

The Growth of Slavery in North Carolina ^[1]

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Colonial legacies

Slavery has been part of North Carolina's history since its settlement by Europeans in the late 1600s and early 1700s. Many of the first slaves in North Carolina were brought to the colony from the West Indies or other surrounding colonies, but a significant number were brought from Africa. Records were not kept of the tribes and homelands of African slaves, however, so it's impossible to know the exact ethnic make-up of North Carolina's slave population.

Because of its geography, North Carolina did not play a large part in the early slave trade. The string of islands that make up its Outer Banks made it dangerous for slave ships to land on most of North Carolina's coast, and most slave traders chose to land in ports to the north or south of the colony. The one major exception is Wilmington; located on the Cape Fear River, it became a port for slave ships due to its accessibility. By the 1800s, blacks in Wilmington outnumbered whites 2 to 1. The town relied on slaves' abilities in carpentry, masonry, and construction, as well as their skill in sailing and boating, for its growth and success.

The colony also lacked the extensive plantation system of the Lower South colonies. When Carolina split into the North and South colonies in 1729, North Carolina had about 6,000 slaves, a fraction of the slave population of South Carolina. As the plantation system expanded across the Lower South, many North Carolina slaves were "sold south" to work on these large plantations. Slaves deeply feared this fate because it usually meant permanent separation from friends and family.

Because extensive records were not kept, and many existing records have been lost, we don't know a great deal about the slaves of the North Carolina colony beyond basic information. By 1767, there were about 40,000 slaves in the colony. About 90 percent of these slaves were field workers who performed agricultural jobs. The remaining 10 percent were mainly domestic workers, and a small number worked as artisans in skilled trades, such as butchering, carpentry, and tanning.

Records do exist detailing the colonial laws that whites enacted to control slaves. The first set of these laws, the North Carolina Slave Code of 1715, required slaves to carry a ticket from their master whenever they left the plantation. The ticket stated where they were traveling and the reason for their travel. The 1715 code also prevented slaves from gathering in groups for any reason, including religious worship, and required whites to help capture runaway slaves.

A second set of even stricter laws was put into place in 1741. These laws prevented slaves from raising their own livestock and from carrying guns without their master's permission, even for hunting. The law also limited manumission, or freeing of slaves. It stated that a master could only free a slave for "meritorious services," and even then the decision had to be approved by the county [court](#) ^[2]. Perhaps the most ominous of all the laws was the one regarding runaway slaves. It stated that if runaways refused to surrender immediately, they could be killed and there would be no legal consequences.

After the Revolution

The ban on importing slaves to North Carolina was lifted in 1790, and the state's slave population quickly increased. By 1800, there were around 140,000 blacks living in North Carolina. A small number of these were free blacks, who mostly farmed or worked in skilled trades. The majority were slaves working in agriculture on small- to medium-sized farms. As in the colonial period, few North Carolina slaves lived on huge plantations. Fifty-three percent of slave owners in the state owned five or fewer slaves, and only 2.6 percent of slaves lived on farms with over 50 other slaves during the antebellum period. In fact, by 1850, only 91 slave owners in the whole state owned over 100 slaves.

Because they lived on farms with smaller groups of slaves, the social dynamic of slaves in North Carolina was somewhat different from their counterparts in other states, who often worked on plantations with hundreds of other slaves. In North Carolina, the [hierarchy](#) ^[3] of domestic workers and field workers was not as developed as in the plantation system. There were fewer numbers of slaves to specialize in each job, so on small farms, slaves may have been required to work both in the fields and at a variety of other jobs at different times of the year. Another result of working in smaller groups was that North Carolina slaves generally had more interaction with slaves on other farms. Slaves often looked to other farms to find a spouse, and traveled to different farms to court or visit during their limited free time.

The slave codes passed in the colonial period continued to be enforced during the antebellum years. Whites hoped these laws would prevent threats of slave uprisings, which terrified slaveholders across the state. In 1829, David Walker, a free black author born in Wilmington, gave whites in North Carolina another reason to fear their slaves turning against them. Walker was an avid [abolitionist](#) ^[4] who moved from his home state of North Carolina to Boston, where he helped escaped

slaves establish new lives. He wrote and published a pamphlet, *Walker's Appeal*, calling for immediate freedom for all slaves and urging slaves to rebel as a group. Copies of the pamphlet were smuggled into Wilmington via ships from the Northern U.S., and then spread throughout the state.

Whites reacted to *Walker's Appeal* by passing increasingly restrictive slave laws. Nervous leaders in North Carolina passed legislation in 1830 making it illegal to distribute the pamphlet in hopes of quelling Walker's radical ideas about abolishing slavery. Another North Carolina law passed in 1830 made it a crime to teach a slave to read or write. Laws were even extended to restrict the rights of free blacks. An 1835 law prevented free blacks from voting, attending school, or preaching in public.

These restrictive laws were also passed in response to the increase in slave uprisings in nearby states, such as the Nat Turner Rebellion just across the border in Virginia. In 1831, Nat Turner led a group of 75 escaped slaves in an uprising, during which the group killed about 60 white people before being captured by the state militia. Whites in North Carolina were appalled at the thought of a similar rebellion happening in their state, and hoped severe slave laws would prevent such bloody uprisings.

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