

Refugees in the Americas



Introduction

The forces we have discussed in this module taking place in Europe and Africa starting in the 1670s were also having direct effects on life in the eastern regions of the Americas, stretching from present-day Canada through to present-day Argentina. These forces - an intensification of colonialism, the expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and religious persecution - were also causing waves of refugees in the Americas, as well.

Perhaps the first association you have in thinking about refugees in the early colonial America relates to the 100 or so Puritans, Protestants who broke with the state church of England, who arrived in the eastern coast of Massachusetts in December 1620. This group of migrants became remembered as "The Pilgrims" (or for those who wanted to stress patriarchy, "The Pilgrim Fathers"). Another group of 700 or so Puritans arrived to establish the larger Massachusetts Bay Colony ten years later. These early efforts to establish a Christian utopia were followed by some 20,000 Puritans traveling by 1640 from England to New England, lured in large part by the promise that they could worship according to their beliefs, without interference or the threat of fines or imprisonment. They were, that is, exporting sacral communalism to the Western Hemisphere. However, in this third lesson on refugees of the Atlantic World, we will cast our gaze away from the Puritans of the 1620s and 30s. That's not because they were historically insignificant, but because looking elsewhere allows us to see some important connections and make some helpful comparisons.

REFUGEES IN THE AMERICAS

INTRODUCTION

THE INTENSIFICATION OF SLAVERY IN THE AMERICAS

REFUGEES FROM ENSLAVEMENT: MAROONS

INDIGENOUS REFUGEES IN THE AMERICAS

HUGUENOT REFUGEES IN THE AMERICAS



Painting of Puritan Pilgrims by George Henry Boughton, 1867

The Intensification of Slavery in the Americas

By the 1670s and 80s - the period when the last major waves of refugees were fleeing in Western Europe and the first major waves of refugees were fleeing in Western Africa - colonialism in the Americas was transforming in ways that was also sending refugees fleeing. Soon after colonialism began, Europeans - including the Puritans - began enslaving indigenous Americans for their labor. But by the late 16th and early 17th centuries, disease and harsh working conditions were decimating native populations.

These losses did not spark widespread moral reconsideration about Europeans' colonial projects. Instead, they inspired colonists to look elsewhere for their labor needs. At the same time, increasing wealth in Europe brought with it a spike in the demand for luxury foods like sugar. As we saw in Lesson 2, in the late 17th century Europeans responded to these supply and demand forces by intensifying their trade in enslaved Africans.

Key Terms:

Puritans

Barbados

Jamaica

Maroons

Stono Rebellion

Palmares

Ganga Zumba

Great Swamp Massacre

Haudenosaunee



Map of North America, 1700



Map of the Caribbean

These shifts were the most dramatic in the islands of the West Indies, including Barbados and Jamaica. Most of the indigenous populations there had died out, through disease, enslavement, and killings by Europeans. Initially, European plantation owners were able to recruit poor indentured servants to work their lands, though it did not take long before news back in England about the brutal labor conditions effectively shut off this labor pool. That's just about the time - starting in the 1650s - that Europeans began expanding their trade in slaves along the West African coastline. Islands with heavy sugar production like Jamaica and Barbados quickly shifted from majority European populations to majority African populations, as whites moved for better job prospects to the mainland of North America.

Meanwhile, sugar plantations got larger in the hands of fewer wealthy landlords, who purchased enslaved Africans to do the grueling work of growing and processing sugar cane. As we learned in Lesson 2, this shift contributed to massive destabilization in West Africa. "The sugar revolution" in the West Indies fed the "gun revolution" in West Africa. Europeans also expanded the enslavement of Africans in other colonies, including Carolina, Virginia, Suriname, the Danish West Indies (present-day United States Virgin Islands). In some locations, like New York and New England, enslavement of Africans was on a smaller scale, but still common. Many families owned slaves, but often just a few. In places that developed plantation economies, however, a single owner might claim to own hundreds of enslaved people.

