

REVIEW



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Foundations in Bondage: Native Enslavement and the Making of Colonial South Carolina

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D. Andrew Johnson's *Enslaved Native Americans and the Making of Colonial South Carolina* offers a fascinating investigation of the history of Native American enslavement during the colonial period in the American South. Johnson seeks to uncover the complex relationships between Indigenous peoples and colonial settlers. He argues that "[a]lthough they were relatively few in number and were always a minority of the enslaved population, enslaved Native people nevertheless were an integral component of the sociocultural history of Carolina" (p. 85). Johnson's book compellingly shows how the enslavement of Native Americans shaped the colony's economy, society, demographics, and political relations with Indian nations, offering a nuanced interpretation of dispossession and bondage.

While colonial historians have included the traffic in Indian slaves in broader narratives, few have delved deeply into what that practice entailed, particularly from the perspective of the enslaved. Johnson builds upon the foundational work of Almon Wheeler Lauber (Lauber 1913), Alan Gallay (Gallay 2002), and Andrés Reséndez (Reséndez 2016), who outlined the scope of Native American slavery. His book provides a crucial regional case study that not only traces the development of Indian slavery from the

perspective of the communities and individuals affected, but also integrates their stories into the history of colonial South Carolina. By doing so, he highlights the significance of Native American slaves for the Southern economy and culture and attempts to recapture their lost history. Johnson goes beyond the conventional narrative of African slavery to address the role that Cherokee, Catawba, Yamasee, and Tuscarora peoples played in the labor systems of colonial South Carolina. His study helps to re-examine the evolution of the plantation economy, the development of racial divisions in early America, and the roles Indigenous peoples played in colonial life.

Johnson reconstructs the history of Native enslavement from the colony's founding in 1670 through the mid-eighteenth century, when the trade in Indigenous captives peaked before yielding to the transatlantic traffic in Africans. He argues convincingly that American slavery did not begin with the arrival of Africans but was rooted in the earlier systematic exploitation of Native peoples. Johnson situates this development within a longer Indigenous history of captivity and servitude, noting that while such practices predated colonization, they were intensified by European expansion and competition over land and resources. The Indian slave trade, he demonstrates, emerged as a central industry in early South Carolina. Both Europeans and Native groups participated in this system, which colonial demand transformed into a large-scale commercial enterprise of devastating brutality.

In the colony's first decade, settlers recognized the necessity of forging alliances with Indigenous communities, particularly as they struggled to secure food supplies. Johnson emphasizes the essential role enslaved Native Americans played in the colony's economic foundations. Colonists adopted Southeastern Indigenous foodways—what Johnson terms the “maize and pease” complex—centered on corn and beans cultivated largely by Native women. English settlers relied on Indigenous agricultural knowledge and sought Native labor, intensifying enslavement. This dependence laid the groundwork for the expansion of African slavery, especially as rice cultivation emerged as the colony's most profitable export. With the rise of rice plantations, planters increasingly imported enslaved Africans, yet Indigenous food production remained critical, sustaining both the colony and its enslaved workforce. Even as African slavery became dominant, the enslavement of Native peoples persisted, though it was eventually absorbed into the broader system of racialized chattel slavery.

A central argument of Johnson's study is that the Indian slave trade was not peripheral but foundational to South Carolina's early development. He demonstrates how colonial elites—including governors and influential traders—actively instigated conflicts between Native groups, supplying weapons to secure captives. This deliberate manipulation of warfare ensured a steady stream of enslaved individuals for local labor and export. Johnson traces this system through conflicts such as the Westo Wars and the Yamasee War, showing their inseparability from mechanisms of capture and sale.

Painstakingly sifting through fragmentary and biased records, Johnson devotes attention to the lived experiences of enslaved Native Americans. Drawing on court proceedings, runaway advertisements, correspondence, and official reports, he recon-

structs narratives of resilience and suffering. His analysis highlights the wide range of roles enslaved Natives occupied and explores relationships between Indigenous captives and enslaved Africans. He also situates Native enslavement within the broader evolution of colonial law, showing how legal codes regulating Indigenous slavery expanded to encompass Africans, laying the foundation for a hereditary, racialized system of bondage. By the mid-eighteenth century, Native enslavement declined due to demographic loss, organized resistance, the profitability of African slavery, and shifting alliances. Yet it did not disappear altogether; instead, it became less visible, as “Negro” became synonymous with enslavement.

Johnson underscores that the boundaries between Native and African slavery were not always clear. Initially, settlers enslaved Native peoples for labor, social control, and agricultural purposes. Over time, however, as Africans outnumbered Indigenous captives, slavery became more rigidly codified in racial terms. Johnson identifies this shift—from fluid relationships to a rigid racialized system—as a central dynamic of South Carolina’s history. He also explores the social complexities generated by the forced migration of Indigenous captives, many of whom labored alongside Africans. Though their experiences differed, both endured systemic violence and exploitation, and distinctions between them diminished within a shared racialized order of unfreedom.

One chapter focuses on the life of Nanny, an enslaved Native woman listed in the estate inventory of planter Charlesworth Glover. Using fragmentary records and archaeological evidence, particularly pottery analysis, Johnson reconstructs several aspects of her life. While necessarily speculative, this reconstruction illustrates both the challenges of recovering Indigenous experiences and the value of interdisciplinary methods for illuminating Native enslavement.

Johnson’s study rests on an extensive foundation of primary sources, including government records, legislative journals, probate inventories, court transcripts, merchant account books, and archaeological findings. This breadth of evidence enables him to reconstruct the workings of the slave trade and trace individual trajectories with detail. When records are sparse, he supplements archival evidence with material culture and secondary scholarship. His argument—that South Carolina’s development relied fundamentally on Native enslavement—is embedded in a broader account of economic, social, and military forces. While acknowledging the limitations, he remains attentive to Native agency and considers how ethnicity and race were constructed in the colonial world. An appendix, “A Note on Language,” reflects this sensitivity, as Johnson explains his choices of terminology and emphasizes the historical contingency of labels and identities.

D. Andrew Johnson’s *Enslaved Native Americans and the Making of Colonial South Carolina* is a significant contribution to the study of early America, Native history, slavery, and the colonial South. It illuminates the mechanics and scale of the Indian slave trade, its devastating human costs, and its enduring consequences. By highlighting Native labor’s role in the colonial economy and the entangled relationships among Native peoples, Africans, and Europeans, Johnson offers a fresh perspective on dispossession, enslavement, and racial formation. Accessible and engaging, the book

is valuable for both scholars and general readers. Ultimately, Johnson forces a reckoning with long-overlooked histories of Native enslavement, challenging silences and demonstrating that Indigenous bondage was foundational to South Carolina.

References

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