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West Africans in Early New England

Welcome to "West Africans in Early New England: Enslavement, Culture, and Influential People"! We know that Africans, many of them enslaved, lived in early America, but how many were in New England specifically? Slavery led to dehumanization of African people; they also had an identity. Who were these people and what were they like? What were their interactions like with English Puritans? In this lecture I will explore these questions and more. I will discuss the presence of Africans, many of whom were from West Central and West Africa, in early New England. This information also will help you to better understand early New England as a whole. There *were* Africans in New England in this time-not just English colonists and Native people there. Their stories stand both separate from and intertwined with those of other people living in Massachusetts. I will first discuss how Africans arrived in New England, discuss their culture and other features of this group of people, then identify two significant early Africans in New England. The learning goals are for you to be able to narrate who the first Africans in New England might have been; explain what the "Atlantic Creole" culture is; and identify some of the significance of either of the two African people I point out at the end.

Scholars have identified two possibilities for the first Africans to live in New England. First, they could be those who came via the ship *The Desire* in 1638. Second, they could be those who arrived in Massachusetts with an English colonist named Samuel Maverick in 1624. In either situation, they arrived as enslaved people. The Africans who came aboard the *The Desire* were likely living in Providence or Tortugas in the West Indies and had been forced into slavery. They were then forced to come on board *The Desire* in order to go to Massachusetts, where they arrived in 1638. We know that the *Desire* arrived carrying slaves because John Winthrop noted in his journal that a ship from the West Indies arrived carrying enslaved Africans (Greene 15-17). On the other hand, information about who the African slaves of Samuel Maverick were and where they came from seems sparse. Something to note is that if the first Africans in Massachusetts came with Samuel Maverick in 1624, they would have arrived here quite early--even earlier then the English Puritans who came with John Winthrop in 1630.

Many of the Africans who came to early New England came as enslaved people. Some Africans did secure their freedom, however—for example, some estimate that in 1750 about one-sixth of the Black population of Connecticut was free (Adams and Pleck 30). Slavery of black Africans was one pernicious form of forced servitude. There were other kinds of forced servitude in New England too including the indentured servitude of whites, Blacks, and Native people as well as slavery of Native people (Greene 19).

Next, let's explore who these African people were, the culture from which they came, and what their lives were like. Let's look at population first. How many Africans lived in early New England? The population of Africans grew through the years; however, it did not become as big as the populations in the southern colonies or in the West Indies. Enslaved Africans did not just live in Massachusetts but also in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire, too. One scholar indicates how difficult it can be to determine the size of the African population in early New England (Greene 72). One estimate is that in 1715 the population of Black people was about 4,150 or 2.62% of the population (Greene 73). Another estimate is that at the time of the American Revolution in 1775, Connecticut had the largest number of slaves, about 6,464 which would be about 3.2 percent of the Connecticut population (Greene 74).

Next, while this lecture looks at Africans in early New England, we still need to focus on the origins of these Africans themselves. This helps us to understand what they were like when they arrived in America. Where were they from in Africa, and what was the culture like there? The Puritans can't be divorced from their origins in England; similarly, Africans who came to New England as slaves already arrived with certain cultures and traditions. Only Native people were not newcomers to New England. Many Africans in early New England would have originally been from West Central Africa or West Africa (Heywood and Thornton 238).[1] Scholars Heywood and Thornton consider "West Africa" the upper and lower Guinea coast in Africa, while West Central Africa is south of this area and includes places in modern day Angola (49-52). West Central Africa has been identified with what is called an "Atlantic Creole" culture, one that includes a blend of European, American, and African customs (Heywood and Thornton 236-9). This blending happened in areas of trade and commerce. These were also areas that the Portuguese and other Europeans visited, traded in, and lived in. Kongo and Angola in West Central Africa were two areas with very heavy exchange and mixing of Atlantic cultures. There were many people in this area who became Catholic, for example, after engaging with the Portuguese. The king of Kongo, King Nzinga, was baptized in 1482; and his son, Alfonso, also seems to have practiced Christianity (Berlin 259; "Kingdom of Kongo"). Europeans who visited the kingdom of the Kongo were struck by the number of Catholic services in Kongo (Heywood and Thornton 172). Syncretic religions, which is to say combinations of Christianity and African traditional religions emerged in this area, too. Scholars Heywood and Thornton propose that the first enslaved Africans in English and Dutch colonies before the mid 17th-century were living in these areas (236-9).[2] They use historian Ira Berlin's term "Atlantic Creole" to describe these people and call the people in this group the "Charter generation" (253-4). Atlantic Creoles often shared similar languages, especially Portuguese (Berlin 258). West Central Africa is a possible origin of some of the earliest Africans who came to early New England, but those who came later might have been from other places.

