

BLACK AND WHITE



IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD, THERE IS no country where racism has been more important than in the United States. How did this racism start? How might it end? Another way of asking the question might be: Is racism natural?

Maybe history can help answer these questions. If so, the history of slavery in North America could hold some clues, because we can trace the coming of the first white people and the first black people to this continent.

In North America, slavery became a widespread substitute for paid labor. At the same time, whites came to believe that blacks were not their equals. For 350 years, blacks would suffer inhumane treatment in American society because of racism, which combines ideas about

(left, detail)
A slave auction
in Virginia, 1861.

black inferiority with the unequal treatment of black people.

Why Turn to Slavery?

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED TO THE FIRST white settlers pushed them toward the enslavement of blacks. In Virginia, the settlers who had survived the "starving time" of 1609–1610 were joined by new arrivals. They were desperate for labor to grow enough food to stay alive. But they wanted to grow more than corn. The Virginia settlers had learned from the Indians how to grow tobacco, and in 1617 they sent the first cargo to England. The tobacco brought a high price. Even though some people thought smoking was sinful, the planters were not going to let such thoughts get in the way of making a profit. They would supply England with tobacco.

But who would do the hard work of growing the tobacco and preparing it for sale? The settlers couldn't force the Indians to work for them. The

Indians outnumbered the settlers. Even though the settlers could kill Indians with their guns, other Indians would massacre settlers in return. The settlers couldn't capture Indians and make them into slaves, either. The Indians were tough and defiant. And while the North American woods seemed strange and hostile to the settlers, the Indians were at home there. They could avoid the settlers—or escape from them.

Maybe the Virginians were angry that they couldn't control the Indians. Maybe they envied the way the Indians could take care of themselves better than the whites did, even though the whites thought that they themselves were civilized and that the Indians were savages. In his book *American Slavery, American Freedom*, historian Edmund Morgan imagines how the colonists felt about their failure to live better than the Indians, or to control them:

The Indians, keeping to themselves, laughed at your superior methods and lived from the land more abundantly and with less labor than you did. . . . And when your own people starting deserting in order to live with them, it was too much. . . . So you killed the Indians, tortured them, burned their villages, burned their cornfields. . . . But you still did not grow much corn.

Maybe those feelings of envy and anger made the settlers especially ready to become the masters of slaves. It was profitable to the Virginians to import blacks as slave labor. After all, other colonies in the Americas were already doing it.

By 1619, a million blacks had been forcibly brought from Africa to work as slaves in the mines and sugar plantations of the Portuguese and Spanish colonies in South America and the Caribbean islands. Even earlier, fifty years before Columbus, the slave trade started when ten Africans were taken to Portugal and sold. So that in 1619, when the first twenty blacks were brought by force to Jamestown and sold to settlers, white people had been thinking of Africans as slave labor for a long time.

