

Indigenous enslavement an overlooked chapter in American history



A monument to the Bandeiras in Sao Paulo depicts settling expeditions during which Indigenous people were killed and enslaved in the region in colonial times. A pair of projects are underway in the U.S. to create public databases chronicling centuries of Indigenous enslavement that peaked during the age of European colonization. They're expected to launch by summer. FERNANDO MARRON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES FILE

'This takes all of us'

Marc Ramirez USA TODAY

In family lore, the story told about Yolanda Leyva's Indigenous great-grandmother Canuta depicted a tale of young romance: Sometime during the 1850s, the Rarámuri girl had been taken in as an infant by a wealthy European couple who'd supposedly found the child abandoned near their hacienda in Chihuahua, Mexico, ultimately growing up to marry the couple's son. • It was a tale Leyva's father had only hinted at over the years. "She was pure Indian," he would say fondly in Spanish, recalling the small, dark-skinned abuelita of his youth.

For Leyva, a professor of history at the University of Texas-El Paso, it all seemed too cryptic. Driven to do her own genealogical research, she gradually pieced together what was likely a more tragic tale – that Canuta had been kidnapped from her Rarámuri people to be groomed into servitude on the Chihuahua estate.

"There's a long history in Mexico of people taking poor children and raising them, and they become servants," Leyva said. "Our family wanted to make it a pretty love story, but it was a classic story of a poor girl either voluntarily or involuntarily having children with the son – including my grandfather."

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In 1909, Deluvina Maxwell, center, a Dine' (Navajo) woman, was enslaved by prominent landowners Lucien and Maria de la Luz Beaubien Maxwell.

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Enslavement

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The story offers a glimpse into a widespread but largely overlooked phenomenon – the enslavement of millions of Indigenous peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere, including North America. The practice preceded and then coincided with the enslavement of more than 12 million Africans in the Americas, though its methods and visibility differed.

Now, two projects are underway in the U.S. to chronicle this neglected chapter in American history through digital repositories that will offer not only opportunity for scholarship but healing for those whose ancestors were enslaved. Together, they represent parallel efforts aiming to document and make public what historian Andrés Reséndez calls “a very important but sad episode of our shared history in the American continent.”

Reséndez, a professor of history at the University of California-Davis, estimates between 2.5 million and 5 million Indigenous people were enslaved from 1491 to 1900.

While Indigenous slaves were put to work in a variety of activities such as ranching and construction, “they were especially prevalent in the mining economy, the backbone of colonial Latin America,” Reséndez said. Mexico’s mining economy alone, he noted, comprised the equivalent of 12 California Gold Rushes between the 16th and 18th centuries.

Some individuals have earned places in history, such as La Malinche, a Nahua girl from Mexico’s Gulf Coast sold into slavery in the early 1500s who eventually served as the interpreter for Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes. In the late 1600s, Tituba, an enslaved Indigenous woman of probable Central American background purchased by Puritan minister Samuel Parris in Barbados, became the first woman accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts.

Most, however, labored in obscurity. As with Leyva’s great-grandmother, many were enslaved not as able-bodied adults but as children. In 1865, for instance, a state-ordered tally of enslaved Indigenous people in Southern Colorado counted 149 people, with 100 of them listed as age 12 or under “at time of purchase.”

In fact, Reséndez notes in his book about the subject, “The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America,” most Indian slaves were women and children, in contrast to the adult males associated with the African slave trade. While sexual exploitation and child-bearing capabilities partly explain why, he said, women were seen as more docile and had skills more useful to European colonists such as weaving and food gathering than the hunting and fishing abilities of Indian men.

Likewise, children were adaptable



Estevan Rael-Gálvez, of Native Bound Unbound, examines records at Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.

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and absorbed European language more easily, even identifying with their enslavers, he said.

But with Indigenous slavery largely illegal in much of the New World, many, like Leyva’s great-grandmother, toiled behind closed doors, lacking the resources or any significant network to aid escape.

Leyva is among those who’ve contributed oral histories to Native Bound Unbound, a Santa Fe, New Mexico-based digital repository project led by anthropologist and historian Estevan Rael-Gálvez.

Leyva could find no record of Canuta’s marriage but did unearth records indicating she had borne several children, the first when she was just 12 years old. One record, she said, described Canuta as a peona, or criada – a servant, not part of the family – and the picture started to become clearer.

