

Slavery and Native Americans in British North America and the United States: 1600 to 1865

By Tony Seybert

Most Native American tribal groups practiced some form of slavery before the European introduction of African slavery into North America; but none exploited slave labor on a large scale. Indian groups frequently enslaved war captives whom they used for small-scale labor and in ritual sacrifice. Most of these so-called Indian slaves tended to live, however, on the fringes of Indian society. Although not much is known about them, there is little evidence that they were considered racially inferior to the Indians who held power over them. Nor did Indians buy and sell captives in the pre-colonial era, although they sometimes exchanged enslaved Indians with other tribes in peace gestures or in exchange for their own members. In fact, the word "slave" may not even accurately apply to these captive people.

The situation of enslaved Indians varied among the tribes. In many cases, enslaved captives were adopted into the tribes to replace warriors killed during a raid. Enslaved warriors sometimes endured mutilation or torture that could end in death as part of a grief ritual for relatives slain in battle. Some Indians cut off one foot of their captives to keep them from running away; others allowed enslaved captives to marry the widows of slain husbands. The Creek, for example, treated the children born of slaves and tribal members as full members of the tribe rather than as enslaved offspring. Some tribes held captives as hostages for payment. 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.

Once Europeans arrived as colonialists in North America, the nature of Indian slavery changed abruptly and dramatically. Indians found that British settlers, especially those in the southern colonies, eagerly purchased or captured Indians to use as forced labor in cultivating tobacco, rice, and indigo. More and more, Indians began selling war captives to whites rather than integrating them into their own societies. And as the demand for labor in the West Indies became insatiable, whites began to actively enslave Indians for export to the so-called "sugar islands."

The resulting Indian slave trade devastated the southeastern Indian populations and transformed Native American tribal relations throughout the region. The English at Charles Town, the Spanish in Florida, and the French in Louisiana sought trading partners and allies among the Indians, offering trading goods such as metal knives and axes, firearms and ammunition, intoxicants and beads, and cloth and hats in exchange for furs (deerskins) and Indian slaves captured from other tribes. Unscrupulous traders, frontier settlers, and government officials encouraged Indians to make war on other tribes to reap the profits from the slaves captured in such raids or to weaken the warring tribes.

It is not known how many Indians were enslaved by the Europeans, but they certainly numbered in the tens of thousands. It is estimated that Carolina merchants operating out of Charles Town shipped an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Indian captives between 1670 and 1715 in a profitable slave trade with the Caribbean, Spanish Hispaniola, and northern colonies. Because of the higher transportation costs of bringing blacks from Africa, whites in the northern colonies sometimes preferred Indian slaves, especially Indian women and children, to blacks. Carolina actually exported as many or even more Indian slaves than it imported enslaved Africans prior to 1720. The usual exchange rate of captive Indians for enslaved Africans was two or three Indians to one African.

Until late in the 18th century, Indian slaves worked on English plantations along side African slaves and even, occasionally, white indentured servants. Women and children frequently were used as menial laborers or domestic servants. By 1720, most whites in the southeastern British colonies preferred enslaved Africans to Indians for obvious reasons. Indians could, for one thing,

more easily run away into the wilderness. Also, Europeans always feared the possibility of a coalition of enslaved Africans and enslaved Indians, aided by free Indians on the frontier. What's more, English settlers played the Indians off against one another in the various Indian wars or wars of empire fought between European colonial powers, using them as allies or as paid mercenaries. Additionally, Europeans commonly believed that Native American men, culturally conditioned to be hunters, considered fieldwork to be women's work, and that Indian warriors would not adapt easily to agricultural labor in comparison to enslaved Africans. Most importantly, the demand for enslaved labor in the tobacco and rice plantations came to far exceed the potential supply of Indian captives, especially once European diseases began to decimate Indian populations and once the Indians began to more effectively resist European powers.

The Indian slave trade lasted only until around 1730, and it was characterized by a series of devastating wars among the tribes. Those Indians nearer the European settlements raided tribes farther in the interior in the quest for slaves to be sold, especially to the British. Before 1700, the Westos in Carolina dominated much of the Indian slave trade until the English, allied with the Savannah, who resented Westo control of the trade, wiped them out. The Westo tribal group was completely eliminated; its survivors were scattered or else sold into slavery in Antigua.

