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Preached in U.S. public schools and political speeches are the ideals of equality, democracy and freedom that set us apart from other global powers. However, this narrative is counter to the historical reality of early America. From the moment the pilgrims and young men of the Virginia Company reached the New World, ideological differences between the natives and new colonists characterized most of their worries. The young men in Virginia, many of them having escaped primogeniture in England, were eager to make a name for themselves. In New England, the pilgrims had escaped economic oppression on the basis of their religious beliefs; they, too, were eager to succeed in a new land. In pursuit of economic freedom, both sets of colonists felt determined to acquire more land. The early motivations of the first colonists set the tone for the next two centuries where economic success was king. Early America was shaped by a consistent chase for economic enterprise that made racism and slavery central to the American identity at the time.

The conditions under which early colonists came to Virginia and New England lent them an unwavering determination to economically succeed - this success was contingent on acquiring new land through systemic race-based violence against the natives. Land was currency in early America. Although the pilgrims and men of Jamestown would struggle to make anything of it for decades, acquiring land was seen as the ultimate goal for growth. The early colonists had brought with them a culture of private property ownership that clashed with the natives' communal land use. In several early accounts, the colonists characterized the land in New England as wasted by the natives since economic output was not the priority. This clash in ideology was coupled with the settlers' distasteful views of the natives as savages. In Mary Rowlandson's personal accounts¹, she often described the natives as creatures and

¹ "Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson." *The Virginia Anthology*, Project Gutenberg Archive Foundation, pages.shanti.virginia.edu/Marking_Up_Johnson/narrative-of-the-captivity-and-restoration-of-mrs-mary-rowlandson/?upm_export=pdf.

barbarians. Rowlandson's depictions of roaring savages painted the natives as almost subhuman. The language she used in her accounts is reflective of the colonial image of the natives as inferior to their white neighbors. Similar dehumanizing language would be used to describe black slaves nearly a century later.

Ultimately, the racial and economic differences between the natives and colonists led to a bloody period of wars in pursuit of land. In New England, competition for control of the fur trade led to the Pequot War which solidified the Englishs' ability to wage war against the natives. As a result, hundreds of Pequot people were killed and their civilization left in shambles. Later on, King Philip's War would officially settle any major conflicts with the natives by decimating the population in New England. The bloody conflicts between colonists and natives undoubtedly benefited the colonial economic trajectory. In an account of the Barbarous Massacre² in 1622, the government in Virginia even detailed the benefits to the colonists - noting provisions that would be given to the colony and the entitlement of native land to relatives of lost.

The normalization of race-based exploitation in the early years of the colonies set the foundation for an easy cultural transition to the acceptance of race-based slavery. If the colonists could validate a practical genocide against the Natives, the same reasoning could be used to support the cruelties that came along with a system of enslavement.

Although New England had found its footing through small communities and victories against native tribes, the Virginia Company was on the brink of failure and desperate for profits. Jamestown was suffering from high mortality rates and its failure to deliver profits in England made the colonists desperate. In 1609, as a last ditch effort to revive the colony, John Rolfe was sent to Virginia and brought with him tobacco seeds from the West Indies. To the colonists' surprise, the tobacco grew well in the Virginia soil. The newfound supply of tobacco in America coincided with massive market demand in

² "The Records of the Virginia Company of London ." *Image 573 of Records of the Virginia Company, 1606-26, Volume III: Miscellaneous Records*, Library of Congress , www.loc.gov/resource/mtj8.vc03/?sp=573.

Europe, where its popularity had been slowly growing for about a century. As with any cash crop, to keep up with demand in Europe, the Virginians had to look to labour sources. Initially, indentured servitude was the preferred form of labor. High mortality rates in the Chesapeake Bay meant that indentured servants rarely lived out their seven year term - essentially guaranteeing free labor to tobacco farmers at the time. However, as mortality rates lowered and the tobacco market grew to be incredibly profitable, indentured servants grew resentful. Two key catalysts were responsible for the transition from indentured servitude to slavery: Bacon's rebellion and King Charles' II acquisition of the Royal African Company of England. In 1672, King Charles II introduced England into the slave trade by creating the Royal African Company. As a result, the colonies had an economic incentive to switch to slavery. Only four years later would this transition be solidified by Bacon's rebellion in 1676. Bacon's rebellion, a violent protest against wealthy tobacco farm owners, highlighted the flaws within the current labor system. Bacon's rebellion instilled fear in the people of Virginia and the Chesapeake Bay. They knew that any labor source would come with possibilities of insurrection. This fear brought the need to strictly *control* the labor force, which was transitioning to slavery.

Racism became the mechanism through which slavery functioned and succeeded. The seemingly unbound profits of tobacco incentivized the institutionalization of slavery and the integration of racism as a means of control. As slavery became the dominant means of labor, both poor whites and the rich elite allied themselves in the name of racial superiority. In 1640, the case of John Punch in Virginia established how the law could be interpreted differently on the basis of race. John Punch, a black indentured servant, and two white indentured servants were captured escaping in Maryland and taken to court. For the two white indentured servants, the court ruled that they would serve out their times according to their indentures plus an additional year. However, for the black indentured servant, Virginia ruled that he would serve his master for the rest of his natural life.³ This court case demonstrated that whites were entitled to a

³ "Affidavit, 1693." *Virginia Museum of History & Culture*, 21 Sept. 2020, www.virginiahistory.org/node/2290.

leniency that blacks were not. From this moment onwards, indentured white servants understood that even they were superior to their black counterparts.

