
TOWARD SLAVERY

IT could be argued that Virginia had relieved one of England's social problems by importing it. Virginians of the late seventeenth century seemed to be plagued by the same kind of restless, roistering rogues who had wandered through Elizabethan England. England had kept them down by the workhouse, by the gallows, by whipping them back to the parish they came from, by sending them off on military expeditions—and by shipping them to Virginia. Richard Hakluyt had hoped that the New World would save them from the gallows. It had, and although Virginians were not all happy about it, throughout the century they kept crying for more. They wanted men. They could not get enough of them. The problem was not, as in England, to find work for them but simply to keep them working for their betters.

As we have seen, Virginians had coped with the problem in several ways: by creating an artificial scarcity of land, which drove freemen back into servitude; by extending terms of service; by inflicting severe penalties for killing the hogs that offered easy food without work. They had also through rents and taxes and fees skimmed off as much as they dared of the small man's small profits for the benefit of burgesses, councillors, and collectors. But the burdens imposed on Virginia's workers placed the colony continually on the brink of rebellion.

Elsewhere the world was trying less dangerous ways to maximize labor and the returns from labor. One way, which had a large future, grew out of the ideas that we associate with Max Weber's term, "the Protestant Ethic." Whether the origin of those ideas lay in any particular religion or not, where they prevailed they excited



in employers and employed alike a zeal for work that exceeded anything the world had formerly known. Men imbued with a yearning for salvation found in diligent, systematic work at their jobs a sign of their predestined election to the joys of paradise. In their eagerness thus to demonstrate their sainthood to themselves and to others, they delivered more work than could be obtained by most external forms of compulsion. But the extraordinary capacity for work displayed by men addicted to the Protestant Ethic was the by-product of a special religious zeal. And religious zeal of any kind was not conspicuous among Virginians. It was the specialty of the New Englanders whom Governor Berkeley so despised. There remained, however, another way of compelling men to a maximum output of labor without as great a risk of rebellion as Virginians had been running.

Slavery is a mode of compulsion that has often prevailed where land is abundant,¹ and Virginians had been drifting toward it from the time when they first found something profitable to work at. Servitude in Virginia's tobacco fields approached closer to slavery than anything known at the time in England. Men served longer, were subjected to more rigorous punishments, were traded about as commodities already in the 1620s.

That Virginia's labor barons of the 1620s or her land and labor barons of the 1660s and 1670s did not transform their servants into slaves was probably not owing to any moral squeamishness or to any failure to perceive the advantages of doing so. Although slavery did not exist in England, Englishmen were not so unfamiliar with it that they had to be told what it was. They knew that the Spaniards' gold and silver were dug by slave labor, and they themselves had even toyed with temporary "slavery" as a punishment for crime in the sixteenth century.² But for Virginians to have pressed their servants or their indigent neighbors into slavery might have been, initially at least, more perilous than exploiting them in the ways that eventuated in the plundering parties of Bacon's Rebellion. Slavery, once established, offered incomparable advantages in keeping labor docile, but the transformation of free men into slaves would have been a tricky business. It would have had to proceed by stages, each carefully calculated to stop short of provoking rebellion. And if suc-

¹ Evsey D. Domar, "Causes of Slavery or Serfdom," 18-32; Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 265.

² C. S. L. Davies, "Slavery and the Protector Somerset: The Vagrancy Act of 1547," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., XIX (1966), 532-49.

cessful it would have reduced, if it did not end, the flow of potential slaves from England and Europe. Moreover, it would have required a conscious, deliberate, public decision. It would have had to be done, even if in stages, by action of the assembly, and the English government would have had to approve it. If it had been possible for the men at the top in Virginia to arrive at such a decision or series of decisions, the home government would almost certainly have vetoed the move, for fear of a rebellion or of an exodus from the colony that would prove costly to the crown's tobacco revenues.

But to establish slavery in Virginia it was not necessary to enslave anyone. Virginians had only to buy men who were already enslaved, after the initial risks of the transformation had been sustained by others elsewhere. They converted to slavery simply by buying slaves instead of servants. The process seems so simple, the advantages of slave labor so obvious, and their system of production and attitude toward workers so receptive that it seems surprising they did not convert sooner. African slaves were present in Virginia, as we have seen, almost from the beginning (probably the first known Negroes to arrive, in 1619, were slaves). The courts clearly recognized property in men and women and their unborn progeny at least as early as the 1640s,³ and there was no law to prevent any planter from bringing in as many as he wished. Why, then, did Virginians not furnish themselves with slaves as soon as they began to grow tobacco? Why did they wait so long?