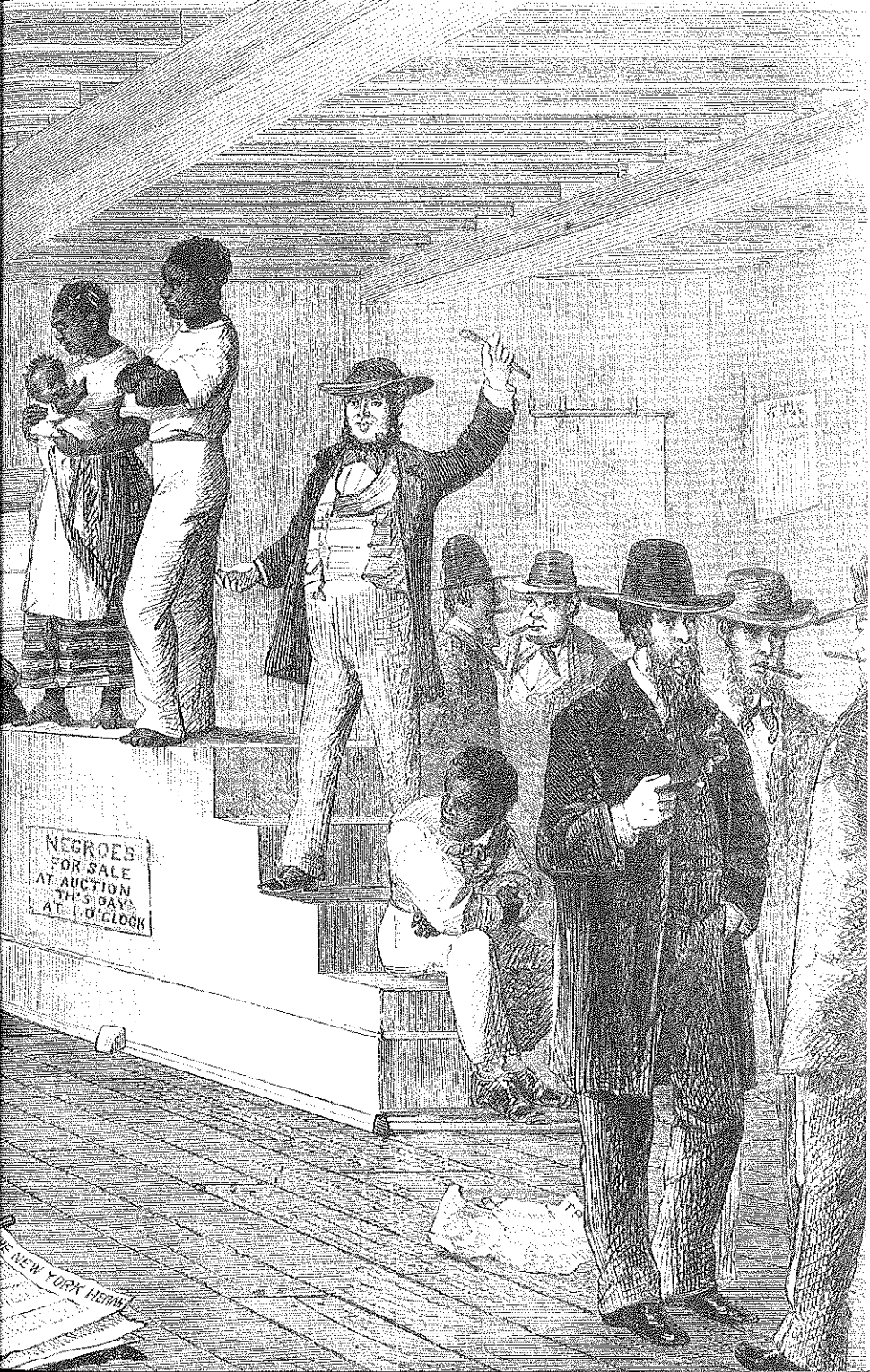
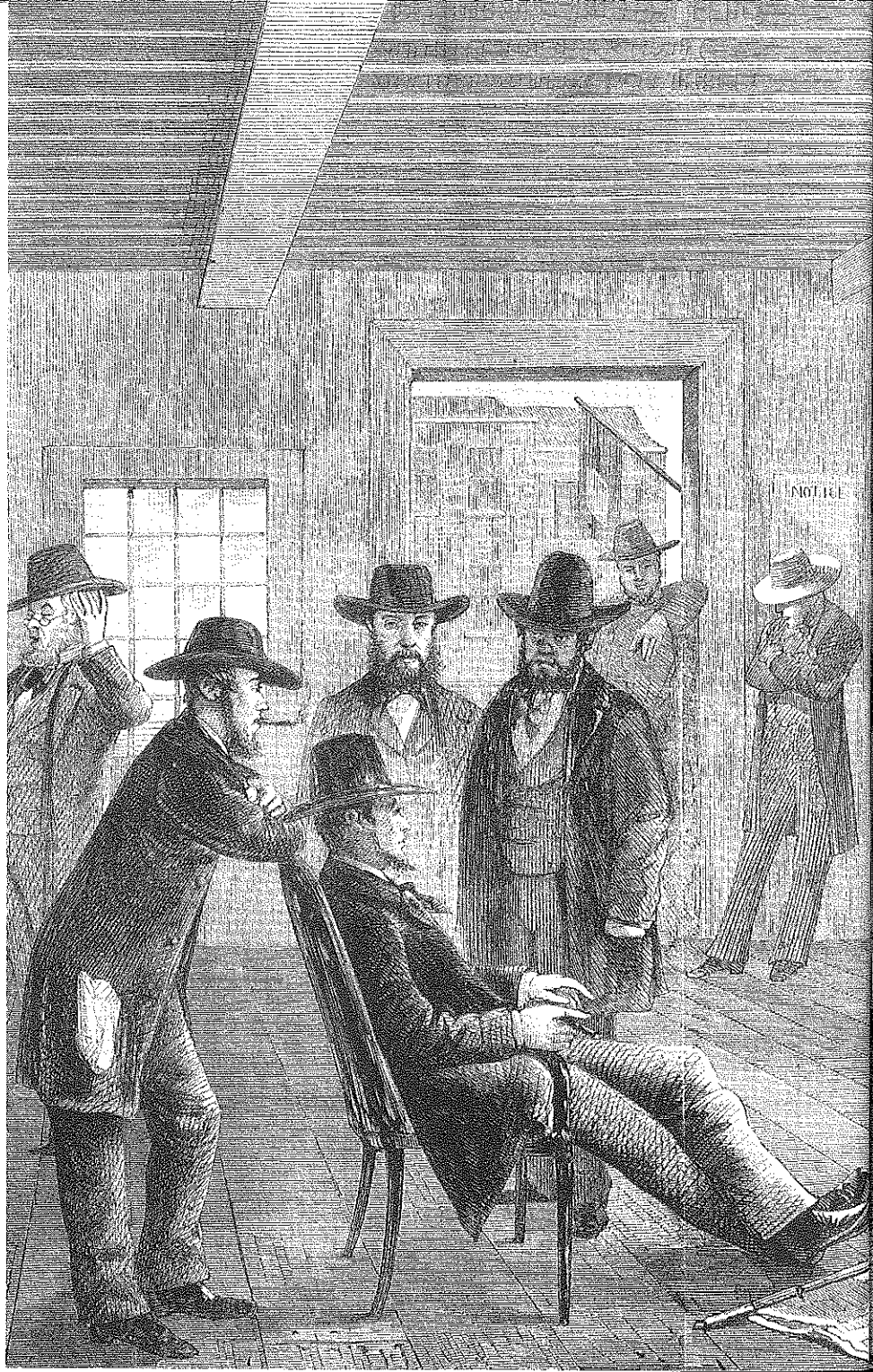
The Africans' having been torn from their land and their cultures made enslavement easier. The Indians were on their own land. The whites were in a new continent, but they had brought their English culture with them. But the blacks had been torn from their land and their culture. They were forced into a situation where their heritage—languages, clothes, customs, and family life—was wiped out bit by bit. Only with amazing strength of will could blacks hold on to pieces of this heritage.

