

The Rise of White Supremacy in 17th-Century Colonial America

Shannon Shih

It is ironic that after more than two centuries of struggle, America still hasn't lived up to the idea that all men are born equal. Non-Whites such as Blacks, Indians, and more recently Hispanics are still treated as inferior to Whites today. But how did this idea come about? To address this important question, we should begin by looking at the 17th century, when the English colonies were developing and constantly in need of labor. To satisfy this demand, the colonists turned to people from Europe and Africa. At first, the English treated foreign laborers, such as the Irish and Africans, as equally inferior to themselves. But over the next century the brunt of English antagonism gradually shifted to the Native Americans and Africans. Historians disagree about the reasons for this change. Some argue that it was fueled by capitalistic motives, while others claim that it was caused by preconceptions that the English brought over from England. Although it is easy to blame the cause of White Supremacy on a single factor, a combination of convenience, economics, and fear from 1620 to 1676 resulted in the foundations of the American phenomenon of White Supremacy.

Court documents hint that slaves existed in the English colonies as early as 1619, when a Dutch ship sold "20. and odd Negroes" to Jamestown.¹ Preexisting slave trade routes to Brazil and the Caribbean made slaves easier to obtain because the infrastructure to transport slaves was already there.² Records from the time also indicate that the economic demand for labor caused the colonists to import more Blacks, compelling the elites to make Blacks inferior to Whites in order to control both Whites and Blacks. Statutes also suggest that the English regarded all non-Europeans with a measure of fear because of the possibility that they would rebel against the English.

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However, in order to determine the root cause of White Supremacy, we must examine the circumstances that surrounded it. Almost as soon as the English settled in the New World, they discovered that profitable cash crops such as tobacco grew well there. As a result, the colonists needed more labor to grow enough cash crops to make a profit. To ease this problem, the Virginian legislature implemented the Headright System, which stipulated that anyone, White or Black, who came to the colonies as an indentured servant would receive a 'headright' (about 5 km²) of land after they served their term. After their indentured terms ran out, the Europeans were free to buy their own land and start their own plantations. However, this system increased competition between plantation owners, which decreased the amount of profit each plantation owner gained. In addition, many of the later indentured servants received plots of land with poorer soil that produced fewer crops, pushing them to seize more land from the Native Americans. Angered by the encroaching colonists in New England, the Native Americans fought back and severely reduced the colonies' population and economy in 1675, an event that was later called King Phillip's War. Meanwhile in Virginia, a group of dissatisfied former indentured servants and free Blacks led by Nathaniel Bacon rose up against the elite planter class in Jamestown in 1676. As a result, the elite class curbed the number of indentured servants allowed in the colony and began to fear and enslave Blacks and Native Americans.

Over the years, there have been many different conclusions about how these events contributed to the rise of White Supremacy. Nineteenth-century historians almost universally believed that slavery and racial prejudice were present from the establishment of the colonies. In the 1940s, the issue came into focus when anti-racist sentiments swept the nation in the wake of the atrocities the Nazis committed during World War II, sparking new ideas and theses. In 1949, Wesley F. Craven, a professor at Princeton University, suggested that Whites might have had a "natural distaste" for Blacks.³ The next year, Oscar and Mary F. Handlin from Harvard University argued instead that the Whites were at first apathetic towards Blacks and Indians, but that slavery developed out of an economic need by the Whites to supplement the labor force.⁴ By 1692, Winthrop Jordan, author of the seminal book *White Over Black*, argued that both slavery and prejudice were "equally cause and effect" in the

process of dehumanizing Blacks, while “economic practicalities shaped the external form of debasement.”⁵ More recently, Robin Blackburn proposed in 1996 that slaveowners utilized slaves because they were more profitable than indentured servants, and used race to justify their practice.⁶ So how did the conditions in colonial America give rise to White Supremacy? It appears that it was a combination of geographical, psychological, and economic conditions that enabled the colonists to discriminate against Blacks and Native Americans.

