The Have-Nots in Colonial Society

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Introduction: Once the colonies were established, colonial leaders faced a long-term problem. If they were to become rich, they had to *recruit* a labor force. Acquiring land was easy for a man of means, since land in America was so plentiful. But acquiring *labor* was a constant problem. The small farmer could rely on his family, but a man with broad acres needed extra hands. Where were they to be found?

One possible source was obviously the Indian. And colonists repeatedly tried to enslave the Indian. As late as 1708, South Carolina held 1,400 Native Americans in bondage as compared with 4,100 Africans. But colonists found to their chagrin that enslaving the Indian was more trouble than it was worth. In any case, the supply of Indian labor was minute compared with the need. Since **enslaving the Indians proved unworkable**, the earliest planters had to look to Europe-particularly to England-for their solutions. The most immediate solution to the labor problem seemed to lie in the English practice of **"indentured" or contractual servitude**. The arrangement was basically simple: in return for a promise of some kind--a promise to be fed and housed and trained in some work, for example--men or women could bind themselves to work for a master for a period of years. The most common term in England, and then in the colonies, was seven years. An agreement, called an indenture, would then be written and signed, and for the agreed-upon period of years, the **servant would become the virtual property of the master.**

As it happened, England in the seventeenth century contained thousands of young men and women who were desperate enough to bind themselves into servitude and risk the hazards of the Atlantic crossing--all in return for little more than the vague hope that they would somehow be better off at the end of their term. It is impossible to know just how many came, but probably as many as half the immigrants of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came in bondage of one kind or another. Most were indentured servants; others were **"redemptioners," who had to work off only the costs of their passage**. But, no matter what the form, their **servitude had much in common with slavery.** Their contracts could be bought and sold. They could not live where they pleased, or marry without their masters' permission, or work for themselves. They had no guarantee of fair treatment or of decent food, clothing, and shelter.

Africans were first purchased as servants in 1619, only a dozen years after Jamestown was settled. But it was not until after 1700 that black slavery displaced white servitude as the dominant form of forced labor. Gradually at first in Virginia and then in other colonies, both north and south, the legal status of slave was defined. Especially in the southern colonies where large-scale commercial agriculture was the way of life, slaves became *the* work force on many plantations. By 1750, the largest single stream of immigration into British North America was composed of black slaves from Africa.

To understand this development, it is necessary to realize that North America was always on the fringes of the immense slave trade that developed between West Africa and tropical America. The Spanish colonies and Portuguese Brazil began importing slaves in the early 1500s, and by the time Jamestown was settled in 1607 some 250,000 African slaves had been brought to the New World. It was primarily the need for labor on the sugar plantations of Brazil and the Caribbean that stimulated the growth of the Atlantic slave trade after 1700. As that trade skyrocketed, the number of slave ships that wandered as far north as Virginia also increased. Yet, of the 6 million slaves who survived the Atlantic voyages between 1700 and 1810, less than 6 percent ended up in what is now the United States. So the growth of slavery in the thirteen colonies was only a small part of the growth of slavery in the New World.

It is also necessary to realize that very few people in colonial times had any qualms about slavery. Human bondage had been considered a part of the natural scheme of things since ancient times--and except for a few Quakers and kindred German sects, colonists everywhere accepted slavery as "normal." Even churches owned slaves. Indeed, the pious often bequeathed slaves to their ministers as tokens of affection. When the Reverend Cotton Mather, one of the leading New England ministers of his day, was honored with the gift of a slave, he recorded the event in his diary as "a smile from Heaven."

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

The Origin and Consolidation of Unfree Labor

Peter Kolcbin

The following selection comes from the opening chapter of Peter Kolchin's imaginative book comparing American slavery and Russian selfdom. The two systems of human bondage developed at roughly the same time, became firmly entrenched by the 1750*s, and played similar economic and social roles in the two countries. In this extract, Kolchin confronts the question of why the American elite embraced forced labor. As you read it, you should keep several questions in mind: Why did the wealthier colonists continue to rely on European indentured servants long after the arrival of the first African slaves? And why did white indentured servitude in some colonies eventually give way to black slavery? What was the importance of race in all this? And, finally, why did the elite fear the "giddy multitude" before 1700--and "servile insurrection" after 1700? How significant was this change?*

