

## Module 02: Unthinking Decision? Why Did Slavery Emerge in Virginia?

### Evidence 6: The Gallows Confession of Thomas Helier

A

#### Introduction

Thomas Hellier (c. 1650-1678), a young Englishman down on his luck, agreed to go to Virginia as an indentured servant. Once there, he found his situation not what had been promised and tried to escape. He grew desperate enough to kill his own master and mistress as well as another servant, for which he was sentenced to hang. The gallows confession below begins with Hellier's account of his life and crime but moves on to encompass a general description of Virginia and indentured servitude during the seventeenth century.

#### Questions to Consider

- Why was Hellier reluctant to go to Virginia? Why did he finally agree to go?
- Did his experience in Virginia have anything in common with that of Richard Frethorne?
- What does contemporary interpretation of the story suggest about life and labor in seventeenth-century Virginia?
- What affect might such a story have had in England on potential indentured servants? What effect might Hellier's story have had in Virginia on the masters of servants? How might it have influenced their choice of labor?

#### Document

Thus had I trifled away and misspent my ten pounds and the price of my horse. Next, to supply necessity, I sold my Cloaths for want of money: so walking up Tower-ditch, I going in at the Eagle and Childe, enquired if there were any Ship-Captain quartered there? one replied, There was no Ship-Captain quartered in that house, but that he himself was concern'd about Sea-faring matters. I enquired to what parts he was concerned? he answered, To Virginia: So asked withal, if I were minded for that Country; if I were, I should have Meat, Drink, and Apparel, with other Necessaries provided for me. I replied, I had heard so bad a character of that Country,

that I dreaded going thither, in regard I abhorred the Ax and the Haw. He told me, he would promise I should be onely employ'd in Merchants Accompts, and such Employments to which I had been bred, if they were here used.

On August the 10th, 77, I being over-perswaded, went on board the Young Prince, Captain Robert Morris Commander; on the 5th of September ditto, the Young Prince weighed Anchor from the Downs; and on the 25th of October following, she arrived within the Capes of Virginia, and dropt Anchor at Newpersnews. I was delivered into the custody and dispose of one Lewis Conner of Barmedoe hundred Virginia, who sold me off to one Cutbeard Williamson, living at a Plantation call'd Hard Labour, belonging to Westover-Parish in Charles City, County Virginia: which said Williamson promised me I should be employed in Teaching his Children, and not be set to any laborious work, unless necessity did compel now and then, meerly for a short spurt. But nevertheless, though I wanted not for Cloahs nor Victuals, yet I found their dealings contrary to their fair promises; which much disheartened me. And though my labour at the Howe was very irksome, and I was however resolved to do my utmost endeavour at it; yet that which embittered my life, and made every thing I took in hand burdensome to me, was the unworthy Ill-usage which I received daily and hourly from my ill-tongued Mistriss; who would not only rail, swear and curse at me within doors, whenever I came into the house, casting on me continually biting Taunts and bitter Flouts; but like a live Ghost would impertinently haunt me, when I was quiet in the Ground at work. And although I silently wrought as fast as she rail'd, plying my labour, without so much as muttering at her, or answering any thing good or bad; yet all the silence and observance that I could use, would not charm her vile tongue. These things burning and broyling in my Breast, tempted me to take the trip, and give my Master the bag to hold; thereupon I vamped off, and got on board Capt. Larimore's ship, where I remained eleven days, or thereabout, the Ship then riding at Warwicks-Creek Bay.

I was absent from my Master's business almost three Weeks, but at length my Master hunting about, and searching to and fro, had discover'd where I was, and so sending a Messenger, fetched me back home again. As I was upon my return homeward, I had a designe to have knocked the Messenger on the head; for which purpose I took up a great stone and carried it along in my hand a good way, unknown to the man: but my heart failing me, I let

drop that designe. At length home I came, begg'd pardon of my Master for my fault, and all seemed pretty well again. But my usage proving still worse than before, my Mistress ever taunting me with her odious and inveterate Tongue, do all I would, and strive all the ways whatever I could, she, I found, was no whit pacified toward me. Whereupon I began to cast about and bethink my self, which way to rid me of that Hell upon Earth, yet still seeking if possible to weather it, but all in vain.

At last, Satan taking advantage of my secret inward regret, suggested to my vicious corrupt minde, that by ridding my Master and Mistress out of the way, I might with ease gain my Freedom, after which time I sought all opportunities to effectuate and bring to pass my said horrid contrivance: Concluding, when they were dead, I should be a Freeman. Which said execrable Project I attempted and put in execution May the 24, 1678. Thus.