One of the major factors that allowed slavery to flourish in the English colonies was the existence of other European colonies in the Americas before 1607, which made slaves a convenient source of labor. This encouraged the colonists to use Blacks as slaves and view them as inferior early in the colonies’ history. By the time the English settled in Jamestown in 1607, other European powers such as the Spanish had utilized Africans as slaves for more than a century, indicating that the infrastructure for the transportation of African slaves was already in place.⁷ This enabled the labor-starved colonies to obtain and use slaves as their primary source of labor very easily, which reinforced their association with inferior status. In fact, the first Africans that came to the English colonies in 1619 were brought over by the Dutch, who originally intended to sell the slaves to New Spain.⁸ There is evidence that the English treated the Africans as slaves, or at least differently from other indentured servants, from as early as the 1640s, perhaps because the Dutch sold the Africans as slaves to the English and the English proceeded to use them as such. For example, an inventory compiled in 1643 from Northampton, Virginia valued “Caine the negro, very anncient at” 3000 pounds without listing a serving term, while a presumably White servant named “Nehemia Coventon Aged 12 yeares to serve 8 yeares” was valued at 1000 pounds.⁹ The only other Black person listed was a nameless 12-year-old girl valued at 2000 pounds, again without a serving term.¹⁰ Charging twice the price of a young, healthy indentured servant with 8 years left in her term for a Black girl of the same age and charging even more for an old Black man would make no sense if the Black girl and the Black man were indentured servants. The only explanation for this price discrepancy would be if the two Blacks were slaves for life, which would allow their owner to get many more years of labor out of them than an indentured servant. The lack of

serving terms and full names for both Blacks suggests that Blacks were treated differently from other laborers and perhaps even regarded as unequal to the Whites. Furthermore, that this appeared in an inventory suggests that such valuations were probably already standard practice. Indeed, a Rhode Island law written in 1652 explicitly stated that it is a “common course amongst English men to buy negers, to...have them for service or slaves forever.”¹¹ The law then also prohibited slavery “for the preventing of such practices among us,” implying the colonists regarded slavery as subhuman and immoral.¹² This shows that the colonies that did allow slavery, such as Virginia, were aware that their actions were denigrating the Blacks, but continued it anyway, indicating that the economic benefit of slavery encouraged the Whites to overlook the degradation of Blacks.

Due to the economic profitability of using slaves to provide labor, the population of Black slaves in the colonies rapidly increased, driving slaveowners to promote the image that Blacks were inferior to the Whites in order to pacify the lower class Whites, who felt threatened by the influx of Black slaves. Over the course of the 17th century, the demand for cash crops from the colonies grew steadily. In fact, “by 1670...half of the adult male population in England smoked tobacco daily” and the consumption of tobacco per capita grew 229% from 1620 to 1698.¹³ This demand caused plantation owners to hire more laborers in order to produce more tobacco, which led to periodic labor shortages that put the problem of labor at the forefront of legislators’ minds, as evidenced by the number of laws pertaining to slavery during the time. This indicates that the plantation owners’ desire for profit outpaced the infrastructure needed to provide enough indentured servants to satisfy demand, pushing the colonists to turn to the most convenient solution: African slaves.

By definition, slaves had to work for life, which provided on average around thirty years of labor, but an indentured servant would only provide labor for a maximum of around seven years, and the cost of retraining a new indentured servant to replace the old one would also add to the cost of labor. Slaves also “were in no position to claim land or demand wages” and could not “legally desert the planter,” making

slaves much more reliable laborers in a business where “the demand for labour was intense and timing was critical.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the Blacks’ darker skin made it much easier to find runaway Black slaves within a free White population.¹⁵ The price of a slave also fell between 1650 and 1690 due to increased competition that made slaves more plentiful (see Figure 1), making slaves a more popular option to plantation owners in the New World.¹⁶ However, when the population of Blacks rose substantially, many White indentured servants felt threatened by the Blacks.¹⁷ In response to those economic and social factors, slaveowners “stimulated a racial fear and solidarity which helped” the slaveowner justify the use of Black slaves because they were “dangerous” and “[rally] the support of white smallholders,” who would then have the privilege of being part of the “ruling race” at the same time. This enabled the wealthier slaveowners to control both poor Whites and Blacks by degrading the Blacks, eventually giving rise to White Supremacy.¹⁸