A shortage of laborers ... plagued English settlers in the American colonies, and ... this situation led to the use of physical compulsion to secure workers. A vast abundance of virgin land together with a paucity of settlers defined the problem in all the mainland colonies; everywhere, land was plentiful and labor scarce. To attract laborers, the colonists consequently found it necessary to pay wages that in Europe would have been considered exorbitant. "Poor People (both men and women) of all kinds, can here get three times the wages for their Labour they can in *England* or *Wales,*" reported an observer from Pennsylvania in 1698. In all the colonies, complaints were rampant about the high cost of labor and about the resulting lack of submissiveness among the much-sought-after workers. The law of supply and demand rendered unsuccessful the early efforts of several colonial governments to legislate maximum wages, and both skilled and unskilled labor continued to command wages up to twice those prevalent in England.

The payment of high wages proved inadequate, however, to secure a sufficient number of workers, and in every colony highly paid free labor was supplemented by forced labor of one type or another. Like the Spaniards to the south, although with less success, the English forced Indians to work for them. Indian slavery was most prevalent in South Carolina, where in 1708 the governor estimated that there were 1400 Indian slaves in a population of 12,580, but Indians also served as house servants and occasional laborers in the other colonies: New Jersey wills reveal the continued presence of small numbers of Indian slaves in that colony as late as the middle of the eighteenth century.

For a variety of reasons, however, Indian slavery never became a major institution in the English colonies. The proximity of the wilderness and of friendly tribes made escape relatively easy for Indian slaves. The absence of a tradition of agricultural work among East Coast Indian males--women customarily performed the primary field labor--rendered them difficult to train as agricultural laborers. Because they were "of a malicious, surly and revengeful spirit; rude and insolent in their behavior, and very ungovernable," the Massachusetts legislature forbade the importation of Indian slaves in 1712. Finally, there were not enough Indians to fill the labor needs of the colonists. In New England, for example, most of the natives present when the Puritans arrived died from illness and war during the next half-century. The policy of eliminating the threat of Indian attack by eliminating the Indians themselves proved in the long run incompatible with the wide-spread use of Indians as slaves and necessitated the importation of foreign laborers.

For the greater part of the seventeenth century the colonists relied on the most obvious source for their labor: other Europeans. Although more prevalent in some colonies than in others, indentured servants were common everywhere in seventeenth-century America. Most served between four and seven years in exchange for free passage from Europe to America, although some were kidnapped and others transported as criminals. All found themselves highly prized commodities. In many colonies, such as Virginia, settlers received a **headright--often fifty acres--for every person they imported**. But even without such incentives, colonists eagerly snapped up newly arriving stocks of servants, who performed vital functions as agricultural laborers, domestics, and artisans. These immigrant servants, as well as colony-born Americans bound out for poverty, debt, or crime, were virtual slaves during their periods of indenture, bound to do as their masters ordered,

subject to physical chastisement, forbidden to marry without permission, and liable to be bought and sold. Like slaves, some were forcibly separated from their relatives. Although a few servants became prosperous and influential in later life, for most the future was decidedly less rosy. In the mid-seventeenth century close to half the servants in Virginia and Maryland died before their terms of indenture were complete; once freed, many males continued to labor for others, living in their households and often--because of the excess of men over women--remaining unmarried.

Finally, the colonists turned to Africa for labor. As early as 1619 the forced labor of blacks supplemented that of whites in Virginia, and by the middle of the seventeenth century blacks were to be found in all the existing English colonies. Nevertheless, what is most striking about the early American labor force is the length of time it took for slavery to replace indentured servitude: throughout most of the seventeenth century white laborers, not black, prevailed in the English mainland colonies, and it was only between 1680 and 1730 that slaves became the backbone of the labor force in the south. This pattern raises two interrelated questions: **why, despite the presence of some slaves, did the colonists continue for so long to rely primarily on indentured servants, and why, during the half-century beginning in the 1680s, did African slaves replace European servants in most of the colonies?**

Despite the prevailing labor shortage, there were certain limitations on the colonists' demand for slaves. Very few could afford to buy them during the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century. Most early settlers were people of fairly modest means for whom the purchase of a servant--at one-third to one-half the price of an African slave--represented a substantial investment. Even if one could afford the initial outlay, the high mortality rate among the inhabitants of the early southern colonies made the purchase of slaves risky, and servants who were held for only a few years may have represented a better buy. Not only were servants cheaper than slaves, but their successful management required smaller investments of time and effort. They usually spoke the language--at least in the seventeenth century, when most of them came from the British Isles--and were at least partially familiar with the agricultural techniques practiced by the settlers. Given the circumstances, as long as European servants were readily available, their labor continued to make sense to most colonists.

