

I7. Colonialism, Slavery, and the Slave Trade in Berbice, Demerara, and Essequibo

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In the early seventeenth century, the Dutch established small settlements and trading posts in the northern coastal region of South America with support from the local Carib and Arawak peoples. This tropical area, known to the Europeans at the time as the Wild Coast, lay between Venezuela and the Amazon Delta. Life in these outposts was precarious. Most settlements succumbed to disease, disputes, or attacks by Indigenous inhabitants or European rivals. Only two of them grew into sustainable colonies: Essequibo (established in 1617) and Berbice (1627). Both were named after the rivers that they were situated on, which flowed northward from the interior to the Atlantic Ocean. A third colony, Demerara, located between Berbice and Essequibo along the river of the same name, was established in 1746. In all three colonies, society was built on slavery, practically from the start.

The Beginning of the Colonies

Essequibo was managed by the Chamber of Zeeland, one of the administrative branches of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), a state enterprise founded in 1621. Berbice was controlled by the influential Van Pere merchant family from Zeeland, who had been granted a charter by the WIC. Despite these administrative differences, the two colonies developed along the same lines. Both grew slowly. Initially, the colonists focused on trade with Indigenous peoples, dealing in wood and annatto, a plant-based orange-red dye produced by South American women and used to color foodstuffs, including butter and cheese, in the Republic. Colonists also grew tobacco, an addictive crop that quickly gained popularity in Europe. By the

mid-seventeenth century, both colonies had their first plantations where, like in the rest of the Caribbean, enslaved West Africans were forced to cultivate sugar cane. The number of enslaved people was still very small at that time. Although the Dutch slave trade grew steadily in the latter half of the seventeenth century, few slave ships set course for the small colonies.

The colonists also immediately started purchasing enslaved South Americans. The deceitful trading practices of the Dutch and the random enslavement of individuals from “befriended” peoples antagonized the Caribs, Arawaks, and Waraos. In the 1670s, they attacked the Dutch in Suriname, and, ten years later, in Berbice and Essequibo. The fact that they conspired with enslaved Africans worried the colonists deeply. Ultimately, however, the colonists broke the resistance in all three colonies by gradually driving a wedge between the South Americans and the Africans. From then on, the colonists promised they would never enslave their allies. This did not put a stop to the lucrative trade in South Americans, however; it merely meant that the Dutch only traded in people who they had no agreements with. In return, the South American allies were expected to help the colonists suppress uprisings by enslaved Africans and to capture those who fled. The colonists were completely dependent on their help as the Dutch had no authority over the vast areas of jungle and savannah that lay beyond the cultivated zone. In the eighteenth century, Indigenous peoples effectively helped the Dutch to maintain and expand the number of Africans whom they kept in slavery on the Wild Coast.¹ The strategy that achieved this, in which colonial rulers used local populations to exert power and thus made them to some extent complicit, is a feature of nearly all European overseas colonies in the early modern period. Of course, local elites had their own political and economic reasons to cooperate with the Europeans.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, both Essequibo and Berbice were attacked by French privateers who demanded ransoms. For lack of cash, the Dutch paid these ransoms partly in enslaved people, who were torn from their families and communities and probably ended up being sold by the French in the Caribbean islands.² In Berbice, the French shake-down attempt led to a change of government because the Van Pere family refused to pay the ransom and opted to transfer the colony to a group of investors in Amsterdam. The buyers founded the Society of Berbice, which managed the colony under a charter from the States General until the end of the eighteenth century. On the Wild Coast, the Dutch state outsourced executive management, the cultivation of export products by enslaved

people, and the violence needed to maintain social order to institutions like the WIC and the Society of Berbice.

