

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

Evidence

Racial Attitudes

Labor Regimes

Economics

Public Safety

The documents below explore several factors that may have influenced Virginians' decision to replace servants with enslaved Africans. The documents were carefully selected to demonstrate certain aspects of early Virginia life and the way Virginians and others viewed the world. Each document presents one element of a larger picture, and only by reading the evidence presented below as a whole can you begin to make out the larger picture. Keep in mind that English as a language has changed much since the seventeenth century. Careful reading, however, should enable you to understand and analyze the documents.

Racial Attitudes

Although slavery did not exist in England, many English had heard or read about slavery and had formed mental images of the sorts of people seemingly fit to be slaves. The availability of such people may have played a role in the Virginians' decision to adopt slavery.

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1. General Historie of Virginia

John Smith describes Native Americans

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2. A true discourse of the three Voyages of discoverie

George Best describes Africans



3. Engravings

Theodor DeBry depicts Native Americans



4. Sketches

John Barbot depicts Africans

Labor Regimes


Freedom and slavery make up opposite ends of the spectrum, yet there exist stages in between that may have made it easier for English planters to move towards slavery. Indentured servitude certainly was not slavery — indentures remained under obligation for set periods of time, not for life, and enjoyed citizenship with basic rights — although servitude in the seventeenth century was at times so harsh as to seem close to slavery.


A [5. Loving and Kind Mother and Father](#)
Richard Frethorne
to his parents


A [6. A Gallows Confession](#)
Thomas Helier's
confession


Economics


At its core, slavery was an economic system adopted for profit. Precise information on prices (excluding tobacco) or life expectancy remains hard to come by for seventeenth-century Virginia, although most scholars accept the general trends shown in the graphs below.


 [7. Chart: Price of Servants](#)
Virginia, 1620-
1690

 [8. Chart: Price of Slaves](#)
Virginia, 1620-
1690

 [9. Chart: Term of Servants](#)
Virginia, 1620-
1690

 [10. Chart: Life Expectancy](#)
Virginia, 1620-
1690

 [11. Chart: Price of Tobacco](#)
Virginia, 1620-
1690

 [12. Calculator: Profit/Cost of Labor](#)
Virginia, 1620-
1690

Public Safety

Both servants and slaves were believed to be dangerous; which group thought to be *more* dangerous may have influenced Virginians' decision to choose slavery over servitude.

A [13. A History of Bacon's Rebellion](#)
Virginia, 1675-
1676

A [14. Executions](#)
A list of those
executed after
Bacon's Rebellion