Indentured Servitude

The Chesapeake region quickly became based on tobacco. European demand for tobacco set off a decade’s long economic boom in the Chesapeake. Wealthy families established large estates along the eastern coastal rivers. Plantation agriculture encourage land consolidation as large planters acquired as much land as possible and experimented with new forms of labor. Chesapeake farmers originally tried to use captured Native Americans, but most Indians died from disease while many others were able to escape. After the failed experiment with Indians, the Chesapeake land owners turned to indentured servants.

Indentured servants were usually young men who signed a contract of four to seven years to work for the master who paid for their trip. After that, they would be free to marry and work for themselves. To maximize their gains, many masters ruthlessly exploited their servants, forcing them to work long hours, beating them without cause, and withholding permission to marry. Female servants were especially vulnerable to abuse. Few indentured servants escaped poverty as half of the men died before completing their contract and another quarter remained landless. Only one-quarter achieved their quest for property and respectability. Female servants often fared better if they survived as many propertied owners married female servants.

In Virginia, the headright system guaranteed 50 acres of land to anyone who paid the passage of a new immigrant, so as the wealthy bought indentured servants and slaves, their land holdings grew. By the 1670s, economic and political power in Virginia was in the hands of a small circle of men who amassed land, slaves, and political offices. Through headrights and royal grants, they controlled nearly half of all settled land in Virginia; what they could not plant themselves, they leased to tenants. Freed indentured servants found it harder to get land of their own and many were forced to lease land or worse, reenter servitude. To make matters worse, tobacco prices fell in the 1670s and the House of Burgesses took away the vote from landless freedmen. Perhaps the most important issue for the indentured servants was Indian conflict. All along the western frontier landless whites tried to take land from Native Americans causing conflict.

Doc 1

In 1676, Nathaniel Bacon (who was never an indentured servant) organized a group of rebels who had been fighting with Indians in the western frontier. They attacked any Indian they could, even friendly tribes and eventually marched on Jamestown. In his manifesto, Bacon demanded a removal of all Indians and an end to the power of the wealthy “parasites” that ruled the poor. Jamestown was burned to the ground, but when Bacon died of dysentery and body lice, Berkeley was able to put down the rebellion. Bacon’s Rebellion was a significant event in colonial history because it made the planters realize that African slaves were a more stable and cost efficient labor supply than indentured servants.

Doc 2
African Slavery

Between 1520 and 1650, Portuguese traders carried about 820,000 Africans across the Atlantic. Over the next half century, the Dutch dominated the Atlantic slave trade; then, between 1700 and 1800, the British transported about 2.1 million of the total 6.1 million Africans carried to the America. The first African slaves were brought to the Chesapeake in 1619. By 1650 they constituted only 2% of the population (400 total) and by 1670, they were still only 5% of the population. When tobacco prices dropped precipitously in the 1670s, many plantation owners turned to African slaves because it was cheaper than using indentured servants. Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676 set off a boom of black slavery in the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland. By 1720, Africans made up 20% of the Chesapeake population and by 1740, they were 40% of the Chesapeake population. After a slave uprising in Barbados (where by 1680s an elite group of 175 planters controlled about 25,000 slaves), hundreds of English farmers fled to South Carolina. They brought with them the “Barbados Slave Code” of race based slavery founded on social inequality and “absolute coercive” force among masters. Thus, by the 1700s, race based slavery had emerged as the main labor force in the southern English colonies.

Doc 3

African slaves were usually captured by other Africans and sold into slavery via one of the European slave trading companies. They endured the horrific Middle Passage where they were crammed under the deck with little to eat or drink and serious health issues with disease, heat, and unsanitary conditions. Things did not improve much in the Americas. Virginia passed laws allowing masters to kill their slaves if necessary and essentially took away all legal rights from African slaves. Rape of women was common. In South Carolina, it was not uncommon to work the slaves to death in the fields.

Doc 4
The work the slaves completed varied based on the crops and weather of the region. Work in the Deep South and the West Indies was generally more labor intensive and challenging than the work in the Chesapeake. Whenever possible, slaves from all over Africa began to develop a new African American identity. Family was the central feature of this community and although it was always threatened by sale or death, family life was as normal as it could be in the circumstances. Many masters encouraged families and procreation because they were able to keep or sell the offspring. Music also played a central role in African American life.

Slave’s lives were carefully controlled by white society. It was illegal to teach slaves to read or write and most slaves owned no property of their own. Slave owners feared slave uprisings and often used cruelty to keep their slaves “in line.” Typically, the larger the plantation, the more gruesome the treatment of the slaves. Slaves were able to resist their masters in several ways both covertly and overtly. The most common means of resistance was working as slow as possible to avoid trouble. Some ran away and theft was common. Slaves and their masters often negotiated extra work for special privileges, for instance Sundays off came to be viewed as a slave “right.” There were very few uprisings but the Stono Rebellion in 1739 was the most notable. Encouraged by the Spanish governor of Florida, 69 slaves escaped to St. Augustine Florida. Later 75 African slaves rose in rebellion and killed a number of whites near the Stono River. They hoped to escape to Florida, but were met by a South Carolina militia who killed 44 slaves and stopped the rebellion.
Massive profits drove the slave trade, sugar plantations made more than 10% profit on their investments. At its height in the 1790s, Britain annually exported 300,000 guns to Africa, and a British ship carrying 300 to 350 slaves left an African port every other day. This commerce stimulated the entire British economy. Shipyards built vessels and thousands of people worked in trade related industries: building port facilities, refining sugar and tobacco, distilling rum from molasses, and manufacturing textile and iron products from market.

**Doc 7**

**TRANS-ATLANTIC TRADE, EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

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Source: Advertisement, *Virginia Gazette*, May 16, 1745.

RAN away, on the 18th Instant, from the Plantation of the late Col. William Wilson, deceased, two slaves belonging to the subscriber, the one a tall yellow fellow, named Emanuel, about 6 feet high, six or seven and twenty years of age; hath a scar on the outside of his left thigh, which was cut with an ax; he had on when he went away, a blue jacket, an Ozenbrig [course fabric] shirt and trousers, and a worsted cap; he speaks pretty good English, and calls himself a Portuguese; is by trade a cooper, and took with him some cooper’s tools. The other is a short, thick, well-set fellow, stoops forward pretty much when he walks; does not speak so plain as the other; had on when he went away an Ozenbrig pair of trousers and shirt, a white Negro cotton jacket, and took with him an axe. They went away in a small canoine, and were seen at Capt. Pearson’s, on Nuse River, the 18th Inst. and ‘tis believ’d are gone towards Virginia. Whoever take up the said Negroes, and brings them to my house on Trent River, North Carolina, or secures them so that I may have them again, shall have four Pistoles reward for each, paid by Mary Wilson.