Berbice and Essequibo transformed over the course of the eighteenth century from trading posts into plantation colonies that were part of the Atlantic economy connecting Europe, West Africa, and the Americas. Relying on Dutch capital, trade goods, and government support, the colonists focused on growing export crops such as coffee, cotton, cocoa, and sugar, all cultivated by enslaved laborers. In Essequibo, the main products were sugar and later cotton. In Berbice, coffee, cotton, and cocoa predominated. Sugar was only produced on Society plantations in Berbice. For private planters, cultivating sugar cane and turning it into sugar was too expensive due to the technology and large numbers of enslaved workers required. Sugar cultivation demanded even more labor from enslaved people than coffee, cocoa, or cotton, and posed greater risks, especially during the milling and boiling of sugar cane.

Because the Dutch wanted to protect the Republic from foreign competition, colonists had to sell their products in the Republic. For the same reason, the Wild Coast colonies could only purchase what they needed from Dutch traders, resulting in high prices and constant shortages. To make matters worse, the European colonial powers in the area were constantly at war, and internal disputes within the WIC reduced the supplies from the Republic. All in all, this led to hunger among the enslaved people and a significant amount of smuggling; the contraband trade was mainly carried on with the British and Americans.³

The sugar industry in Essequibo and Demerara (after 1746) received a boost from the departure of Britons from Caribbean islands such as Barbados and Antigua, where the soil was growing depleted. At the invitation of the governor of Essequibo, many of the British started sugar plantations along the Demerara River. Initially, Demerara was governed by Essequibo, but in 1750, a separate “commander” was appointed to run the colony, and in 1772 it got its own governor and council. The colony, blessed with fertile soil, grew rapidly with British capital and eventually overshadowed both Essequibo and Berbice. Just as in Essequibo, the new plantations in Demerara were mainly established along the river delta, which meant that the enslaved not only had to clear forests and plow fields but also build dikes and dig canals to protect the land against the tides.⁴ This grueling work drastically transformed the landscape.

A Growing Population

From 1730, the population of the colonies grew. An overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were of West African descent. Precise figures are not available, but in 1735, Essequibo counted around 2,700 enslaved people and fewer than 150 Europeans. A few years later, Berbice had a similar ratio: 2,200 to 2,500 Africans to 135 Europeans. After the mid-eighteenth century, the population grew more rapidly. In 1763, on the eve of the major slave uprising, 350 Europeans in Berbice kept 300 South Americans and 4,500 to 5,000 Africans in slavery. By 1785, the combined population of Essequibo and Demerara included 2,000 colonists and a staggering 42,000 enslaved people. This demographic composition, with an overwhelming Black majority, was typical of most plantation colonies in the Caribbean, to which the Wild Coast also belonged. There were also many people of mixed ancestry, most of whom were enslaved. They were either the offspring of European men and enslaved African or South American women (usually conceived through non-consensual sex), or they had a combination of African and Indigenous parentage (these were more often consensual relationships).⁵

The appalling living and working conditions, harsh punishments, and constant food shortages among the Black population led to high mortality rates. Only a constant flow of new captives from West Africa could maintain and grow the Black population. The Slave Voyages project website documents over 36,000 Atlantic slave voyages. From this project, we now know that in the seventeenth century, most captives were shipped from the Slave Coast (present-day Togo and Benin) and the Loango Coast (which stretched from present-day South Cameroon to the Congo River). In the eighteenth century, the main shipping points were the Loango Coast, the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), and after 1740, increasingly the Windward Coast (present-day Liberia and Ivory Coast).⁶

Initially, the WIC had a monopoly on the transport of new captives to the Wild Coast colonies, but after 1738, slave traders from Amsterdam and Zeeland took over. Many planters, deeply in debt, lacked the credit to acquire as many new workers as they wanted. Especially in Essequibo and Demerara, many captives were acquired through illicit channels, obviously making it difficult for historians to trace. Hardly any research has been conducted on the impact of this experience on slaves.

