

# **SLAVERY IN PUERTO RICO**

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## **Introduction**

Slavery on the island of Puerto Rico has a unique history. In contrast to most other regions that depended on slave labor in centuries past, the growth of the plantation economy and, thus, the demand for slaves developed rather late in Puerto Rico. For a number of reasons, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the island's economy began to depend on the importation of slaves for labor purposes. A crucial factor in Puerto Rican history is the role of foreign powers, principally those of the Spanish Crown and foreign immigrants, that shaped the political and economic structures of the island well into the nineteenth century. In order to understand the development of slavery, the uneven relations between Puerto Rico and Spain need special attention. In conjunction, the rapid expansion of the sugar industry on the island will be illustrated in terms of its direct relation to the Puerto Rican slave trade.

The chronological evolution of slavery in Puerto Rico will be discussed in the following three time periods: 1508-1815, 1815- the 1840s, and the 1840s- 1873. Each will be evaluated in terms of specific political, economic, social, and cultural factors that influenced the development of slavery in this region.

### **1508- 1815: A Stagnant Economy**

1508 marked the year of Spanish colonization in Puerto Rico. Although claimed for Spain in 1493, it was not until fifteen years later that the Spaniards began to populate and govern the island. From this period until the end of the nineteenth century the Spanish Crown controlled most all aspects of Puerto Rican life. Being part of an overseas empire the island was subject not only to political and social changes in Spain, but also to its changing relations with other nation-powers such as France and Britain. Under the hand of Spanish mercantilism, Puerto Rico was prohibited from trading with other nations and, thus, isolated from foreign markets (Curet, 1980). In this way, the opportunity for Puerto Rican natives to accumulate the capital needed to stimulate a strong economy was essentially non-existent.

With the exception of a brief interlude of slave importation in the mid-sixteenth century, a subsistence economy, what Scarano calls a “peasant society” (Scarano, 1984: 5), persisted in Puerto Rico until the end of the eighteenth century. Curet notes that the slave population between 1530 and 1560 rose from 2,000 to 15,000; this was the result of the first attempt by the Spanish Crown to create an export economy on the island (Curet, 1980). This failed, however, and a successful export economy as such would not develop in Puerto Rico for another three centuries.

Although it is estimated that the first African slave was brought to the region in 1513 by Portuguese traders, a significant slave population did not develop on the island until the nineteenth century. The primary reason for this was that Spain itself could not support this extension of its overseas empire; it did maintain the consumer power to sustain a successful export economy without the financial support of other foreign nations, and yet Puerto Rico was restricted from trading with other regions. In addition, the island lacked an indigenous labor supply to support agricultural expansion since a majority of the natives had been wiped- out during the first century of Spanish colonization. Instead of continuing to promote economic expansion through agricultural means, the capital of San Juan was converted into a Spanish military post in the mid-seventeenth century and remained the only developed part of the island for many years (Scarano, 1984).

In 1765 the *Compañía Gaditana de Negros* was created to bring African slaves to the Caribbean Islands. Incidentally, Puerto Rico was chosen as the main distribution port for this operation, creating the opportunity for the development of a slave-dependent agricultural system. However, the majority of slaves that initially came to the island were soon relocated to other regions where slave labor was already an established component of the economy. Hence, eight years later the distribution center was moved to Havana, and further development of the slave trade was once again put in the hands of Puerto Rican planters (Curet, 1980).

Despite these setbacks, Puerto Rico began to experience a major economic transition in the final decades of the eighteenth century with the expansion of coffee, tobacco, and, most importantly, sugar cane production. In response, the Spanish government reduced the restrictions on immigration to the island in 1778, lifted duties on

the slave trade in 1789, and permitted its colonies to trade with “neutral” nations on a temporary basis in 1797 (Scarano, 1984). This created a foundation from which further agricultural and economic development was possible. However, these changing relations between Spain and Puerto Rico were only a prelude to the more deregulatory policies of the early nineteenth century.

