



How did the African and European inhabitants of British America view each other in the 1700s before the Revolution?¹ From journals, narratives, reports, poems, a sermon, a letter, and runaway slave advertisements come these statements by white colonists and former slaves as they consider the racial “other” in their lives. Although the record holds much more commentary by whites than blacks, it yet reveals the “unhappy influence,” as Thomas Jefferson later noted, “on the manners [behavior] of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us.”¹

“Give Ear, ye pitied Blacks, Give Ear!”

Rev. Cotton Mather, 1696¹

Mather was a prominent Puritan clergyman in Boston, Massachusetts.

Give Ear, ye pitied *Blacks*, Give Ear! It is allowed in the *Scriptures*, to the *Gentiles*, That they *May keep Slaves*; although the Law of *Charity* requires your Owners to Use you as those that have *Reasonable Souls* within you. Yes, ’twould be against the Conscience of any Good man to keep

you for *Slaves* if he find himself unable to use you according to that Law of *Charity*. But the most of you have so little cause to desire your being any other than *Slaves* as you are, & where you are, that it would soon make you miserable to be otherwise. You are better *Fed* & better *Clothed* & better *Managed* by far than you would be if you were your *Own men*. All that now remains for you is to become first the *Good Servants of the Lord Jesus Christ*, & then of those that have purchased you. . . .

“they did not think God made them Slaves”

William Moraley, early 1730s²

Moraley was a white English indentured servant in the middle colonies.

I have often heard them say they did not think God made them Slaves, any more than other Men, and wondered that Christians, especially *Englishmen*, should use them so barbarously. But there is a necessity of using them hardly, being of an obdurate, stubborn Disposition; and when they have it in their power to rebel, are extremely cruel.

National Humanities Center, 2009: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds. Except for poems, spelling and punctuation modernized by NHC for clarity. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/credits.htm.

¹ Except for Venture Smith’s statement at the conclusion of this compilation, the commentary of African Americans reflects their experiences during the colonial era.

² Rev. Cotton Mather, *A Good Master Well Served: A Brief Discourse on the Necessary Properties & Practices of a Good Servant, in Every Kind of Servitude*, sermon, 1696. Accessed through Early American Imprints online collection, American Antiquarian Society; permission pending.

³ William Moraley, *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley, an Indentured Servant, 1743*; eds. Susan E. Klepp & Billy G. Smith (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, 2d. ed. 2005), p. 60; permission pending.

“Numbers make them insolent”

William Byrd, 1736³

Byrd was an influential Virginia planter and slaveholder.

They import so many Negros hither that I fear this Colony will some time or other be confirmed by the Name of New Guinea. I am sensible of many bad consequences of multiplying these Ethiopians amongst us. They blow up the pride, & ruin the Industry of our White People who, seeing a Rank of poor Creatures below them, detest work for fear it should make them look like Slaves. . . .

Another unhappy Effect of Many Negros is the necessity of being severe. Numbers make them insolent, and then foul Means must do what fair will not. We have however nothing like the Inhumanity here that is practiced in the [Caribbean] Islands, & God forbid we ever should. . . .

“cunning subtle fellows”

Runaway slave advertisements, *Virginia Gazette*, 1745-1770⁴

The standardized and derogatory phrasing in runaway advertisements reveal slaveholders' awareness (conscious or not) of their slaves' initiative and intelligence.

CUFFEY & BACCHUS. “cunning subtle fellows.” 4-21 March 1745

STEPHEN. “he is a brisk, sensible lad, about 16 Years of Age, is very artful and cunning, has been much whipt, which his Back will shew” 8-15 May 1746

CAESAR. “he is a very cunning subtle Fellow, can read very well, and write a little; it is suppos'd he will endeavor to pass for a free Man, and follow the Shoemaker's Trade as he understands a little of the Business.” 20 March 1752

JACK. “He is a very ingenious fellow, can do cooper's work [make wooden barrels], and is supposed to have a pass from some villainous person or other, and will endeavour to pass as a freeman; and as he is a sensible arch [crafty] fellow, probably he will attempt to make his escape from off this continent.” 19 March 1767

CHARLES AND HIS WIFE. “[Charles] is very ingenious at any work; he has been used to hire his time, and has a pass of Joseph Jones for that purpose which was not taken in when I sold him to Lockhart. He took his wife with him, a Mulatto, about 19 years old, about 5 feet and a half high, a very likely well shaped woman, and very ingenious at any work. The above slaves will endeavour to pass for free man and woman, and as the man is a sensible arch fellow, he will probably attempt to make his escape from off this continent” 14 May 1767

FREDERICK. “he is an artful cunning fellow. . . I have some suspicion he will endeavour to get on board some vessel and go out of the colony as a free man.” 15 September 1768