Precisely such conditions prevailed during the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century, when the population of the colonies was small and the number of Englishmen anxious to come as servants was large. Readjustments in the English economy during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries worked serious hardships on many British subjects, who suffered through periodic depressions and famines. Vagabondage, crime, and destitution all increased markedly, as did public awareness of these problems. Increased concern was expressed both by greater attention to charity and by savage repression of the criminal, the rowdy, and the idle. Impoverished Britons were only too anxious to start anew in America, where radically different conditions promised some hope of success and where they were actually wanted rather than regarded as a burden, but so too were many skilled and semiskilled workers who saw their opportunities decline at home. Recent studies of servant immigrants in the seventeenth century suggest that they were overwhelmingly young and male but represented a wide diversity of occupations with perhaps as many as one-half having some skill. The tide of immigration reached its peak in the third quarter of the seventeenth century when, spurred by a series of ten crop failures, political dislocations at home, and a strong colonial demand for labor, close to forty-seven thousand Englishmen came to Virginia alone.

If the supply of servants seemed abundant during most of the seventeenth century, that of slaves was limited at best. The English were latecomers to the African slave trade, which, throughout the first two-thirds of the century, was primarily in Portuguese and then Dutch hands. Only after the Anglo-Dutch war of 1664-1667 was English naval superiority established; shortly thereafter, in 1672, the Royal African Company, with a (theoretical) monopoly of the English slave trade, was formed. Even then, the supply of Africans remained limited. Despite the anguished cries of British planters in the West Indies (where the most lucrative colonies were located), the Royal African Company was unable to supply a sufficient quantity of slaves. West Indian planters mounted a vigorous attack on the company's monopoly, and even before 1698, when the monopoly was formally lifted, private traders illegally supplied a large portion of the islands' laborers. If there were not enough Africans for the West Indies, where the need was greatest, the number available for export to the mainland, which was of relatively small economic importance, was small indeed. Until the last third of the century, most of the slaves imported to the mainland colonies were probably bought from Dutch and other

private merchants, so it is not surprising that New York, where the Dutch had early encouraged the importation of slaves, had a higher proportion of blacks in its population than any other English mainland colony except South Carolina as late as 1680.

During the half-century from 1680 to 1730 these conditions impeding the importation of slaves changed radically. The growing prosperity of many colonists meant that an increasing number of them were able to afford slaves. The growth in the number and wealth of large holdings was especially significant, because large planters, who could afford to make the initial investment and whose need for labor was greatest, were the principal purchasers of slaves. In Maryland, for example, the average net worth of the richest 10 percent of probated estates increased 241 percent between 1656-1683 and 1713-1719, far more than the increase among smaller estates; as a consequence the proportion of all wealth owned by the richest 10 percent increased from 43 to 64 percent.

Since servants were only temporarily bound and did not produce new servants, as the colonial population grew the number of servants imported would have had to increase sharply in order for them to form a constant proportion of the population. The 10,910 headrights issued in Virginia between 1650 and 1654 were the equivalent of more than 57 percent of the colony's estimated population in the former year; the 10,390 issued between 1665 and 1669 were only equal to about 29 percent of the population in 1670. Even if the number of immigrants had remained constant, they would have represented a continually decreasing percentage of the population and would soon have become inadequate to meet the colonies' labor needs.

In fact, the supply of English servants declined sharply at just the time that the demand for labor was increasing in many of the colonies. As the English social situation stabilized following the Restoration of 1660 and the British government adopted a strongly mercantilist policy, Englishmen no longer complained, as they had formerly, about an excess population; instead, with increasing economic productivity and well-being, a large population now seemed an asset in Britain's struggle for supremacy with other European powers. Although conditions for the poor remained hard, they no longer experienced the continual crises, famines, and unemployment of the early and middle seventeenth century. Conditions within the colonies also acted to discourage immigration. By the late seventeenth century land was no longer so easily acquired as it had been earlier; furthermore, generally declining tobacco prices may have led merchants to reduce intentionally their importation of servants to Maryland and Virginia.