On an international scale, the British campaign to impede the slave trade, from 1808 on, was a major factor that inhibited the development of a slave-dependent economy in Puerto Rico (Scarano, 1984). This increased competition in the slave market and forced Puerto Rico to engage in, although still on a small scale, illicit trade through the neighboring St. Thomas. At the same time, Puerto Rico was permitted by the Spanish Crown to appoint a governing representative for the island. D. Ramón Power took the post in 1808 and began to push for increased commercial independence through the development of social, economic, and political structures of the island. This included the demand for a dependable labor force which could support large-scale agricultural expansion. By 1812, a total of 17,000 slaves resided on the island (Mintz, 1974); 2,000 more were imported in the following three years (Scarano, 1984).

It is important to note that Puerto Rico also maintained a substantial free black population. As Mintz illustrates, in 1777 4,249 African slaves inhabited the island in addition to 4,747 free Africans; in 1787 the numbers had risen to 6,603 and 7,666, respectively (Mintz, 1974). According to Schmidt-Nowara, by the mid-nineteenth century the free black population represented nearly forty percent of the total population, continuously outnumbering the percentage of enslaved inhabitants (Schmidt-Nowara, 1999). This was a result of the tradition of ‘*coartación*’ - a legal agreement in which the slaves were permitted to buy their freedom from plantation owners. Consequently, this process of continued manumission created a phenomenon rare to most slave-dependent societies: prejudice was not exclusive to racial categories in Puerto Rico but also extended to include class and labor divisions. The forced-labor policies of the mid-nineteenth century will further illustrate this point.

Moreover, the slave population in Puerto Rico was never a homogenous one: Africans, Creoles (those born in Puerto Rico), and a small portion of slaves imported from other regions all contributed to the total “slave population.” Although the larger

plantations tended to depend more heavily on African slave imports, Creole slaves also constituted a substantial proportion of the slave labor on the island.

In comparison to other foreign economies, such as French and British colonies during this time, Puerto Rico lagged far behind. An island of merely 3,350 square miles, it was not considered an initial priority in the eyes of the Spanish Crown. However, this began to change with the transition of Spanish rule and the consolidation of the Spanish Empire in the nineteenth century.

### **1815- the 1840s: Prosperity**

The *Cédula de Gracias*, adopted in 1815, marked a turning point for Puerto Rico. This royal decree was the second major attempt by the Spanish government to create a prosperous (and profitable) export economy on the island through increased trade and foreign settlement. In essence, this legislation promised the continuation of Spanish political control in Puerto Rico but moved to expand the economy towards foreign interests. Puerto Rican ports were opened to trade, duties on the importation of slaves and machinery for agricultural production were reduced, and, perhaps most significantly, immigration from allied Catholic countries was encouraged through generous land grant policies (Scarano, 1984). This change in immigrant policy proved crucial to the development of the two major components that dominated Puerto Rican economic and social structures until the third-quarter of the nineteenth century: sugar production and slave labor. Firstly, Puerto Rico served as a place of asylum displacement for many foreign planters from slave-dependent colonies where revolutions had erupted. As Curet notes, “Exiles- especially former landlords from Venezuela, Haiti, and even Louisiana- took refuge in Puerto Rico” (Curet, 1980: 37). This had numerous repercussions: not only did this immigration increase the total population of the island, but it also expanded the capital base and slave population. Some foreign planters immigrated with their slaves and most were accustomed to depending on slave labor for production; they favored this method of forced labor because it was considered the most profitable, particularly in respect to the sugar industry. The production of sugar required an abundant labor force, extremely hard work, and timely dedication to harvest. In this context, the inconsistency of wage- labor employment could greatly jeopardize plantation profits.

To illustrate the parallel changes in population growth and the sugar industry on the island: between 1812 and 1820 the total population increased by 47,608 to reach 230,622, and the slave population increased by 4,194 to a total of 21,730. At the same time, from 1815 to 1819 sugar production was augmented by over one- million pounds. However, to simply apply these statistics to Puerto Rico as a whole is misleading since this growth was not evenly distributed. Instead, sugar production was concentrated in the fertile coastal regions of Puerto Rico where the majority of slaves were imported and the most significant economic expansion occurred. Specifically, the towns of Ponce, Guayama, and Mayagüez benefited most from sugar production and slave labor (Curet, 1980). In contrast, the mountainous interior remained relatively isolated from these developments and their dependency on slave labor was contained to small-scale agricultural production.