The answer lies in the fact that slave labor, in spite of its seeming superiority, was actually not as advantageous as indentured labor during the first half of the century. Because of the high mortality among immigrants to Virginia, there could be no great advantage in owning a man for a lifetime rather than a period of years, especially since a slave cost roughly twice as much as an indentured servant.⁴ If the chances of a man's dying during his first five years in Virginia were better than fifty-fifty—and it seems apparent that they were—

³ See chap. 7, note 69.

⁴ A newly arrived English servant with five years or more to serve cost 1,000 pounds of tobacco, more or less, in the 1640s and early 1650s. The earliest surviving contract for importation of Negroes, in 1649, called for their sale on arrival at 2,000 pounds apiece, but whether they actually sold for that price is unknown (Northampton III, 204a). A seasoned Negro man or woman then cost between 2,000 and 3,000. Values for both slaves and servants in inventories rose in the late 1650s, with servants fetching as much as 3,000 and slaves 4,000. See also chap. 8, notes 68 and 69.



and if English servants could be made to work as hard as slaves, English servants for a five-year term were the better buy.

If Virginians had been willing to pay the price, it seems likely that they could have obtained Negro slaves in larger numbers than they did. During the first half of the century the Dutch were busy dismantling the Portuguese empire and, in the process, taking over the African slave trade. They promoted the development of English sugar plantations in the West Indies and supplied those plantations with enough slaves to give Barbados (founded twenty years after Virginia) a black population of 5,000 by 1645 and 20,000 by 1660.⁵ Virginia could scarcely have had a tenth the number at either date. Yet the Dutch were heavily engaged in the purchase of Virginia tobacco. They would surely, in the course of that trade, have supplied Virginians with slaves if the Virginians had been ready to pay.

That Virginia's tobacco planters would not pay, while Barbados' sugar planters would, requires explanation, for mortality was evidently as heavy in Barbados as in Virginia.⁶ If servants for a term were a better buy for Virginians, why not for Barbadians?

Up until the 1640s, when the principal crop in Barbados was, as in Virginia, tobacco, the labor force was mainly composed, as in Virginia, of white servants. But a shift from tobacco to cotton and then to sugar in the early 1640s made the islands less attractive than the mainland for servants who crossed the ocean voluntarily. Sugar production required such strenuous labor that men would not willingly undertake it. Sugar planters, in order to get their crops grown, harvested, and processed had to drive their workers much harder than tobacco planters did. Richard Ligon in the late 1640s was scandalized to see how the Barbados planters beat their servants in order to get the work out of them.⁷ Moreover, when a servant turned free, he found land much scarcer than in Virginia or Maryland. And even if he could hire a plot, at high rents, sugar production (unlike tobacco) required a larger outlay of capital for equipment than he could likely lay hands on.⁸ For these reasons, when Barbados servants became free, they frequently headed for Virginia or other

⁵ Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 33, 55–60, 63–68, 82–84; Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1972), 312.

⁶ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 327–34.

⁷ Ligon, *True and Exact History*, 43–55; Harlow, *Barbados*, 302–3; Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 102–17.

⁸ Ligon, *True and Exact History*, 109–17; Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 85, 287; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 91, but cf. 197.

mainland colonies. The sugar planters may thus have bought slaves partly because they could not buy servants unless the servants were shanghaied, or “barbadosed” as the word was at the time, or unless they were sent as prisoners, like the captured Scottish and Irish soldiers whom Cromwell shipped over.⁹ A dwindling supply of willing servants may have forced a switch to slaves.

It is possible that the conversion to slavery in Virginia was helped, as it was in Barbados, by a decline in the number of servants coming to the colony. The conditions that produced Bacon’s Rebellion and the continuing discontent thereafter did not enhance the colony’s reputation. Moreover, by the third quarter of the century there was less pressure on Englishmen to leave home. Complaints of overpopulation in England had ceased, as statesmen and political thinkers sought ways of putting the poor to work. Certainly the number of white immigrants to Virginia does seem to have declined.¹⁰ But if this was a factor in the conversion process, another, probably of greater consequence, was the decline of heavy mortality toward midcentury, for as life expectancy rose, the slave became a better buy than the servant.