The forced journey from West Africa to the “New World” was called the Middle Passage.⁷ About 13 percent of the captured Africans did not survive this inhumane journey on the overcrowded Dutch slave ships. The longer they remained on the ship (many spent months on board before the crossing even began), the greater the chance they would not survive. Those who did survive often regarded their fellow “shipmates” as family. Once in the Wild Coast colonies, they were again separated. Some were delivered and allotted to planters who had ordered enslaved individuals before the journey, while others were transported on speculation and sold on the spot. Thus, people were yet again brutally separated from their (new) families.

Life on the Plantation

Upon arrival, the newcomers had to rebuild their lives. Plantations on the Wild Coast were not as large as elsewhere in the Caribbean. Here, they ranged from five to 150 people. Africans had to adapt to a new working regime, forge new social ties, and find their place within the existing plantation hierarchy. Rankings were based on gender, work, and origin. Creoles (those born in the colony) often looked down on people newly arrived from Africa. If Africans could not find enough people on a plantation who spoke their native language, they had to learn the local creole language. This came on top of having to process the trauma of the Middle Passage and the heart-breaking loss of family, homeland, and future prospects. Generally, people adapted their African customs and practices to their new situation, creating flexible diaspora cultures that were modified and adapted further by each new generation. The Dutch did not make it a priority to convert the enslaved to Christianity, so the enslaved could retain their own religions.

While some enslaved men were trained as coopers and carpenters, and other men and women worked as household servants, the majority of adult enslaved people toiled in the fields under the blazing sun for six long days a week. The hard work, severe punishments, and regular hunger took their toll. One-sixth of the adults were consistently unable to work due to illness, injury, or permanent disability. Sugar cane was predominantly grown in Essequibo and Demerara, while Berbice mainly produced coffee. In Berbice, plantations were established closer to the coast only in the late eighteenth century, while in Essequibo and Demerara this had already been common practice earlier in the century. These coastal areas were tide sensitive and prone to flooding, so the enslaved had to dig canals and ditches and build

dikes to protect the fields from seawater, which was grueling and back-breaking work. Women also took care of their children as well as they could while working in the fields, in line with West African gender norms that remained prevalent in the New World. The planters had little consideration for pregnant women. Child mortality was high, and parents had little say in childrearing. Creoles had a better chance of starting a family than first-generation Africans.



Drawing of an African woman holding a tree trunk and carrying a toddler in a sling on her back. This illustrates the caregiving role of African women that continued in Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara.

In the evenings and on Sundays, enslaved people worked on their own little plots of land. Planters in the Caribbean cut costs for maintaining enslaved people by allotting them a plot of land to grow their own food. Although this effectively meant a second *corvée*, historians argue that many enslaved people liked having these plots. They could grow crops that they were accustomed to from their home countries—many enslaved people had been farmers in West Africa—and the plots were often far from the plantation house, providing a degree of autonomy. The produce could be eaten or traded, as could the products of hunting and fishing, or the chickens and ducks some kept. The “underground” economy that arose from this trade is worthy of further research.

Newcomers learned what it meant to be enslaved in a Dutch colony. In their home countries, slavery existed too, but generally in less rigid forms than Atlantic chattel slavery, in which slaves, along with their children, were the absolute property of the slaveholders and could be treated and traded as any other commodity.

Unlike the Spanish and French authorities, the Dutch state never drew up central legislation about slavery to deal with pertinent questions like: Did enslaved people have rights, such as the right to marriage, children, or possessions? Were there rules for slaveholders regarding the treatment of enslaved people? How could enslaved people be punished, and were there consequences if a punishment resulted in death? Was it possible to gain freedom, and if so, how? Every individual Dutch colony regulated such matters in an ad hoc manner by means of ordinances drawn up by the governor and his council of local planters. These so-called *plakkaaten* (acts) were then approved by officials of the WIC and the Society of Berbice in the Republic. The regulations legalized the violence and dehumanization on which slavery was based. In this way, slavery, which had existed in much of the world since time immemorial, also became a Dutch phenomenon.

