

Definition: **peonage** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1847) **1 a** : the use of laborers bound in servitude because of debt **b** : a system of convict labor by which convicts are leased to contractors **2** : the condition of a peon

Summary Article: **peonage**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(pē'əniĵ), system of involuntary servitude based on the indebtedness of the laborer (the peon) to his creditor. It was prevalent in Spanish America, especially in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru. The system arose because labor was needed to support the agricultural, industrial, mining, and public-works activities of the conquerors and settlers in the Americas. With the Spanish conquest of the West Indies, the *encomienda*, establishing proprietary rights over the natives, was instituted. In 1542 the New Laws of Bartolomé de Las Casas were promulgated, defining natives as free subjects of the king and prohibiting forced labor. Black slave labor and wage labor were substituted. Since the natives had no wage tradition and the amount paid was very small, the New Laws were largely ignored. To force natives to work, a system of the *repartimiento* [assessment] and the *mita* was adopted; it gave the state the right to force its citizens, upon payment of a wage, to perform work necessary for the state. In practice, this meant that the native spent about one fourth of a year in public employment, but the remaining three fourths he was free to cultivate his own fields and provide for his own needs. Abuses under the system were frequent and severe, but the *repartimiento* was far less harsh and coercive than the slavery of debt peonage that followed independence from Spain in 1821. Forced labor had not yet included the working of plantation crops—sugar, cacao, cochineal, and indigo; their increasing value brought greater demand for labor control, and in the 19th cent. the cultivation of other crops on a large scale required a continuous and cheap labor supply. To force natives to work, the plantations got them into debt by giving advances on wages and by requiring the purchase of necessities from company-owned stores. As the natives fell into debt and lost their own land, they were reduced to peonage and forced to work for the same employer until his debts and the debts of his ancestors were paid, a virtual impossibility. He became virtually a serf, but without the serf's customary rights. In Mexico a decree against peonage was issued in 1915, but the practice persisted. Partly to alleviate it, Lázaro Cárdenas instituted the *ejido* in 1936. In that year, too, debt peonage was abolished in Guatemala. In the United States after the Civil War, peonage existed in most Southern states as it had in the Southwest after its acquisition from Mexico. Not only blacks and Mexicans but whites as well found themselves enmeshed. By 1910 court decisions had outlawed peonage, but as late as 1960 some sharecroppers in Southern states were pressured to continue working for the same master to pay off old debts or to pay taxes, which some states had levied to preserve the sharecropping system.

See Simpson, L. B. , *The Encomienda in New Spain* (1950);

Bannon, J. F. , *Indian Labor in the Spanish Indies* (1966).

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peonage. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/peonage>



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