

### Becoming a Modern-Day Freedom Fighter Tour

Watch the 5 min 38 sec video : Hazard, A. (2014). *The Atlantic slave trade: What too few textbooks told you*. TedEd: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NXC4Q\\_4JVg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NXC4Q_4JVg)

1. Why did the Atlantic Slave Trade begin and why did it grow?
2. How did slavery change over time?
3. Describe the experiences of the enslaved.
4. What was the relationship between race and slavery?
5. How did the Atlantic Slave Trade impact Africa?

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### Historical Foundations of Race

National Museum of African American History and Culture. *Historical Foundations of Race*.  
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race>

Modified from original text

1

Race is a human-invented, term used to describe and categorize people into social groups based on characteristics like skin color, physical features, and genetic heredity. Race is not a valid biological concept. However, it is a real **social construction** that gives or denies benefits and privileges. American society developed the notion of race early in its formation to justify its new economic system of capitalism, which depended on the institution of forced labor, especially the enslavement of African peoples. To more accurately understand how race and its counterpart, racism, are woven into the very fabric of American society, we must explore the history of how race, white privilege, and anti-blackness came to be.

A social construct is an idea or collection of ideas that have been created and accepted by the people in a society. These constructs serve as an attempt to organize or explain the world around us.

### The Invention of Race

The concept of “race,” as we understand it today, evolved alongside the formation of the United States. The concept of “race” was deeply connected with the evolution of two other terms, “white” and “slave.” The words “race,” “white,” and “slave” were all used by Europeans in the 1500s, and they brought these words with them to North America. However, the words did not have the meanings that they have today. Instead, the needs of the developing American society would transform those words’ meanings into new ideas.

The term “race,” was rarely used before the 1500s. When it was used, it identified groups of people with a similarity or group connection. The modern-day use of the term “race” (identifying groups of people by physical traits, appearance, or characteristics) is a human invention. During the 17th century, European Enlightenment philosophers based their ideas on

the importance of reasoning, rationality, and scientific study. Scientists began classifying things found in nature, such as plants, minerals, and animals, into categories. Soon, they began classifying people as well. Enlightenment beliefs, which started in the late 17th century and grew through the late 18th century, argued that there were natural laws that governed the world and human beings. Today, we know that not all claims made during the Enlightenment Era were true. For example, the false notion that “white” people were naturally smarter, more capable, and more human than nonwhite people became accepted worldwide. This categorization of people became a justification for European colonization and the enslavement of people from Africa.

The concept of slavery has existed for centuries. Enslaved people, “slaves,” are forced to labor, or work, for another person. We can point to the use of the term slave in the Hebrew Bible, ancient societies such as Greece, Rome, and Egypt, as well as during other eras of time. Within the Mediterranean and European regions, before the 16th century, enslavement was acceptable for persons considered heathens or godless non-Christians. At that time, being a slave was not for life or hereditary - meaning the status of a slave did not automatically transfer from parent to child. In many cultures, slaves were still able to earn small wages, gather with others, marry, and potentially buy their freedom. Similarly, peoples of darker skin, such as people from the African continent, were not automatically enslaved or considered slaves.

The word “white” held a different meaning, too. Before the mid-1600s, there is no evidence that the English referred to themselves as being “white people.” This concept did not occur until 1613 when the English society first encountered and contrasted themselves against the East Indians through their colonial pursuits. Even then, the term “white” was rarely used. From about the 1550s to 1600, “white” was exclusively used to describe elite English women, because the whiteness of skin signaled that they were persons of a high social class who did not go outside to labor. However, the term white did not refer to elite English men because the idea that men did not leave their homes to work could signal that they were lazy, sick, or unproductive. Initially, the racial identity of “white” referred only to Anglo-Saxon people and has changed due to time and geography. (The term Anglo-Saxon refers to settlers from the German regions of Angeln and Saxony, who made their way over to Britain after the fall of the Roman Empire around AD 410.) As the concept of being white evolved, the number of people considered white would grow as people wanted to push back against the increasing numbers of people of color, due to emancipation and immigration. Activist Paul Kivel says, “Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white.”

European colonists’ use of the word “white” to refer to people who looked like themselves, grew to become entangled with the word “race” and “slave” in the American colonies in the mid-1660s. American colonists created “races” of “savage” Indians, “subhuman” Africans, and “white” men. These social constructions successfully united the white colonists, marginalized

native people, and permanently enslaved most African-descended people for generations. Tragically, American culture, from the very beginning, developed around the ideas of race and racism.

**Discussion:** *In your own words ...*

*What is “race?”*

*What was the purpose for constructing the concept of race?*

*Why do social constructions exist?*

## 2

### **Race (and Racism) in Colonial and Early America**

European colonists came to North America in search of a place to create a new society. The ideals of Enlightenment spread to the North American colonies and formed the basis of their democracy. However, these same ideals formed the most brutal kind of servitude - chattel slavery.