The point at which it became more advantageous for Virginians to buy slaves was probably reached by 1660. In that year the assembly offered exemption from local duties to Dutch ships bringing Negroes.¹¹ But in the same year Parliament passed the Navigation Acts, interdicting both the export of tobacco from the colonies to the Netherlands and any trade by Dutch ships in the colonies.¹² The result was to delay Virginia’s conversion to slavery. The mother country attempted to compensate for the severing of the Dutch slave trade through a royally sponsored English trading company, the Royal Adventurers, which was reorganized and rechartered in 1672 as the Royal African Company. These companies enjoyed a monopoly of supplying all the colonies with African slaves until 1698; but the men who ran them never gained sufficient familiarity with Africa or the slave trade to conduct the business successfully. And even though their monopoly could not be effectively enforced, especially against knowledgeable private traders, both tobacco and sugar plant-

⁹ Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 18, 219; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 69.

¹⁰ Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 309; C.O. 5/1316, f.53.

¹¹ Hening, I, 540.

¹² The acts excluded all foreign shipping and required tobacco to be taken only to England or another English colony, but it was the Dutch who were principally aimed at.

ers complained that it prevented them from getting the number of workers they needed.¹³ Virginia thus began to change to slave labor at a time when she had to compete with the sugar planters for a smaller supply of slaves than would have been available had the freer conditions of trade still existed under which Barbados had made the conversion.

In the competition for slaves after 1660 the sugar planters still enjoyed some advantages. Although sugar and tobacco were both “enumerated” commodities that must be shipped only to England or to another English colony, England did not collect nearly so heavy an import tax on sugar as on tobacco.¹⁴ Consequently, a larger percentage of the price paid by the consumer went to the grower. Moreover, the price of slaves in the West Indies was less than in Virginia, because the islands were closer to Africa, so that costs of transportation and risk of loss on the “Middle Passage” were therefore less.¹⁵ The figures for slave imports into Barbados, Jamaica, and the Leeward Islands in the last quarter of the century are all far above those for Virginia.¹⁶ That Virginia was able to get any at all was owing to the fact that while slaves had become a profitable investment for tobacco growers, the profitability of growing sugar had declined.

It is impossible to reconstruct from surviving data the returns that could be expected on capital invested in growing tobacco in Virginia in comparison with the same amount invested in growing sugar in the West Indies at different periods in the seventeenth century.¹⁷ It is clear, however, that by the end of the seventeenth cen-

¹³ K. G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London, 1957), 131, 133, 145, 149, 300–315.

¹⁴ In 1668–69 tobacco imports in England valued at £50,000 paid customs duties of £75,000, while sugar imports valued at £180,000 paid customs duties of £18,000. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 206–7.

¹⁵ The Royal African Company's proposed prices in 1672 were £15 in Barbados and £18 in Virginia. C.O. 1/62, f.133.

¹⁶ Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 363; Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 256; Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, Wis., 1969), 53, 55, 62.

¹⁷ Various contemporary calculations survive of the possible return on investment in sugar; for example, Ligon, *True and Exact History*, 109–17, and C.O. 1/58, ff.155–60. But they do not rest on actual records of production. Since they were made in support of arguments that the planters were doing well or that they were doing poorly, they are either much too optimistic or much too pessimistic.

ture and probably by the third quarter of it the tobacco growers had one strong advantage in the longevity of their laborers. A smaller proportion of their profits had to go into labor replacement and was available to meet the higher initial cost of a slave. Life expectancy in Barbados, especially for the black population, continued to be low throughout the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century. The slaves on Barbados plantations had to be replaced at the rate of about 6 percent a year.¹⁸ It is estimated that between 1640 and 1700 264,000 slaves were imported into the British West Indies. The total black population in 1700 was about 100,000.¹⁹ In the next century, between 1712 and 1762 the importation of 150,000 slaves increased the Barbados black population by only 28,000.²⁰ By contrast, while Virginia imported roughly 45,000 slaves between 1700 and 1750 (figures from the seventeenth century are sporadic), the black population increased from perhaps 8,000 or 10,000 to over 100,000.²¹ In Virginia not only had the rate of mortality from disease gone down, but the less strenuous work of cultivating tobacco, as opposed to sugar, enabled slaves to retain their health and multiply. To make a profit, sugar planters worked their slaves to death; tobacco planters did not have to.²² A slave consequently had a longer period of usefulness in Virginia than in the West Indies. The return on the investment might be less in the short run, but more in the long run.

The gap between the ability of Virginia and West Indies planters to pay for slaves was also narrowed in the course of the century by changes in the market price of their respective crops. The selling price of muscovado sugar in the islands during the 1640s, when the planters were converting to slavery, was perhaps 60 shillings the hundredweight (it brought 80 shillings at wholesale in London). In the 1650s and 1660s it dropped to about 30 shillings, in the

¹⁸ The sex ratio among Barbados slaves was about even. Although more men were imported than women, they died faster, and total deaths outnumbered births. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 251, 309, 314-17, 323; Bridenbaugh, *No Peace beyond the Line*, 354-55. Cf. Richard Pares, *A West India Fortune* (London, 1950), 122-25.