For a minority population to rule a large, enslaved majority required extreme coercion and violence. Brutal working conditions, widespread disease and poor diets among these new workforces in the late 17th century led to ever more anger among the enslaved African population, but also to fear and anxiety on the part of the white minority. The colonists' response to high death rates was not to improve working conditions, but to import ever more enslaved Africans. And their response to increased resistance to the violence of plantation life was to increase their cruelty, which they hoped might act as a deterrent. As the Virginia plantation owner William Byrd wrote in his diary, one "unhappy effect of owning many Negroes is that necessity of being severe." The use of terror to compel submission was common. In Barbados in 1675 planters responded to fears of rebellion by publicly executing thirty-five people, including burning six alive to serve as an example to other enslaved people. New laws permitted cruel public punishments, under the theory that fear of retribution would scare enslaved people into submission.

Depiction of enslaved people on sugar plantation in Antigua





Map of Barbados, showing trees and plants

Refugees from Enslavement: Maroons

This increasing cruelty led many enslaved Africans to flee for safety. The options for escape depended widely on local circumstances. It was much easier to flee from large-scale plantations with hundreds of enslaved laborers than from a single family with just one or two enslaved workers. But the environment mattered too. On flat islands like Barbados and the Danish West Indies, there were few places to hide, especially by the 1660s by which time the forest had been cleared to make way for sugarcane fields. The only permanent escape from slavery was via boat, whether that was by stealing one, building one, threatening or bribing sailors, stowing away, deceiving a ship's captain or, in some cases, joining a ship's crew.

There were greater opportunities to escape enslavement in places with dense forests, mountains, caves, and swamps. In some cases, escapees only fled temporarily, usually to reconnect with a loved one. But in other cases, they fled as refugees who effectively emancipated themselves. Such refugees - known in English as maroons - formed small settlements all through the Americas. Often, they took with them tools, blankets or other survival gear. A maroon community needed access to clean water, arable land for farming, firewood, access to fishing or hunting, as well as a good defensible position. While we might expect maroons to travel as far from colonies as they could, for the most part they stayed within a day's walk from white settlements.

Why might that be? First off, it's useful to remember that most had no idea where they were, and thus no clear idea where to go. But staying close also allowed them perform raids to access food, firearms, and supplies, or to find sympathetic traders to access goods. They also sometimes attacked plantations, in retribution for the cruelty they had experienced. Thus, maroon refugees usually lived far enough away from slave owners to be protected, but close enough to take advantage of periodic access.



Map of Harrison's Landing, Virginia; maroon communities often formed in wooded areas near swamps and plantations.

Historians really have no idea how many maroon settlements there may have been. The Spanish colony of New Grenada (present-day Columbia and Venezuela) had dozens. The Minas Gerais region of southeastern Brazil had well more than a hundred. In some cases, refugees from slavery were welcomed into Native American communities. The Tupinambá people of Brazil and Moskito people of Central America both welcomed maroons in sizeable numbers, for instance. There is no doubt that such self-emancipation took place basically everywhere that slavery was practiced.



17th century map of Barbados, showing a European chasing two maroons (upper left corner).

Colonists developed three responses to the dangers they sensed from maroons. First, they passed an ever-increasing number of laws restricting the movement of enslaved people and facilitating their return, such as Virginia's 1672 "Act for the Apprehension and Suppression of Runaways, Negroes, and Slaves." Similar laws proliferated in French, Dutch, and English colonies. Second, slave owners posted advertisements offering a bounty for the return of runaway slaves or hired slave hunters directly to catch maroons. Colonists could often find Native Americans willing to hunt down maroons, especially in exchange for firearms. Third, colonial governments sent militias and even armies to destroy maroon communities, sometimes killing their inhabitants *en masse*. The Portuguese government in Brazil sent military expeditions to destroy maroon communities Bahia in 1692, 1697, and 1723. A military campaign against a New Grenada maroon settlement in the Sierra Madre de Santa Maria Mountains in 1683 found a well-defended encampment. But escaping maroons had burned it down before taking refuge in the forest.



