

The Origins of Slavery in America

- ❖ Grasslands of W. Africa were home to several empires c. 1400
 - E.g. Ghana, Mali, & Songhai
 - C. 1492 – Songhai dominant w/ capital at Timbuktu
 - Traded w/ Arabs across Sahara
- ❖ Coastal W. Africa not as important as grassland empires
 - In 15th century – Guinea & Senegambia became trade sites for Portuguese traders & explorers
 - Among trade “goods” were slaves
 - Slavery already existed in Africa & elsewhere before the arrival of the Europeans
 - Slaves were usually people captured in wars
 - Muslims & Euros made slave trade a business
 - Portuguese started Euro slave trade in 1444 – needed agricultural workers
 - Slave trade enriched the coastal W. Af. kingdoms
 - ◆ Slave trade stimulated conflicts among Africans
 - Soon – Spanish, English, French & Dutch had slave trade
 - 1st Africans in American colonies arrived at Jamestown in 1619 aboard a Dutch ship
 - Nearly 12 million Africans would eventually become slaves in the New World
 - The slave trade changed in volume, harshness, & eventually came to be based on race
 - Africans brought in to replace Indian workers who died in large numbers due to disease, overwork & malnutrition
 - Within 100 years of arrival – every colony had slaves
 - Crossing from Africa to colonies known as the Middle Passage – very harsh conditions w/ high death rates
- ❖ Africans initially treated as indentured servants
 - Worked for a fixed term before being granted freedom
 - Many white Europeans came as indentured laborers
 - Most laborers in south before 1700 were poor whites
- ❖ Most African slaves went to the West Indies
 - 1st big crop of W.I.'s was tobacco – later sugar was dominant
 - Sugar a high profit product w/ huge demand in Europe
 - Refinement costly & needed many laborers
 - Most land in islands deforested to grow cane

- Created a demand for N.E. lumber, crops, & fish
- **Slaves often part of a triangular trade pattern**
 - ◆ E.g. – New England rum to Africa for Slaves – Slaves to West Indies for sugar & molasses – sugar & molasses to New England to be distilled into rum
- Slaves less expensive & more durable than whites or Indians
 - ◆ Also never earned freedom like indentured workers
 - ◆ Indians were difficult to enslave
- **During 1690's - # of slaves in American colonies increased**
 - Trade monopoly w/ W. Indies broken – allowed more sales to Chesapeake region & elsewhere
 - Many Chesapeake colonists came w/ slaves from W.I.'s
 - **More land cultivated = need for more workers to harvest**
 - **Not enough whites to meet the labor demand**
 - Pop. drop in England made labor more valuable there
 - ◆ Wages up by 50%
 - ◆ Less English laborers willing to emigrate overseas
- **After 1640 – Africans were treated more as slaves**
 - **Racial prejudice reinforced use of blacks as slaves**
 - By 1700 – 22% of Chesapeake inhabitants were slaves
 - Slavery was primarily a southern institution but 15% of all slaves lived north of Maryland in the mid-1700's
 - Many slaves were able to earn \$ after their daily tasks were finished – sold surplus produce, performed labor, etc.
 - **In time, fear & a desire to control slaves led to restrictions**
 - **Maryland 1st to define slavery as lifelong & inheritable (1661)**
 - Slave children began working as early as age 7
 - Women tended crops, even when pregnant
 - Most slaves labored until they died
 - **Numerous “slave codes” eventually written**
 - Including dress codes, curfews, restrictions on gatherings
 - Slave revolts in Indies and in colonies led to more laws
 - ◆ 1739 Stono (S.C.) Rebellion – 20 whites killed
 - Many slave codes remained until the Civil War
- ❖ **The use of slaves became an important factor in the economic success of the colonies – mainly the southern plantation economy**
 - Later agricultural developments would reinforce the institution
 - Cotton would revitalize southern agriculture in early 1800's