Alongside the economic origins of White Supremacy is evidence in the lawbooks. After several destructive conflicts such as Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676 and King Phillip’s War of 1675, the English grew fearful of Blacks and Native Americans due to the threat that they posed to the colonists and the vast differences in appearance and culture, causing them to limit the freedoms of both groups and thus giving them status as second-class citizens. From as early as 1640, the colonists limited the legal rights of Blacks by prohibiting them from owning “arms and ammunition,” which suggests that the colonists feared armed insurrections from discontented Black slaves and sought to alleviate this fear by denying certain rights from the Blacks.¹⁹ Virginia laws also clearly establish the attitudes of the colonists towards Blacks. For instance, an act passed in 1662 required “any christian...[who] committ[ed] ffornication with a negro man or woman...[must] pay double the ffines imposed by the former act,” indicating that the legislators viewed Blacks as disgusting and feared racial mixing.²⁰

Native Americans, the only other non-White group in the colonies, were not spared discrimination. Before King Phillip’s War, Native Americans were virtually equal to any other English colonist. The House of Burgesses in Jamestown decreed that Native Americans could

not be sold as “slaves nor for any longer than English of the like ages” in 1662.²¹ After King Phillip’s War erupted in 1675, however, the legislators limited the rights of Native Americans. In 1676, they passed an act titled “an act for carrying on a warre against the barbarous Indians,” which decreed, “all Indians taken in warr be held and accounted slaves dureing life.”²² This reversal of attitudes before and after conflict between Native Americans and Whites clearly illustrates that fear of violence from the Native Americans motivated the colonists to take away privileges from the Native Americans, demoting the entire race to a status below that of Whites.

Perhaps the largest factor that convinced the colonists to change their labor practices was Bacon’s Rebellion. This event forced the colonists to reconsider the social impact of their labor on the colony, leading them to denigrate Blacks to the same level as the Native Americans in order to prevent Blacks and White indentured servants from rising up against the elites. Even before the rebellion, there were concerns that “single freemen (whose labor will hardly maintain them) or men in such debt... [will] defect to [the Dutch] in hopes of bettering their condition,” indicating that the rich upper class was fearful of rebellion from former indentured servants.²³ This thought was further reinforced once the colonists witnessed former indentured servants and Blacks burn down Jamestown together, demonstrating the destruction that discontented lower class colonists could inflict on the colony. Thus, when the British government reestablished control over the colony, the colonists began to look for alternatives to indentured servitude to avoid increasing the population of dissatisfied former indentured servants. As a result, they began discriminating more based on race in order to control the poor, thus preventing the Blacks and Whites from uniting by making Blacks inferior to Whites.²⁴ Records show that the number of servants in the Chesapeake colonies declined sharply after 1680, while the African population grew exponentially, surpassing the servant population after 1680 (see Figure 2). This shows that the slaveowners were beginning to replace their indentured laborers with slaves.²⁵ This movement towards slavery clearly shows that the slaveowners were looking for alternatives to indentured servants, accelerating the dehumanization of Blacks in the colonies through enslavement.

White Supremacy arose in the English colonies because of a combination of certain factors that made the lawmakers of the colonies place Whites at the top of their newly established society. Despite its ancient origins, White Supremacy is still a very prevalent issue today, if the riots over police shootings of Blacks and the overwhelming pervasiveness of Whites in the top echelons of society are anything to go by. Knowing how White Supremacy even came into being would help us prevent similar mentalities from arising elsewhere, and perhaps even figure out how to end it. ●