The result was a rather abrupt decline in the number of British immigrants to the colonies. In no five-year period between 1650 and 1674 did the number of head rights issued for whites in Virginia fall below 7,900; in none between 1675 and 1699 did it rise above 6,000:

1650-1654:	10,910	1675-1679:	3,991
1655-1659:	7,926	1680-1684:	5,927
1660-1664:	7,979	1685-1689:	4,474
1665-1669:	10,390	1690-1694:	5,128
1670-1674:	9,876	1695-1699:	4,251

The number of English servants thus declined precisely when more were needed. Although Britain continued to transport convict laborers to Maryland and a growing number of German and Irish servants settled in Pennsylvania, there simply were not enough Europeans willing to sell themselves into indentured servitude in America to continue filling the labor needs of the colonies.

At the same time that the supply of servants was decreasing, that of enslaved Africans was increasing, and it was this changing relative supply (and hence price) of labor in the face of high (indeed growing) demand that most simply explains the shift in the nature of the colonial labor force. With the founding of the Royal African Company **in 1672, Britain became the foremost slave-trading country** in the world. In 1713, by the Treaty of Utrecht, the English won the *asiento* or monopoly awarded by the Spanish government to supply the Spanish colonies with slaves. The eighteenth century was the golden era of the English slave trade, when British merchants provided slave labor for most of the world's colonies.

Given the heightened demand for labor and the new availability of Africans, planters who needed large, stable labor forces had good reason to prefer slaves to indentured servants, even had the supply of the latter not begun to dwindle. For one thing, slaves were held permanently--as were their children--while servants were freed after a definite term. As a consequence, although slaves required a larger initial investment, a plantation using slaves became a self-perpetuating concern, especially by the early eighteenth

century, when slave fertility rates increased markedly, mortality rates declined, and the black population began to grow through natural reproduction as well as importation. A plantation using indentured servants, however, required the continual replenishment of the labor force.

Equally important, servants tended to disrupt the efficient working of a farm or plantation by running away. Although slaves too attempted to escape, it was more difficult for them to succeed. Their color made them easily identifiable and naturally suspect. White servants, on the other hand, had little trouble pretending to be free, and the shortage of labor rendered it easy for fugitives to find employment. As a result, the flight of indentured servants was a common and widely lamented occurrence. The colonies adopted stringent penalties for fugitives, usually involving their serving additional time and, for subsequent offenses, branding or mutilation. Newspaper advertisements for fugitives give evidence of both the scope of the problem and the treatment of servants. A typical notice in the Pennsylvania *Gazette* of 18 June 1752 offered a five-pound [*pound* is the word for British money, as in £5] reward for the return to his West Jersey master of "an Irish servant man, named Thomas Bunn, a thick well set fellow, of middle stature, full faced, a little pock mark'd, and his hair cut off; he speaks pretty good English, and pretends to be something of a shoemaker, he has a scar on his belly, and is mark'd on the upper side of his right thumb with TB."

A comparison of the number of slaves and servants from New Jersey listed in newspaper advertisements with the number of slaves and servants listed in New Jersey wills suggests how much more often indentured servants escaped than did slaves. Although more than four times as many slaves as servants were listed in the wills of 1751-1760, in 1753 and 1754 there were fifty-four notices of fugitive servants and only seventeen of slaves. In other words, servants were apparently escaping at a rate about thirteen times as high as that of slaves. For planters this kind of discrepancy must have been a powerful argument in favor of using slaves.

Discontent with white laborers was not confined to the problem of fugitives. The prevalent labor shortage together with the availability of land encouraged an independent mode of thought on the part of supposedly subordinate white workers-who knew they would have little trouble finding employment no matter what their behavior--that was extremely distasteful to employers. After complaining about the high price of blacks, New York planter-politician Cadwallader Colden noted that "our chief loss is from want of white hands . . . . The hopes of having land of their own & becoming independent of Landlords is what chiefly induces people into America, & they think they have never answer'd the design of their coming till they have purchased land which as soon as possible they do & begin to improve ev'n before they are able to mentain *[sic]* themselves." That slavery did not allow for the development of this kind of independence among the laboring class was one more consideration in its favor.