Before 1500, the notion of hierarchy was a common principle. In a hierarchy, people or groups are ranked one above the other according to status or authority. Every person belonged to a hierarchical structure in some way: children to parents, parishioners to churches, laborers to landowners, peasants to nobles, etc. However, as the Enlightenment ideas of the natural rights of man became more common through the 18th century, the concept of equality became common as well. People came to believe that peasants had the same rights as nobles. At the same time, people still desired to classify themselves, especially if they could rank themselves above others. By categorizing humans by “race,” a new hierarchy was invented based on what many considered fact-based science.

Within the first decades of the 1600s, the first Africans were captured and brought to the American colonies as enslaved labor (most colonies had made enslavement legal). At this time in colonial America, enslaved Africans were just one source of labor. The English settlers used European indentured servants and enslaved indigenous people as other forms of forced labor. These groups of enslaved and forced labor often worked side-by-side and co-mingled socially. The notion of enslavement changed throughout the 1600s. In this early period, enslavement was not an automatic condition, nor did it apply to all African and African-descended people. Very importantly, being enslaved was not necessarily a permanent lifetime status. The boundaries between groups were more fluid but began to shift over the next few decades to make strict distinctions, which eventually became law.

By the late 1600s, significant shifts began to happen in the American colonies. As the population increased, there were more demands for land and labor to work the land. When wealth was the goal, landowners wanted a lot of labor and a very low cost. Indentured

servitude lost its attractiveness as it became less profitable to use servants of European descent. White settlers began to turn to slavery as the primary source of forced labor in many of the colonies. African people were seen as more desirable slaves because they brought advanced farming skills, carpentry, and bricklaying skills, as well as metal and leatherworking skills. Characterizations of Africans in the early period of colonial America were mostly positive, and the colonists saw their future as dependent on this source of labor.

The evolution of Virginia's law demonstrates how the system of chattel slavery and, along with it, anti-blackness (*opposed to or hostile toward black people*), became common in colonial America. Chattel slavery is the enslaving and owning of human beings and their offspring as property, able to be bought, sold, and forced to work without wages. Chattel slaves were legal property and were not guaranteed the option to earn or purchase their freedom. This is different from other systems of forced, unpaid, or low-wage labor also considered to be slavery.

A significant turning point came in 1662 when Virginia enacted a law of hereditary slavery, which meant the status of the mother determined the status of the child. This law was different from English common law, which assigned the legal status of children based on their father's legal status. Thus, children of enslaved women would automatically share the legal status of "slave." This doctrine laid the foundation for the natural increase of the enslaved in the Americas and increased the abuse of female slaves by white planters or other men. Each child born by an enslaved woman was now chattel, owned property, and was viewed as a labor source that could be sold for profit. In Virginia, 1667, a new law deemed it legal to keep enslaved people in bondage even if they converted to Christianity. Prior to this, enslavement was acceptable for persons considered heathens or non-Christians. With this decree, the justification for black servitude changed from a religious status to a designation based on race.

Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 had a lasting impact on anti-blackness and the racial divide in the colonial Chesapeake region. During the uprising, coalitions of poor white people and free and enslaved Africans rebelled against the rising elite, planter class. The goal was to acquire land reserved for Virginia's indigenous people. Wealthy planters were shaken by the fact that a rebel militia that united white and black servants and slaves had destroyed Jamestown, the colonial capital. After Bacon's Rebellion, Virginia's lawmakers began to make legal distinctions between "white" and "black" inhabitants. By permanently enslaving Virginians of African descent and giving poor white indentured servants and farmers some new rights and status, they hoped to separate the two groups and make it less likely that they would unite again in rebellion. The Africans physical distinctiveness marked their newly created subordinate position. To further separate the social and legal connections between lower-class whites and African laborers (enslaved or free), laws were put into place to control the interaction between the two groups. These laws created a hierarchy based on race.

**Discussion:** *In your own words ...*

*What was the significance of adopting concepts of race, slavery, and hierarchy into law?*

*How and why did “white” people accept the concepts of race, slavery, and hierarchy?*

*How and why was race-based slavery justified?*

### 3

### **Liberty and Slavery**

American colonists’ belief in natural laws produced revolutionary political thoughts in the last part of the 18th century. New generations of Americans, many born in the colonies, seized upon ideas like that of John Locke’s “Social Contract” which argues that all people naturally had a right to life, liberty and property, and that any created government is legitimate only with the consent of those people being governed. Thomas Jefferson built upon these ideas in the Declaration of Independence by proclaiming that “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” were inalienable, God-given rights to all men. After the Revolution, the U.S. Constitution adopted the protection of property within its words. It is within these founding documents that the concept of liberty - the human right to freedom and the protected right to own property - became the foundation of American ideals. However, as these founding documents were being written and adopted, race-based slavery was common practice in America. Although some of the Founding Fathers acknowledged that slavery violated the ideal of liberty, others fought fiercely to preserve the system that provided free labor, cheaper goods, and ultimately, much wealth.