The Africans in early New England would have worked on a variety of tasks as enslaved people. While the environment in the South made farming tobacco and rice profitable, cash crops like tobacco and rice were not particularly effective in the North. Instead, Africans worked on diversified tasks including farming different vegetables, working on ships, serving in the house, repairing items, managing the master's business, and shipbuilding (Greene 101-3). Harbors and fishing opportunities in New England led to an expansive shipbuilding enterprise. Slaves as well as indentured servants were necessary to support this enterprise (Greene 114-6).

In terms of farming, there were both smaller farms with about 2-4 slaves and larger farms with up to 40 slaves. The smaller farm sometimes contained slaves living in close quarters with the masters, who lived on more equal footing with them compared to overseers at larger farms. Narragansett county, Rhode Island was an area which contained larger farms, many of them dairy farms, with up to 40 slaves working there (Greene 104-5).

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[1] Thornton and Heywood focus a lot on West Central Africa as the origins of many Africans who were enslaved and brought to the Americas in the 16th-17th-centuries, over West Africa. They buttress Ira Berlin's thesis by suggesting that many West Central Africans, rather than West Africans formed an "Atlantic Creole culture." (See Heywood and Thornton, Chapter 5 "Shifting Status and the Foundation of African American Communities" and pg 49-52.)

[2] My course focuses on a broader time period, covering early 17th-to early 18th-century, so I have not given a thorough picture of where all Africans in New England in this time period were from. I have only discussed the possible origins of Africans who arrived to New England in the early 17th-century (as coming from West Central Africa).

Who were some significant early Africans in New England? In this lecture I will discuss Belinda Sutton and Onesimus. Belinda Sutton is now seen as one of the first people who asked for reparations for slavery. Although she lived in the latter end of the period that we are focusing on for this course (she was born around 1712 and many of the documents we are looking at were written in the mid and late 17th-century), her story is still an important part of this period. Sutton was born in Ghana, enslaved by traders, brought to Antigua, and eventually to Medford to the Royall family household in Medford, MA ("Belinda Sutton").[3] She was freed in 1778, but she wrote a series of petitions, starting in 1783, to ask for a pension, as compensation for past labor. She was granted 15 pounds and 12 shillings every year but needed to make more petitions in order to obtain the money granted ("Belinda Sutton and Her Petitions"). Scholars have since seen her petitions as one of the first requests for reparations for slavery. Her petitions were circulated in American magazines and especially several British magazines ("Belinda Sutton"; Rich). Her 1783 petition describes where she was born in vivid detail, how she was brought to Massachusetts, and asks ultimately for support for herself and her daughter—for "such allowance may be made her out of the estate of Colonel Royall" ("Belinda Sutton and Her Petitions").