For the most part, maroons were not principled opponents of colonialism or champions of abolitionism. But in places where they were well armed and bitter about their treatment, they could pose serious challenges to colonial rule. In Suriname, maroon communities in the late 17th century began launching a guerilla war against plantation owners. In 1692, a group of maroons in Brazil sacked a group of plantations and threatened to capture the town of Camamú. The maroons finally fell to an army expedition sent to quell them. In the final battle, some maroons were heard yelling "Death to the whites and long live liberty." In 1711 in South Carolina, a group of maroons under the leadership of a man known as Sebastian robbed and plundered houses and plantations.

Depiction of Leonard Parkinson, a captain of maroons, 1796

Maroon Refugees in Jamaica

The place where maroons most threatened colonialism itself was in Jamaica. Soon after England captured the island from Spain in 1655, English colonists started arriving, many from Barbados. However, most quickly became just as disillusioned as they had been in Barbados and moved on to North America. A small group of plantation owners acquired most of the land and began importing enslaved Africans to work the island's sugar plantations. In the early 1660s there had been some 12,000 English immigrants to the island and only about 550 enslaved Africans. By 1700, there were only about 2,000 whites living in Jamaica and some 45,000 enslaved Africans, facing brutal working conditions and high death rates. Most of these Africans had been purchased in forts along the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin. That is, many of them had been war captives in the military expansions of the Asante and Dahomey kingdoms we looked at in Lesson 2. That also means that many of them spoke an Akan language, and thus could communicate with one another in a language other than English.



Maroon leader Cudjoe making peace with the British during the First Maroon War

The white population was completely unprepared for the implications of this transition. The island saw a series of slave revolts in the 1670s and 80s. In some cases, the rebellions were suppressed and the captives executed. In others, the Africans escaped. In 1673, 200 enslaved Africans killed their master and thirteen other whites, plundered that estate and several others and stole firearms and ammunition. In 1690, 400 Africans burned down another plantation. A few were captured, but 318 escaped well-armed into the woods. Such groups attracted other Africans escaping slavery, who formed sizeable and well-organized maroon encampments in the mountains and hills.

As the English continued to expand their plantations - and continued to import more enslaved Africans to Jamaica - the maroon communities too grew larger and more formidable. By the 1720s, frequent conflicts between maroons - mostly Akan speakers - and colonists erupted into a decade of open war - usually called the First Maroon War - that badly damaged the English colony. The war ended in peace treaties that granted maroons land, freedom, and hunting rights if they would help the colonists maintain order in the island.

Did you know?

For over a century, Jamaican maroon communities fought to maintain their freedom from British forces. Among their prominent leaders were Queen Nanny and her four brothers, one of whom, Cudjoe, was a leader of the First Maroon War against British forces.

Explore more about Queen Nanny, conflict with the British, and Jamaican maroon communities:

- [Queen Nanny of the Maroons](#)
- [First Maroon War Treaty with Trelawney Town](#)
- [Past and Present: Maroons in Jamaica](#)



TRELAWNEY TOWN, the CHIEF RESIDENCE of the MAROONS .



Painting of maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina

The Jamaican maroons gained fame across British North America. Slave owners feared that maroons would upend colonialism. But they may have inspired Blacks as well. On July 28, 1739, the *South-Carolina Gazette* in Charles Town, South Carolina printed a story describing “an account from Jamaica of the truce which the English governor there had felt compelled to negotiate with an armed and independent force of runaways.” Just five weeks later, a group of enslaved people - this time mostly from Central Africa - at a nearby plantation along the Stono River rebelled against colonists, hoisting a banner reading “Liberty!” and fleeing for Spanish-ruled Florida. We cannot know whether the Stono escapees were inspired by news of the Jamaican maroons, but the timing suggests it’s possible. In any case, the Stono rebels were less successful. They were hunted down by a militia and, after a bloody battle, defeated. The survivors were either publicly executed or resold into slavery in the West Indies. The following year, South Carolina increased the financial rewards for hunting down refugees from slavery.

