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### Chattel Slavery in Colonial America

The history of colonial America covers the European colonization of the continent from 1619 to 1865. The main aim of European colonists was to enhance their military, governmental, and economic power at the expense of American slaves. Chattel slavery was a specific form of legalized slavery in colonial America that allowed Europeans to keep Africans in possession. Chattel slaves were treated as the personal property of slave owners or masters who could buy, sell, or exchange their subordinates as commodities. Thus, chattel slavery was a self-imposed form of enslavement of Africans and African-Americans in colonial America used by Europeans for maintaining total control over blacks and their children.

Even though chattel slavery was formally abolished by the legal systems of internationally recognized governments in the 16th century, Europeans, including the British, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Dutch, widely used it on the territory of colonial America. In general, chattel slavery can be defined as a legal institution of human chattel enslavement during the European colonization of America in the 16th and 17th centuries (Warren 126). Forced labor was the most notable characteristic of chattel slavery, since blacks were made to work against their own will and under the threat of punishment (Warren 127). The owners kept total control over their chattel slaves, who did not have any substantive, de jure legal, or traditional rights.

Due to the lack of ability to change their working conditions, chattel slaves were subject to various forms of coercion, discrimination, and violence outside their places of work.

Masters valued their slaves at every stage of their lives, similarly to a product life cycle when a commodity is valued every time it is turned into money. Under the chattel slave system, slave status was imposed on children of the enslaved from the date of birth. Masters also examined women's fertility and based on this, projected their value in the long term. When chattel slaves grew up, masters valued their slaves based on the amount of work they could complete on a daily basis. An "A1 prime hand" was a term which was used by masters for a first-rate slave who could do the most work in a particular day (Berry). The value of slaves could decrease to one-fourth hands or zero when they became older adults or acquired a disability, meaning that they could not continue to work in the way they performed before. The rating system that was used by masters for chattel slaves is an excellent example of the inhumane attitude to enslaved African and African-Americans in American colonies.

Human trafficking was a popular form of forced labor during chattel slavery in colonial America. Specifically, chattel slaves in colonial America were used not only for labor but also for sex and breeding because those slaves were considered valuable commodities that could be exchanged for money. Masters violated chattel slaves' human rights by selling and buying them as if they did not deserve to be humans. Even when chattel slaves were freed, they had to pay their former masters a tribute because they maintained inheritance rights to freed slaves' property (Singh). Thus, the chattel slavery system served masters as a guarantee of a lifetime service of free labor and a source of enrichment. Chattel slaves had no personal freedom and were denied their right to decide the direction of their lives.

The Declaratory Act of 1766, which established the British Parliament's authority to pass laws binding on the American colonies, reconfirmed the legal status of chattel slaves in colonial America. According to John Lathrop, an African-American pastor of the Second Church in Boston, the passage of the Declaratory Act guaranteed that colonials would work days and nights for domineering masters who would leave them a tiny fraction of their hard earnings to support their miserable existence (Okoye 14). Great Britain strongly relied on the institution of slavery in colonial America because chattel slaves worked hard on British plantations and factories, thereby contributing to the state's treasury. Therefore, chattel slaves represented the driving economic force for European colonists who prioritized financial well-being and economic stability in their home countries over the lives of black slaves in American colonies.

During more than two centuries, enslaved blacks were deprived of their human rights and treated as chattel. The era of chattel slavery in colonial America showed that slavery is heritable and transmissible to one's posterity (Berry). Chattel slaves were poor, discriminated, and oppressed since they were forced to work for miserable wages and denied their right to land where they worked and lived before European colonization started. They lost their liberties and were subject to the lawless dominion of white masters who were known for their cruelty and violence towards the enslaved. The lives of chattel slaves were encumbered by innumerable proscriptions and plagued by stigmas based on their race (Berry). Without the system of chattel slavery that gave rise to many other forms of slavery, white and black people in America and all over the world could be at the same social level and enjoy the same benefits and human rights.

Chattel slaves were deprived of their human rights and liberties since both white Americans and European colonists considered that only blacks deserved a servile status. Chattel

slavery was a profitable practice of organizing the workforce and keeping total control over them. A burdensome way of life, including forced labor, misery, and diseases were the routine reality for chattel slaves in colonial America. Even though some researchers insist on the idea that black Americans are biologically inferior beings and thus, could not protect themselves from slavery, European colonists showed themselves as cruel subjugators who decided that race is the most important distinguishing characteristic for humans (Berry). Certainly, subjugating blacks based on their race is an inhumane act of Europeans that had a long-term effect on their destiny since later, chattel slavery served as a foundation for the development of racial inequality in the United States.

However, chattel slavery lasted different amounts of time in various American states. For example, in Texas, Anglo-American chattel slavery existed from 1845 to 1865 because Mexico and Spain, which occupied the state's territory, implemented policies that either abolished or limited slavery (Warren 135). In addition to that, in Texas, slaveholders represented only 27% of the population and controlled 73% of the regional wealth (Warren 135). These astonishing figures show that regardless of the short period of chattel slavery in Texas, a great number of people were affected by wealth and income inequality. Treating blacks as a subspecies of the human race, European colonists committed a crime against humanity because all people should have equal rights and opportunities regardless of race, culture, or ethnicity.

Then, with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution by Congress in 1865, chattel slavery was abolished. According to the 13th Amendment, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States" ("The 13th Amendment of the U.S.

Constitution”). Particularly, Section 1 of the 13th Amendment outlawed chattel slavery and involuntary servitude in all of the 13 colonies in 15 southern and border states of America (“The 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution”). More than 4 million people of African descent were freed from chattel slavery and returned their human and constitutional rights to be treated equally. The passage of the 13th Amendment showed the bold commitment of the United States to equality based on equity, fairness, and justice. Former chattel slaves received equal rights and opportunities that white Americans had.

As a result, chattel slavery, which lasted from 1619 to 1865 and represented a particular form of slavery according to which the enslaved were treated as a commodity and could be bought, sold, given, and inherited, was a terrible period of colonization in America since about 4 million Americans of African descent were denied their human rights. Africans and African-Americans were subject to oppression, discrimination, coercion, and violence since they were forced to work for miserable wages, and their masters could do with them whatever they wanted to do, including raping, killing, or crippling. European colonists were highly unwilling to recognize Africans and American blacks as human and thus, treated them as property without a sign of empathy or compassion. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution returned their human and constitutional rights, thereby demonstrating America’s direction towards equality and justice.

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