

Colonial America Depended on the Enslavement of Indigenous People

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An illustration of the Pequot War. In 1637, a Pequot village in Connecticut was attacked and the Pequot survivors were sold as slaves. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Textbooks and classroom lesson plans are starting to present a more clear-eyed view of America's history. They are slowly recognizing the violence that happened when European settlers encountered the indigenous, or native people of the so-called "New World." But there are still many overlooked stories. One of these startling omissions from history books is something Margaret Ellen Newell is calling attention to in her book, "Brethren by Nature." She is bringing attention to the fact that colonists living in New England relied on the labor of thousands of Native Americans to build their new lives.

The enslavement of New England's native people was glossed over in the work of historians after World War I, as Tanya H. Lee reports for Indian Country Today, a news website.

Historians told a different story

Newell is a professor of history at Ohio State University. She writes that historians "reconstructed the compelling narrative of the Puritan migration. ... Many of these works stressed the uniqueness of New England culture and sought there the origins of American exceptionalism." In other words, they overplayed the uniqueness of what the settlers were doing in founding the U.S., and downplayed that the settlers used Native American slaves to help them found the U.S.

During the course of researching her first book, "From Dependency to Independence: Economic Revolution in Colonial New England," Newell came across a list of Native American slaves kept by colonists in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She was surprised by the find because she had been taught that New England colonists didn't keep Native Americans as slaves, because they often ran away. But that impression was incorrect.

"The colonial economy depended on slavery," Lee writes. "Many well-to-do households functioned only because of slavery, early colonial legal codes were devised to justify slavery and the Pequot War and King Philip's War were fought in large measure to perpetuate slavery."

Wars break out

Indeed, in the 1630s, the Connecticut River Valley was home to the powerful Pequots. The settlers at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay wanted this tribe's rich, fertile land. In order to get it, they persuaded the Mohegan and Narragansett tribes to help them fight the Pequots. In 1637, they burned a village on the banks of the Mystic River in southeastern Connecticut, killing 400 to 700 Pequots, according to the Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Connecticut, a historical preservation group. That massacre turned the tide of the war and Pequot survivors were pursued, captured and sold as slaves.

King Philip's War in the mid-1670s was fought because Native Americans in New England wanted to protest the English colonists' increasing influence and the forced labor of Native Americans. The British won the war, and war ended with "as many as 40 percent of the Indians in southern New England living in English households as indentured servants or slaves," Lee writes.

One way to expand the economy

The English colonists weren't the only ones to use the labor of enslaved native people, of course. "The Spanish were almost totally dependent on Indian labor in most of their colonies," writes Alan Gally for History Now magazine. Enslaving Native Americans became one of the primary ways to expand the economy for colonists in South Carolina. It was also used to a

lesser amount in North Carolina, Virginia and Louisiana. "From 1670 to 1720 more Indians were shipped out of Charleston, South Carolina, than Africans were imported as slaves — and Charleston was a major port for bringing in Africans," Gally writes.

Lost to time

As the African slave trade took off in the late 1700s, African slaves were brought to the U.S. This caused the Native American slave trade to slow down. Also, many tribes had been forced off of their land and made to move West to live on reservations. But something else was taking place to reduce the numbers of Native Americans being enslaved. Some Native Americans were intermarrying with African-Americans. The children were then referred to as "colored," effectively erasing their Native American ancestry. The enslavement of Native Americans thus became obscured, but modern DNA technology helped keep that story from being lost to time.

The history of the enslavement of Native Americans continues to be a complicated and dark part of America's history, but it is one that deserves to continue to be researched and reconciled with.