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UNIT 7

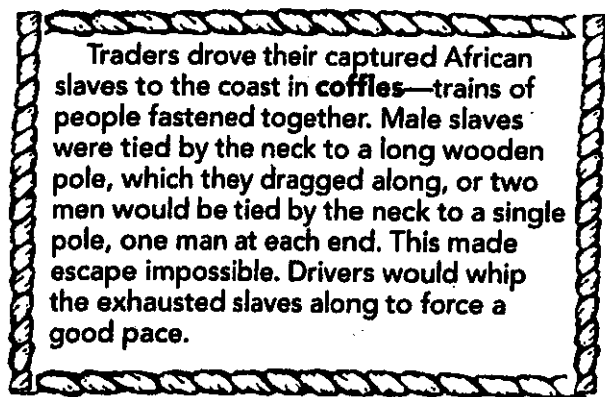
STUDENT BACKGROUND SHEET

## The Rise of Slavery

As you learned in Unit 5, the American colonies needed laborers to work the land. Indentured servants helped, but the demand was much greater than the supply. European shipmasters trading in Africa discovered a rich new source of labor: black slaves. For centuries it had been common practice in Africa to enslave prisoners of war. These enslaved prisoners often became members of their new families and communities. Some Africans also became slaves in order to pay their debts. Others were sentenced to slavery as the penalty for adultery.

### The Slave Trade

Portuguese traders began buying African slaves in the 1400's. Other European nations soon joined in this profitable commerce. African rulers strictly controlled the trade. Europeans were permitted only to rent land for trading forts at certain sites along the coast. The Africans themselves captured prisoners in the interior areas. The African slavers drove their captives to the coastal forts, where they delivered them to the European slavers in exchange for rum, trade goods, and guns and ammunition. The slave trade badly disrupted life in West Africa, creating constant chaos and violence.



Traders drove their captured African slaves to the coast in **coffles**—trains of people fastened together. Male slaves were tied by the neck to a long wooden pole, which they dragged along, or two men would be tied by the neck to a single pole, one man at each end. This made escape impossible. Drivers would whip the exhausted slaves along to force a good pace.

Many captured Africans did not survive their forced relocation. Some died during the initial raid. Others fell during the trek to the coast. Worst of all was the voyage across the Atlantic. Deaths occurred from disease, suffocation, suicide, rebellion, starvation, and brutality. Illegal slavers about to be arrested sometimes practiced mass murder by throwing their captives overboard at sea.

### Slavery in the Americas

Some African slaves came to Spanish America in the 1500's. Several were in Virginia with Spaniards in 1526. The first known black Africans in British North America arrived in 1619. A Dutch ship brought these 20 captives to Jamestown, Virginia.

At first, blacks in the British colonies may have been treated as indentured servants. But the demand for labor, especially on southern plantations, increased. Tobacco and rice plantations needed many workers. Sugar plantations in the Caribbean needed many more. Slavery seemed to be the perfect solution (for the slaveholder!). Here's why:

Indentured Servant	Slave
Bound for set number of years	Bound for life
Children are free—not bound	Children are slaves—bound for life
Escape easy—white skin, blends in	Escape hard—black skin, easily noticed

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European prejudices certainly played a role in the growth of black slavery in the Americas. Europeans thought all "heathens" were inferior. Such people could only benefit from being owned by Christians. Also, Europeans linked blackness with the devil, with dirt, with fearful and threatening darkness. Gradually,

slavery became legally established in the colonies. Virginia declared its African slaves "perpetual servants" in 1662. Maryland enacted a similar law in 1664.

The conditions of slave life varied, by slave owner and by region. Here's how:

<b>Brazil:</b>	<b>Spanish West Indies:</b>	<b>French West Indies:</b>
Male slaves have many chances to become free. Race mixing common. Social levels open.	Law gives slaves some rights. Male slaves can buy their own freedom and their children's freedom.	Laws control treatment of slaves, but laws are often ignored.
<b>Dutch West Indies:</b>	<b>British West Indies/British North America:</b>	
Slaves are generally treated harshly.	Few slaves become free. Slaves are chattel—property, objects, not people with rights. Owner's power over slave is total.	

**Black Resistance**

Blacks, of course, bitterly objected to being slaves. But they had few ways to resist in the North American colonies. An African suddenly placed in an alien society and an alien culture couldn't run away. Where would he go? Who would help her? Blacks not on their owner's plantation would always be spotted because of their skin color. Failure to obey a master's or overseer's orders would result in brutal beatings.


Still, some slaves did rebel. Here are some examples:

- About 25 black slaves set a fire in New York City in 1712. Then, as planned, they killed some of the whites who tried to put out the fire.
- About 100 slaves attacked whites and fled toward Florida in South Carolina's Stono rebellion of 1739. They were defeated in a fierce battle against white militia and Indians.

- Other serious rebellions occurred later in the 1700's and the 1800's. (You'll learn more about them in Book 4 of this series.)

Also, slaves practiced subtler forms of resistance. They performed acts of sabotage—digging up crop seedlings while hoeing weeds, for example, or damaging farm equipment. They pilfered many items, insisting that what belonged to the plantation owner belonged to them as well. They pretended to be too dull-witted to do their tasks correctly. They worked as slowly as possible. They committed many acts of arson.

**TO BE SOLD by William**  
*Yeomans, (in Charles Town Merchant,) a parcel of good Plantation Slaves. Encouragement will be given by selling Rice in Payment, or any*



*Time Credit, Security to be given if required There's likewise to be sold, very good Tramping saddles and Furniture, choice Barbados and Boston Rum, also Cordial Waters and Limonades, as well as a parcel of extraordinary Indian trading Goods, and many of other sorts suitable for the Seafar.*

Ad in the *Charlestown Gazette*, mid 1600's

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### African-American Culture

Through all this, enslaved blacks added elements of their African culture to the new slave culture they were forced to evolve. Africans imported into the Americas came from different backgrounds and spoke many different languages. The condition of being black in white America was what created a sense among slaves of being "African." They also shared many broad cultural traditions, which gave them a further feeling of being bonded as Africans.

Religion, with traditional African spirits and gods mixing with the Christianity of the new culture, was part of everyday life. Their prayerful response to a constant spiritual presence was lively—singing, dancing, shouting. African culture also placed high value on the

family and the community. Because of this, black slaves preferred to work together, in groups rather than individually. They made up songs about work and religious beliefs (and rebellious thoughts) that were sung in a call-and-response group style. Ripped from their original families, slaves formed new ones. Many owners tried to avoid breaking up these strong families because the affected slaves would quickly become poor workers in revenge.

African slaves also brought their folk medicines and charms with them to the Americas. These included love potions—and poison, another often-used weapon against white owners. African folk art was kept alive in wood carvings, quilts, baskets, mats, and the like. By holding on to some African traditions, black slaves in America kept part of their African identity.

African-American slaves often sang in a **call-and-response** style. A leader sings a line. The other group members sing a line of response. Then the leader sings the next line, and the group sings its response, and so on. Here's an example from the spiritual "O, Wasn't That a Wide River."

*Leader:* O, the river of Jordan is so wide,

*Response:* One more river to cross,

*Leader:* I don't know how to get on the other side,

*Response:* One more river to cross.

*Leader:* Satan is just a snake in the grass,

*Response:* One more river to cross,

*Leader:* If you ain't mighty careful he will hold you fast,

*Response:* One more river to cross.

