

Race, Slavery, and the Problem of Numbers in Early New England: A View from Probate Court

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Slavery was integral to the growth and development of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England, but elements of its local practice remain opaque—including the foundational matter of who actually toiled in bondage. Was the early coerced workforce dominated by bound Natives, enslaved Africans, or indentured Europeans? And how did the population of unfree laborers change over time? Systematic analysis of probate records from Suffolk County, Massachusetts—the county encompassing Boston and its surrounds—indicates that Africans dominated the unfree labor pool from very early on and that Natives played only a marginal role. A quantitative approach to probate therefore allows people of African descent to figure centrally in our stories of bondage in New England. Such an approach, with its tallies and tables, provides one view from probate court. But another view is possible. The archive created by the court enables scholars to work in both a quantitative and a qualitative register at once, documenting how quickly English colonists turned from a system of white indentured servitude to a dependence on African slavery while simultaneously making intelligible the experiences of those caught in bondage. Though probate records are sullied by violence, careful qualitative analysis shows that this archive can yield histories that center the desires, demands, and actions of people in bondage rather than the brutality of their enslavers.