¹⁹ Curtin, *Atlantic Slave Trade*, 59, 119.

²⁰ David Lowenthal, "The Population of Barbados," *Social and Economic Studies*, VI (1957), 445-501.

²¹ Appendix, p. 423, and *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 769.

²² It is possible also that diseases in the West Indies contributed to the higher death rate there. Mortality from disease may have continued to be as high there as it was in Virginia in the early part of the century.

1670s to about 15, and in the 1680s to as low as 10, with some recovery in the 1690s.²³ Tobacco reached 10 shillings the hundredweight in the 1660s and 1670s and stayed there with occasional ups and downs for half a century.²⁴

What these prices meant in profits for the planters depended in large measure on the comparative productivity of sugar and tobacco workers; and, in the absence of actual records of production, that is less easy to determine. No significant innovations in technology occurred in the growth or processing of either crop before the nineteenth century, and by 1660 both sugar and tobacco planters were thoroughly familiar with their respective crops and with ways of maximizing production. Contemporary estimates of productivity per hand on sugar plantations vary widely, but a fair medium might be 1,500 pounds a year. Because of Virginia's fickle weather the tobacco harvest probably varied more from year to year than the sugar harvest, and a man might grow a smaller but better and higher-priced crop by reducing the number of leaves left on each plant. Any estimates of productivity are therefore even more tenuous than those for sugar. It is likely, however, that by the 1660s a man would make less than 1,000 pounds of tobacco in a lean year, but more than 2,000, perhaps much more, in a good year. In the long run a man's labor for a year would probably make about the same weight of tobacco in Virginia as of sugar in the islands. But the tobacco worker could at the same time grow enough corn to sustain himself. And in the most favorable locations, especially on the York and, to a lesser degree, the Rappahannock, he could grow a variety of tobacco (known as sweet-scented) which brought a higher price and weighed more in relation to bulk (reducing freight costs) than the ordinary Orinoco.²⁵

In addition, tobacco continued to enjoy the advantage, which

²³ Harlow, *Barbados*, 170, 188, 259–60; Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 196, 205, 211; C. S. S. Higham, *The Development of the Leeward Islands under the Restoration, 1660–1688* (Cambridge, 1921), 158, 191–92, 194. These prices are crude, but more precise ones for London show a similar though not so steep decline. Noel Deerr, *The History of Sugar* (London, 1950), II, 528; Davies, *Royal African Company*, 365–66. In Virginia in the 1650s a pound of sugar was valued at from 3 to 7 pounds of tobacco. Northampton IV, 203a; V, 132a, 139a; Norfolk II, 180; IV, 114.

²⁴ Chap. 7, note 7; chap. 10, notes 10 and 29.

²⁵ On sugar production see Ward Barrett, "Caribbean Sugar-Production Standards in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in John Parker, ed., *Merchants and Scholars: Essays in the History of Exploration*

it had always had, of requiring a smaller outlay of capital for production equipment. And land, if scarcer than it had been, was still much cheaper in Virginia than in the islands. The far greater number of slaves delivered to the sugar islanders indicates that sugar remained the more attractive risk to English capital investment. Nevertheless, tobacco was so close a competitor that before the 1680s slaves were being shipped from Barbados for sale in Virginia.²⁶

In financing the extra cost of slaves, Virginians were not wholly dependent on upswings in the tobacco market. They could draw on capital accumulated during the first half century. Their earnings from tobacco (apart from any they returned to England) had been invested, as we saw earlier, in cattle and hogs and servants. When they wanted to buy slaves in Barbados, they could send cattle and hogs in exchange. Land in the West Indies was too valuable to be devoted to food products, and sugar planters were eager to buy live cattle as well as barreled beef and pork. They needed live cattle not only to turn their mills but also to dung their land as the canes exhausted it. Virginia joined with New England in supplying the need, and though no figures exist to show the volume of the trade, there is a good deal of evidence in county court records of contact between Virginia and Barbados in the seventeenth century.²⁷ But the extra capital to buy slaves came not only from livestock. In spite of the low profits of tobacco growing after 1660, there were the entrepreneurial profits of the merchant planters and the substantial amounts accumulated by the judicious use of government office.