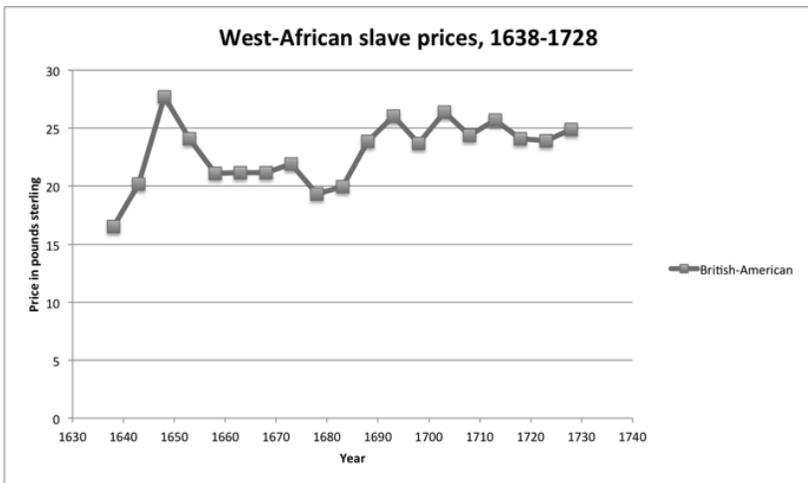


Figure 1: Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, “British-American and West African,” in *Historical Statistics of Black*, 1.

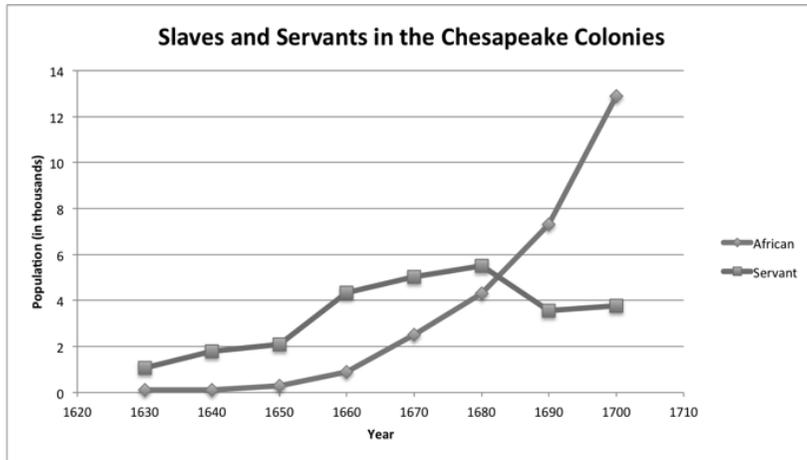


Figure 2: Source: Matson, *The Economy of Early*, 155.

Notes

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9. John Neale et al., "An Inventory of the goods Cattles and Chattles of and belonging unto thestate of Mr. William Burdett deceased," 1643, in *County Court Records of Accomack-Northampton, Virginia, 1640-1645*, comp. Susie M. Ames (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1973), 419-23.
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12. Ibid.
13. Allan Brandt, *The Cigarette Century: The Rise, Fall, and Deadly Persistence of the Product that Defined America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), 21, accessed April 17, 2015, [http://books.google.com/books?id=yybaN6j4IpEC](http://books.google.com/books?id=yybaN6j4IpEC;).; Jordan Goodman, *Tobacco in History: The Cultures of Dependence* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2005), 57.
14. Blackburn, *The Making of New World*, 315.

15. *Ibid.*, 316.

16. U.S. Bureau of the Census, "British-American and West African Slave Prices," 1970, in *Historical Statistics of Black America: Media to Vital Statistics*, comp. Jessie Carney Smith and Carrell Peterson Horton (New York, NY: Gale Research Inc, 1995), 1850-1.

17. Blackburn, *The Making of New World*, 323.

18. *Ibid.*, 323-4

19. Virginia Assembly, "ACT X," 1639, in *The Statutes at Large: being a collection of all the laws of Virginia, from the first session of the legislature, in the year 1619. Published pursuant to an act of the General assembly of Virginia, passed on the fifth day of February one thousand eight hundred and eight*, comp. William Waller Hening (New York, NY: Bartow, 1814), 1:226, accessed February 3, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/statutesatlargeb01virg>.

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21. Virginia Assembly, "ACT CXXXVIII: Concerning Indians," 1661-2, in *The Statutes at Large*.

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