

The Slave Codes

A Complete Record — Colony by Colony, Statute by Statute

1640 – 1865 · The Legal Architecture of American Slavery

ERA	ERA II — Colonial America & the Founding Contradiction
ENTRY	Entry 8 — Slave Codes: How Law Became a Weapon
TRACK	Persecution
DATE RANGE	1640 – 1865
SCOPE	Virginia · Maryland · South Carolina · North Carolina · Georgia · New York · Massachusetts · Federal
NC COVERAGE	1715 NC Colonial Slave Act · 1741 NC Slave Code · 1866 NC Black Codes

All Slave Codes — Chronological Index

The following table indexes every slave code covered in this document. Each entry is detailed in full on the pages that follow.

YEAR	COLONY / STATE	CODE / ACT	CATEGORY
1640	Virginia	Re John Punch — First Lifetime Servitude Ruling	Court Ruling
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1664	Maryland	Act Concerning Negroes and Other Slaves	Colonial Statute
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1682	Virginia	All Non-Christian Imported Servants Are Slaves	Colonial Statute
1691	Virginia	Anti-Miscegenation Act — Banishment for Inter-marriage	Colonial Statute
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1793	Federal	Fugitive Slave Act of 1793	Federal Law
1800	Federal	Act Prohibiting Import of Enslaved People (1807/1808)	Federal Law
1830	Various	Anti-Literacy Laws — Reading/Writing Banned	State Statutes
1850	Federal	Fugitive Slave Act of 1850	Federal Law
1857	Federal	Dred Scott v. Sandford	Supreme Court Ruling
1865–66	NC + Southern States	Black Codes — Post-Civil War	State Statute

Rows highlighted in green indicate NC-specific codes. Full summaries follow in chronological order.

Complete Record — Colony by Colony, Statute by Statute

1640

VIRGINIA

Re John Punch — First Lifetime Servitude Ruling

SIGNIFICANCE: First legal codification of race-based permanent servitude in English colonial America.

RULING

- Three runaway servants — two white, one African (John Punch) — are recaptured. The two white servants receive extended indenture terms. John Punch is sentenced to serve his master for the rest of his natural life. No English statute authorizes this distinction. The court creates it.

LEGAL PRECEDENT

- Establishes that an African man's body can be subjected to permanent servitude as a judicial punishment — a precedent with no English common law basis and no parallel ruling applied to white servants.

WHAT IT DID NOT YET DO

- Does not yet establish hereditary slavery. Does not create a general statute. It is a single court ruling — but the precedent is immediately absorbed into colonial judicial practice.

NC CONNECTION: *Virginia's judicial precedents were adopted directly into NC colonial practice. The logic of the John Punch ruling — that African men could be permanently bound by court order — underlies the entire legal system governing enslaved Africans in colonial NC.*

Source: *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia*, ed. H.R. McIlwaine (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1924). Library of Virginia.

1662

VIRGINIA

Hereditary Slavery Act — Partus Sequitur Ventrem

SIGNIFICANCE: The single most consequential slave law in American history. Made slavery permanent and self-reproducing through the mother's line.

CORE PROVISION

- The legal status of a child follows the condition of the mother, not the father. A child born to an enslaved woman is born enslaved — regardless of the father's status, race, or freedom.

REVERSAL OF ENGLISH COMMON LAW

- English common law held that a child's status followed the father. This statute inverts that principle specifically to ensure that the children of enslaved women — including children fathered by slaveholders — are born into slavery.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

- Transforms enslaved women's reproductive capacity into a property production mechanism. Every child an enslaved woman bears is born owned. The slave population becomes self-reproducing — reducing dependence on the transatlantic trade.

DOUBLE FINE

- The act also doubles the fine for interracial fornication — the first anti-miscegenation provision in Virginia law.

NC CONNECTION: *North Carolina adopted the partus sequitur ventrem principle directly. Estate inventories from Cumberland County list children of enslaved women as property of the estate from birth. This law governed every enslaved*

person born in NC from adoption through the Civil War.

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 2, p. 170 (1662). vagenweb.org/hening/

1664

MARYLAND

Act Concerning Negroes and Other Slaves

SIGNIFICANCE: First comprehensive colonial statute explicitly defining Black Africans as slaves for life and extending that status to their children.

LIFETIME SERVITUDE

- All Negroes and other slaves within the province — and all children born of any Negro or other slave — shall be slaves for life.