PETER DEADFOOT. “he is so ingenious a fellow, that he can turn his hand to anything; he has a great share of pride, though he is very obliging, is extremely fond of dress; and though his holiday clothes were taken from him, when he first attempted to get off, yet, as he has probably passed for a freeman, I make no doubt he has supplied himself with others, as such a fellow would readily get employment.” 22 September 1768

CHARLES. “an artful cunning fellow . . . He is a sawyer and shoemaker by trade, and carried with him his shoemaker's tools. The said fellow reads very well, and is a great preacher, from which I imagine he will endeavour to pass for a free man. . . The said fellow run away the 16th of February 1765, and was absent near two years.” 23 September 1769

FAUQUIER. “ has a smooth insinuating way of talking . . . being an artful subtle fellow, [I] imagine he will go as much in disguise as possible, to prevent suspicion.” 15 November 1770

⁴ William Byrd, letter to Lord Perceval, Earl of Egmont, 12 July 1736. in Marion Tinning, ed., *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia*, Vol. II (University of Virginia Press, 1977); permission pending.

⁵ Runaway slave advertisements, in online collection Virginia Runaways: Runaway Slave Advertisements from 18th-Century Virginia Newspapers, by Prof. Thomas Costa, University of Virginia at Wise; at people.uvawise.edu/runaways; permission pending.

“keep a constant guard over them”

Daniel Horsmanden, 1747⁵

Horsmanden was a judge in the trials of white and black New Yorkers for an alleged plot to set fires in the city in 1741. He explains the necessity of publishing documents related to the trials.

... the people in general might be persuaded of the necessity there is for everyone that has negroes to keep a very watchful eye over them and not to indulge them with too great liberties, which we find they make use of to the worst purposes, caballing and confederating together in mischief, in great numbers when they may, from the accounts in the ensuing sheets [pages], from what they *see* has happened, *feel* the consequence of giving them so great a latitude as has been customary in this city and province [colony], and thereby be warned to keep themselves upon a strict guard against *these enemies of their own household*, since we know what they are capable of; for it was notorious that those among them who had the kindest masters, who fared best and had the most liberty, nay, that those in whom their masters placed the greatest confidence, insomuch that they would even have put their own swords into their hands in expectation of being defended by them against their own colour, did nevertheless turn out the great villains. . . The principal inducement, therefore, to this undertaking was *the public benefit* that those who property in slaves might have a lasting memento concerning the nature of them; that they may be thence warned to keep a constant guard over them, since what they have done, they may one time or other act over again, . . .

“Eternal slavery to them . . . is an unbearable yoke”

Rev. Johann Martin Bolzius, 1750⁶

Bolzius, a cofounder of the German Lutheran settlement of Ebenezer, Georgia, published a Q&A guide for potential immigrants that included questions on slaves and slavery.

10th Question. Whether these people are as false, malicious, and terrible as they are described.

Answer. A faithful and sincere Negro is a very rare thing, but they do exist, particularly with masters who know how to treat them reasonably and in a Christian way. Foolish masters sometimes make disloyal and malicious Negroes. Nearly all like to lie and steal, and if they gain the upper hand in a rebellion they give no mercy, but treat the whites very cruelly. Eternal slavery to them, as to all people, is an unbearable yoke, and very hard treatment as regards food and work exasperates them greatly. New Negroes therefore must be treated very carefully, for they frequently take their own lives out of desperation, with the hope of resurrection in their homeland, and of rejoining their people.

“contented with their condition, reconciled to servitude”

Gov. James Glen, 1751⁷

In a report to the British Board of Trade, the governor of South Carolina asserts that the American-born slaves are content and have “no notion of liberty.”

I have said there are 40,000 Negroes in the province, these if valued as new Negroes from Africa are now sold, may be reckoned at £20 sterling per head, but this valuation does not satisfy me for when it is considered that many of these are natives of Carolina, who have no notion of liberty, nor no longing after any other country, that they have been brought up among white people, and by white people have been made, at least many of them, useful mechanics, as coopers, carpenters, masons, smiths, wheelwrights, and other trades, and that the rest can all speak our language, for we imported none during the war. I say when it is considered that these are pleased with their masters,

⁶ Serena R. Rabin, ed., *The New York Conspiracy Trials of 1741: Daniel Horsmanden's Journal of the Proceedings, with Related Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2004), pp. 45-46; permission pending. Sabin's edition is based on the 1810 reprint of the 1747 original; she notes the change in title made by the anonymous 1810 editor — *The New-York Conspiracy or a History of the Negro Plot*. “The title removes whites from center stage and reformulates the ‘conspiracy’ as a ‘Negro plot.’ [p. 37].

