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1/4/2023

Florence Kidder Memorial Scholarship: Africans in the 13 Colonies

Before the slave trade, Africans lived in various societies, ranging from small, kin-based communities to large, centralized states. They engaged in various economic activities, including farming, herding, fishing, and trade. Many West Africans lived in villages and were part of a larger community that shared a common culture and traditions. They often lived in close-knit extended families and were active in their community, participating in social, religious, and political events. Africans valued their cultural traditions and emphasized community and family ties.

During the European age of exploration, countries competed for access to the new world. Colonizers enslaved Native Americans, but they were not a suitable source of labor. European diseases such as smallpox wiped out the Native American population. Those who survived the old-world sicknesses ran away because it was their homeland. As a result, a desperate need for labor arose and led to the Transatlantic slave trade in Africa. "After 1713, English ships dominated the slave trade... At the peak of the trade during the 1790s, they transported 50,000 per year (Hine, 2.3). "Although indentured servitude had its reign, Europeans came together around the idea that Africans were inferior in all aspects of life, and chattel slavery became the pillar of the economy." Slaves were transported, seasoned, and sold. Many slave ships entered the Americas in the Bahamas, but as time progressed, Charleston, South Carolina, became the largest port for slaves. They structured a new social class where all whites were equal and significantly above Africans. Miscegenation was no factor in deciding the status of the slave.

Planters determined who was a slave based on the position of the mother. In doing so, this kept slaves in bondage and guaranteed masters future generations of laborers. Until the mid-late 19th century, slavery was an inexpensive source of labor that drove America by producing goods that fueled the growth of a national economy.

Slavery stripped Africans of their human rights and forced them to bear mental, physical, and emotional trauma. With all forces against them, they developed ways to survive slavery. The movie *Goodbye, Uncle Tom* depicts the harsh, inhumane treatment that slaves faced. When a slave refused to eat, their teeth were knocked out and food was forced down their throat. Europeans saw Africans as animals, not humans. They had no rights, no citizenship, and no authority.

The African slave culture is still visible in society. "Music was a way slaves could cope or express themselves without a white person looking over their shoulder." The secular songs told of the slave's loves, work, and floggings and expressed his moods and the reality of his oppression (Blassingame, 115). "Not only did this help slaves get through slavery, but it transformed music in the south." Drawing on their African musical heritage, Southern slaves had created by 1850 music that would later be popularized as "the blues." "Slaves often referred to fear, infidelity, love, hard times, work, slave coffles, conjuration, food, drinking, sex, and freedom in their songs" (Blassingame, 121). This call-and-response type of music preserved the practices of the African homeland. African American cooks, primarily women, developed a distinctive cuisine based on African culinary traditions. They fried meat and fish, served sauce over rice, and flavored vegetables with bits of smoked meat (Hine, 6.6). As a part of their diet, masters gave slaves the waste from their meals or animal feed. They feasted on holidays or celebrations. The term "soul food" comes from the delicious food slaves could prepare from the

scraps thrown at them. It spread across the South, and to this day, southerners are head over heels for savory soul food. The reminiscence of African culture still stands to this day.

As an African American male, I am proud to say I know about the history of my ancestors. Although my ancestors were treated like animals and without human rights, I could not imagine how slavery would look in modern America. I want to learn more about the causes of the slave trade and why Europeans chose Africans. What would life be like if Africans were never enslaved?

Works Cited

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