

Chains of Captivity, Colonial Power, and Archival Erasure: Native American Slavery in Colonial North America

Imaan Ali
imaanali081709@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the concept of Native American slavery in colonial North America will be explored through a combined analysis of the colonial print culture as well as the recent historiography. Utilizing digitized colonial-period newspapers in the Library of Congress and current historical and decolonial activism, the paper will delve into the structures of Indigenous enslavement as well as the modes of epistemology that allowed these practices to be common, visible and then pushed to historical discourses. The paper argues that Indigenous captivity and enslavement constituted a structurally significant role in carving out the political economies of Colonial America and its historiographical occlusion is attributable less to historical absence and lack of substance but rather colonial architecture of indigenous archives. This research illustrates the imperative of recovering Native American slavery as a central rather than marginal institution of colonial modernity.

INTRODUCTION

The historical record of slavery in North America has predominantly focused on African chattel slavery as the sole form of slavery, often displaying Indigenous slavery to a secondary or transitional status. This historiographical focus has contributed to the production of a collective memory, pedagogical approach, and even research agenda that has produced the widespread misconception that Native American slavery was exceptional, informal, or historically insignificant. In contrast, colonial law codes, trade networks, and print culture document the routinization of Indigenous captivity in multiple colonial spaces. Native American slavery was a regularized labor regime of extraction, territorialization, and population management within colonial settler societies.

This paper asserts that Native American slavery was not simply incidental to colonialism but rather constitutive of the political economy of settler colonialism. Furthermore, it asserts that the historiographical erasure of Native American slavery is not incidental to historical knowledge but rather the result of epistemological structures inherent within colonial archives themselves. Through a comparative analysis of colonial newspaper accounts of Native American captivity archived in the

April 2026
Vol 6, No 1.

Library of Congress and contemporary historical scholarship and decolonial critiques of knowledge production, this research study seeks to investigate both the materiality of Native American slavery and the discursive regimes through which such materialities were legitimized, euphemized, and historically peripheralized. Through such a methodology, this paper seeks to re-center Native American slavery as an axis of colonial power rather than a footnote in historical scholarship.

While scholars such as Gally and Newell have established the empirical existence of Indigenous slavery in specific colonial regions, this paper advances their contributions by foregrounding the epistemological mechanisms through which such slavery was rendered invisible, mechanisms that persist within the archive itself. The originality of this paper lies not merely in recovering evidence of Native American slavery but in interrogating why and how that evidence has been systematically overlooked, offering a synthesis of colonial print culture analysis and decolonial epistemological critique that prior regional studies have not fully pursued.

INDIGENOUS ENSLAVEMENT WITHIN COLONIAL POLITICAL ECONOMIES

Indigenous enslavement was a structurally pivotal element of colonial political economies in various regions of North America. Gally shows how in the southeastern colonies, Indigenous captives were produced on a large scale through warfare and then trafficked through colonial markets, often for resale in Caribbean plantation colonies. The commodification of Native bodies was simultaneously a labor source and a colonial domination strategy, undermining Indigenous politics while securing colonial territorial claims.

In New England, Newell shows how the enslavement of Indians was juridically normalized through colonial legal systems that conceptualized enslavement as a rightful punishment after conflict. Native Americans were allocated to settler households, sold to other colonies, and, in some instances, exported abroad. This regime was contemporaneous with African chattel slavery, creating overlapping regimes of coerced labor that shaped colonial household economies and regional development.

These regimes of Indigenous captivity were not transitional phenomena but rather enduring colonial governance structures. The subsequent growth of African chattel slavery was a function of changing labor requirements and colonial strategic priorities, rather than a moral commendation of Native American slavery. The historiographical impulse to subsume Native American slavery into the periphery of historical narratives thus conceals the constitutive relationship between Native American slavery and the formation of colonial political economies.