Maroon Refugees in Brazil

While the Jamaican maroons came the closest to toppling the colonial regime, probably the largest and longest running maroon community was in of Brazil. The earliest record of this collection of settlements - known as Palmares - came shortly after 1602, when the colonial governor, Diego Botelho, learned of its existence. By 1612, Palmares’s reputation was widespread, and it was attracting more refugees from enslavement. At some point, its residents formed an organized government with an elected monarchy. Unlike most maroon settlements, Palmares was not located near a colonial settlement but was more autonomous. Residents of Palmares cultivated their own food, brewed their own palm wine, raised their own chickens, and forged their own iron for tools and weapons. They also built their own churches and had extensive defensive fortifications to repel invaders.



Location of the modern Brazilian state of Alagoas, where Palmares was located



Contemporary sculpture of Zumbi dos Palmares in Alagoas, Brazil

Estimates of its size vary - and the actual numbers probably fluctuated considerably over time - but at its largest Palmares may have had 30,000 residents. From 1672, the Portuguese government launched roughly seventeen military campaigns against Palmares. When these attacks started, the king was a man mostly known today as Ganga Zumba, who claimed to be part of a royal family back in the Kingdom of Kongo. Ganga Zumba's experienced soldiers withstood attack after attack, making up for their poorer weapons by using guerilla tactics like camouflage and ambushes. In 1678, Ganga Zumbi agreed to a peace treaty, which the Portuguese quickly broke. Ganga Zumbi died under mysterious circumstances soon after this, to be replaced by one of his military commanders, Zumbi, who continued the war against the Portuguese. In 1692, after many more failures, the Portuguese hired a group of indigenous warriors who had seen some successes destroying maroon communities further south. This campaign dragged on for two more years, until the Portuguese finally broke through Palmares's fortifications in February 1694. Palmares fell after an extended pitched battle. On November 20, 1695, Zumbi was decapitated, and his head placed on a spike in the provincial capital as a warning to others. While the Portuguese military razed Palmares to the ground, we know its fame lived on, because refugees from slavery continued to flee there, forming new maroon settlements as late as 1746.

Explore more...

The Palmares were settlements of fugitive slaves, many of whom fled sugar plantations in the region of modern-day Brazil. The anniversary of the execution of leader Zumbi dos Palmares on November 20 1695 has since been remembered as a day of Afro-Brazilian consciousness.

Learn more about the history of the Palmares, Zumbi dos Palmares, and the legacies of this history in Brazil today:

- [The Palmares \(1605-1694\)](#)
- [The History and Legacy of Zumbi dos Palmares](#)



Zumbi dos Palmares

Indigenous refugees in the Americas

Algonquin Refuges from New England

Back in the north by the 1670s and 80s, New England's Puritan character was in jeopardy. The colony had more than doubled in size, but church membership was down, rules requiring church attendance were repealed, and people of other faiths were migrating to the area. Among Puritans, a spirit of disappointment set in that regretted the failure of their dream of sacral communalism and mythologized the religious and moral purity of their grandparents. By 1691, the English government disbanded the charters of the original colonies (which had privileged Puritans). Meanwhile, the purchase of enslaved Native Americans and Africans had become a common feature of life. Even if we categorize the early Puritans as refugees, by the later 17th century, they were not refugees by any means, but members of the social, economic, and political elite threatened by increasing diversification of life in the colonies and frustrated by native peoples who stood in the way of their Christian utopianism.