America would come to be defined by the language of freedom and the acceptance of slavery. Along with the revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality, slavery concerns began to surface as Black colonists embraced the meaning of freedom, and the British abolished slavery within their lands. As the young United States tried to establish itself, it had to wrestle with the tension that came with promoting freedom while condoning slavery. For those who wanted to maintain the institution of slavery, it became necessary to develop new rationales and arguments to defend it. They had to answer the question - How does one justify holding a human as property? As a result, major political leaders and thinkers promoted unfounded theories about racial differences and the immorality of nonwhite people. These theories spread throughout the late-18th century. Physical differences were merged with status differences and came together to form a social hierarchy that placed “white” at the top and “black” at the bottom. By the beginning of the 19th century, “white” was an identity that designated a privileged, landholding, (usually male) status. Having “whiteness” meant having clear rights in the society. Not being white signified the instability or nonexistence of your freedoms, rights, and property. Ironically, Jefferson and Locke also both made arguments for the idea of inferior “races,” thereby supporting the development of the United States’ culture of racism. Their support of inferior races justified the taking of American Indian land and the enslavement of Africans in the era of revolution. It was this racial ideology that allowed American chattel slavery and anti-blackness to continue

**Discussion:** *In your own words ...*

*What was the role of race and racism in our country's foundation?*

*Not everybody during early American history believed in racial hierarchies. Can the beliefs of those who did be justified?*

*What systems and institutions needed to support racial hierarchies for it to thrive?*

*What was the relationship between racism and the economy in early America?*

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### Teaching Hard History: American Slavery | Learning for Justice: Classroom Videos

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/classroom-videos>

*These classroom-ready films align with Teaching Hard History: A Framework for Teaching American Slavery and the resources that support that framework. In these short, streaming films, historians and scholars explore the undertaught history of African and Indigenous enslavement, explain critical concepts, and share recovered narratives that can help students better understand the individual and collective impact—and the damaging legacy—of hundreds of years of American slavery.*

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### Becoming a Modern-Day Freedom Fighter Tour | Vocabulary

**Abolitionists** – Historically: a person who favored the abolition, or end, of the institution of slavery. Today: a person who favors the abolition of any law or practice deemed harmful to society. Abolitionists are **anti-slavery**.

**Allies** – people or nations united by a common cause that support one another

**American Indian/ Native American** - a member of any of the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America, especially those indigenous to what is now the continental US.

**Atlantic Slave Trade** – or **transatlantic slave trade**, involved the transportation by slave traders of various enslaved African people, mainly to the Americas. The slave trade regularly used the triangular trade route and its Middle Passage and existed from the 16th to the 19th centuries.

**Chattel**- portable personal property. **Chattel slavery** equated human beings with livestock, furniture, and any other portable personal property. Chattel could be inherited, sold, or transferred without permission, in the case of the enslaved person.

**Conductors** - Underground Railroad conductors were free individuals who helped freedom seekers traveling along the Underground Railroad. Conductors helped freedom seekers by providing them with safe passage to and from stations. If a conductor was caught helping free the enslaved, they would be fined, imprisoned, branded, or even hanged.

**Cooperation** - working or acting together for a common purpose or benefit

**Courage** - ability to do something that you know is difficult or dangerous.

**Economics** - the study of how society uses its limited resources. Economics is a social science that deals with the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services

**Emancipation** - to free from restraint, control, or the power of another; to free from slavery.

**Enslaved Person** - This term is used in place of *slave*. It more accurately describes someone who was forced to perform labor or services against their will under threat of physical mistreatment, separation from family or loved ones, or death.

*Enslaved person* emphasizes the person. *Slave* emphasizes the condition forced upon them. The term *enslaved person* focuses attention on the person while also recognizing that the person was forcibly placed into the condition of slavery by another person or group.

**Forced migration** – the movement of people made to leave a place due to forces outside of their control.

**Foundation** - the underlying basis or principles upon which a system or institution is built. A foundation influences what is built upon it.

**Freedom seeker** – an enslaved person who takes action to obtain freedom from slavery.

The term *freedom seeker* is favored over the *fugitive*, *runaway*, and *escapee*. These labels were created by slave-holding society and some white abolitionists and portrayed freedom seekers as illegal and law breakers. Such labels also belittled African American efforts toward freedom, making African Americans appear incapable of strategic planning and heroics.

**Indigenous** – original or native to a place

**Internal Slave Trade** – after the Atlantic slave trade was abolished in the U.S. in 1808, slave owners in the upper south found it profitable to sell slaves to new plantations in the lower south. This **domestic slave trade** relocated slaves across the south using land and water routes.

**Middle Passage** - the forced voyage of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas

**Modern slavery** - refers to situations of exploitation in which a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, or abuse of power.



**Perseverance** - continued effort to do or achieve something, even when this is difficult or takes a long time

**Plantations** - The difference between Farm and Plantation is that a farm is a relatively smaller piece of land that is used to grow either commercial crops or food for the farmer's family, and livestock is typically kept. A plantation is a large farm used only for producing commercial crops. Unlike farms, on which a variety of crops can be grown, a plantation generally grows only one crop. This crop is then sold in the market for monetary gains. A plantation may also include housing for the owner and labor working there.

**Slavery** – a condition in which a person is owned by another person.

**Systems and institutions** – Institution: an established custom or practice, or a group of people that was socially constructed for a specific reason. System: where humans interact in society using their culture.

**Underground** – secret, not operating in the open