WHITE WOMEN MARRIED TO ENSLAVED MEN

- White women who marry enslaved men shall serve the master of the enslaved husband for the duration of the husband's life. Their children shall also be enslaved. This provision was designed to prevent free white women from elevating enslaved men through marriage.

SCOPE

- Applies to all people of African descent, regardless of prior status, Christian faith, or length of residence in the colony.

Source: *Archives of Maryland*, Vol. 1, p. 526 (1664). *Maryland State Archives*.

1667

VIRGINIA

Baptism Does Not Confer Freedom Act

SIGNIFICANCE: Removed the last theological argument against enslaving baptized Christians, opening the door for church participation in the slave system.

CORE PROVISION

- The conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of a person as to his bondage or freedom. An enslaved person who is baptized remains enslaved.

PURPOSE

- Slaveholders had resisted baptizing enslaved people, fearing that Christian conversion might legally confer freedom. This act eliminates that concern — and removes the last spiritual obstacle to the church's full participation in the slave system.

CONSEQUENCE

- Following this act, colonial churches begin baptizing, confirming, and recording enslaved people in parish records — while those same people remain legally classified as property.

NC CONNECTION: NC colonial churches operated under the same framework. Parish records from the Cape Fear region document enslaved people receiving baptism while remaining the legal property of their enslavers.

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 2, p. 260 (1667).

1670
VIRGINIA

Free Black Persons Cannot Own White Servants

SIGNIFICANCE: Began the systematic legal degradation of free Black status, creating a racial hierarchy enforceable by law.

CORE PROVISION

- No Negro or mulatto, though baptized and freed, shall purchase any Christian white servant.

BROADER SIGNIFICANCE

- Marks the beginning of legislative restrictions specifically targeting free Black people — not just enslaved people. The law begins constructing a racial caste system in which Black freedom is always partial, always conditional, always subject to white legislative override.

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 2, p. 280 (1670).

1682
VIRGINIA

All Non-Christian Imported Servants Are Slaves

SIGNIFICANCE: Shifted the legal basis of slavery from religion to race, closing the baptism loophole permanently.

CORE PROVISION

- All servants imported into Virginia who were not Christian in their native country at the time of purchase shall be accounted and be slaves.

RACIAL SHIFT

- In practice, this applied almost exclusively to Africans and their descendants. The religious framing was a legal fiction — the operative criterion was African origin.

CLOSING THE LOOPHOLE

- Even conversion to Christianity before importation would not confer freedom. The system is now explicitly racial, not theological.

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 2, p. 490 (1682).

1691
VIRGINIA

Anti-Miscegenation Act

SIGNIFICANCE: First explicit anti-miscegenation law in American history. Established racial purity as a legal principle.

CORE PROVISION

- Any white man or woman who intermarries with a Negro, mulatto, or Indian shall be banished from Virginia within three months.

FREE BLACK STATUS

- Free Black people who had been manumitted could no longer remain in Virginia after manumission — they were required to leave the colony within six months.

PURPOSE

- Designed to prevent the creation of a free mixed-race population that would complicate the binary racial structure the slave codes required.

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 3, p. 86 (1691).

1696

SOUTH
CAROLINA

First South Carolina Slave Code — Modeled on Barbados

SIGNIFICANCE: Established the most brutal slave code in the North American colonies, setting the template for the Deep South.

ORIGINS

- Drawn directly from the 1661 Barbados Slave Code — the first comprehensive slave code in the English colonial world. South Carolina planters, many of whom came from Barbados, transplanted the Barbados system wholesale.

KEY PROVISIONS

- Enslaved people classified as chattel property. Death penalty for striking a white person. Patrol system established — first formal slave patrol in North America. Enslaved people prohibited from assembling without white supervision.

PATROL SYSTEM

- The 1696 code creates the first organized slave patrol — armed white men with legal authority to stop, search, and punish any enslaved person found off their plantation without written permission. This is a direct ancestor of modern American policing.

NC CONNECTION: NC's colonial slave regulations drew from both Virginia and South Carolina models. The patrol system established in SC spread into NC colonial law and was formally codified in the 1741 NC Slave Code.

Source: Thomas Cooper, ed., *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, Vol. 7 (1836). South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

1705

VIRGINIA

Virginia Slave Codes — The Comprehensive Code

SIGNIFICANCE: The most consequential slave legislation in American history. Set the legal template for every subsequent American slave state.

ENSLAVED PEOPLE AS REAL PROPERTY

- Consolidated all previous statutes. Declared enslaved people to be real estate — equivalent in legal standing to land or livestock. They could be bought, sold, mortgaged, inherited, and seized for debt.