While the majority of enslaved people reluctantly resigned themselves to their existence and focused on the day-to-day, there was also resistance. The conflict between slaveholders and enslaved people took various forms. People pretended not to understand orders, did their work half-heartedly, or broke their tools. They feigned illness and mocked their slaveholders behind their backs. Some, mainly young African men, ran away, sometimes for short periods, to blow off steam or visit a loved one on another plantation, and sometimes for good. They hoped to build an independent life

in the jungle, like the Maroons in Suriname, or to flee to the Spaniards in Venezuela, who promised freedom to escaped enslaved people who converted to Catholicism.

As mentioned earlier, Indigenous South American allies often made short shrift of this. Slave hunters brought back the chopped-off and roasted left hands of their victims to the colonial authorities for payment. Those who escaped from Essequibo had the best chance of reaching the Spaniards in Venezuela. In 1772, the governor of Essequibo complained that the Spaniards were harboring so many enslaved people from his colony. “The numbers of runaways increasing daily,” he wrote, “this matter will end in the total ruin of a great many plantations.”⁸ Freedom seekers from Demerara or Berbice had to travel much farther to reach the Spanish, and it seems likely that they sought to establish an independent existence locally, like the Maroons in Suriname.



A painted papier-mâché diorama of a celebration on a Surinamese plantation, created by Gerrit Schouten (1779–1839). Under a canopy, enslaved people are performing a *Du*, a role play in which music and dance are used to express criticism of life in slavery. Such expressions undoubtedly also occurred in the colonies of Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara.

Organized Resistance

There were also large-scale, collective forms of resistance. Regularly, a group of people or even an entire plantation community left their labor camp. For example, in 1741, thirty-eight Creole enslaved people fled the WIC plantations Poelwijk and Duinenberg in Essequibo. The WIC had put them to work digging silver mines. At some point, the enslaved people decided that they no longer wanted to do this exhausting and dangerous work and fled to an island in the Cayuni River. Only after seven months of negotiation did they agree to return in exchange for a pardon and exemption from mining labor.⁹

Most revolts had less favorable outcomes. In 1772 and 1789, small uprisings in Demerara were suppressed with the help of South Americans.¹⁰ In Berbice, collective attempts to seek freedom occurred in every decade of the eighteenth century, but the escapees were usually tracked down and captured or killed by South American commandos or fellow enslaved people sent out by the planters. Such methods ensured that only a few free Maroon communities were established in Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara, although that began to change in the late eighteenth century. Additional research is needed to map out the extent and full range of resistance that took place.

The political struggle between enslaved people and slaveholders rarely resulted in armed conflict. Large-scale armed resistance was difficult to organize, and except in Haiti, it never succeeded. The most successful uprising in the three colonies occurred in Berbice in 1763. In fact, it was the longest and largest revolt in the entire Caribbean in the eighteenth century before the revolution in Saint Domingue (Haiti) in 1791. The freedom fighters, a coalition of Africans and Creoles, took over the entire colony for more than a year. Their leader, who called himself Governor Kofi, aimed to create his own state alongside a Dutch colony. He probably planned to continue growing sugar cane in his new country using forced labor, as he did during the uprising. After a few months of fighting, he even proposed to divide Berbice in two. The southern part would be for him and his people, and the other half for the Europeans. This diplomatic initiative led to an exchange of letters between Governor Kofi and the Dutch governor, but the negotiations broke down. Eventually, the Dutch suppressed the revolt with the help of soldiers from the Republic and with crucial assistance from Caribs and Arawaks. Many people of African descent in Berbice tried to avoid in-

volvement in the war. They preferred self-determination over serving a new regime, in this case ruled by the rebels.

The States General spent large sums of money to suppress the revolt by force, for two reasons. One was to protect the financial interests of the Dutch elite; the other was that they feared the freedom struggle would spread to the much larger colony of neighboring Suriname. The rebels lost the fight mainly due to a lack of allies and a supply line. The Dutch colonists could obtain food, medicines, and military assistance from their neighbors and the Republic. Moreover, they received crucial help from their South American allies. The rebels, on the other hand, had no one to provide them with new guns and more fighters. Nevertheless, it took until the summer of 1764 for the Dutch to regain full control of their battered colony. By that time, from one-fifth to possibly as many as one-third of the enslaved people had perished.¹¹ We do not know how the survivors processed the trauma of this war.

