American Slavery: 1619 to 1865

The “Triangle of Trade” from Europe, to Africa, to America, and back to Europe across the northern Atlantic

Early 1500s: Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch instigate the trans-Atlantic slave trade
1619: Dutch traders brought the first African slaves to the Jamestown colony
1865: Slavery was outlawed in all American states and territories by the 13th Amendment
I. Middle Passage
   a. Slave “castles” in equatorial western Africa
   b. Slaves traded for weapons, textiles, iron tools
   c. More than a voyage: a psychological torture to dehumanize people
      i. High mortality: disease, torture, murder, suicide
   d. Ended with slave auction block in American port cities

Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1700-1810
Number of Africans arriving alive in the Americas and Europe
9,645,000

British North America
500,000

Dutch America
500,000

Spanish Central America
1,500,000

Portuguese Brazil
3,650,000

European 175,000

West Indies

British 1,660,000

French 1,660,000

Approx. 14% died on slave ships
II. Arrival in the New World

a. Most slaves brought to North America had already lived in the Caribbean and South America (little direct trade with western Africa)

b. Mixing of west African culture
   i. polytheistic/animistic religion
   ii. oral communication culture
   iii. foodways: okra, rice, yams
   iv. balanced sex ratio led to natural population increase

c. Geographic distribution (originally all British North American colonies included slaves)
   i. New Amsterdam/New York and Narragansett Bay
   ii. Chesapeake Bay: tobacco
   iii. Carolina and Georgia coast: rice, indigo
   iv. Louisiana and Gulf Coast: sugar
   v. “Black Belt” across the South: cotton
   vi. Little slavery in Appalachia, Ozarks, and “piney woods”
III. The Slave Code and Control
a. Person vs. Property: chattel slavery
   i. No legal rights, no citizenship, no literacy
b. Slave patrol: posse of local white males who monitored slave behavior
c. Punishments: Colonial mutilation vs. Antebellum whipping

IV. The Slaves’ World
a. Family & Marriage (non-legal, but recognized)
   i. Christianity and morale issues played a role, but property rights superseded
   ii. Children born of slave mothers were slaves
b. The “Quarters”
   i. Wood, brick, or “tabby” shelters for slaves
   ii. “Cabin Culture” preserved African cultural traits
      1. Story-telling, music, religion, culinary/cuisine

  c. Food & Medicine
     i. Corn & Pork, plus some regional supplements (or master’s discretion)
     ii. Poor medicine (no germ theory, based on Four Humors)
d. Religion:
   i. Hebrew-Christian traditions emphasized the relationship between the authoritative “father” and dutiful “children”
   ii. The promise of heavenly afterlife after the suffering of earthly life had special poignancy
   iii. The figure of Moses became popular among African Americans
   iv. In Catholic areas, the pantheon of saints resembled African polytheism, and voodoo/hoodoo resulted
   v. Spirituals

V.  Work: The Central Feature of Slave Life
a. Agricultural: “from sun up to sun down”—by far the most common
   i. Yeoman farms vs. plantations
      1. drivers, overseers, managers, and owners
      2. year-round work (Christmas/Jubilee)
   ii. Example: Cotton
      1. Mar-Apr: planting, 6” rows
      2. May-June: hoeing, 8-10 days after sprout
      3. July: “laid by”
      4. Aug-Oct: picking, from 200 lbs. to 500 lbs./day
b. Domestic
c. Urban (ship-building, some industry)

VI.  Resistance
a. Most slaves did not internalize their identity as slaves, but resisted (even if only psychologically)
b. Sabotage: Minor & Major
c. Runaways, Maroon colonies, and the Underground Railroad
   i. Obstacles: no maps, long distance, slave patrol
   ii. Chronic offenders were “sold down the river”
d. Revolt:
i. Stono Rebellion 1739 (instigated by Spanish Florida)
ii. Louisiana Revolt of 1811 (St. John’s Parish, 40+ executed)
iii. Nat Turner’s Rebellion: 1831, 60+ Anglo Virginians killed
iv. Saint-Domingue (1789) led by L’Ouverture (12 to 1 ratio of slave population to masters/free)