NO LEGAL STANDING

- Enslaved people had no standing to testify in court against white persons under any circumstances.

KILLING WITHOUT PUNISHMENT

- If an enslaved person died as a result of correction by their master or overseer, no felony was committed. The killing of an enslaved person in the course of punishment was not a crime.

PRESUMPTION OF SLAVERY

- Any person of African ancestry was presumed enslaved unless they could prove otherwise. The burden of proof of freedom rested on the Black person, not the claimant.

NO ASSEMBLY

- Enslaved people were prohibited from assembling in groups of more than five without white supervision, under penalty of corporal punishment.

WEAPONS PROHIBITED

- Enslaved people were prohibited from carrying any weapon — firearms, clubs, or otherwise — under penalty of corporal punishment.

FREE BLACK STATUS RESTRICTED

- Free Black people were stripped of the right to vote, hold office, or bear witness in court. The law created a racial caste system in which Black freedom was always subordinate to white citizenship.

NC CONNECTION: *The 1705 Virginia code is the direct parent document of NC's 1715 colonial slave regulations and 1741 Slave Code. Cumberland County courts operated under these legal principles from the county's establishment through the Civil War.*

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large*, Vol. 3, pp. 447–463 (1705). vagenweb.org/hening/

1712

SOUTH
CAROLINA

Revised South Carolina Slave Code

SIGNIFICANCE: Expanded and hardened the 1696 code; became the model for Georgia and the Deep South.

PATROL SYSTEM EXPANDED

- Formalized and expanded slave patrols with regular compensation and authority to enter any property.

DEATH PENALTY PROVISIONS

- Extended list of capital offenses for enslaved people — including insurrection, arson, and assault on white persons.

WRITTEN PASS SYSTEM

- Enslaved people moving off their plantation for any reason required a written pass from their enslaver. Patrollers could stop and punish any enslaved person found without documentation.

PROHIBITION ON TRADE

- Enslaved people were prohibited from buying, selling, or trading any goods without their enslaver's written permission.

Source: *Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, Vol. 7 (1712). South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

1715

NORTH
CAROLINA

NC Colonial Slave Regulations

SIGNIFICANCE: First formal slave regulations enacted by the NC colonial assembly. Established the legal framework for slavery in NC.

MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS

- Enslaved people were prohibited from leaving their enslaver's property without written permission. Violation was punishable by corporal punishment.

ASSEMBLY PROHIBITED

- Meetings of enslaved people without white supervision were prohibited. The regulation was aimed specifically at preventing organized resistance.

NO LEGAL TESTIMONY

- Enslaved people had no standing to testify against white persons in NC colonial courts.

RUNAWAY PROVISIONS

- Established legal procedures for the capture, return, and punishment of enslaved people who escaped their enslavers — including authorized use of force.

MODELING VIRGINIA

- The 1715 regulations tracked Virginia's 1705 comprehensive code closely — evidence of direct legislative borrowing across colonial assemblies.

NC CONNECTION: *These regulations governed enslaved Africans arriving in the Cape Fear region from 1715 onward. Cumberland County was established in 1754 — the county's entire antebellum legal history operated under the framework first codified here.*

Source: *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, Vol. 2. NC State Archives, Raleigh.

1723
VIRGINIA

Free Black Voting Rights Eliminated

SIGNIFICANCE: Completed the legal exclusion of Black people from political participation, regardless of free status.

CORE PROVISION

- Free Black, mulatto, and Indian people are prohibited from voting in any election in Virginia.

PRIOR STATUS

- Before 1723, free Black property-owning men had technically retained the right to vote in Virginia. This act explicitly removes it.

PATTERN

- Follows the pattern established since 1670 — systematically stripping free Black people of civil rights that white colonists took for granted.

Source: *Hening's Statutes at Large, Vol. 4, p. 133 (1723).*

1740
SOUTH
CAROLINA

Negro Act of 1740 — Post-Stono Rebellion Response

SIGNIFICANCE: One of the harshest slave codes ever enacted in North America — a direct response to the 1739 Stono Rebellion.

CONTEXT

- The Stono Rebellion (1739) — the largest slave uprising in colonial America — terrified South Carolina slaveholders. The 1740 Negro Act was the legislative response.

DEATH PENALTY EXPANDED

- Any enslaved person who raised an insurrection, or attempted to do so, was subject to execution. Any white person who aided enslaved people in rebellion was subject to a heavy fine.