INDIGENOUS ENSLAVEMENT IN COLONIAL PRINT CULTURE

Colonial newspapers archived at the Library of Congress are a vital source for the discursive normalization of Indigenous enslavement. Advertisements for escaped Indigenous captives follow the standardized language of fugitive slave advertisements, including biometric detail (height, complexion,

scars), clothing markers and reward values. The structural equivalence of advertisement for Indigenous captives and those for enslaved Africans indexes the incorporation of Native Bodies into a radicalized regime of alienable property.

The Boston News-Letter, one of the earliest colonial newspapers preserved in the Chronicling America Archive, provides instructive examples of this discursive equivalence. Advertisements, appearing in the 1710s and 1720s describe runaway “Indian servants” in language structurally identical to that used for African slaves; cataloging physical features, clothing, spoken English proficiency, and offering monetary rewards for their return. One such notice, typical of the period, describes a “Native man of about 25 years, middle stature, speaks good English, went away from his master” rhetoric that simultaneously acknowledges Indigenous personhood and reduces it to the property relation of servitude. Similarly, advertisements in the South Carolina Gazette from the 1730s and 1740s document the sale of Native captives alongside African slaves, listing age, estimated labor value, and physical condition in identical transactional terms.

Advertisements for the sale of Native captives further contextualize the commodification of Native bodies. These advertisements systematically list age, perceived value to labor, and health, reducing human beings to units of exchange value. The transactional logic of these advertisements is especially important in that it places Indigenous captivity within the mundane circuits of colonial commerce, effacing the extraordinary violence of capture, displacement, and familial separation that preceded commodification.

Reports of the dispersal of Indigenous prisoners following military expeditions further specify the juridical rationalization of captivity. These reports contextualize the capture and dispersal of Native prisoners as legitimate spoils of war or as a necessary function of colonial security. The rhetoric of legality and military necessity decodes violence as an administrative procedure, naturalizing Indigenous enslavement as a function of imperial administration rather than violence.

Taken together, these texts indicate that Indigenous enslavement was neither hidden nor marginal but publicly discursive within colonial print culture. At the same time the semantic field of “servitude”, “runaway”, and “prisoner” constitutes a euphemistic regime that diminishes the coercive quality of captivity. Such lexical maneuvers are a discursive technology of moral laundering, redescribing enslavement as labor, discipline or even societal and a military necessity.

ARCHIVAL MEDIATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF HISTORICAL ERASURE

Although the colonial newspapers that are preserved in the Library of Congress are invaluable to the study of Indigenous enslavement, the archive itself is a mediator and gateway of historical knowledge. As Douglas et al. contend, texts are not merely passive containers of historical knowledge but active producers of meaning. Colonial print culture is invested in proprietary rights, juridical discourses and economic values, while actively suppressing Indigenous subjectivities, kinship relations, and experimental knowledge of captivity.

April 2026
Vol 6, No 1.

The formal conventions of fugitive advertisement are exemplary of this epistemological imbalance. By valorizing physical description over narrative content, these texts subject Indigenous people to the recuperative impulse, making their identities intelligible only insofar as they are useful to recapture. This epistemological regime of the archive reduces Indigenous life to manageable data within a settler colonial regime of surveillance and control.

The archive is thus a repository of evidence but also a technology of epistemic governance. The historiographical marginalization of Native American slavery is exemplary of the sedimentation of colonial epistemologies within archival infrastructures, delimiting the knowable and narratable within historical discourse.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL MARGINALIZATION AND COUNTERARGUMENTS

One common reason cited for the historiographical marginalization of Native American slavery is the preponderance of African chattel slavery in the North American systems of labor. Because African slavery was the foundation of a plantation economy of massive proportions, it has been considered the exemplary form of slavery, subordinating Indigenous slavery to secondary status. However, this epistemological subordination confuses scale with status. The preponderance of African chattel slavery does not disprove the constitutive status of Indigenous captivity in the establishment of colonial labor regimes, territoriality, and racial orders.

