

BLACKS IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in a new series of articles by Professor Fitzgerald dealing with human rights, constitutional guarantees, the Presidency, Ronald Reagan and minority people.

One year before the arrival of the Mayflower twenty Africans landed at Jamestown, Virginia.

They did not come voluntarily to America but, like most Europeans

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John brings to the real estate industry, a background of mathematics, having been a mathematics teacher for over 20 years. At present, John is a teacher with Clark County School District. He doubles as a residential sales person with Toler Realty. John, his wife and daughter arrived in Las Vegas from Gary, Indiana.

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who came here during those early years, they were indentured servants and not slaves.

They labored for a maximum of seven years for those who had paid their passage. After having served the proscribed time they received their freedom.

This scenario repeated itself hundreds of times and it involved Africans and Europeans. These Africans could acquire property, exercise whatever mobility they wished and partake in whatever activities they wished so long as they were legal.

The practice of bringing indentured servants to America continued for approximately a hundred years. The ebb and flow of European indentured servants was quite often influenced by military, political, and economic circumstances. Resultantly, more attention was directed toward the uninterrupted supply of Africans. These indentured servants did whatever work had to be

done. Their tasks ranged from pushing back the forest, tilling the soil, planting and harvesting, constructing houses and fortresses, brick making, piloting ships, cabinet making, furniture construction and just about everything else which had to be done. There were no real distinctions made between the treatment of African and European servants. There was not, initially, a great deal of intermingling between the races. There existed at that time definite communications obstacles which had to be hurdled. Not only could not the Europeans and Africans communicate but it was often difficult for the Africans to communicate with each other. Quite often they came from different villages and were members of different language groups. The difficulties which existed in this area were not of long-standing. Words and phrases were exchanged and bit by bit the barriers diminished.

There were, simultaneously, difficulties in communicating with native groups of Americans. This also had to be coped with. The relationships which developed between these three groups (Africans, Europeans and Indians) were total.

There were intermarriages due to the fact that the number of African and European women who came to America during the early years of foreign settlement comprised only a small percentage of that of men. No eyebrows were raised because of that reality.

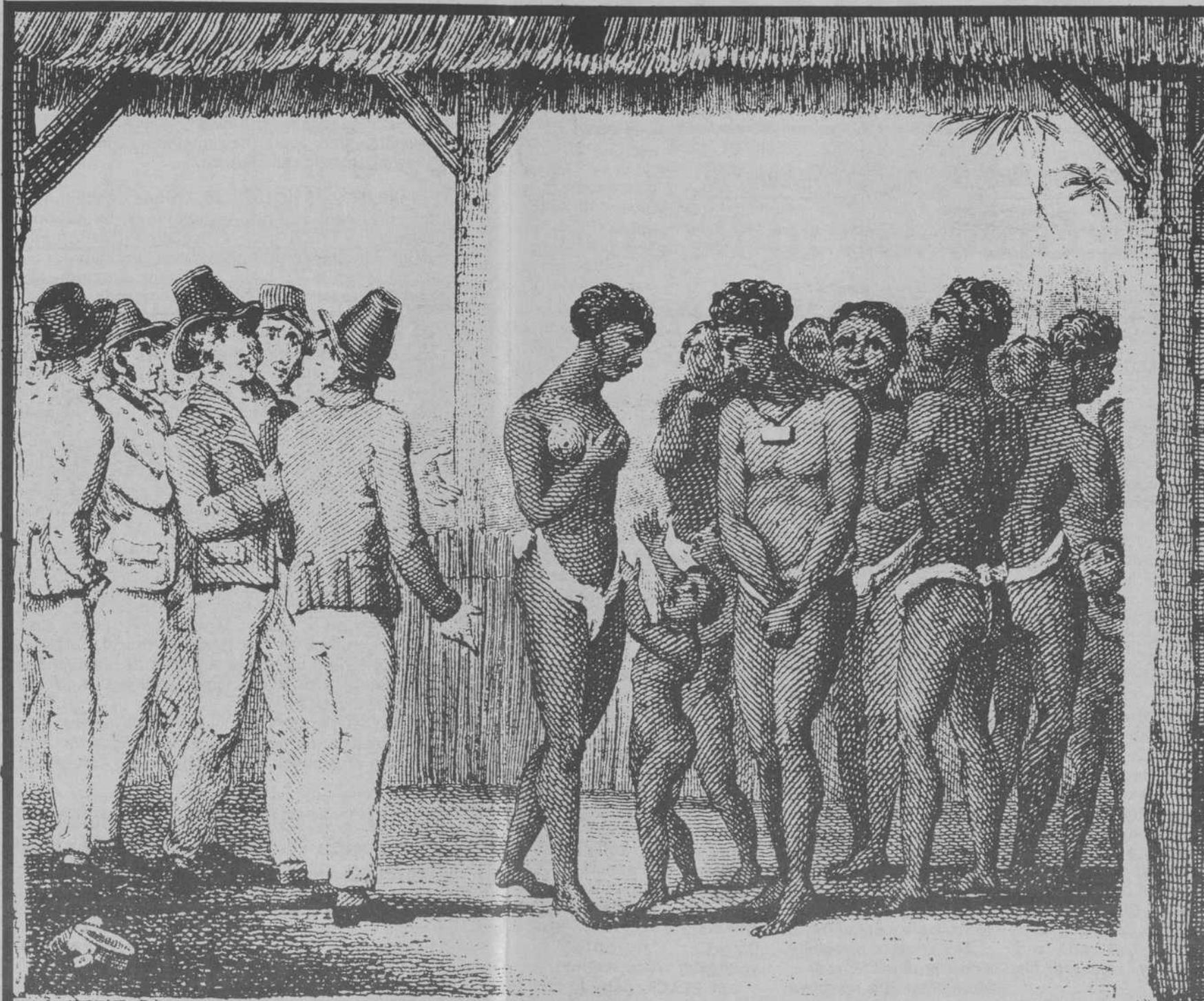
Racism, at that time, was not practical. The colonists were also yet living in accordance to one of the basic tenets of Christianity — the

universal brotherhood of man.

