

Title: Slavery and Working Conditions in British Colonial America

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Approximately 450,000 African slaves were brought to Colonial America by the British. The first African presence in British colonial North America is documented as occurring in Virginia in August, 1619. ¹ Slavery in the United States was a form of slave labor which existed as a legal institution from the early colonial period.

The British who came to America, due to the extenuating circumstances of being land rich, and labor poor embraced slavery as a means to capitalize on the products that their land could grow. The Africans brought to Jamestown in the early seventeenth century were bound laborers who worked long hard hours in the fields and in the homes of the white Virginians. ²

Although many early Americans opposed slavery on moral grounds, it became a legal institution in America and was incorporated into colonial legislations. An

example comes from Maryland in 1664: Because of “The harsh realities of a land-rich, but labor-scarce economy...” and “clear overtones of racism” settlers of Maryland in 1664, through the Maryland Colonial Assembly enacted statutes of law to impose “perpetual slavery upon Negro slaves and their offspring.” Any English woman or any “freeborn” woman who married an African slave was also put under harsh restriction condemning her also to servitude and any children of hers to lifetime slavery. ³

After the American Revolution (1775-1783), Thomas Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence included clauses denouncing the slave trade and the home governments’ interference in Colonialists attempts to stop the slave trade. These clauses in the Declaration were thrown out. George Washington, the 1st President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson and other “Founding Fathers” of the nation owned slaves.

After America’s independence from England, the northern states all abolished slavery, and Congress prohibited slavery in the Northwest Territory. Slavery, however slavery gained new life with the cotton industry after 1800, and expanded into the Southwest.

Slavery existed in the United States for 246 years, from 1619 until 1865, after the Civil War, when it was abolished under the administration of America’s 16th President, Abraham Lincoln.

The “One Drop Rule”: Definition of Black in the United States

America is very peculiar, because of the history of slavery and racism with the law of hypodescent, or the “One Drop Rule” – In the United States, if you have one drop of black ancestry, then you were black historically. ⁴

1. Gates, Henry Louis Jr. (2011), pp.65-73, Blacks In Latin America, New York and London, New York University Press ISBN 978-0-8147-3298-

2. Horton, James Oliver and Horton Lois E., (2005) p. 27 , Slavery and the Making of America, Oxford, NY: Oxford Press ISBN -13: 978-0-19-530451-0

3. Georgii, Collette (May 2007), “Land Rich, Labor Poor Colonial America and Slavery; <http://www.helium.com/items/365359-Colonial-Early-American>

4. ^Gates.