Puritans' brutality towards indigenous Americas resulted in native refugees fleeing New England. By the early 1670s, tensions were rising between the Wampanoag, an Algonquian-speaking people who lived around Cape Cod Bay, and New England's Puritans, especially those at Plymouth. Matters escalated quickly after Plymouth colonists captured and executed three Wampanoag men who had killed a native who had served as an informant for English colonists. Angry Wampanoag warriors responded by attacking Puritan settlements. A brutal war broke out. Puritans began to see all Native Americans as a scourge to their biblical dreams.

They even attacked those native peoples who remained neutral. Such was the case with the Narragansett, who lived to the west, in Rhode Island. The bloodiest episode came in December 1675, at the Great Swamp Massacre, when Puritans engaged in indiscriminate killing of a Narragansett settlement. These attacks were among the most ruthless and gory in colonial American history. Defeated Narragansett and other native peoples fled as refugees to find safety with other Algonquian-speaking peoples to the north, or even further north to New France. These refugees maintained a deep hatred for New England Puritans, and participated with French raiders in attacks on New England settlements until the 1750s.



Engraving of the colonial assault on the Narragansetts' fort in the Great Swamp Massacre, 1675

Shawnee Refugees of the Upper Midwest

Even as Puritans were decimating native populations in New England, the number of non-Puritans migrants moving from England was skyrocketing. Native peoples were fleeing as refugees up and down North America in the late 17th century. They fled disease, enslavement, and the loss of their homelands, as well as an alliance of five Iroquoians-speaking peoples, known as the Haudenosaunee, who had gained early access to flintlock muskets and began expansionist attacks on Iroquoian- and Algonquian-speaking groups to control the fur trade, which would give them more access to guns.

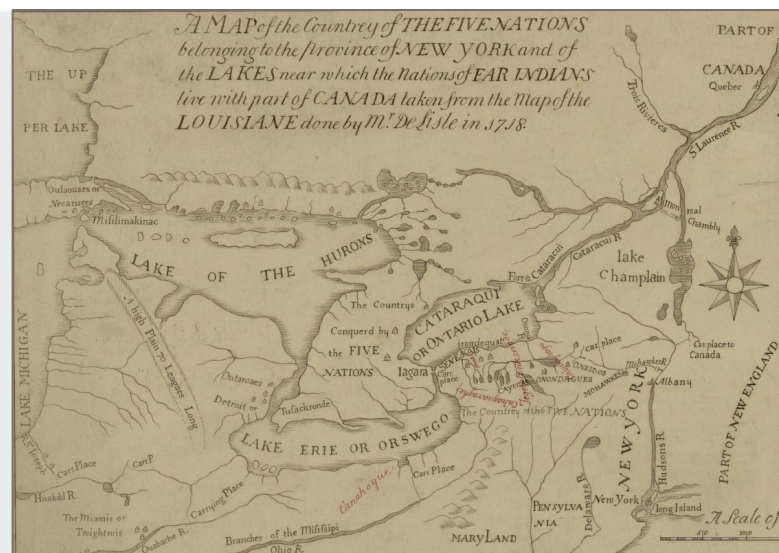


Early 17th century battle between Algonquin, Huron, and French forces against Iroquois in New York

Refugees from these combined crises fled in large numbers to the Upper Midwest. In 1670s, they formed new mixed-ethnic refugee communities stretching from the southern shore of Lake Superior, south to the upper Illinois River, and west to the southern shores of Lake Michigan. Life in these refugee settlements was precarious and refugees sometimes fought between themselves over access to hunting and fishing grounds.

By the 1680s, these Shawnee refugees began to form alliances with French colonists of New France, who were trying to increase their access to fur trade. At trading posts like Fort St. Louis (along the Illinois River) and Michilimackinac (at the straight connecting Lake Michigan and Lake Huron), the French provided these refugees with guns in exchange for furs. In some cases, the French traders formed partnerships (in the sense of a business relationship and a sexual one) with women from these indigenous refugee populations, which gave them access to kin networks, language assistance, protection, and help with labor. The refugees were able to use the guns they got from the French in their conflicts with Haudenosaunee.