Conditions did begin to change around 1640. It was during this time that one of the major turning points in race relations in America occurred. Three indentured servants, two whites and one black decided not to live up to their end of the "contractual" arrangement. The two white men had entered into the arrangement voluntarily while the lone black had not. The flight of the former was clearly a breach of contract which had been made without duress, while that of the latter was merely an attempt to escape his kidnappers. The three were apprehended and returned to their place of employment. The punishment which was meted out gives a classic example of injustice. The two white indentured servants were given a nominal extension of their period of servitude. John Punch, the African, was made an indentured servant for life. This set an unusual precedent.

Thereafter, Africans brought to America ceased to be indentured servants for a period of time and progressively the status of life-time indenture became the standing order. Obviously, unexpected problems arose. There were situations in which a "free man of color" might have a child with a female indenture. The question arose as to the disposition of the child. Would it be free as its father or would it be not free as its mother. A Virginia law ruled that the child would be of the same status as its mother.

Even before these developments had occurred, the Black family, in regards to its relationship to America had been negatively af-



Slaves "seasoned" in the West Indies were sold to colonial planters in exchange for lumber, livestock, grain, and rum. Purchasers carefully examined them for any problems of health or age that would make them incapable of hard labor. Since slaves were considered nothing more than property, little thought was given to preserving their families.

ected. Beginning on the African end where it all began the family was broken up. A husband might be sold to one group, the mother to another and the children to still others. In those rare instances where a portion of the family might have been fortunate enough to remain together through that first experience it was surely affected during the second stage. The long trek overland to the African Gold Coast

brought with it fatalities.

Those who were fortunate to survive this ordeal were placed in holding stations awaiting the pleasure of the buyers. These men were not concerned with maintaining African families. They were interested in making money. When the traders arrived for their "ebony cargoes" it was as though they had shopping lists — eighty males ranging in age from twelve to twenty, fifty males ranging in age from eight to twelve, one hundred females ranging in age from ten to twenty and to be cer-

tain that they do not speak the same language. (This was necessary so that they could not plot some kind of overthrow.) When those purchases were made they did not ask all families to remain together. The Africans were lined up and the buyers went among them and selected those who filled their bill — always conscious of the need to separate language groups. More than fifty percent of the time, even with these careful measures, there were among the groups selected Africans who spoke the same language and often

some family members might be lucky enough to remain together.

Stage two was survival. The Middle Passage, the voyage from Africa to the New World, was not uneventful. There were revolts on board ship which resulted in some deaths; there were those who preferred becoming food for sharks rather than accept the condition they were forced to be in. After six or eight weeks, depending upon the route, the survivors arrived in the New World. The Caribbean Islands were usually their first stop. The odds of any family members

yet being together were slim but they were there. Two, three, maybe four might have survived those first stages of their enslavement. In the Islands they oftentimes were able to re-establish contact with each other. Part of the family might still be in Africa, perhaps one might have died during the overland trek, one quite possibly was left at the Gold Coast because they were not on the "shopping list," one might have died during the Middle Passage. The remnants were safely tucked away on one of the Caribbean plantations where they were being "seasoned" or made ready for slavery. Psychological or cultural shock and dehumanization were major parts of the "OJT" program of those islands. From time to time some few Africans managed to effect their escape. They banded together and roamed the countryside seeking to survive. They became known as the "Mar-

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oons" and the damage and terror they inflicted on plantation owners was known throughout the Islands. Once again, one of those possible maximum number of four members of a family might have been among those who escaped. The number was then diminished to three.

After their matriculation they were sent to the auction blocks of the mainland. If they were lucky they would all arrive at the same place. New Orleans, Mobile, Charleston were among the well known auc-

tioning centers. Let us hypothesize that they were all lucky enough to go to Charleston, South Carolina. The day of the auction arrived. A thirty year old mother, a fourteen year old son, and a nine year old daughter are still unseparated — quite a combination. The final split-up occurs here. The shopping lists, at this level, are much more restricted. Not many prospective buyers could afford to purchase three Africans at one time. At that level the Black African family gasped its last breath.

TO BE CONTINUED

Insurance Corner

By ALEX THOMAS
Ebony Insurance Agency

DOGS, KIDS, BOATS and INJURIES

Liability insurance carried by a family under a homeowner's policy covers a wide range of possible accidents.

For example: a boy may injure someone while riding his bicycle. A family dog may bite a visitor. A salesman may fall on the front steps. A power mower may sling a rock which injures a neighbor.

If you carry liability insurance, a claim filed against you will be defended by the insurance company which will supply attorneys and pay court costs. However, it will pay only up to the maximum amount of coverage of the policy. This is normally a minimum of \$25,000 in the standard homeowner's policy.

Although most court awards are below \$25,000, settlements have been growing larger in recent years (58 percent increase in the past 10 years). For a very small amount, this coverage could be increased to \$100,000.

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