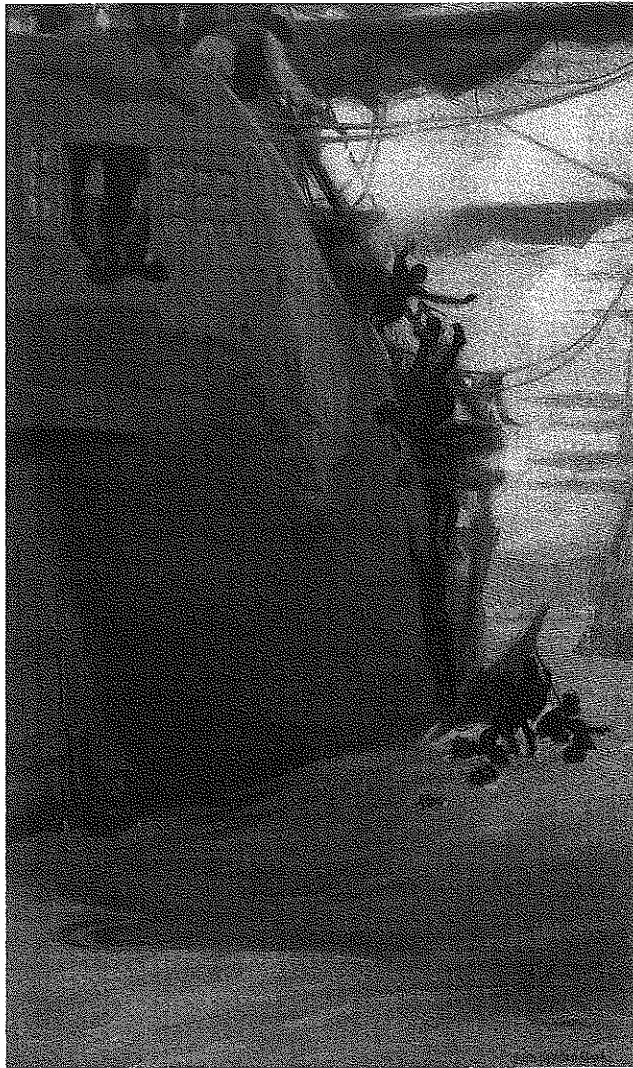
Was African culture easy to destroy because it was inferior to European culture? African civilization was in some ways more advanced than that of Europe. It was a civilization of 100 million people. They built large cities, they used iron tools, and they were skilled at farming, weaving, pottery making, and sculpture. Europeans who traveled in Africa in the sixteenth century were impressed with the kingdoms of Timbuktu and Mali. These African states were stable and organized, at a time when European states were just beginning to develop into modern nations.