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The key determinant of the kind of labor system that emerged in the American colonies was the degree to which agriculture was geared to market. Although the increased availability of Africans made *possible* the widespread adoption of slave labor after 1680, slavery became the backbone of the economy in some colonies while in others it made little or no advance. Where a basic subsistence agriculture was practiced (as in most of New England), farms were small, the labor of a farmer and his family--and perhaps one or two extra hands at harvest time--was quite sufficient, and there was little need for forced labor. Where crops were grown for export, planters sought to maximize their production and extend the acreage planted. In such areas, which included much but not all of the southern colonies, the demand for labor was great, and the indentured servitude that characterized agricultural operations prior to the 1680s gave way to slave labor. Where commercial agriculture was practiced on a smaller scale, as in the middle colonies, the labor system was less uniform: in some places, such as Pennsylvania, indentured servitude remained widespread; in others, families augmented their own labor with that of occasional hired hands; and in still others--most notably parts of New York--slavery was an institution of some importance.

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A brief examination of the geographic distribution of slaves . . . illustrates the close connection between agricultural expansion and the spread of forced labor. In the British mainland colonies large-scale commercial agriculture developed first in the Chesapeake Bay region. As early as 1617 tobacco was grown "in the streets, and even in the market-place of Jamestown"; a Dutch traveler reported of Maryland and Virginia in 1679 that "tobacco is the only production in which the planters employ themselves, as if there were nothing else in the world to plant." Spurred by a seemingly insatiable European demand for the new weed and blessed with good

soil, a mild climate, and an excellent system of water routes, Chesapeake Bay planters produced increasing quantities of tobacco throughout the seventeenth century; the 20,000 pounds exported in 1619 swelled to 175,590,000 in 1672 and 353,290,000 in 1697, after which, despite annual fluctuations varying with tobacco prices, average yields stabilized for the next generation.

With an abundance of land and a shortage of labor, the amount of tobacco a planter could raise depended primarily on the number of workers he could command. Relying throughout most of the seventeenth century on a continual supply of fresh indentured servants, beginning in the 1680s, when the number of white immigrants had begun to decline sharply and African slaves had become more readily available, planters turned to slave labor. Wesley Frank Craven's computation of slave imports into Virginia, based on the number of black head rights granted, shows a marked increase beginning in 1690:

1650-1654:	162	1675-1679:	115
1655-1659:	155	1680-1684:	388
1660-1664:	280	1685-1689:	231
1665-1669:	329	**1690-1694:**	**804**
1670-1674:	296	1695-1699:	1,043

He suggests, however, that "the greatly expanded number of **black headrights in the 1690s** ... is substantially representative of postponed claims for Negroes reaching the colony somewhat earlier." Corroborative evidence comes from a calculation that in York County, Virginia, the ratio of servants to slaves plummeted from 1.90 in 1680-1684 to 0.27 in 1685-1689 to 0.07 in 1690-1694; **within a decade servants had virtually stopped coming to the county**. By 1700, when more than one-quarter of Virginia's population was black, the revolution in the composition of the colony's labor force had been largely completed. In Maryland, too, the number of slaves increased markedly, although because large parts of Maryland were unsuited for tobacco growing and because the colony continued to receive **substantial shipments of convict servants**, the change occurred slightly later than in Virginia and was less dramatic.

Even more heavily dependent on slave labor, although later in development, was South Carolina. First settled by Europeans in the 1660s, it grew slowly as colonists sought in vain to find a staple that would play for them the same role that tobacco did in Virginia. They raised cattle and hogs for sale to the West Indies and also exported deerskins and naval stores. Because of the large role played by West Indian planters in the settling of South Carolina, the colony from the beginning had a higher percentage of slaves than the other mainland colonies, although as elsewhere from Pennsylvania south most of the early immigrants were white indentured servants.