Betimes in the Morning before day, I put on my best Cloaths, then got my Ax, and attempted two or three times to enter my Master's Lodging-room, still my heart failing me, I stept back again; but however at length in I rushed: A Servant-maid, who lay every night in the same Room, passed along by me the same time with her Bed on her shoulder, or under her arm, to whom I offer'd no violence, but let her pass untouched; nor had I meddled with her, had she kept out of my way. From her I passed on to my Masters Bed, and struck at him with the Ax, and gave him several blows, as near as I could guess, upon the Head: I do believe, I had so unhappy an aim with my hand, that I mortally wounded him the first blow. My Mistress in the interim got out of Bed, and got hold of a Chair, thinking to defend her self; and when I came toward her, struggled, but I proved to hard for her; She begg'd me to save her Life, and I might take what I would, and go my way. But all in vain, nothing would satisfie but her Life, whom I looked on as my greatest Enemy; so down she went without Mercy. The Wench to whom I intended no hurt, returned, as I suppose to rescue her Mistress; whereupon she suffer'd the same cruel Fate with the other two.

After this Tragedy I broke open a Closet, and took Provision for my journey, and rummaging my Mistriss Chest, I took what I thought fit, as much as loaded a good lusty Horse; So taking my Master's Gun in my hand, away I hastned: But while the Horse stood without door, a Neighbour came to the house, with an excuse to borrow the said Horse. To whom, I frowning, answered very roughly, and threatning him, bid him be gone, he could not

have the Horse; who departed, and (I suppose) betrayed to the other Neighbours some jealousy he had conceived, concerning some Mischief I had been doing. A Childe also belonging to the Family was run forth to betray the business. But before any body came, I was gone upon my intended progress with my Master's Horse loaded, and his Gun in my hand.

After wandering the unknown Woods a tedious time, to and fro, and finding no path, I struck up towards a Plantation belonging to one Gully, near Chickabommony Swamp, where I had a Ship-mate living; here I found a Path, and following that Path, it led me up to the house, where finding my Ship-mate, I enquir'd the nearest way to the Falls of James River: Who told me, he knew not the way, but said, he would go and enquire; so he called his Master's Son, who asked, if I would not walk into the house, and eat before I went. I said it was too early for me to eat: The said Gilly's Son-in-law came forth also, and very urgent they were to have me walk in and smoke Tobacco, seeing I would not eat. I told them, I would not smoke, but desired them to direct me my way, (still keeping my Gun in my hand, I being as shie of them, as they were watchful over me.) At last they told me, they would shew me the way; one walking before me, and the other following me, who led me to a Passage over a Water: where, before I passed over, I had some occasion to lay my Gun out of my hand: Whereupon one laying hold of the Gun, said, This is a compleat Gun, and withal fired it off: whereupon I discern'd my self surprized.

They told me I was to go no farther: So they seising me, I struggled a while, and had like to have been too hard for one of the men. But Gully himself hearing the report of the Gun, run down toward the place; so being overpower'd, I was forced to submit to have my hands bound.

Upon this seisure I was struck with silejice, not having power either to confess or deny the Fact. They forthwith brought me before Mr. John Stith, the next justice of Peace; This hapned May 25, 1678. I had no power to answer the Justice to any thing, only I begg'd that I might have a Minister sent for to me, and then I should relate the whole matter. One Mr. Williams<sup>26</sup> was sent to me the next morning (being Saturday) to whom I acknowledged the whole matter. After conference with the said Minis-ter, I began by degrees to be rendred sensible of the heinousness of my horrid and bloody Crime; for which I was Tryed at James-Town, July 26, 1678. And was Sentenced to be Hang'd in Chains the ditto; according to which

just Sentence, I am now deservedly to suffer here this instant 5th of August, 1678. . . .

Now 'tis no way to be doubted at all, but that each sober-minded person will seriously declaim against that Unchristian-like and execrable course of life driven by your Men-stealers, termed otherwise Spirits or Kidnappers, whose whole employ it is to collogue and seduce indigent, ignorant Souls (under fair pretences, and by making Golden promises of things never likely to come to pass) drilling many distressed; desperate Wretches on to their own speedy and unavoidable destruction, thereby studying to raise themselves by the ruine and downfall of rambling and unsettled Spirits.

The truth whereof might be sadly testified by several deplorable Examples of some, who for very grief and vexation of Minde (discerning themselves abusively danced into a Fools Paradise, or behampered in an inextricable Labyrinth of vexatious Mischiefs) have even desperately made themselves away.

All necessitated persons therefore who shall seek to shun shame or other miseries in England, or elsewhere, by changing Climate, and transporting themselves for this Country of Virginia, ought to be cautelous and wary, whom they trade with on this account, that they be not abused, will they, nill they, to their own destruction.