A similar pattern of friendly and then hostile relations among the English and Indians followed in the southeastern colonies. For example the Creek, a loose confederacy of many different groups who had banded together to defend themselves against slave-raiding, allied with the English and moved on the Apalachee in Spanish Florida, destroying them as a group of people in the quest for Indian slaves. These raids also destroyed several other Florida Indian tribes, including the Timucua. Indeed, most of the colonial-era Indians of Florida were killed, enslaved, or scattered. It is estimated that English-Creek raids on Florida yielded 4,000 Indian slaves between 1700 and 1705.

A few years later, the Florida Savannahs (or Shawnee) raided in similar fashion the Cherokee. In North Carolina, the Tuscarora, fearing among other things that the English planned to enslave them as well as take their land, attacked the English in a war that lasted from 1711 to 1713. In this war, Carolina whites, aided by the Yamasee, completely vanquished the Tuscarora, taking thousands of captives as slaves. Within a few years, a similar fate befell the Yuchis and the Yamasee, who had fallen out of favor with the British.

In Mississippi and Tennessee, the war-like Chickasaw played both the French and British off against each other and preyed on the Choctaw, traditional allies of the French, as well as the Arkansas, the Tunica, and the Taensa, establishing slave depots throughout their territories. A single Chickasaw raid in 1706 on the Choctaw yielded 300 Indian captives for the English. In response, the French armed the Natchez, who lived on the banks of the Mississippi, and the Illinois against the Chickasaw. By 1729, the Natchez, along with a number of enslaved and runaway blacks who lived amongst them, rose up against the French and were massacred in turn by an army composed of French soldiers, Choctaw warriors, and enslaved Africans.

Native Americans and Slavery in the Southeastern United States

The Indian wars of the early 18th century combined with the growing availability of African slaves essentially ended the Indian slave trade by 1750. Numerous colonial slave traders had been killed in the fighting, and the remaining Indian groups banded together more determined than ever to face the Europeans from a position of strength rather than be enslaved. Many of those Indians who remained joined confederacies like the Choctaw, the Creek, and the Catawba for protection, making them less easy victims of European slavers.

From 1750 to the American Civil War in 1861, Native Americans, especially those in the Southeast, interacted with enslaved blacks in every way possible, although there is no evidence

that blacks ever owned Indian slaves. The nature of this interaction depended upon the historical character of the Indian groups, the enslaved people in their midst, and the white slaveholders. Native Americans assisted runaway slaves and also tracked them down and returned them to slavery. They married free and enslaved blacks, and accepted the children of such unions with few strings attached. They also sold blacks to whites, trading them like so many blankets or horses. Most importantly, many Indians owned black slaves. By 1824, it is estimated that the Cherokee owned 1,277 black slaves; the Choctaw and the Chickasaw held over 5,000 blacks in slavery by 1860. Some mixed-blood Indians, such as the Choctaw chief Greenwood Lefore and the Cherokee chief John Ross, owned between 100 and 400 enslaved blacks respectively. And when the southeastern Indians were forcefully marched west to present-day Oklahoma by the American government in the infamous "Trail of Tears" in the 1830s and 1840s, as many as 15,000 enslaved blacks were taken with them.

Native Americans resisted, as best they could, Anglo-American encroachment on their lands after 1800, as illustrated by the Creek Wars of 1813 and 1836, and a series of wars with the Seminoles that lasted into the 1850s. At the same time, the leaders of the major tribes of the southeastern states—the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creeks and Seminole—responded to the overwhelming power of the Anglo-Americans by attempting to imitate their lifestyles. This adjustment process included accepting the white practice of private land ownership, working and living on family farms and plantations, and acquiring slaves as workers much as was the case with white slaveholders. Indeed, these southeastern Indians came to be known among whites as the "Civilized Tribes" because of their willingness to embrace the ways of life and labor identified with Anglo-Americans.