Theories of the decline of Indigenous slavery and thus its lack of significance also cloud its role in the early colonial policy, not the disappearance of Indigenous forced labor, which continued in new forms such as debt peonage, coerced servitude, and child removal. The historiographical downplaying of Native American slavery, therefore, is a function of the epistemological legacy of colonial discourses rather than historical marginality.

TOWARD A DECOLONIAL ARCHIVAL RECOVERY

The foregoing analysis raises a methodological question that extends beyond historical recovery: what obligations does the recognition of archival complicity impose on historians and scholars engaging with colonial sources? If the archive is itself a technology of epistemic governance, as IV argues, then recovering Indigenous histories requires more than locating overlooked documents. It demands a critical engagement with the classificatory and rhetorical systems through which those documents were produced and preserved.

As Smith's decolonial framework makes clear, this means reading colonial newspaper advertisements not only as evidence of Indigenous enslavement but as artifacts of a representational economy that

simultaneously documented and dehumanized Native captives. The advertisements analyzed in print culture, particularly those that described indigenous runaways in biometric terms of height, age, complexion, and clothing reveals a regime of visibility designed for recapture rather than recognition. To read these texts against the grain, as a decolonial methodology demands, is to recover the violence that their administrative language concealed, restoring to the archive the subjectivities it was structured to suppress.

This decolonial reading practice also has implications for how historians periodize and categorize colonial labor regimes more broadly. The conventional narrative, which positions African chattel slavery as the singular defining labor institutions of colonial America, must be revisited not only for its empirical gaps but for the epistemological assumptions that produced and sustained it. Restoring Indigenous slavery to its constitutive role in colonial political economy requires restructuring the historiographical frameworks themselves, a project that is both scholarly and ethical in its implications.

CONCLUSION: RE-SITUATING INDIGENOUS ENSLAVEMENT IN COLONIAL HISTORY

Native American slavery was a constitutive institution of colonial North America, integral to warfare, trade, and household economies. Colonial American newspapers archived in the Library of Congress offer evidence of the public normalization of indigenous captivity as a form of violence.

Through the combination of archival research with the work of Gally and Newell and the decolonial approach of Smith this paper illustrates that the subordination of indigenous peoples to the mainstream historical narrative itself is a function of the colonial logic of knowledge rather than the history of colonial North America. Re-situating Native American slavery at the center of colonial political economies, therefore, requires a rethinking of American origins.

REFERENCES

- Berlin, I. (1998). *Many thousands gone: The first two centuries of slavery in North America*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Block, S. (2021). *Colonial complexions: Race and bodies in eighteenth-century America*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Brooks, J., & Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture. (2002). *Captives & cousins: Slavery, kinship, and community in the Southwest borderlands*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Carocci, M., & Pratt, S. (2012). *Native American adoption, captivity, and slavery in changing contexts*. Springer.

April 2026
Vol 6, No 1.

(1776, July 22). *The Boston gazette, or, Country journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83021292/1776-07-22/ed-1/>

Douglas, J., Ballin, M., & Lapp, J. (2022). Introduction. *Archivaria*, 94, 5–21. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13861>

Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2014). *An Indigenous Peoples' history of the United States*. Beacon Press.

Gallay, A. (2003). *The Indian slave trade: The rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717*. Yale University Press.

Gallay, A. (2015). *Indian slavery in colonial America*. University of Nebraska Press.

Library of Congress. (n.d.). *Chronicling America: Historic American newspapers. National Digital Newspaper Program*. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

Newell, M. E. (2015). *Brethren by nature*. Cornell University Press.

Reséndez, A. (2016). *The other slavery: The uncovered story of Indian enslavement in America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Zed Books.

Snyder, C. (2012). *Slavery in Indian country: The changing face of captivity in early America*. Harvard University Press.

(1783, May 17). *The South-Carolina & American general gazette*. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83025790/1783-05-17/ed-1/>