To be successful, they needed to end their internal conflicts, though. The French saw this too, and used it to their advantage. As the Jesuit Chrestien LeClerc wrote "It is absolutely necessary to keep all these tribes ... in peace and union against the common enemy - that is, the Iroquois." The French helped these native refugees set aside their hostilities and joined them in battle against the Haudenosaunee in the 1680s and 90s. By 1701, the French and their allies finally signed a peace treaty with the Haudenosaunee, allowing Shawnee refugees to return safely to their former homes or to make new homes for themselves. Among the Shawnee refugees, some returned to their former homes in the Ohio River Valley. Others embraced a more mobile life as a survival strategy.



Map of the five Iroquoians-speaking nations around the great lakes

Westo and Cusabo Refugees in Virginia and Carolina

Besides those refugees who fled to the Upper Midwest, other Iroquoian- and Algonquian-speaking refugees fled south. Such was the case with the Westo, a group of Iroquois-speaking refugees fleeing Haudenosaunee attacks who fled to Virginia colony, arriving about 1650, where they served as slave hunters for white colonists in exchange for firearms and ammunition.



Map of Charles Town, Carolina, 1733

In 1670, the Westo had moved to the Savannah River, where they raided the Cusabo people of that area, to bring them back as slaves for the Virginian plantation owners. In response, the Cusabo fled as refugees to Spanish Florida, where they hoped for protection. But they received none. So, when a group of colonists from Burmuda arrived in Carolina to establish a new English settlement at Charles Town that same year, the Cusabo refugees allied with them for protection, including helping the English defend their colony from a Spanish attack. But the Cusabo learned a difficult lesson about colonialism when the English quickly abandoned that alliance to side instead with the Westo, whom they provided with muskets and ammunition, which the Westo could use to capture the Cusabo.



The Westo learned a similar lesson when another group of English colonists hired a group of Shawnee refugees who had moved to the area around Charles Town to attack and enslave them in exchange for guns, ammunition, and alcohol. And these Shawnees learned the same lesson when they tried to get out of the slaving business by moving north, inspiring some white settlers to pay a group of Catawba native people to hunt them down and enslave them for the plantations of Carolina. The guns-for-slave cycle in North America had an eerie parallel with the one taking place in West Africa at exactly the same time. And here to, this perverse incentive system was creating cycles of refugees.