⁷ Rev. Johann Martin Bolzius, *Reliable Answer to Some Submitted Questions Concerning the Land Carolina in Which Answer, However, Regard Is Also Paid at the Same Time to the Condition of the Colony of Georgia*, 1750; reprinted in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 14:2 (April 1957), pp. 218-261; trans., eds., Klaus G. Loewald, Beverly Starika, and Paul S. Taylor. Reproduced by permission of *The William and Mary Quarterly*.

⁸ Gov. James Glen, *An Attempt Towards an Estimate of the Value of South Carolina, for the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations*, 1751; in H. Roy Merrens, ed., *The Colonial South Carolina Scene: Contemporary Views, 1697-1774* (University of South Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 182-183; permission pending.

contented with their condition, reconciled to servitude, seasoned to the country, and expert at the different kinds of labour in which they are employed, it must appear difficult if not impracticable to ascertain their intrinsic value. I know a gentleman who refused five hundred guineas for three of his slaves, and therefore there is no guessing at the value of the strong seasoned handy slaves, by the prices of weak, raw, new Negroes.

“some into madness fly”

Charles Hansford, 1753⁸

A Virginia blacksmith, Hansford published poems anonymously in the *Virginia Gazette*. These are the first lines of his poem entitled “The Country’s Worth.”

That most men have a great respect and love
To their own place of birth I need not prove—
Experience shows ’tis true; and the black brood
Of sunburnt Affrick makes the assertion good.
I oft with pleasure have observ’d how they
Their sultry country’s worth strive to display
In broken language, how they praise their case
And happiness when in their native place.
Such tales and such descriptions, when I’d leisure,
And many times with questions would assail
The sable lad to lengthen out his tale.
If, then, those wretched people so admire
Their native place and have so great desire
To reenjoy and visit it again—
Which, if by any means they might attain,
How would they dangers court pains endure
If to their country they could get secure!
But, barr’d of that, some into madness fly,
Destroy themselves, and wretchedly they die.
Nor is this love to Affrick’s race confin’d
But spreads itself (I think) through human kind.
A northern Tartar forc’d from thence would show
The warmest wishes for his ice and snow
Which in that climate doth so much abound
That they for months in caves live underground;
The snow so deep, the cold is so intense
Above ground, houses would be no defense.
For food their case must needs be very bad:
Horse-flesh and milk of mares by them are had
In much esteem. (A loathsome bill of fare—
Methinks t’would poison me did I live there!)
And yet those people love and like it well,
And praise (no doubt) the country where they dwell.

“rendered tame, docile, and submissive”

Boyrereau Brinch, late 1750s⁹

Brinch was captured in west Africa (probably Mali) in the late 1750s and imprisoned on the Caribbean island of Barbados before being sold to a New England merchant.

Thus I remained for about three months from the time I was taken from the ship, starved, whipped, and tortured in the most shameful manner, obliged to work unceasingly, in order I suppose that the clement, benevolent and charitable whiteman should be satisfied that the

⁹ David S. Shields, ed., *American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Library of America, 2007) pp. 329, 854; permission pending.

¹⁰ Boyrereau Brinch & Benjamin F. Prentiss, *The Blind African Slave, or Memoirs of Boyrereau Brinch, Nick-named Jeffrey Brace. Containing an Account of the Kingdom of Bow-Woo, in the Interior of Africa*, Vermont: 1810; full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brinch/menu.htm.

heathen spirit of an African boy of noble birth should be sufficiently subdued, rendered tame, docile and submissive; and all for my good that I should thereby become a tame, profitable and honest slave. The natural man must be obliterated and degraded, that even the thought of liberty must never be suffered to contaminate itself in a negro's mind; and the odious thing, equality, should be taught by European discipline never to raise its head.

“when you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue”

Olaudah Equiano, mid 1750s¹⁰

Equiano was captured in west Africa (present-day Nigeria) in the mid 1750s and was eventually sold in Virginia. In his 1789 autobiography, he published these thoughts on the dehumanizing effect of slavery on both the enslaved and the enslaver.

Such a tendency has the slave-trade to debauch men's minds, and harden them to every feeling of humanity! For I will not suppose that the dealers in slaves are born worse than other men — No; it is the fatality of this mistaken avarice that it corrupts the milk of human kindness and turns it into gall. And had the pursuits of those men been different, they might have been as generous, as tender-hearted and just, as they are unfeeling, rapacious and cruel. Surely this traffic cannot

be good which spreads like a pestilence and taints what it touches! which violates that first natural right of mankind, equality and independency, and gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend! For it raises the owner to a state as far above man as it depresses the slave below it; and, with all the presumption of human pride, sets a distinction between them, immeasurable in extent, and endless in duration! Yet how mistaken is the avarice even of the planters? Are slaves more useful by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes, than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you — No.

