

White Slavery in America

A Brief History

by: Daniel Deville

One thing that is largely overlooked in the history of America is the fact that there were white European slaves. They were in no small numbers either: Close to ¹"two-thirds of the original American colonist came here, not of their own free will, but kidnapped, shanghaied, impressed, duped, beguiled, and yes, in chains...We tend to gloss over it... We'd prefer to forget the whole sorry chapter..." (Elaine Kendall, 1985)

Yes it is true, there was white slavery--even here in America. This was not only in the country's infancy, but lasted until the end of the Civil War when all slaves were freed.

Who were these white slaves? Most were peasants from the British Isles. The nobility of England thought it would be a great way to clean up the streets, to send all the poverty stricken and homeless out of the country. These families were told to choose one of their children to give up or one would be chosen for them.

Besides the state taking a child, there were midnight raiders who would kidnap small children and stack them into ships so much that three-fourths would die from starvation or illness before they reached America.

This was no loss for profit for the raiders as when they got to America they still had plenty of child slaves to sell. It didn't cost the raiders anything anyway, as these children were stolen from their parents.

If these children were not bought at the docks through auctions then they were brought further inland to be sold. If by then a child was not bought it was cheaper to kill the child than to feed it as it was now worthless.

Children often worked in factories 16 hours a day, working through the night with little to no food. There they worked the machines or were part of an assembly line. The conditions these children had to endure were inhumanly cruel.

In 1830, Rev. Richard Oastler, a Methodist minister protested the conditions in these factories and mills where young children labored for long hours, often falling asleep while still standing due to lack of rest and pure exhaustion. The slave masters would beat the children when they fell asleep. Oastler attacked the hypocrisy of the clergymen and politicians who condemned with great fervor the enslavement of blacks while ²"**thousands of our fellow creatures...are at this very moment...in a state of slavery more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system...**".(Cecil Driver, pp36-55; Inglis, p260)

In factories during the Industrial Revolution the labor force consisted primarily of white children stolen from the British Isles. ³ "Here then was a ready source of labor--and a very welcome one. Mill-owners began to appear in London, visiting parish officers, and making the necessary arrangements. What happened to these children was nobody's concern. A Parish in London, having gotten rid of a batch of unwanted pauper children, was unlikely to interest itself in their subsequent fate...".(Inglis, pp75-76,81) These children were sold to factory-owners and brought to America as slaves.

Other jobs still ensured for these children. They were often forced to work as chimney sweeps. A child of age 4-6 was the right size to fit into a chimney. They would often have to crawl up the chute with the fire still lit and with burning ashes filling the small hole. These children often died while stuck in these chutes. These children were white.

The Virginia Company arranged a deal with the City of London to have 100 poor white children "out of the swarms that swarme [sic] in the place" sent to Virginia in 1619 for sale to the wealthy planters of the colony to be used as slave labor. The Privy Council of London authorized the Virginia Co. to "imprison, punish and despose of any of those children upon any disorder by them committed, as cause shall require."

Whites kidnapped in Britain could be exchanged directly for produce from American farmers.

In November 1670, Captain Henry Brayne was ordered to sail from Carolina with a consignment of tember for sale to the West Indies. From there he sailed to London and traded a load of sugar, purchased with the timber profits, for nearly 300 white slaves that were to be sold in Carolina.

⁴In 1657, Richard Ligon wrote in his book, **A True and Exact History**, of a white female slave who was traded for a pig by her master. Mr. Ligon was an eye witness to this. Both the pig and the woman were placed on a scale to measure their weight; a common practice for the sale of livestock.

Few today know about white slavery. These few hold the belief that white slavery was only an "indentured servitude," meaning that such "servants" were working off a debt, usually for apprenticeship or for their voyage here. This did happen but as the exception and not the rule.

There were some indentured servants to be fair, though these were in small numbers, and still occured even after slavery was outlawed. Most of these white slaves, as said above, were kidnapped and sent to America to be slaves for life.

⁵ According to the Parliamentary Diary, in 1659 the English debated the practice of selling British whites into slavery in the New World. In the debate the Whites were referred to not as "indentured servants" but as "slaves" whose "enslavement" threatened the liberties of all Englishmen. (Thomas Burton, vol.4, pp253-274)

To be fair, some whites, as well as blacks, were indentured. When their debt was worked off they were set free.

⁶ "...[F]ree negro boys bound out as apprentices were sometimes given the benefit of an educational clause in the indenture. Two such cases occur in the Princess Anne County Records; one in 1719, 'to learn the trade of tanner, the master to teach him to read'; and the other in 1727, 'to learn the trade of gunsmith, the master to teach him to read the Bible distinctly.'" (Jernegan, p162)

It is often looked at that Blacks were the only slaves and, when considered at all, that whites were only indentured, working off voluntary debts. This is certainly not true as blacks often had better treatment than whites.

⁷ Foster R Dulles writes in *Labor in America: a History*, whether convicts, children 'spirited' from the countryside, or political prisoners, "white slaves experienced discomforts and sufferings on their voyage across the Atlantic that paralleled the cruel hardships undergone by negro slaves on the notorious Middle Passage."