Slavery existed in Africa, and Europeans sometimes pointed to that fact to excuse their own slave trade. But although slaves in Africa had a harsh life, they also had rights that those brought to America did not have. American slavery was the most cruel form of slavery in history because of two things. First, American slavery was driven by a frenzy for limitless profit. Second, it was based on racial hatred, a view that saw whites as masters and blacks as slaves. For these reasons, American slavery treated slaves as less than human.

The inhuman treatment began in Africa, where captured slaves were chained together and

(overleaf)
A Slave Auction in
Virginia, 1861.





forced to walk to the coast, sometimes for a thousand miles. For every five blacks captured, two died during these death marches. When the survivors reached the coast they were kept in cages until they were sold.

Then they were packed aboard the slave ships, chained together in the dark, in spaces not much bigger than coffins. Some died for lack of air in the crowded, dirty cargo holds of the ships. Others jumped overboard to end their suffering. As many as a third of all the Africans shipped overseas may have died during the journey. But the trade was profitable, so merchants crammed the blacks into the holds of the slave ships like fish.

At first, the Dutch were the main slave traders. Later the English led the trade. Some Americans in New England entered the business, too. In 1637 the first American slave ship sailed from Massachusetts. Its holds were divided into racks two feet wide and six feet long, with leg irons to hold the captives in place.

By 1800, somewhere between 10 million and 15 million black Africans had been brought to the Americas. In all, Africa may have lost as many as 50 million human beings to death and slavery

(left)
African captives
leaping off a slave ship
off the coast of
Africa, 1700s.

during the centuries that we call the beginnings of modern civilization.

Slavery got started in the American colonies because the Jamestown settlers were desperate for labor. They couldn't use Indians, and it would have been hard to use whites. But blacks were available in growing numbers, thanks to profit-seeking dealers in human flesh. And the terrible treatment Africans suffered after being captured left many of them in a state of helplessness. All of these things led to the enslavement of the blacks.

Fear and Racism

WERE ALL BLACKS SLAVES? MAYBE THE SETTLERS considered some blacks to be servants, not slaves. The settlers had white servants, too. Would they have treated white servants differently from black ones?

A case from colonial Virginia shows that whites and blacks received very different treatment. In 1640, six white servants and one black started to run away. They were caught. The black

man, named Emanuel in the court record, received thirty blows with a whip. He was also branded on one cheek and sentenced to work in shackles for a year or longer. The whites received lighter sentences.