This process of absorbing white culture began as early as the 1600s due to the influence of white traders, who frequently lived among the Native Americans, taking Indian wives, and imprinting their ways of life onto Indian settlements. By the late 1700s, their mixed-blood descendants had assumed, in many cases, leading positions in tribal councils. The attempts of missionaries, moreover, to Christianize the southeastern Indians resulted in some small success. Most importantly, in the 1790s, the American government, as part of its Indian policy, established programs to help the tribes of the Southeast in the transition to agriculture and a way of life more in tune with the white view of civilization. For example, the Treaty of Holston contained this clause: "That the Cherokee Nation may be led to a greater degree of civilization, and to become herdsmen and cultivators, instead of remaining in a state of hunters, the United States will from time to time furnish gratuitously the said nation with useful implements of husbandry...."

To this end, the newly established U.S. government offered some minimal assistance to the Creeks, the Cherokee, and the other southeastern tribes with loans, plows, and livestock. Especially among the Cherokee, the white man's view of civilization was embraced—perhaps reluctantly but surely—including the use of enslaved blacks as a labor force on their farms and, in some cases, their plantations. By the 1820s and 1830s, many Indians lived in European-American-style brick houses, sent their children to mission schools, and lived in villages virtually identical to the towns of white Americans. In 1828, Elias Boudinot published the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first newspaper printed by Native Americans. Indians also operated a number of successful businesses, including cotton plantations worked by slaves not much different from those owned by white southerners. Along the Natchez Trace, which ran from Tennessee to the Mississippi River, the Choctaw and Chickasaw operated ferries, trading posts, inns and taverns; and, Indian farmers frequently sold their produce to travelers along the Trace.

In the 1820s, the Five Civilized Tribes organized republican-style governments with written constitutions, courts, and procedures for law enforcement. The slaveholding, mixed-bloods generally controlled the Indian governments and passed laws that reflected their concern with the status and control of slaves. The 1827 Cherokee constitution disallowed the ownership of property by the enslaved, including their mixed-blood descendants; made illegal the buying of goods from enslaved people; and imposed heavy fines on slaveholders when their enslaved

people consumed alcohol. It was illegal for an enslaved black to marry a white or an Indian. No blacks, not even free blacks, could vote. Nor could the offspring of Indian and white men if the mother was black. Cherokee laws, however, did not impose nearly as many restrictions on enslaved blacks as did white Americans in their slave codes. There were no Cherokee laws, for example, dealing with insurrection or rebellion.

In 1809, nearly 600 enslaved blacks lived in the Cherokee nation. This number increased to almost 1,600 in 1835 and to around 4,000 in 1860. Cherokee populations for these dates are: 12,400 in 1809, 16,400 in 1835, and 21,000 in 1860. The proportion of families that owned slaves never exceeded ten percent, comparable to the percentage among white families across the South. In the 1835 census, only eight percent of Cherokee households contained slaves, and only three Cherokee owned more than 50 slaves. Joseph Vann had the most, owning 110. Of the 207 Cherokee listed as owning slaves, 168, or 83 percent, owned less than ten slaves. Of the slave-owning families, 78 percent claimed some white ancestry.

Only a minority of southeastern Indians, however, embraced fully the material aspects of the Anglo-American definition of civilization. The majority of full-blood Indians, even those who took to farming and commerce, struggled valiantly to retain the beliefs and ways of life identified with their traditional, Indian view of civilization. This cultural struggle reflected not only Native American aversion to the materialism and market-oriented character of the emerging commercial capitalism of the white society; it also reflected the antagonism of whites towards all Indians. The minimal protection and assistance provided by the Federal Government for the integration and assimilation of the southeastern Indians did not last long. Presidents after George Washington, with the exception of John Quincy Adams, made little effort to protect Indian lands and rights. State governments and private interests pressured the Indians to give up their lands, and the tribes found little protection from the Federal Government when white settlers stole their property and assaulted or killed them.

