

# Colonial America Depended on the Enslavement of Indigenous People

**The role of enslaving Native Americans in early American history is often overlooked**

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Textbooks and classroom lesson plans are starting to present a more clear-eyed view of America's history—such as slowly recognizing the [violence that happened when European settlers encountered the indigenous people](#) of the so-called “[New World](#).” But there are still many [overlooked stories](#). One of these startling omissions to the history books is something Margaret Ellen Newell is calling attention to in her book, [Brethren by Nature](#): 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 indigenous people was glossed over in the work of historians after World War I, Newell says, [as Tanya H. Lee reports for \*Indian Country Today\*](#). Newell, an [associate professor of history at Ohio State University](#), 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.”

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.

Lee writes:

The colonial economy depended on slavery, 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.

Indeed, in the 1630s, the Connecticut River Valley was home to the powerful Pequots. The settlers at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay wanted their rich, fertile land and in order to get it, they persuaded Mohegan and Narragansett allies 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](#). 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—which was fought to [protest the English colonists encroaching influence](#) and forced labor of Native Americans—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.

The English colonists weren't the only ones to use the labor of enslaved indigenous people, of course. “The Spanish were almost totally dependent on Indian labor in most of their colonies,” [writes Alan Gally for History Now](#). Enslaving Native Americans became one of the primary ways to expand the economy for colonists in South Carolina and to a lesser extent

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,” Gallyay writes.

As the [African slave trade](#) took off in the late 1700s, the Native American slave trade waned. Many remaining tribes had been pushed West, but something else was taking place, that pushed the data down, as well. Some Native Americans were intermarrying with African American. The children were then [referred to as “colored,”](#) effectively erasing their Native American heritage. 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.