Depiction of an Iroquois warrior with musket, 1730



Gabriel Manigault, Huguenot merchant in Carolina

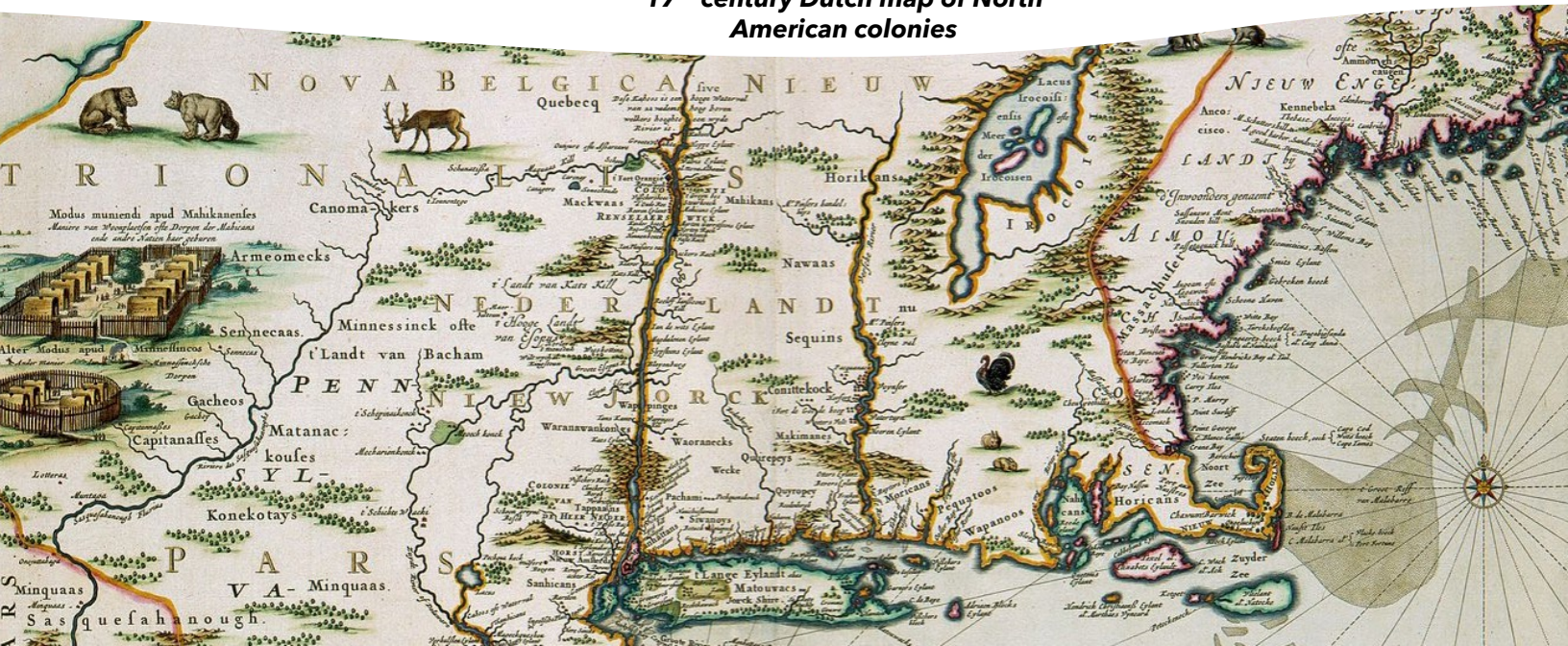
Huguenot Refugees in the Americas

By the 1670s and 80s, European refugee communities covered in Lesson 1 of this module were showing up in the Americas too. Huguenots fleeing the *dragonnades* and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes fled to the Americas during this period. Indeed, the coincidence of the "*Le Refuge Huguenot*" which we learned about in Lesson 1, with the intensification of colonialism in the late 17th century led to the dispersal of Huguenots across the Atlantic World.

Some Huguenots moved to the Dutch colony in South Africa. A number went to the Dutch colony of Suriname, where by the early 18th century about one fifth of plantation owners had French last names. They were among the same slave-owning-plantation owners that were being targeted by Suriname's maroon armies. Huguenot refugees also moved to New York, Carolina, Virginia, and Massachusetts. Nearly every place they went, they became owners of enslaved Africans, and, in some cases, slave traders as well. Indeed, the juxtaposition between the Huguenots' tender humanitarian rhetoric about their suffering and their apparent disregard for the inhumane treat of enslaved Africans can feel rather jarring to 21st-century readers.

In Carolina, Huguenot refugee brothers Pierre and Gabriel Manigault, both merchants, each owned hundreds of enslaved Africans, who worked on rice plantations on land given to the two men by the colonial government. In New York, Huguenots owned more enslaved Africans per person than English colonists did, probably because those who fled in *Le Refuge Huguenot* were overall wealthier than English colonists. Colonial governments in the 1680s competed to recruit Huguenots, including commissioning Huguenots to write treatises aimed at convincing their coreligionists to join them. Of course, Huguenots in the Americas were not fleeing directly from France to colonies in the Americas. Instead, they had already fled - mostly to England - and later made their way from there to the Americas, attracted by the prospect of amassing wealth and land and sometimes frustrated by cool reception they received from fellow Protestants who feared that immigrants would take their jobs or drive up costs. Still, they self-identified as refugees, even as they quickly learned English, adopted the local religion, and integrated into the local economy, including the slave economy.

17th century Dutch map of North American colonies



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