to become the hallmark of social status and, consequently, of power in colonial America. This stratification was not only socially repressive but highly economically favorable to the colonial elite, where they could count on a permanent labor force of enslaved Africans for sustaining their wealth and political predominance.

### **Conclusion**

The enslavement of Blacks within the colonies was basically and definitely entrenched in the political power of people control. From the first year that Africans arrived (1619) to the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion (1677), slavery began to take shape as an institution that regulated labor supply and secured the dominance of the colonial elite. Creating a racialized hierarchy, codified into law and reinforced in social behavior, had the effect of guaranteeing that Blacks remained subordinated within the social order while binding white colonists together in a common sense of racial superiority. This overt racial repression and political manipulation would plant the seeds of lasting social development within America.

Works Cited

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