

COLONIAL LAWS

Divide and Conquer

CHRISTMAS DAY, 1522: On a sugar plantation owned by Christopher Columbus' son, Diego, enslaved Africans united with enslaved Taíno Indians in the first recorded black/Indian rebellion in the Americas. They killed their white overseers and ran away. In Great Britain's North American colonies black and Indian slaves *and* white indentured servants often ran away together.

Throughout the history of early America, white ruling elites worried about what blacks and Indians might do if they got together. The people with property were also concerned about uprisings of white indentured servants, poor whites, and enslaved blacks, as occurred in 17th-century

Virginia in Bacon's Rebellion. Conditions were different in different colonies, but everywhere people who had some wealth wanted to make sure that no one took it away from them.

Below are a number of specific problems that colonial legislatures faced. *Try to predict the laws they passed to deal with these problems and protect their privileged position.* Some laws may deal with more than one problem, and some problems required several laws. Sometimes legislatures passed no specific laws, but white leaders promoted general policies. *For each problem, except #4, come up with at least three laws or policies—some require more than others.*



Wealthy white merchants, such as these in a 17th-century etching of commerce in New Amsterdam (New York), feared any alliance among black slaves and poor whites.

The Problems

1. At times, Indians would attack white settlers on the frontier, kill them, and take their slaves. In parts of North America, enslaved black people and Indians greatly outnumbered whites. If blacks and Indians united, they could crush the white rulers. **Predict the measures that were taken to keep Indians and blacks from uniting, or that may have even made them to feel hostile toward one another.**

2. Some white indentured servants along with enslaved blacks escaped from their masters. **Predict laws or policies adopted to discourage white indentured servants and enslaved blacks from running away together.**

3. Black slaves, indentured servants, and even some poor but free whites organized together to threaten rebellion.
 - a. **Predict how poor whites and white indentured servants were taught to believe that they were superior to and didn't have anything in common with blacks.**

 - b. **Predict how blacks and whites were kept separate, so that whites would not even imagine getting together with blacks.**

4. In some areas, there were not enough whites to supervise enslaved blacks. This made rebellion more likely. In some colonies, there were not many poor whites or indentured white servants in relation to the number of enslaved blacks. **Predict the measures adopted to ensure that on every plantation there were enough white overseers in relation to black slaves. How might white owners have found more white indentured servants to help supervise blacks?** ■