Later on, Virginia would set a precedent by enacting law codes that explicitly defined this racial hierarchy. In 1680, a Virginia law was passed to prevent negroe slave insurrections. The law stated that if any black person or other slave opposed any christian, they would be subject to thirty whippings. The language used directly equated one's blackness with enslavement. Similarly, the word christian was used interchangeably for the word white. The use of the word "negroe" in labor laws to denote slavery set an important precedent. Such obscure language meant that any black person, whether "free" or enslaved, was threatened by the legal system in early America. In 1705, a Virginia court solidified the legitimacy of race-based slavery, enacting that all black, mulatto and indian slaves were considered real estate.⁴ Now, only thirty three years after the Royal African Company was chartered, any person other than whites were legally considered property. This law is critical in understanding how white colonists built a culture of dehumanizing black and brown individuals for their own benefit. With this 1705 law, slaves, specifically any "negro, mulatto [or] indian," were no longer seen not as human but as an economic resource for productivity.

The codification of race-based slavery grew parallel to tobacco growth and a changing demographic in the Chesapeake bay. From 1680-1710, the population of blacks in the Chesapeake doubled every eleven years while the white population grew much slower only doubling every thirty-five years. (Kulikoff) It is clear that to manage a growing black population, the colonies instituted a legal system of oppression and inherent racism. As markets grew in the south and middle colonies, so did the economic incentives to maintain slavery. By the end of the 18th century, nearly 22 million pounds of tobacco was being exported annually to England. (Kulikoff) The southern economy became so heavily reliant on tobacco and cash crops that slavery became integral to their survival. This economic

⁴ "Of Servants and Slaves in Virginia, 1705." *Robert Beverley on Slavery, 1705; 1705 Virginia Law on Servants and Slaves*, National Humanities Center, nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/power/text8/BeverlyServSlaves.pdf.

dependence was nationally recognized. Even in the constitution of the United States, in section 2 of article 1, slaves were said to be $\frac{3}{5}$ of a free individual. This both implied that slaves were less of a human being than one who was free and granted more political power to the South. The founding fathers *did not* denounce slavery and instead saw it as a necessary component of American life. With the 1790 naturalization act soon after, it became clear that whiteness was synonymous with the American identity by stating that only free whites could be granted citizenship. Racism was a necessary evil; there *had* to be a distinction between black slaves and free whites for both economic success and cultural unity.

The culture and labor system put in place by the tobacco boom facilitated the quick success of cotton. Prior to the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, slavery had been waning as an economic institution. The demand for tobacco had slowed and slaves devalued during the time of the American revolution. However, Eli Whitney's invention revived the need for a controlled labor system. The United States once again had the opportunity to capitalize on European markets - the industrial revolution in England and the rest of Europe made cotton a highly demanded raw material. The infrastructure left behind by the tobacco market allowed for an easy transition to quick, efficient cotton production. With the support of state and national law, the constitution and a culture that accepted slavery as the norm, the south could continue expanding and exploiting blacks in the name of cotton.

Cotton came to dominate the American economic landscape and, in doing so, implicated both the north and the south in the system of slavery. The north was beginning its own industrial revolution thanks to the introduction of steam engines and factories. Industries in the north soon relied on the cotton picked from slaves in the South. This tight economic relationship between north and south provided America with a national economic incentive to keep slavery afloat. Slavery was arguably the most valuable asset for America as a nation. In 1860, the value of slaves was three times higher than the total amount of capital invested in banks and seven times greater than all of the currency in circulation in the U.S. (Steven) And cotton, which depended on this slavery, was America's leading export for over a century. New England was especially reliant on southern grown cotton, consuming 67 percent of cotton used by U.S. mills in 1860. (Historical Statistics)

In essence, the American economic identity *was* cotton. Without it, New England manufacturing would not have been able to thrive and export at the rate it did. In the south too, cotton defined the cultural and economic landscape. Plantations of the elite fueled by slave labor became the norm. The Mississippi River Valley, thanks to king cotton, was home to more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the U.S. (Timmons) Despite growing wealth disparities in the south between wealthy white landowners and poor whites, white racial unity veiled these concerns. John Brown, in his account of life in Georgia⁵, illustrated the undeniable connection between the cotton economy and the growth of slavery. He described that rises in the price of cotton caused a rise in demand for slaves in Georgia, making a direct correlation between the commodity and slave demand. John Brown's account gives a glimpse into the positive relationship between cotton production in America and the growth of slavery as a whole.

America's early identity was its economic identity. The success of the American economy relied so heavily on slavery as an institution that to get rid of it seemed to threaten the nation's very survival. This proved true when the south's economic security was threatened by the prospect of abolition - indeed, racism was so central to identity that it led to civil war. Southerners, nonetheless Americans, were willing to die for their economic success & the system that made it run. American history is thus uglier and more complex than it is often painted as. The United States could not have risen as a formidable global power without its role as an economic leader. However, in order to lead economically, the United States had to maintain the racist principles that kept its economy alive and efficient.

⁵ "Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings and Escape of John Brown ." John Brown, Fl. 1854. Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England., 2001, docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jbrown/jbrown.html.

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