Then, in the 1690s, Carolinians discovered rice, a crop that within a few years became as much a staple for them as tobacco was to planters of the Chesapeake. American rice shipments to England--almost all of which came from South Carolina (and from the middle of the eighteenth century, Georgia)--increased from less than 1 percent of the total value of American shipments to England in 1697-1705 to 12 percent in 1721-1730 and 24 percent in 1766-1775. Even more than in Virginia, South Carolina's commercial orientation created a society in which most heavy labor was coerced. With a population of only a little more than a thousand in 1680, the colony by 1740 claimed forty thousand residents, of whom approximately two-thirds were slaves.

Slavery was much less central in the northern colonies and consequently proved relatively easy to abolish without serious social dislocations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. . . . Nevertheless, it is worth noting that unfree labor was of some importance in parts of the north as late as the middle of the eighteenth century. In Pennsylvania, spurred in part by an active propaganda campaign waged by William Penn and his agents who sought to convince impoverished Europeans of the boundless opportunities that awaited them in the colony, tens of thousands of indentured servants, many of them German, continued to perform a significant share of the agricultural labor. By far the largest concentration of slaves outside the southern colonies, however, was located in New York: as late as 1760 about one of every seven New Yorkers was a black slave.

Although both the Dutch, who ruled the colony as the New Netherlands until 1667, and the British who came after them actively promoted the importation of Africans, this policy would have met with little success had conditions there not been conducive to their employment. Wherever water transportation was

available, especially on Long Island, Staten Island, and along the banks of the Hudson River, large planters--beneficiaries of huge land grants from both the Dutch and the English--grew a variety of crops for sale. The most important of these was wheat. "Wheat is the staple of this Province . . . " explained New York's governor in 1734; "it's generally manufactured into flower *[sic]* and bread, and sent to supply the sugar collonys." Slaves appeared wherever large quantities of wheat or other crops were raised for export; on Long Island, for example, they increased from 14 percent of the population in 1698 to 21 percent in 1738. Of course, some New Yorkers, especially in the city, employed slaves as house servants, and others possessed slaves who performed various trades. The typical owner, however, was a farmer with one to five slaves, who used them to supplement his family's labor and increase the amount of its product available for sale.

Slavery was least important in New England, where small farms and a largely self-sufficient agriculture required little labor that a farmer's family could not provide. In the seventeenth century the New England colonies contained relatively few indentured servants, and those few more often served as domestics and artisans than as agricultural laborers. In the early eighteenth century blacks constituted about 2 percent of the population in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, and few of them were farm workers. They were a luxury for those who could afford them rather than an essential part of the economy.

The one area of New England where extensive use of slaves prevailed nicely illustrates the impact of commercially oriented agriculture on the labor system of colonial America. In the fertile flatlands of the Narragansett region of Rhode Island, there arose a system of large-scale stock raising and dairy farming. There, on soil ideally suited for grazing, planters bred the famed Narragansett racehorses, raised herds of sheep and dairy cows, and developed an aristocratic lifestyle similar to that of Virginia and Carolina planters. Estates of hundreds and sometimes thousands of acres required a large, steady laboring population, and it is no accident that "slavery, both negro and Indian, reached a development in colonial Narragansett unusual in the colonies north of Mason and Dixon's line." In 1730 about 10 percent of Rhode Island's population was black, but this figure conceals widespread variations. In the Narragansett country townships of South Kingston and Jamestown from one-fifth to one-quarter of the inhabitants were black, and including Indians about one-third were slaves; in many other areas of Rhode Island blacks constituted no more than 3 or 4 percent of the population. As elsewhere in the colonies, slavery in Rhode Island was strong only where there was substantial market-oriented agriculture.

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Over the course of the seventeenth and first part of the eighteenth centuries, unfree labor gradually became entrenched and solidified in . . . the American south. If at first serfdom and slavery had emerged as institutions designed to help landholders cope with specific problems of labor shortage, by the middle of the eighteenth century they appeared part of the natural order, as God-given as government or agriculture itself. A central feature of this process of entrenchment was the hardening and clarification of class lines, so that . . . the welter of overlapping groups that still prevailed in much of the seventeenth century had coalesced by the eighteenth into well-delineated classes, the masters and their bondsmen. Of course, there remained intermediate groupings, people who did not fit into either of these major classes; these two, however, dominated society and gave shape to the social order.