‘A hemispheric effort’

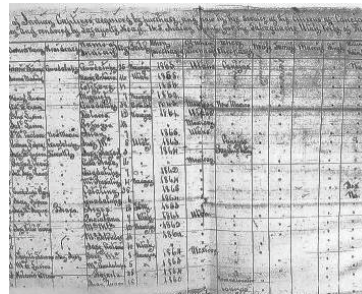
Rael-Gálvez, too, had been inspired by personal history. Growing up, he said, he’d heard stories involving two enslaved Indigenous ancestors, one of them Pawnee, the other Navajo. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the subject, knowing his story couldn’t be unique.

For the next 20 years, even while serving as New Mexico state historian and a National Trust for Historic Preservation executive, Rael-Gálvez gathered information on the subject.

Native Bound Unbound launched in February 2022, powered by Mellon Foundation funding that allowed Rael-Gálvez to build a database and assemble a 75-person team of global researchers, translators and transcribers who’ve been combing through records from Alaska to Argentina, as well as in Europe.

The archive will include artifacts, a chronology of Indigenous enslavement and oral histories collected from descendants like Leyva.

Meanwhile, at Brown University’s Center for Digital Scholarship in Provi-



A document from 1865 compiled by Lafayette Head, an Indian agent charged with tallying the Indigenous individuals enslaved in southern Colorado, is among items being collected by Native Bound Unbound, one of two projects in the U.S. aiming to create public digital repositories chronicling the enslavement of Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

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dence, Rhode Island, associate history professor Linford Fisher leads a separate but similar effort called Stolen Relations: Recovering Stories of Indigenous Enslavement in the Americas.

The university-funded project, bolstered by a 2022 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, originated with Fisher’s research for a book about Indigenous enslavement in the English colonies. Stolen Relations is being conducted in collaboration with regional tribal nations and institutions such as the Tomaquag Museum, an Indigenous museum in Exeter, Rhode Island.

“If slavery studies typically looks at it from the enslavers’ side, they’ve pushed us to think about it in terms of what was lost,” he said. “To me that was a powerful reorientation.”

Both Native Bound Unbound and Stolen Relations expect to launch by summer 2025.

“It’s not one person’s project,” Fisher said. “It’s a hemispheric effort. I’m excited that there’s another effort out there. This takes all of us to unearth.”

Documenting an open secret

Intertribal slavery was ongoing before Christopher Columbus’ ships made landfall in the Americas.

But the practice exploded with the influx of Spanish, Dutch, French and Portuguese colonialists, eventually spreading throughout South and Central America, Mexico, the 13 British colonies and what is now the American Southwest.

According to Reséndez of UC-Davis, Native peoples who enslaved captured enemies gained a stronghold in the trade as they acquired European weaponry and horses; the Ute and Comanche nations, for instance, were major suppliers of Indigenous slaves for both European colonists and other Native nations.

Finding information about those enslaved, however, can be difficult.

“This is really diffuse and not centralized,” Fisher said. “There are shipping records for 12 million African slaves, but you don’t have that for Indigenous slavery. It’s one person in a will, or a few people in runaway slave ads.”

Rael-Gálvez, of Native Bound Unbound, said kidnapped Indigenous women or children were often recorded in documents as maids, servants or other terms he argues were simply euphemisms for slaves.

“The law obfuscated and hid what was happening on the ground,” he said. “It was a tolerated illegality. People were ‘capturing’ individuals left and right.”

Indigenous slavery to Indian boarding schools

Fisher, of the Stolen Relations project, said Indigenous enslavement is inseparable from later policies intended to eradicate Native culture and identity such as Indian boarding schools and adoptions, both of which continued into the 1960s.

“Boarding schools were initially very labor-based, and many children were sent out into communities to work in homes,” Fisher said. “This gets to the heart of a centuries-long process of cultural annihilation. People have used the term genocide, and I don’t think that’s wrong.”

Both he and Rael-Gálvez say while they hope their projects will prove useful for researchers, educators, artists and journalists, their true goal is to provide genealogical answers and meaning for the descendants of those enslaved.

Rael-Gálvez said, “is about every one of those individuals who experienced slavery. We want to treat every document with reverence and to document their stories as fully as we can.”

Fisher said the involvement of current regional tribal members, and their first-person testimonies, assures the Stolen Relations project focuses not only on the past but the present as well.

“It’s a platform for tribal members to say, we’re still here,” he said. “It’s not just a story of domination and genocide but of resistance.”