Resistance and Revolts

Resistance was present from the beginnings of slavery. Enslaved Africans resisted bondage in a variety of active and less apparent ways. They fought against their initial capture, their transport to the Americas, and their forced labor in the New World. Individual resistance was common and included breaking tools, feigning illness, and sabotaging equipment. Slave revolts also occurred on occasion and were most common when large numbers of enslaved individuals were assembled.

Running away was another form of resistance. Many enslaved people sought permanent escape from captivity, often finding refuge in Canada or in the free states in the North. While scholars disagree, as many as 50,000-100,000 people are thought to have made their way to freedom between the 1600s and 1865. Others believe 1,000 people escaped each year. An informal network of African American and other people working together sometimes assisted the freedom seekers in their flight. Many were avowed abolitionists (people who sought to abolish slavery), and collectively they became known as the Underground Railroad.

Despite continual resistance on the part of free and enslaved men and women, the demand for cheap labor increased in the colonies. Slavery continued in the United States until the end of the Civil War in 1865, when the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution legally abolished it.