When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your own conduct an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful! You stupify them with stripes [i.e., from whipping], and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning; that their minds are such a barren soil or moor that culture would be lost on them; and that they come from a climate where nature, though prodigal of her bounties in a degree unknown to yourselves, has left man alone scant and unfinished, and incapable of enjoying the treasures she has poured out for him! — An assertion at once impious and absurd. Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another; And are ye not struck with shame and mortification to see the partakers of your nature reduced so low? But, above all, are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment? Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection?

¹²

“slaves are devils”

Landon Carter, 1758¹¹

A Virginia planter, Carter revealed contempt for his slaves, and white people, in his diary entries.

A Cow calved and the Calf died by reason of neglect in putting her into a Stall at such a time when she ought to have been in a house and at full liberty; but negroes will do these things and white people are more deceitful. 17 Feb. 1758

The cockling wheat this year an immense trouble occasioned by the Rascal who was overseer last year at the Fork who never saw the work well done there and from thence came most of my seed wheat. 25 March 1758

The brutes who suffered [allowed] my tobacco to be so eaten [by worms] shall be severely punished, by every method not barbarous that I can devise. . . . Indeed, Slaves are devils and to make them otherwise than slaves will be to set devils free. 31 August 1758

¹¹ Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, London: 1789; full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library), Vol. I at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/menu.html; Vol. II at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano2/menu.html.

¹² *The Diary of Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, ed. Jack P. Greene (University Press of Virginia, published for the Virginia Historical Society, 1965), Vol. 1; permission pending.

“a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race”

Benjamin Franklin, 1763¹²

Franklin describes the “Negro school” in Philadelphia to a friend in England.

ready Obedience to the Mistress, and seem’d very attentive to, and a good deal affected by, a serious Exhortation with which Mr. Sturgeon concluded our Visit.

I was on the whole much pleas’d, and from what I then saw, have conceiv’d a higher Opinion of the natural Capacities of the black Race than I had ever before entertained. Their Apprehension seems as quick, their Memory as strong, and their Docility in every Respect equal to that of white Children. You will wonder perhaps that I should ever doubt it, and I will not undertake to justify all my Prejudices, nor to account for them.

I have visited the Negro School here in Company with the Rev[eren]d. Mr. Sturgeon and some others, and had the Children thoroughly examin’d. They appear’d all to have made considerable Progress in Reading for the Time they had respectively been in the School, and most of them answer’d readily and well the Questions of the Catechism. They behav’d very orderly, show’d a proper Respect and

“Some view our sable race with scornful eye”

Phillis Wheatley, 1773¹³

Wheatley was captured as a young girl in west Africa about 1760. The Boston family that purchased her encouraged her education and creativity, and in 1773 her first volume of poems was published,

__“On Being Brought from Africa to America”__

‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a *Savior* too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic dye.”

Remember *Christian*; *Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.

“good enough for the black dog”

Venture Smith, 1792¹⁴

Smith was captured in west Africa in the mid 1730s and ultimately sold to a Rhode Island merchant. He worked to purchase freedom for himself and his family. In his autobiography he relates this incident from 1792.

. . . going to New-London [Connecticut] with a grandchild, I took passage in an Indian’s boat, and went there with him. On our return, the Indian took on board two hogsheads of molasses, one of which belonged to Capt. Elisha Hart of Saybrook, to be delivered on his wharf. When we arrived there, and while I was gone, at the request of the Indian to inform Captain Hart of his arrival and receive the freight for him, one hogshead of the molasses had been lost overboard by the people in attempting to land it on the wharf. Although I was absent at the time, and had no concern whatever in the business, as was known to a number of respectable witnesses, I was nevertheless prosecuted by this conscientious gentleman (the Indian not being able to pay for it) and obliged to pay upwards of ten pounds lawful money, with all the costs of court. . . Such a proceeding as this, committed on a

defenceless stranger, almost worn out in the hard service of the world, without any foundation in reason or justice, whatever it may be called in a christian land, would in my native country have been branded as a crime equal to highway robbery. But Captain Hart was a *white gentleman*, and I a *poor African*, therefore it was *all right, and good enough for the black dog*.

¹³ Benjamin Franklin, Letter to John Waring, 17 December 1763. The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Yale University and the American Philosophical Society, #624225; permission pending.

¹⁴ Phillis Wheatley, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, 1773; in Wheatley & Margaretta Matilda Odell, *Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave. Dedicated to the Friends of the Africans*, Boston, 1834; full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/wheatley/menu.html.

¹⁵ Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa: But Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America. Related by Himself*, New London, Connecticut, 1798. Full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/venture/menu.html.