The Trail of Tears and Slavery

Despite the willingness of many mixed-blood Indian leaders to imitate Anglo-American culture, the 1830s witnessed the wholesale removal of the Civilized Tribes from their lands east of the Mississippi River. Although some Native Americans had already moved to lands west of Louisiana, the issue came to a head with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which forcibly deported thousands of Indians to an arid area west of the Mississippi River (present day Oklahoma). The forced removals started in the early 1830s with the migration of the Choctaw, and each tribe made the arduous journey in waves until the Chickasaw, the last group to make the journey, arrived in Indian Territory in the late 1830s. Few Indians went willingly, and thousands died on the trek from hunger, disease, and suffering at the hands of the whites. Tribes that resisted, like the Sux and Fox Indians in Illinois and Wisconsin, were slaughtered (Black Hawk's War). The Seminole and numerous blacks who had joined them as runaway slaves, as well as free maroons, fought back from the swamps of Florida between 1835 and 1842, the longest Indian war in American history. The last remnants of this struggle did not end until the 1850s.

The removal issue brought to head a simmering cultural war between slaveholding Indians, who were often of mixed blood, and the so-called "full-bloods," who wanted to retain control of ancestral lands at all cost. The slave-owning mixed-bloods had largely abandoned traditional ways and were not as strongly attached to the land they farmed or held as plantations. Many of these slave-owning Indians believed it would be best for the tribes to cooperate, sell their ancestral lands, and move to Oklahoma peacefully. They often violated tribal laws, however, by acting without consulting the full-bloods. This conflict among the Indians was principally about land rather than slavery. The more traditional, non-slave-owning members of the tribes had few moral hesitations about human bondage, but they deeply resented the sale of their lands to whites.

The forced migrations left the Civilized Tribes and their slaves in a new environment not nearly as suitable to the type of agrarian or hunter lifestyle they had known in the East. Moreover, the support and supplies promised by the U.S. government proved inadequate or were never delivered, and many Indians perished from disease and starvation. For example, of 12,000 Cherokee who migrated to Oklahoma, 4,000 died.

The move to Indian Territory significantly transformed the relationships of blacks and Indians. Slavery became more profitable, and slave-owning Cherokees hardened their attitudes as well as their laws. Not surprisingly, some Indian slaveholders treated their enslaved blacks with abject cruelty. The Cherokee mixed-blood James Vann, for example, is reported to have buried a slave alive as punishment for robbery. The newly enacted slave codes adopted restrictive provisions similar to those in southern states: a member of the Cherokee nation could be expelled for teaching blacks to read, and the death penalty was instituted for any slave convicted of raping a Cherokee woman. Cherokee leaders encouraged, moreover, full cooperation with the Federal Government in enforcing the new fugitive slave law enacted as part of the Compromise of 1850, designed to stem the flow of escaped slaves to the northern free states.

The harsher treatment of blacks by the Five Civilized Tribes, including the Seminoles, possibly stemmed in part from the larger number of enslaved blacks held by Indians after the removal. The number of enslaved blacks among the Creeks increased from 502 to 1,532; among the Cherokees, the number grew from 1,592, to 2,511; among the Choctaw, from 512 to 2,349; and among the Chickasaw, the number climbed from several hundred to around 1,000. For the Seminole, the number increased from 500 to less than 1,000, although most scholars dispute this figure as too high in view of the many who are known to have been stolen and sold by slavers or else who had run off to Mexico.

For whatever reasons, enslaved blacks began running away in record numbers after the removal to the Indian Territory. In 1846, an editorial in the *Cherokee Advocate* warned that:

...our country is traversed by numbers [of slaves], who have escaped from their rightful owners; either of the nation or the State, or the Creek country, we have every reason to believe. Some of these have become associated with the band of Seminole slaves under the guardianship of Gen. Jessup—and the mere fact of being thus protected, has infused into them a spirit which leads them with the most bare faced impunity to trespass upon peaceable Cherokees.

Cherokee newspapers frequently ran advertisements placed by Indian slaveholders seeking fugitive slaves, something uncommon before 1835. The formerly enslaved Betty Robinson, remembered later in life the 1842 slave revolt in Cherokee Territory, when 35 slaves, aided by Seminoles, ran away from their masters, stole firearms, and fled to the Creek Nation, stealing clothes, horses, and mules. They were soon apprehended, however, and returned to the Indians who claimed ownership of them.