In respect to Ponce Chinaa notes, “Foreigners who controlled much of Ponce’s sugar during the first half of the nineteenth century had ties to sugar before immigrating to Puerto Rico, either as planters in other parts of the Caribbean or as merchants in those islands where the sugar trade was important” (Chinaa, 1996: 6). Thus, in addition to contributions of capital and slave labor, foreigners also brought invaluable knowledge of the sugar industry to Puerto Rico.

The U. S., as a growing world power during this time, also played a significant role in the expansion of the sugar industry in Puerto Rico. Towards the end of the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries U.S. demand for sugar increased; by 1808 Puerto Rico was one of the major economic beneficiaries of this consumption. In 1815 duties on sugar exported to the U.S. were reduced, and by the 1830s over seventy-five percent of sugar produced in Puerto Rico was shipped to the U.S. In addition, Puerto Rico imported technology and raw materials from the U.S. to advance the sugar industry (Scarano, 1984). By the 1840s, however, competition from the Cuban sugar industry and a decline in sugar prices worldwide curbed U.S. importation. This marked the slowing of sugar expansion in Puerto Rico in combination with other factors that will be discussed further.

In respect to the expansion of slavery, the Anglo- Spanish Treaty of 1817 declared African slave importation illegal. Ironically, however, the Puerto Rican slave trade did

not reach its peak until the 1830s; between 1820 and 1830 alone the slave population grew by 12,500. By 1834 roughly 40,000 slaves populated the island, approximately half of which were born in Africa; by 1841 the number had risen to 41,000 (Scarano, 1984). This was made possible by a number of factors including accessibility, political support, and capital investment.

From 1815 through the 1830s Puerto Rico imported African slaves from neighboring Caribbean Islands. French traders stationed in Guadeloupe and Martinique benefited from this exchange in addition to middlemen in St. Thomas. St. Thomas served as a major commercial port for Puerto Rico, particularly from 1815 through the 1840s (Scarano, 1984), and thus played an important role in both the development of the economy and the growing dependency on slave labor. In this way, although illegal, the slave trade continued to be accessible to the Puerto Rican planter class for decades after the Treaty was signed.

On a political level, the authoritarian regime of Miguel de Latorre in 1824 admitted large numbers of slaves to the island in an attempt to stimulate agricultural production. The slave trade in Puerto Rico reached its peak under the Latorre government with a majority of slaves being imported from other Caribbean colonies. In respect to the influence of foreign powers and their connection to the sugar industry, Chinaea states, “Foreign labor, technology and capital was a significant injection to Puerto Rico’s stagnant economy. Nearly seventy-five percent of the capital was invested in commercial agriculture...by 1830 the bulk of immigrants resided in zones yielding sixty percent of the sugar” (Chinaea, 1996: 6). Thus, heightened immigration and the economic and social developments it inspired were highly concentrated in sugar producing regions and, therefore, had the most impact upon natives residing in these areas.

Regardless of major increments in the slave population, at no point in Puerto Rican history did slaves represent more than twelve percent of the total population. This was due in part to the concentration of slave labor in sugar plantation regions and increased restrictions on the slave trade in the mid-1830s when the sugar industry could have potentially profited most from an increase in slave labor. With the emancipation of British colonial slaves in 1833, the Anglo-Spanish Treaty of 1835 (which granted Britain permission to search cargo ships for illegal slaves), and the deterioration of the French

slave trade in the mid-1830s, the cost of slave importation skyrocketed (Scarano, 1984). Lacking an extensive capital base to work from, Puerto Rican planters were left with few options to continue their participation in the slave trade.

By the late 1830s alternatives to slave labor were being developed in order to sustain the dominant sugar industry on the island. One such legislation, *El Bando de Policía y Gobierno* enacted in 1837, forced the landless, unemployed population of Puerto Rico to work on local plantations (Mintz, 1974). Such workers were termed “*agregados*” and although many had worked alongside slaves and had supplemented slave labor for centuries, this law marked a change in the labor force that powered Puerto Rican plantations: no longer did forced labor solely reflect racial differences within the population but also distinctions in class and social status. Despite the fact that alternative sources of labor proved problematic, the plantation system continued to prosper on the island into the 1870s.