Had the rebels won—which they nearly did—the history of the Atlantic area would have looked very different. Instead, the Dutch government began to realize how much it cost the state to fight revolts and Maroons for the benefit of private enterprises like the Society of Suriname and the Society of Berbice. In 1795, the state therefore took direct control of the colonies on the Wild Coast, including Suriname. Within a few years, Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara passed into British hands. Many planters in those colonies were British or pro-British. They were dissatisfied with the inability of Dutch enterprise to provide them with sufficient capital and enslaved people. The British poured a lot of money into the colonies and brought in large numbers of enslaved people. In the nineteenth century, the three settlements briefly joined the ranks of Great Britain's most profitable Caribbean possessions.

The Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice archives have been explored only piecemeal. For a long time, historians were more focused on Suriname and the Dutch possessions in Asia, and if they showed an interest in these three small colonies, they tended to focus on the European minority rather than the large majority of people of color. This is changing, however. The National Archives in The Hague has digitized many of the sources on the three colonies, including documents from the Guyana Archive in Georgetown and The National Archives in Kew (UK). This will facilitate further ex-

ploration of topics such as the role of enslaved people in the underground economy, gender relations, interactions between Africans and South Americans, the trade in locally enslaved individuals, the outlook on life of the enslaved people, and daily life on the plantations. Only then will a “history of colonialism” emerge that does justice to all involved and addresses today’s urgent questions about the afterlives of slavery.

Notes

- 1 Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2020), 44–48.
- 2 P.M. Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de koloniën Essequibo, Demerary, en Berbice, van de vestiging der Nederlanders aldaar tot op onzen tijd* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1888), 159.
- 3 Bram Hoonhout, *Borderless Empire: Dutch Guiana in the Atlantic World, 1750–1800* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 112–15.
- 4 E.W. van der Oest, “The Forgotten Colonies of Essequibo and Demerara, 1700–1814,” in *Riches from Atlantic Commerce: Dutch Transatlantic Trade and Shipping, 1585–1817*, eds. Victor Enthoven and Johannes Postma (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 323–61.
- 5 Netscher, *Geschiedenis*, 108; “Notitien der Plantagien in Rio Berbice,” NA, Oude West-Indische Compagnie Archives, 1.05.05, Inv. no. 72; Hoonhout, *Borderless Empire*, 3; Wim Klooster and Gert Oostindie, *Realm between Empires: The Second Dutch Atlantic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 131.
- 6 Kars, *Blood on the River*, 54.
- 7 The Middle Passage was one leg of the triangular trade route that took manufactured goods (such as tools, guns, ammunition, cloth) from Europe to Africa, African captives to work in the Americas and West Indies, and products and raw materials produced on the plantations (sugar, rice, tobacco, indigo, rum, and cotton) back to Europe.
- 8 Hoonhout, *Borderless Empire*, 90–91.
- 9 Netscher, *Geschiedenis*, 112, 381 (note 48).
- 10 Hoonhout, *Borderless Empire*.
- 11 Kars, *Blood on the River*.

Abstract

The Dutch West India Company introduced enslaved Africans into its North American colony of New Netherland soon after the first European families settled in the region. These enslaved men, women, and children helped build the Dutch colony. Indeed, slavery proved instrumental to the development of New Netherland. But Dutch slavery in North America did not end when the WIC lost New Netherland to the English in 1664. North America's Dutch descendants continued to enslave Black and Indigenous peoples. This chapter explores Dutch slavery, the lives of the enslaved, and Dutch slavery's legacy in what is now the United States.

Keywords: African-American history; Dutch slavery; New Netherland; Dutch New York; slavery in New York