Indians, Slavery, and the Civil War

As the 1850s progressed, the controversy over slavery divided the Civilized Tribes even as it tore apart the nation. After the 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln and the rapid secession of most of the southern states, the Confederate government actively sought allies from the Five Civilized Tribes. The resources of Indian Territory—men, grain, and livestock—would be valuable to both sides; the strategic location of the Indian Territory was also a consideration. A Confederate Oklahoma would isolate Kansas from the Union. If Indian Territory remained in the Union, however, it might provide a base for invading Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri.

By 1861, all of the Five Civilized Tribes renounced their treaties with the Union and formed alliances with the Confederacy. Many of the tribal members resented the negligence and the

abuse they had suffered under the United States Government in previous years. Also, government Indian agents were predominantly southerners, and they remained in Indian Territory pressuring the tribes to join the Confederacy, offering aid, and claiming that northern Republicans planned, once again, to remove the Indians when the war ended. Stand Watie, who formed a band of Cherokee to fight for the Confederacy, led his men into Cherokee territory, killed Cherokees suspected of supporting the Union, and looted supplies to use against the Union army. He and his men fought in several major battles in the southwestern theater, including the Confederate victory at Wilson's Creek in Missouri and its defeat at Pea Ridge in Arkansas. When Watie capitulated to the Union Army on June 23, 1865, he was the last Confederate general to surrender.

On the other hand, the full-bloods of the Seminole, perhaps a majority of the tribe, and many other Indians sided with the Union. One Creek traditionalist chief, Opothleyohola, led a large contingent of Creek and Cherokee in flight to Kansas, a journey during which they endured numerous attacks from Confederate and Indian forces. Traditionalist-minded Creeks, calling themselves the Ketoowahs after the sacred Cherokee town on the Little Tennessee River, held strong antislavery sentiments and generally supported the Union. The slave-owning mixed-bloods formed in response the Knights of the Golden Circle, and the two factions fought each other in the early days of the Civil War

Fighting, refugees, raiding, guerrilla warfare, and battles devastated Indian Territory during the Civil War, and disrupted the lives of slaves and Indians alike. Some enslaved blacks took advantage of the turmoil by escaping to the free states of the Union and fought against the Confederacy. Many former Cherokee slaves, for example, fled to Kansas and joined the First Kansas Colored Infantry, fighting at the battles of Honey Springs and Cabin Creek. Others simply ran away to Union lines in valiant breaks for freedom.

In 1866, after the victory of Union forces, the Civilized Tribes signed new treaties with the United States, freeing their slaves and cloaking them—in theory but not in fact—with citizenship in the tribal nations, which, among other things, granted them the right to acquire land, actual representation in government, and the protection of Indian laws. This extension of Indian citizenship to blacks was important because Indians held common ownership of the land, and any citizen was allowed to use Indian land unoccupied by other Indians. When the Indian lands were divided up among individual members of the tribes in the 20th century, African-American Indians received full title to property just like any other Native American. The Seminole, Creeks, and Cherokee generally adopted their formerly enslaved blacks fully into their tribes shortly after the Civil War ended; but it was only the Seminoles that immediately extended to them the full rights of citizenship. The Choctaw put off embracing the formerly enslaved as tribal members until 1885; only the Chickasaw, however, refused to take this step, never recognizing their formerly enslaved blacks as full tribal members. (For more a more in-depth look at the Seminoles and formerly enslaved blacks, read the [Seminoles and Slaves: Florida's Freedom Seekers](#) essay.)

Questions to Ponder

1. Why were Native Americans so eager to engage in the enslavement of other Indians before 1750?
2. What long-term effects did the Indian slave trade have on Native Americans, their ways of living, their relationships with each other, and their relationships with Anglo-Americans?
3. Why did Europeans prefer enslaved Africans to enslaved Indians?

4. Do you think it was easier or harder to be a slave held by Native Americans compared to being a slave held by Anglo-Americans?
 5. Imagine what might have happened to enslaved blacks had the Confederacy won the Civil War.
 6. Explain what the formerly enslaved Henry Bibb meant when he said: "If I must be a slave, I had, by far, rather be a slave to an Indian than to a white man."
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