It was not at first obvious that this would be so. In the English mainland colonies, class lines were still fluid during most of the seventeenth century, and a variety of laborers, ranging from slave through semi-free to free, rubbed shoulders. Indentured servants continued to arrive and in some colonies--most notably Pennsylvania--continued to provide a large share of agricultural laborers well into the eighteenth century. There were still Indian slaves. Criminals and debtors were routinely bound out to work as servants, as were children learning a trade. Nor was the status of all blacks immediately clear: there were some who served as indentured servants, especially during the first two-thirds of the seventeenth century, and for several decades the notion persisted among some colonists that the conversion of African slaves to Christianity might necessitate their **manumission** [granting them freedom]. The very term *slave* lacked precision and was sometimes used for someone only temporarily deprived of freedom. In 1639, for example, a white man, "John Kempe, for filthy, uncleane attempts with 3 yong girles, was censured to bee whiped ... very severely, and was committed for a slave." In this case and several others from the same period the slavery imposed was only temporary, but it is significant that the nature of slavery and freedom could remain so ill defined in the 1630s and 1640s. The early colonists were familiar with a continuum of unfree and semifree statuses and did not yet set the black slaves off from other laborers as an entirely separate class. Of course, the Africans were different

and perceived as such, but so too were they differentiated from one another on the basis of national origins; among Carolina planters, for example, "Coromantes and Whydahs, because of their greater hardiness, were supposed to be especially desirable as field hands, whereas Ibos, Congos, and Angolas, allegedly weaker, were said to be more effective as house servants." The rigid dichotomy of later years between black and white, slave and free, did not yet exist.

A flexibility was evident in South Carolina slavery as late as the early years of the eighteenth century, when, although blacks were already a majority of the labor force, there was considerable leeway in what was expected of them. Until the 1720s "servants and masters shared the crude and egalitarian intimacies inevitable on a frontier." Because of the lack of white manpower in this frontier environment, slaves performed a multitude of jobs that would later be considered inappropriate and that sometimes involved considerable initiative, independence, and free association with whites. Thus, slaves served as hunters, trappers, guides, sailors, and fishermen; they were even used to fight Indians, as in the Yamassee war of 1715.
In Virginia, where until shortly before the turn of the century blacks were still a small proportion of the population and most unfree workers were white, racial lines seemed even less firmly drawn. Black and white agricultural laborers often worked together; in his 1705 description of Virginia Robert Beverley noted that "the male servants, and slaves of both sexes, are employed together in tilling and manuring the ground" although "some distinction indeed is made between them in their clothes, and food" and white women were no longer assigned field work. Black and white laborers also fraternized with one another, shared living accommodations, and sometimes, ran away together. Indeed, black and white, slave, servant, and often exservant as well were all part of a general underclass, a "giddy multitude" that in the third quarter of the seventeenth century showed growing restiveness and caused considerable unease among the well-to-do.

Just how fluid class alliances still were was demonstrated by Bacon's Rebellion, a conflict that erupted in 1676 when Nathaniel Bacon led an uprising against the government of Governor William Berkeley, an uprising that achieved momentary success before its leader caught ill and died of the "bloody flux" and his forces disintegrated. One of a series of violent upheavals that shook the colonies in the 1670s and 1680s, Bacon's Rebellion seemed destined to bear out all the worst fears about the "giddy multitude." Although historians have disagreed sharply over the nature of the rebellion, what is significant here is not Bacon's goal so much as the composition of his forces, which cut across racial and class lines. Enlisted in Bacon's ranks was an incongruous medley of disaffected Virginians: slaves, indentured servants, debtors, ex-servants, frontiersmen chafing under Berkeley's restrained Indian policy, and political enemies of the governor. That such an alliance was possible and that the governor's supporters did not make an issue of the participation of blacks on the side of the rebels indicate how little slavery had yet shaped class attitudes.

Such a configuration of forces as was seen in Bacon's Rebellion would have been impossible in the southern colonies by the early eighteenth century. The rapid spread of slavery and the decline in the number of servant immigrants meant that blacks, instead of constituting one element of a complex, turbulent underclass, were now the backbone of the labor force. Class lines were coming more and more to approximate racial lines. The change was not just one of numbers: the social distance between blacks and whites increased too. As plantation labor came to be associated with slaves, there was a perceptible rise in the status, treatment, and economic well-being of most white colonists. Not only were fewer whites coming over as indentured servants, but those who did tended to be from a somewhat higher social rank, often possessing mechanical skills much in demand in the colonies. David W Galenson, after examining the backgrounds of 2,955 servants leaving England for Jamaica, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia between 1718 and 1759, found that most were skilled, 65 percent of the men were literate, and only 6 percent listed their occupations as "laborers."