### **1840s-1873: The Decline of Slave-Labor Dependency**

The beginning of the 1840s marked the final years of Puerto Rican involvement in the slave trade. Although other Caribbean regions continued to depend on the influx of slaves to support their labor force (such as Cuba), Puerto Rican planters simply did not have the capital to maintain these relations and, instead, began to explore the possibilities of native labor. The *Reglamento de Jornaleros* of 1849 sustained low wages and forced peasants to work (Scarano, 1984)- an extension of the legislation passed twelve years earlier with the exception that the slave trade had deteriorated by this point. In this way, it can be deduced that forced labor on the island simply shifted from slave-dependent to peasant-dependent, changing the structure of the economy but having little impact upon the production of the plantations themselves. However, consideration must be given to the fact that the slaves who had arrived in Puerto Rico prior to the 1840s continued to be a viable source of labor for at least three decades more. By 1846 over 50,000 slaves remained on the island (Curet, 1980).

By 1850 Puerto Rico was the second major Caribbean exporter of sugar and the second largest supplier to U.S. markets. However, much of the growth of the industry in the decade of the 40s was a result of trade with Britain and not the U.S. With a reduction

of import duties in 1845, British markets depended in large part on the Puerto Rican sugar industry to satisfy consumption levels until 1850 (Scarano, 1984), which also acted to uphold the economy during this time. This illustrates the relative success of the forced-labor laws in their early decades and also implies the sustainability of the slave population already on the island. Although the sugar industry ceased to expand at the same rate after 1850, it continued to dominate agricultural production on the island until the coffee boom of the 1870s.

As the latter decades of the nineteenth century approached, emancipation movements began to take route in Puerto Rico. As Schmidt-Nowara states, “antislavery arose in Puerto Rico not because of slavery’s marginality to the island’s economy and society...but as a projected solution...to the island’s economic decline and political subordination” (Schmidt-Nowara, 1999: 7)). As expected, this was not supported by the planter class who continued to depend on slave labor for production. However, the planter class represented only a small minority of the population, and in consideration of the substantial free black population on the island and those victimized by the forced labor laws, such sentiments were undeniable. Furthermore, decline in the production of sugar, which had profound economic effects, raised critical question in terms of Spain’s political control and how effective it would prove in the future. Realistically, increasing pressures from foreign powers involved in the abolition movement and the inaccessibility of new slaves to support Puerto Rican plantations made eventual emancipation inevitable.

It was not until 1873 that slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico. At this time laws that had forced labor upon peasants and *agregados* were also repealed. However humanitarian this may seem, plantation labor was extended: contracts called ‘*libertos*’ were enforced for the next three years essentially requiring workers and ex-slaves alike to remain on the land and stay ‘loyal’ to the planters (Mintz, 1974). Although this delayed the deterioration of forced labor, the sugar industry was already in jeopardy and production continued to decline until the economic transformation following the U.S. invasion of 1898.

## **Conclusion**

The period of slave-labor dependency in Puerto Rico was relatively short-lived. In comparison to British colonies that had been slave dependent for over 150 years before emancipation movements began to take shape, Puerto Rico experienced only three decades of intense participation in the slave trade prior to abolition. Despite the fact that slaves were present on the island for nearly four centuries, it was not until the large-scale agricultural development of the sugar industry in the early years of the nineteenth century that slaves were imported in mass numbers.

Both the regulation and the influx of slave labor in Puerto Rico were products of foreign influence. Spain's restrictive policies in the first three centuries preceding colonization acted to isolate the island from the developments of the world market. Once alterations to these policies were made, foreign immigration represented the driving power behind the development of the sugar industry and, thus, the increasing dependency on slavery in Puerto Rico. At this juncture, export markets such as the U.S. and Britain as well as foreign slave traders (primarily French) acted as indirect forces to encourage slave labor on the island. In this context, Puerto Rican natives had very little input in the development of their own island, particularly on political and economic terms. As social and cultural transformations resulted from this influx of immigrants and slaves alike racial and class divisions were redefined, and the difficulty of overcoming such prejudice views continue to challenge Puerto Rican society of the present day.

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