Background Information

Note: Before African slavery became well established, British colonists enslaved Indigenous peoples in Salem and across New England.

Slavery is the holding of someone by force, or when one person “owns” another person as property. Its main purpose is to make money for the enslaver. In rural and urban areas across New England, colonists had a demand for enslaved people, or a desire to maximize their wealth by using unpaid labor.

A significant portion of enslavers in New England were members of the middle or working class. Some colonists invested in enslaved children (who were less expensive) and trained them with the specific skills of their own profession or trade (similar to an apprentice). These children grew up to be part of a valuable, unpaid labor force, working for free in jobs that may otherwise have required expensive labor. In Salem, for example, enslaved people worked as blacksmiths, shoemakers, and hairdressers.

Most of Salem’s economy was based on trade with the West Indies and the global slavery economy. The most significant industries included farming, fishing, shipbuilding, other maritime professions, and rum distilling. Enslaved people worked alongside free people in all these fields. Despite having the same qualifications, skills, and experience, enslaved people were usually not paid and often performed the most dangerous work.

Another significant piece of Salem’s economy was household labor. This colonial labor was extremely different from modern-day household labor. It was especially physical, time-consuming, complex, and required specialized skills. It provided men with the time to work outside the home. It was sometimes referred to as a “business” of its own.

Working-class and wealthy families enslaved African women (and children) to preform household labor. This included making clothes, raising children, cooking, farming, cleaning, producing goods to be sold outside the home, and selling and purchasing products at market.

Enslavers controlled much more than labor. They controlled where people lived, who they married, what they ate, etc. In New England, enslaved men, women, and children often lived alongside their enslavers. Sleeping areas included attics, kitchens, or even an enslaver's bedroom floor. Without separate living spaces, enslaved people were under almost constant surveillance and control. Most lived in a home with only a few or no other enslaved people. People could be sold as punishment or for economic gain, and families were often separated in this manner.

But despite bondage and isolation, enslaved people married, had children, and formed communities outside their enslaver’s home. People resisted, defied their enslavers, and took back control of their lives. Examples include marrying without permission and “running away.”

In Salem, enslaved and free Black people gathered once a year for a holiday known as “Negro Election Day.” This sometimes-multi-day event included drinking, dancing, games, a parade, and a feast. Most importantly, it included an election where enslaved people voted for a leader from their own community. Although mostly ceremonial, the election was a way for people to practice civic engagement. The holiday was an opportunity to gather in community, express joy, and experience freedom in enslavement.

Note: Most evidence of enslaved people living in New England is documented from a white, enslaver perspective. From these documents we learn how enslavers interacted with enslaved people. They offer less information about how enslaved people lived beyond enslavement. Despite this lack of evidence, we know people had rich experiences beyond bondage. Enslaved people loved, formed families and friendships, practiced cultural traditions, and resisted bondage in small and revolutionary ways.

Vocabulary

* Enslaver: this term is used in place of “slave owner.” Slavery treated people like commodities, products capable of being bought, sold, and owned. However, human beings can never be "products." Enslaved people continuously fought for and retained their humanity.
* Enslaved: used in place of “slave” to emphasize that an enslaved person was a person and their life had meaning far beyond the status of “slave” imposed on them.
* Invest: spend money on something with the expectation that you will later make a profit.
* Apprentice: a person who is learning a skilled trade from an employer and agrees to work for a set amount of time for lower-than-normal wages.
* Economy: a region's wealth and resources, including the goods and services people produce and consume.
* Global slavery economy: sometimes referred to as the “Triangle Trade,” this economy was based on the kidnapping of people from Africa, who then produced trade goods on slave plantations in the Americas, which were bought and sold across the Atlantic Ocean.
* Maritime: related to the sea or ocean.
* Rum distilling: in this process, molasses (a thick, dark syrup) is used to create rum (an alcoholic beverage) at a factory known as a distillery.