For Virginia is of it self a very fertil, good, pleasant Country, abounding with the manifold Blessings of luxuriant Nature, the only Region of all under the Sun to enrich laborious, painful, industrious poor-men. So that many, who in England and many other Parts of the World are unable to get their Bread, may in this Region live comfortably and happy; the native Riches of the Soil bountifully requiting each industrious persons labour with a yearly plentiful product. The Rivers richly stored with delicious fish, the Air with several sorts and numerous flocks of Wild-fowl; the whole Country throughout Woody, and plentifully furnished in most parts with whole Herds of Deer and other endless Wild-game. Wherefore I dare confidently assert, that any person, who is by Nature and Education capable of hard labour, and that can bear and undergo heat and cold, any one who is but able to inure himself to the Ax and the Howe, need never to recant; nor will, I judge (if he transport himself for this Climate) ever finde just ground to repent his coming hither. But on the contrary, persons nicely educated, or train'd up

to a sedentary Life, accustomed to a warm House in Winter, and to solace themselves in cool Shades in Summer-season, such (unless they come over on their own proper cost, defraying the charges of their Passage themselves) cannot expect equal success with lusty labouring men.

For, though there be here some Gentlemen of Rank and Quality, yet are they but few, and very exceeding rare, who are capable to prize or value good Breeding, gentile Education, or ingenious Literature, according to the true worth thereof. And indeed, how should it be otherwise? Who can expect Oats from Beasts which never eat any? (as our English Proverb patly insinuates.) Therefore this general neglect, or light esteem of truly laudable Endowments, needs must proceed hence, even from the flat, low, mean Education, and obscure base Original of some, who (though Beggars in their Native Soil) yet have by their drudging Industry, since their arrival in this Country, attained to something of Estate, and seem now in their own conceits great men, or persons of more than ordinary account. The gross Fancies of such cloudy-pated persons will, by reason of their invincible Ignorance, misplace their esteem on a Taylor, Smith, Shoemaker, or the like necessary Handicrafts-man, courting such an one with their utmost art and skill; when a Scholar (if never so well qualified) shall but be contemned, and happily set at nought. For, in this Region, he commonly thinks himself the best man, who can at the Fall of the Leaf produce the largest crop of Corn and Tobacco. Wherefore each Virginy-Planter building solely on this fruit of his Labour, cares not how little he or his are guilty of being Book-learned, so he can but handle an Ax and Howe dexterously.

Now, 'tis to be confessed altogether Legal, Just and Equitable, that such who change their Climate, and are brought over hither on other mens accounts, having their Passage paid, and Charges born to their hands ('tis I say but altogether just, legal and equitable) that such coming voluntary, being withal supplied with all necessaries for Transportation out of other persons Pockets, should willingly and to the full retribute what hath been so disbursed by any Merchant on the said score. But in regard, after their arrival here, this satisfaction can be usually made no otherwise than by serving four Years by Indenture, or five Years according to the Custome of the Country, by those who come in without Indenture. Therefore it first and mainly concerns all persons to consider seriously before their shipping on board, what must be expected necessarily to follow. And being once throughly well-advised concerning the unavoidable Consequences of

running so uncertain a hazard, they ought in the next place to arm themselves with an unalterable Resolution to wade through all whatever seeming Difficulties they shall fall into, with invincible Chearful-ness, Courage and Constancy. They who come thus qualified, never need to doubt unhop'd-for success in storming any the most discouraging opposition whatsoever, which they shall any time meet with. Otherwise, who sail hither in the capacity of Servants unresolved within themselves as to these forementioned Proviso's, do but pedantickly presume to aim at building Castles in the Air without materials.

Nor dare I undertake to encourage any, who know themselves unable to labour, to come over Servants at all; unless they can before-hand on infallible grounds assure themselves, that they shall be consigned to some truly-generous-spirited Gentleman of real repute, good quality, and true worth, who will infallibly deal so indulgently and favourably by them, as to employ them in such concerns, which their former Education hath most properly fitted them for. For your lusty people, able of Limbs, and healthy of Constitution, or hardy Lads, who are fit to drudge it stoutly, and are willing to learn to take pains, in hopes of being richly rewarded for their labour, are here every where in very high esteem. 'Tis more for the Interest of Virginia to have their Servants to chop Logs lustily, than to chop Logick. Handling the Howe proves here far better Musick than the Hoghboy. Let your robustious Rusticks, if I may advise, sail to Virginia to choose, to seek their fortunes. For an English Tinker, Cobler, Pedler, a meer Mumper or Dunghil-raker, may be the blessing of Providence upon his painful Industry live in this Country as plentifully, and (I think I may boldly affirm according to truth) reap as much or happily more content, than some Farmers in England of an hundred a year.