Another important early African in New England is Onesimus. Onesimus introduced the idea of inoculation to Cotton Mather, who then started to practice and recommend it, especially in the smallpox epidemic of 1721. While the idea was highly controversial and some people objected to it strongly, Mather continued to promote it and engaged the physician Zabdiel Boylston to help him use it. Onesimus was a slave in the household of Cotton Mather, but he eventually obtained his freedom. He was married and had a son named Onesimulus, who died in 1714, before he did (Niven 641). Onesimus described to Cotton Mather how he himself had been inoculated for smallpox when he was living in West Africa, in what is now Ghana. (Minardi 47). It had been a practice there to get a little of the smallpox disease so that one would not actually receive the disease again in the future. Mather remembered what Onesimus had told him five years later, during the smallpox epidemic. We often pay attention to Mather and Boylston as the ones who implemented the first full scale application of inoculation in the United States, but this idea came from another culture, that of West Central Africa, specifically through an African man named Onesimus.

Let's end by considering the role of early Africans as related to the themes of this course. We might ask: Can Africans be Puritans and can Puritans be Africans in early New England? What kind of communications media did early Africans use and how might it be similar to those of the English Puritans? The course doesn't explore these questions as much in-depth as it could, but you can choose to investigate this theme as you participate in discussion forums for the other course lectures. I'll also touch briefly on these questions now. First, I don't think "African" and "Puritan" are exclusive categories—a Puritan could be African. As we have seen, there were certainly people from the Kongo who were Catholics, and enslaved Kongolese Catholics probably even arrived in South Carolina (Thornton 1102; 1106). Catholic most definitely doesn't mean Puritan, but at least there were enslaved Africans who shared some religious beliefs with the Puritans. Africans who were enslaved and brought to the Netherlands participated in the Dutch Reformed church (Berlin 269). Someone else I can think of is Lemuel Haynes, an ordained minister and preacher who fought in the Revolutionary War and whose father was Black and mother was white, though he was abandoned by both and raised in a pious white family (Saillant 9). He's living in a later period than the time we are focusing on, but studies of

[3] Some scholars contest the dates and places, even if she was actually born in Africa (see Jeremy Rich).

his sermons and writings show his theology to be strongly Calvinist, like those of the earlier English Puritans (Saillant 4). What about early African media? Belinda Sutton used written petitions, participated in print circulation of her works, and used the media ecology of the American legal system to obtain redress for her time in slavery. She is a later example of how early Africans would have manipulated media, but there are doubtless more.

In this lecture I've looked at who the first Africans in New England might have been, the West or West Central African origins of these people, and discussed two significant figures, Belinda Sutton and Onesimus. I've speculated at the end about how early Africans played a role in Puritan media. Now it is your turn to add some of your thoughts to the discussion. What is your response to the way I have answered the questions about Puritan Black Africans and early African media at the end? If you've already listened to other lectures in this course, what is the role of early Africans in connection to the topics that I have talked about? I'll look forward to reading your answers in the discussion forums!

Discussion question 1: Read this *Slate* article of Berlin's work on the people he refers to as "Atlantic Creole" (https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/05/ira-berlin-generations-of-captivity-excerpt.html) or the following excerpted paragraph:

"The 'Atlantic creoles' traced their beginnings to the historic encounter of Europeans and Africans, emerging around the trading factories or *feitorias* established along the coast of Africa in the 15th century by European expansionists. Many served as intermediaries in this developing crop of transatlantic trading enclaves, employing their linguistic skills and their familiarity with the Atlantic's diverse commercial practices, cultural conventions, and diplomatic etiquette to mediate between the African merchants and European sea captains. In so doing, some Atlantic creoles identified with their ancestral homeland (or a portion of it)—be it African or European—and served as its representatives in negotiations. Other Atlantic creoles had been won over by the power and largess of one party or another so that Africans entered the employ of European trading companies, and Europeans traded with African potentates. Yet others played fast and loose with their mixed heritage, employing whichever identity paid best" (Berlin).

What were Atlantic Creoles like compared to English Puritans? (you can use what you know about the Puritans or you may have to look at other lectures first). Did they have any similar characteristics or experiences, or different ones?

Discussion question 2: Read Belinda Sutton's first petition from 1783 (https://royallhouse.org/belinda-suttons-1783-petition-full-text/). Who is Belinda Sutton and what does this petition tell us about her? Compare and contrast how she describes her home in Africa with Massachusetts.

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