This unequal treatment was racism, which showed itself in feelings and in actions. The whites felt superior to the blacks, and they looked at blacks with contempt. They also treated the blacks more harshly and oppressively than they treated each other. Was this racism "natural"? Did the whites dislike and mistreat the blacks because of some instinct born into them? Or was racism the result of certain conditions that can be removed?

One way to answer those questions is to find out whether any whites in the American colonies viewed blacks as their equals. And evidence shows that they did. At times when whites and blacks found themselves sharing the same problems and the same work, with the same master as their enemy, they treated each other as equals.

We don't have to talk about "natural" racial dislike to explain why slavery became established on the plantations of the American colonies. The need for labor is enough of a reason. The number

of whites who came to the colonies was just not enough to meet the needs of the plantations, so the settlers turned to slaves to meet those needs. And the needs kept rising. In 1700, Virginia had six thousand slaves, one-twelfth of the colony's population. By 1763, there were 170,000 slaves, about half the population.

From the beginning, black men and women resisted their enslavement. Through resistance, they showed their dignity as human beings, if only to themselves and their brothers and sisters. Often they used methods that were hard to identify and punish, such as working slowly or secretly destroying white property. Another form of resistance was running away. Slaves just arrived from Africa, still holding on to the heritage of village life, would run away in groups and try to set up communities in the wilderness. Enslaved people born in America were more likely to run off alone and try to pass as free.

Runaway slaves risked pain and death. If they were caught even planning to escape, they could be punished in terrible ways. Slaves were burned, mutilated, and killed. Whites believed that severe punishments would keep other slaves from becoming rebellious.

White settlers were terrified of organized black uprisings. Fear of slave revolts, it seems, was a fact of plantation life. A Virginia planter named William Byrd wrote in 1736 that if a bold slave leader arose, "a man of desperate fortune," he might start a war that would "tinge our rivers wide as they are with blood."

Such rebellions did take place—not many, but enough to create constant fear among the planters. In 1720 a settler in South Carolina wrote to London about a planned slave uprising that had been caught just in time:

I am now to acquaint you that very lately we have had a very wicked and barbarous plot of the . . . negroes rising with a designe to destroy all the white people in the country and then to take Charles Town . . . but it pleased God it was discovered and many of them taken prisoners and some burnt and some hang'd and some banish'd.

We know of about 250 cases in which ten or more slaves joined in a revolt or plot. But not all rebellions involved slaves alone. From time to time, whites were involved in the slave resistance. As early as 1663, white servants and black slaves in Virginia formed a conspiracy to rebel and gain

their freedom. The plot was betrayed and ended with executions.

In 1741, New York had ten thousand white and two thousand black slaves. After a hard winter brought much misery to poor people of both races, mysterious fires broke out. Blacks and whites were accused of conspiring together. The trial was full of high emotion and wild claims. Some people made confessions under force. Eventually two white men and two white women were executed, eighteen slaves were hanged, and thirteen slaves were burned alive.

Only one fear in the American colonies was greater than the fear of black rebellion. That was the fear that whites who were unhappy with the state of things might join with blacks to overthrow the social order. Especially in the early years of slavery, before racism was well established, some white servants were treated as badly as slaves. There was a chance that the two groups might work together.

To keep that from happening, the leaders of the colonies took steps. They gave a few new rights and benefits to poor whites. For example, in 1705 Virginia passed a law that said that masters had to

give white servants some money and corn when their term of service ended. Newly freed servants would also receive some land. This made white people of the servant class less unhappy with their place in society—and less likely to side with the black slaves against the white masters.

A web of historical threads trapped blacks in American slavery. These threads were the desperation of the starving settlers, the helplessness of Africans torn from their homeland, the high profits available to slave traders and tobacco growers, and the laws and customs that allowed masters to punish rebellious slaves. Finally, to keep whites and blacks from joining together as equals, the leaders of the colonies gave poor whites small benefits and gifts of status.

The threads of this web are not “natural.” They are historical, created by special circumstances. This does not mean that they would be easy to untangle. But it does mean that there is a possibility for blacks and whites to live together in a different way, under different historical circumstances.