And though many persons (through the baseness and knavery of those who have transported them, on the one hand, and what through the Ignorance of the persons themselves who have been gull'd, on the other hand) have been, sore against their Wills, cheated over and trepann'd hither, to their own great Misery and utter Destruction: Yet 'tis well known to this day, that many having deserved the Gallows in England, some who have sailed over to Virginia in Shackles, have (after their arrival here) done very well; Leading a creditable, comfortable, and for ought I can understand, a plausible honest Life.

So that peoples own Mistakes chiefly create their own Discomfort on this behalf; For Example, When a person both unable and unus'd to labour, coming over hither in capacity of a Servant, meets unhappily with a Master who expects and compels him to work hard, much against his minde; (the said Master therefore justly expecting labour, while the Servant on the contrary fondly hopes and vainly desires to lead an easie Life.) This contradiction between the aims and ends of Master and Servant, renders both at once unavoidably miserable. But above all, the grand mischief is, when Masters in Virginia shall undertake to purchase Servants whom they know naturally incapable of hard labour, or by Education totally averse to the same; pretending they will employ the said Servants in concerns suitable to their Strength, or Education, or both. Who after they have the said Servants, as they judge, fast bound to them, contrive imprudently and impolitickly to employ them, quite perhaps contrary to their own Promises, and the poor Servant's Expectations. And suppose these Servants may happily prove willing to strive (though with much grief and sore vexation of Minde) to put themselves forth to their utmost ability; yet they shall, ten hundred to one, be curs'd, bann'd, swore at, trampled under foot, and perpetually tormented with abusive Usage; all because they do not, and it may be cannot, answer altogether the now unreasonable expectation of their tyrannical Masters, who full well knew before they had them, that they ought not to expect what they so eagerly but vainly exact from them.

Whereas in truth, How much more consonant and agreeable were it to common Policy, Self-interest, as well as true Christian Charity, for all Masters in Virginia, Planters as well as others, to consider first their own Ability, and the Capacity of the Servants whom they designe to purchase, before they deal for them; sincerely at the same time imparting to them, What their Work must be, and what their Usage? And if, by enquiry into their former Condition, they discover them improper persons for their purpose; How much a wiser course were it, that such should seasonably pitch their choice on some others, more useful for them? Or if they will chuse no others, Conscience and Christianity sure ought to oblige them to use such Servants as their Christian Brethren, with Gentleness and Courtesie, content with their honest endeavours, not Tyrannizing over Christians, as Turks do over Galley-slaves, compelling them unmercifully beyond their strength.



For though Masters justly do expect and require Fidelity and painful Industry from their Christian Servants, and such Servants ought to put themselves forth to their utmost power for their Masters Benefit: Yet, the merciful Man exerciseth Mercy towards his Beast, much more toward a Christian Servant. And let cruel, tyrannical, Egyptian Task-masters know, that their Master is also in Heaven, whose Omniscience beholds and knows all persons dealings, and will judge according to Equity, without respect of persons, in his own due time, and listen to the Groans and Sighs of poor oppressed Wretches, vindicating the cause of injur'd Innocents, retributing crosses, vexations and troubles to all Wrong-doers.

And whereas this poor Penitent Wretch declar'd, That the bitterness of his ill-tongued Mistress was the main immediate provocation prompting and exciting him to give way to Satan's suggestions, while he tempted him to perpetrate this horrid, execrable Outrage: I suppose, all will grant, that Bitterness in any case (especially to morigerous Servants of a gentle Temper, obediently willing to do their endeavours) is no way Christian-like nor commendable, but rather Patience and kinde usage. . . .

Also you that are Masters of Servants in this Country, have respect to them, to let them have that which is necessary for them, with good words, and not (Dam you dog, do such a thing, or such a thing.) They are not Dogs, who are professed Christians, and bear God's Image; happily they are as good Christians as your selves, and as well bred and educated, though through Poverty they are forced to seek Christianity under thy roof; where they usually find nothing but Tyranny. Be good to your Servants, as you would have God be good to you. Servants, in all things obey your Masters according to the flesh, not with eye-service as man-pleasers, but with singleness of heart, fearing God. Masters, give to your Servants what is right and equal; know that you also have a Master in Heaven.

Source:

"The Vain Prodigal Life and Tragical Penitent Death of Thomas Hellier. . . printed for Sam. Crouch. . ." (London, 1680), in *Early English Books, 1641-1700* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Roll 881, Position 2).