LITERACY PROHIBITED

- Enslaved people were prohibited from learning to read or write. Teaching an enslaved person to read was made illegal — the first anti-literacy law in American history.

DRUMS PROHIBITED

- Enslaved people were prohibited from using drums, horns, or other loud instruments — the colonial assembly recognized that drums could be used for communication between enslaved communities.

ASSEMBLY PROHIBITED

- No gathering of enslaved people without a white person present for any reason whatsoever.

NC CONNECTION: NC's 1741 Slave Code was enacted one year after the SC Negro Act and adopted several of its provisions, including anti-literacy provisions and drum prohibitions. The fear that spread through SC slaveholders after Stono reached the Cape Fear region directly.

Source: *Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. 7, p. 397 (1740).*

1741

NORTH
CAROLINA

NC Slave Code — Comprehensive Revision

SIGNIFICANCE: North Carolina's first comprehensive slave code. Governed enslaved life in NC — including Cumberland County — for over a century.

PATROL SYSTEM ESTABLISHED

- Formalized slave patrols in every NC county. Patrollers had authority to enter any property, stop any enslaved person without written permission, and administer corporal punishment on the spot.

ANTI-LITERACY

- Adopted the SC prohibition on teaching enslaved people to read or write. Literacy was classified as a threat to public order.

NO ASSEMBLY

- Gatherings of enslaved people for any purpose — including religious worship — were prohibited without white supervision.

WEAPONS PROHIBITED

- Enslaved people could not carry firearms, clubs, or any weapon. Violation: thirty-nine lashes.

RUNAWAY PROVISIONS

- Extended provisions for the capture of runaways. Enslaved people who had been absent for thirty days could be proclaimed outlaws — meaning any white person could legally kill them.

CAPITAL OFFENSES

- Death penalty for: insurrection or conspiracy to rebel, rape of a white woman, arson, and second offense of striking a white person.

NC CONNECTION: The 1741 code directly governed Cumberland County from the county's establishment in 1754 through the Civil War. Slave patrols operated in Cumberland County under this code. The market at Cross Creek (Fayetteville) operated under these legal provisions. Estate inventories listing enslaved people as property in Cumberland County are legal instruments created under this framework.

Source: State Records of North Carolina, Vol. 23, pp. 65–73 (1741). NC State Archives, Raleigh.

1755

GEORGIA

Georgia Slave Code

SIGNIFICANCE: Georgia initially prohibited slavery (1735) — then reversed course and enacted one of the most comprehensive slave codes in the colonies.

REVERSAL OF PROHIBITION

- Georgia was founded in 1733 with slavery prohibited. By 1750, pressure from planters overturned the prohibition. The 1755 code institutionalized the system Georgia had initially rejected.

MODELED ON SC

- Drew directly from South Carolina's 1740 Negro Act — including the anti-literacy provision, patrol system, and capital offenses.

PATROL SYSTEM

- County slave patrols established with the same stop-and-search authority as SC and NC patrols.

Source: Colonial Records of Georgia, Vol. 18 (1755). Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA.

1793
FEDERAL

Fugitive Slave Act of 1793

SIGNIFICANCE: Gave slaveholders a federal legal tool to recapture enslaved people who escaped to free states — nationalizing the slave system.

CORE PROVISION

- Any person who aided an escaped enslaved person was subject to a fine of \$500 — a substantial sum in 1793. Federal courts were required to assist in the return of escaped enslaved people.

CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS

- Based on the Fugitive Slave Clause of the U.S. Constitution (Article IV, Section 2) — meaning the founders explicitly built the recapture of enslaved people into the foundational document of the republic.

EFFECT ON FREE STATES

- Required citizens of free states — including those morally opposed to slavery — to participate in the return of escaped enslaved people under federal law.

NC CONNECTION: The 1793 act affected NC by requiring free states to return escaped enslaved people. NC enslavers used federal courts to pursue escaped enslaved people who reached Northern states, including those who had escaped through the Underground Railroad.

Source: 1 Stat. 302, 2nd Congress, Session 2, Chapter 7 (1793). U.S. National Archives.

1830
S
MULTIPLE
STATES

Anti-Literacy Laws — Reading and Writing Prohibited

SIGNIFICANCE: Following Nat Turner's Rebellion (1831), states across the South enacted explicit laws making it a crime to teach enslaved people — or free Black people — to read or write.

NC ANTI-LITERACY ACT — 1830

- North Carolina made it a criminal offense to teach any enslaved person, free Black person, or free person of color to read or write. Fine: \$100–\$200 for a white person. For a free Black person: fined, imprisoned, or whipped.