⁸ Dr. Revilo P. Oliver, of the University of Illinois, had this to say of the treatment of white slaves: "...[E]specially after the colonization of the New World, hard labor was often performed by persons who were 'indentured servants'...Many were not actually indentured,

but kidnapped from the British Isles by thugs and sold to slave dealers. One shocking fact you will learn...is that the whites commonly fared worse than black slaves."

There are far too many accounts of white slaves being treated as bad if not worse than black slaves to list here, as space does not allow in this article; infact, there are more than enough accounts to fill an entire Encyclopidia.

⁹"Fugitive slave" laws were enacted against runaway white slaves. William Henning in his 13 volume *Statue at Large of Virginia* records punishment for runaway whites was " to be branded in the cheek with the letter 'R'." They would also cut one or both ears off.

The current image of blacks as predominately the ones who bore scars of the whip is in error!¹⁰ On September 20, 1776 the Continental Congress authorized the whipping of unruly American enlisted men with up to 100 lashes at a time. There is a case on record of rank and file white American troops recieving up to 250 whip lashes. This can be found in Walter J. Fraser, Jr.'s *Reflections of Democracy in Revolutionary South Carolina, in the Southern Common People.*

There were even slave revolts among white slaves. One of the biggest was led by Nathaniel Bacon in Virginia in 1676 when a small army of white slaves and fugitive white slaves joined Bacon against the House of Burgesses and the Govenor. They burned down the city of Jamestown, plundered the plantations and expelled the Govenor, William Berkely. By January 1677 all these men had been captured or killed after fighting all winter, half of which they had no leader. Bacon died on October 26, 1676 during the height of the insurrection. He died of an illness.

Other white slave rebellions include the rising of 1634 which took 800 troops to put down.

¹¹ Richard Ligon was an eyewitness to a proclamation in 1649, "An Act for an Annual Day of Thanksgiving for our deliverance from the Last Insurrection of Servants." He had this to say about it: "Their sufferings being grown to a great height, and their daily complainings to one another...being spread throughout the island; at the last, some amongst them, whose spirits were not able to endure such slavery, resolved to break through it, or die in the act; and so conspired with some others... so that a day was appointed to fall upon their masters and cut all their throats..." (Ligon, p45)

Fourty Irish slaves in 1735 ran a vessel aground off Nova Scotia and excited the entire ship's company.

¹² The British colonial government was not adverse to calling unlikely "police" to suppress white slave revolts: Blacks. Blacks were admitted to the colonial militia responsible for policing white slaves. The aristocratic planters felt the need to "arm part of their blackmen" to assist in suppressing white slave revolts. (Beckles, p17)

In 1710 Thomas Nairne reported that Blacks continued to be members of militias organized by local governments in the Carolinas to police white slaves.

¹³ In 1715 a reward was offered in Maryland to American Indians to capture runaway white slaves and return them to their masters. This can be found in **Maxcy's Laws of Maryland, vol. one.**

When attempts were made to abolish white slavery and stop the flow of both kidnapped and convict labod, the measures were generalls struck down, as when in 1748 Virginia's Burgesses upheld the Act of 1705--which legitimized white slavery.

In the book **Andrew Johnson, A Biography** we learn that President Andrew Johnson, vice-president to Lincon, was sold into indentured servitude at age 10. His term of servitude was to last until he was 21 years of age. He was sent to work in the Selby Tailor shop in Raleigh, North Carolina. There he often worked more than 12 hours a day. After enduring six years of this he escaped and made his way to Tennessee, where he went into buisness hor himself. (Trefousse, p21)

It is the way of our European blood to push on with grit and determination--to overcome adversity. Thus, you've have heard no crying for reparations--no blubbering about oppression. We have forged on--but let us not forget,--for he who forgets history is doomed to repeat it...

NOTES

- 1) Kendall, Elaine, Los Angeles Times, September 1, 1985.
- 2) Driver, Cecil, Tory Radical: The Life of Richard Oastler
Inglis, Brian, Poverty and the Industrial Revolution.
- 3) Ingles Brian, Poverty and the Industrial Revolution.
- 4) Ligon, Richard, A true and Exact History of the Island of
Barbados.

- 5) Burton, Thomas, Parliamentary Diary: 1656-59.
- 6) Jernegan, Marcus W., Laboring and Dependent Classes in
America, 1607-1783.
- 7) Dulles, Foster Rhea, Labor in America, A History.
- 8) Oliver, Revilo P., University of Illinois.
- 9) Henning, William, (editor) Statues at Large; Being a
Collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the First
Session of hte Legislature in the Year 1619.
- 10) Fraser, Walter J. Jr., "Reflections of 'Democracy' in
Revolutionary South Carolina? The Composition of Military
Organizations and the Attitudes and Relationships of
the Officers and Men, 1775-1780," in The Southern Common
People.

- 11) Ligon, Richard, A true and Exact History of the Island of Barbados.
- 12) Beckles, Hilary McD., White Servitude and Black Slavery in Barbados, 1627-1715.
- 13) Maxcy's Laws of Maryland.
- 14) Trefousse, Hans L., Andrew Jounson: A Biography.

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