Equally important were the changed conditions they met in the colonies. As fewer servants arrived, the colonists felt stronger pressure to treat them tolerably, because only by convincing prospective immigrants that they faced a bright future in America could the colonists generate continued immigration. Of course, even at the height of the immigration in the 1650s and 1660s the need to attract laborers had militated against treatment so harsh as to discourage other would-be servants from indenturing themselves; here is one reason, as Edmund Morgan has suggested, that indentured servants were never actually reduced to slaves. But when the economic and political dislocations leading Englishmen to flee their country had largely disappeared, the need to offer positive incentives to potential immigrants was much greater. The relatively few immigrants who continued to perform agricultural labor were increasingly differentiated from slaves, as Beverley noted in stressing differences in food, clothing, and treatment of women. The economic well-being of white immigrants

in the colonies also improved. Not only were they employed more often in skilled trades, but as the general economic level of the colonies improved, they were more able to translate the heavy demand for their services into better material conditions.

There was no such improvement in the status of blacks, who came to America involuntarily and did not have to be lured by attractive conditions. In fact, as the ranks of indentured servants diminished and as their condition improved, the blacks seemed increasingly different and threatening, and there was a decrease in the fraternization and sense of common cause that had once existed between black and white in the laboring underclass. Contributing to this growing isolation of black slaves was the fact that whereas previously most had spent time in the West Indies, where they had already been "seasoned" before coming to the United States, from the 1680s the majority were imported directly from Africa, spoke no English on arrival, and consequently seemed more alien to white Americans. By the turn of the century the pervasive fear of the "giddy multitude" had disappeared. Southern colonists of the eighteenth century dreaded rebellion too, but their fear was of a "servile insurrection," an uprising by black slaves against whites. The growing tide of slave imports and the changed relations between whites and blacks led to a sharp rise in white racial consciousness and widespread expressions of fear that too large a slave population threatened the peace of the community. As Virginia planter William Byrd--himself a large slave owner--wrote to the Earl of Egmont in 1736, congratulating him on the (temporary) prohibition of slavery in the new colony of Georgia, "They import so many Negros hither, that I fear this Colony will some time or other be confirmed by the Name of New Guinea. . . . The farther *[sic]* Importation of them in Our Colonys should be prohibited lest they prove as troublesome and dangerous everywhere, as they have been lately in Jamaica."

The result was a rash of colonial legislation designed to regulate slaves. Codification of slavery lagged well behind its actual establishment. In Virginia blacks "had an uncertain legal status" until 1661, and it was only in 1664 that a Maryland law spelled out that "all Negroes and other slaves ... shall serve Durante Vita"; so long as there were relatively few blacks in the colonies there seemed little need to pass elaborate legislation defining their status and regulating their behavior. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, the southern colonies passed a series of laws designed to set blacks off from whites, legitimize slavery, and protect society from potential servile insurrections. These laws ranged from reassurances that conversion to Christianity did not require manumission, as in Virginia's act of 1667 and Maryland's of 1671, to measures prohibiting free blacks from voting, testifying in court against whites, or marrying whites, to the establishment of slave patrols to guard against suspicious behavior and the passage of duties in part designed to stem the importation of Africans and thus safeguard public security.

By the middle of the eighteenth century slavery was solidly entrenched as the labor system of the southern colonies, from Maryland to Georgia. Whereas a century earlier freedom was a vague concept, and the lot of most laborers, white and black, was to one extent or another unfree, now the assumption was practically universal among whites that slavery was the natural state of blacks and freedom that of whites. Blacks were simply different: "Kindness to a Negroe by way of reward for having done well is the surest way to spoil him although according to the general observation of the world most men are spurred on to diligence by rewards," wrote Virginia planter Landon Carter in 1770. Eight years later he expressed the same sentiment more bluntly: blacks "are devils," he proclaimed, "and to make them otherwise than slaves will be to set devils free."