VIRGINIA — 1831

- Post-Nat Turner: any assembly of Black people for the purpose of instruction — including religious instruction involving reading — was prohibited.

GEORGIA — 1833

- Fine of \$500 and imprisonment for teaching any person of color to read or write.

RATIONALE

- Literacy was understood by slaveholders as the primary tool of resistance. David Walker's Appeal (1829) — written by a Wilmington, NC native — was read aloud in enslaved communities across the South. The anti-literacy laws were a direct response.

NC CONNECTION: David Walker, born free in Wilmington, NC, published his Appeal in 1829 — the most radical anti-slavery document of the era. NC's 1830 anti-literacy law was enacted in direct response. Walker is a documented local figure in the Two Americas NC lens.

Source: Revised Statutes of North Carolina, Chapter 111 (1837). NC State Archives, Raleigh.

1850

FEDERAL

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

SIGNIFICANCE: The most aggressive federal enforcement of slavery ever enacted — and a primary catalyst for the Civil War.

EXPANDED ENFORCEMENT

- Required all U.S. citizens — not just law enforcement — to assist in the capture and return of escaped enslaved people. Refusal was a federal offense.

DENIED DUE PROCESS

- Accused escaped enslaved people had no right to a jury trial. A federal commissioner decided their status. The commissioner was paid \$10 if they returned the person to slavery, \$5 if they freed them.

CRIMINALIZED SANCTUARY

- Made it illegal to shelter, feed, or assist any escaped enslaved person. Northern abolitionists faced criminal prosecution for acts of basic humanity.

EFFECT

- Galvanized Northern opposition to slavery more than any previous event. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in direct response. The act radicalized the abolitionist movement and accelerated the path to Civil War.

Source: 9 Stat. 462, 31st Congress (1850). U.S. National Archives.

1857

FEDERAL
(SUPREME COURT)

Dred Scott v. Sandford

SIGNIFICANCE: The Supreme Court ruled that Black people — free or enslaved — were not citizens of the United States and had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.

CORE RULING

- Dred Scott, an enslaved man who had lived in free territories, sued for his freedom. Chief Justice Roger Taney ruled that Black people — whether enslaved or free — were not citizens and had no standing to bring suit in federal court.

PROPERTY RIGHTS

- The ruling held that Congress had no authority to prohibit slavery in the territories — the Missouri Compromise was declared unconstitutional.

LANGUAGE OF THE RULING

- Taney wrote that Black people had historically been regarded as so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. This language was not judicial overreach — it was a summary of the legal logic embedded in the slave codes since 1640.

CONSEQUENCE

- The ruling made legal compromise on slavery impossible and accelerated the crisis that produced the Civil War.

Source: *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857). U.S. Supreme Court.

**1865
–66**

**NC +
SOUTHERN
STATES**

Black Codes — Post-Civil War Reconstruction of Slavery by Law

SIGNIFICANCE: Enacted within months of emancipation, the Black Codes attempted to recreate the conditions of slavery under new legal language.

NC BLACK CODE — 1866

- North Carolina's post-war legislature enacted a series of statutes governing the newly freed Black population. Key provisions: formerly enslaved people were required to sign annual labor contracts — refusal was vagrancy, a criminal offense; vagrancy was punishable by forced labor; apprenticeship laws allowed courts to bind Black children to white employers without parental consent.

VAGRANCY LAWS

- Any Black person who could not prove employment was subject to arrest for vagrancy. Convicted persons were leased to planters — the convict leasing system recreated plantation labor under criminal law.

APPRENTICESHIP LAWS

- Courts could remove Black children from their parents and apprentice them to white employers — in many cases to the same enslavers who had held them in bondage.

WEAPONS PROHIBITION

- Formerly enslaved people were prohibited from carrying firearms without a license — licenses were systematically denied.

FEDERAL RESPONSE

- The Black Codes were so egregious that they helped prompt Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th Amendment — and to place the South under military Reconstruction.

NC CONNECTION: NC's Black Codes were enacted by the post-war Democratic legislature and directly targeted Cumberland County's newly freed Black population. Fayetteville State University (founded 1867 as Howard School) was established in direct response to this environment — as formerly enslaved community members created their own institutions precisely because the law was designed to prevent their advancement. The Black Codes are a Living Record entry — their structural descendants persist in contemporary Cumberland County criminal justice and economic data.

Source: NC Session Laws, 1865–66. NC State Archives, Raleigh. Also: Foner, Eric. *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (Harper & Row, 1988).

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