

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

[\[Close this Window\]](#)

The Origins and Nature of New World Slavery

American Slavery in Comparative Perspective

Digital History ID 3044

[Previous](#) [Next](#)

Of the 10 to 16 million Africans who survived the voyage to the New World, over one-third landed in Brazil and between 60 and 70 percent ended up in Brazil or the sugar colonies of the Caribbean. Only 6 percent arrived in what is now the United States. Yet by 1860, approximately two thirds of all New World slaves lived in the American South.

For a long time it was widely assumed that southern slavery was harsher and crueler than slavery in Latin America, where the Catholic church insisted that slaves had a right to marry, to seek relief from a cruel master, and to purchase their freedom. Spanish and Portuguese colonists were thought to be less tainted by racial prejudice than North Americans and Latin American slavery was believed to be less subject to the pressures of a competitive capitalist economy.

In practice, neither the Church nor the courts offered much protection to Latin American slaves. Access to freedom was greater in Latin America, but in many cases masters freed sick, elderly, crippled, or simply unneeded slaves in order to relieve themselves of financial responsibilities.

Death rates among slaves in the Caribbean were one third higher than in the South, and suicide appears to have been much more common. Unlike slaves in the South, West Indian slaves were expected to produce their own food in their "free time," and care for the elderly and the infirm.

The largest difference between slavery in the South and in Latin America was demographic. The slave population in Brazil and the West Indies had a lower proportion of female slaves, a much lower birth rate, and a higher proportion of recent arrivals from Africa. In striking contrast, southern slaves had an equal sex ratio, a high birthrate, and a predominantly American-born population.

Slavery in the United States especially distinctive in the ability of the slave population to increase its numbers by natural reproduction. In the Caribbean, Dutch Guiana and Brazil, the slave death rate was so high and the birth rate so low that slaves could not sustain their population without imports from Africa. The average number of children born to an early 19th century southern slave woman was 9.2--twice as many as in the West Indies.

In the West Indies, slaves constituted 80 to 90 percent of the population, while in the South only about a third of the population was slaves. Plantation size also differed widely. In the Caribbean, slaves were held on much larger units, with many plantations holding 150 slaves or more. In the American South, in contrast, only one slaveowner held as many as a thousand slaves, and just 125 had over 250 slaves. Half of all slaves in the United States worked on units of twenty or fewer slaves; three quarters had fewer than fifty.

These demographic differences had important social implications. In the American South, slave owners lived on their plantations and slaves dealt with their owners regularly. Most planters placed plantation management, supply purchasing, and supervision in the hands of black drivers and foremen, and at least two thirds of all slaves worked under the supervision of black drivers. Absentee ownership was far more common in the West Indies, where planters relied heavily on paid managers and relied on a distinct class of free blacks and mulattos to serve as intermediaries with the slave population.

Another important difference between Latin America and the United States involved conceptions of race. In Spanish and Portuguese America, an intricate system of racial classification emerged. Compared with the British and French, the Spanish and Portuguese were much more tolerant of racial mixing, an attitude encouraged by a shortage of European women, and recognized a wide range of racial gradations, including black, mestizo, quadroon, and octoroon. The American South, in contrast, adopted a two category system of racial categorization in which any person with a black mother was automatically considered to be black.

Copyright 2012 Digital History