Native American Slavery

**Traditions of Native American Slavery**

The majority of Native American tribes did practice some form of slavery before the European introduction of African slavery into North America; but none exploited slave labor on a large scale. In addition, Native Americans did not buy and sell captives in the pre-colonial era, although they sometimes exchanged enslaved individuals with other tribes in peace gestures or in exchange for their own members. "Slave" may not be an accurate term for their system of using captives.

The conditions of enslaved Native Americans varied among the tribes. In many cases, young enslaved captives were adopted into the tribes to replace warriors killed during warfare or by disease. Other tribes practiced debt slavery or imposed slavery on tribal members who had committed crimes; but, this status was only temporary as the enslaved worked off their obligations to the tribal society.

Among some Pacific Northwest tribes, about a quarter of the population were slaves. Other slave-owning tribes of North America were, for example, Comanche of Texas, Creek of Georgia, the Pawnee, and Klamath.

**European enslavement**

When Europeans arrived as colonists in North America, Native Americans changed their practice of slavery dramatically. They found that British settlers, especially those in the southern colonies, purchased or captured Native Americans to use as forced labor in cultivating tobacco, rice, and indigo. Native Americans began selling war captives to whites rather than integrating them into their own societies. As the demand for labor in the West Indies grew with the cultivation of sugar cane, Europeans enslaved Native Americans for export to the "sugar islands." Accurate records of the numbers enslaved do not exist.

As slavery became a racial caste, the Virginia General Assembly defined some terms in 1705: "All servants imported and brought into the Country. . . who were not Christians in their native Country. . . shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this dominion. . . shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resists his master. . . correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction. . . the master shall be free of all punishment. . . as if such accident never happened."

The slave trade of Native Americans lasted only until around 1730, and it gave rise to a series of devastating wars among the tribes, including the Yamasee War. The Indian wars of the early 18th century, combined with the increasing importation of African slaves, effectively ended the Native American slave trade by 1750. Colonists found it too easy for Native American slaves to escape, and the wars took the lives of numerous colonial slave traders. The remaining Native American groups banded together to face the Europeans from a position of strength. Many surviving Native American peoples of the southeast joined confederacies such as the Choctaw, the Creek, and the Catawba for protection.

**Native American adoption of African slavery**

Native Americans resisted Anglo-American encroachment on their lands and maintained cultural ways. Native Americans interacted with enslaved Africans and African Americans on many levels. Over time all the cultures interracted. Native Americans began slowly to adopt white culture. Native Americans shared some experiences with Africans, especially during the period when both were enslaved.

The five civilized tribes tried to gain power by owning slaves, as they assimilated some other European-American ways. Among the slave-owning families of the Cherokee, 78 percent claimed some white ancestry. Native Americans often assisted runaway slaves. They also sold Africans to whites, trading them like so many blankets or horses.

While Native Americans might treat enslaved people as brutally as Europeans did, most Native American masters rejected the worst features of southern white bondage (Chattel Slavery). Though less than 3% of Native Americans owned slaves, bondage created destructive cleavages among Native Americans. Mixed-race slaveholders were part of a class hierarchy that seemed related to European ancestry, but their advantage was based on the transfer of social capital from their fathers. Proposals for Indian Removal heightened tensions of cultural changes due to the increase in the number of mixed-race Native Americans in the South. Full bloods sometimes tried harder to maintain traditional ways, including control of land. The more traditional members who did not hold slaves often resented the sale of lands to Anglo-Americans.