More important perhaps than the capital generated locally was that attracted from England by the new competitive position of tobacco. Substantial men who might earlier have headed for Barbados now came to Virginia, supplied with funds to purchase or rent land and labor. And men with small amounts of capital, insufficient for the initial outlay of a sugar plantation, could make a good start in Virginia. Though the colony had ceased to be, if it ever was, a land of opportunity for the servant who came with nothing, it offered much to the man with £300 or £400 sterling. With half of it

and Trade. Collected in Memory of James Ford Bell (Minneapolis, 1965), 147-70. On tobacco see chap. 7, note 33.

²⁶ Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America* (Washington, D.C., 1930-35), IV, 89.

²⁷ See chap. 7, note 26.

put into buying a well-located plantation, he would have enough left over for eight or ten slaves, and “a handsom, gentile and sure subsistence,” as William Fitzhugh said, who had done it. Ten slaves might make 20,000 pounds of tobacco in a good year, which at the time Fitzhugh wrote would be worth from £100 to £200 sterling. The cost of feeding them would be nothing and of clothing them little. The return on the investment would be accordingly a good deal more than could be expected from any agricultural enterprise in England.²⁸

Englishmen with spare cash came to Virginia also because the prestige and power that a man with any capital could expect in Virginia was comparatively much greater than he was likely to attain in England, where men of landed wealth and gentle birth abounded. Well-to-do immigrants and their sons, who came to Virginia after midcentury, dominated the colony’s politics, probably in default of male survivors of earlier successful immigrants.²⁹ But the fortunes gathered by those early immigrants during the deadly first half century were not necessarily lost or dispersed. Capital still accumulated in the hands of widows and joined in profitable wedlock the sums that well-heeled immigrants brought with them. The Ludwells, Byrds, Carters, Spencers, Wormeleys, Corbins, and a host of others not only shared the spoils of office among themselves, but also by well-planned marriages shared the savings gathered by their predecessors. In Lancaster County, of the twelve persons who were listed for more than twenty tithables between 1653 and 1679, one was a widow and nine of the remaining eleven married widows.³⁰

These were the men who brought slavery to Virginia, simply by buying slaves instead of servants. Since a slave cost more than a

²⁸ Davis, *Fitzhugh*, 279–80.

²⁹ Bailyn, “Politics and Social Structure”; Quitt, “Virginia House of Burgesses.”

³⁰ The twelve (derived from Lancaster I, III, and IV) were Robert Beckingham (married widow of Raleigh Travers), John Carter I (married widow of William Brocas), John Carter II (did not marry a widow), Sir Henry Chichely (married widow of Ralph Wormely), Henry Corbyn (married widow of Roland Burnham), Anthony Ellyott (married widow of Justinian Aylmer), David Fox (married widow of Richard Wright), Robert Griggs (wife unknown), Lady Lunsford (widow of Sir Thomas Lunsford), Richard Parrott (married widow of Nicholas Dale), Robert Smith (married Lady Lunsford), and Thomas Wilkes (married widow of Robert Beckingham).

servant, the man with only a small sum to invest was likely to buy a servant. In 1699 the House of Burgesses noted that the servants who worked for “the poorer sort” of planters were still “for the most part Christian.”³¹ But the man who could afford to operate on a larger scale, looking to the long run, bought slaves as they became more profitable and as they became available.

How rapidly they became available and how rapidly, therefore, Virginia made the switch to slave labor is difficult to determine, partly because the Royal African Company monopoly made it necessary to conceal purchases from illicit traders. During the period of the monopoly (1663–98), slaves could presumably still be purchased legally from Barbados, but few records of trade between the two colonies have survived.³² Nevertheless, from stray bits of evidence we do know that Virginians were getting slaves from other sources than the company and what prices they were willing to pay for them. The ship *Society*, of Bristol, carried about 100 slaves to Virginia in 1687. She was an interloper and was seized by William Cole, the collector for the lower James River, who later accounted for the sale of the cargo. The prices he obtained varied according to the age, sex, and condition of the slaves. For “5 Sick Negroes not able to goe or Stand” he got £20 sterling, for a man £23, a youth £20, another £21, another £22, and so on. All told, for 90 Negroes, including 13 sick (two “almost dead”) and a number of small children who were probably under twelve (but not counting seven slaves who died on his hands), he got £1,501.13.6, an average of £16.6.0.³³ William Fitzhugh in 1683 apparently thought he could get better prices than these, for he offered to buy slaves worth up to 50,000 pounds of tobacco from a New Englander, at prices ranging from 3,000 pounds (for children aged seven to eleven) to 5,000 pounds (for men and women aged fifteen to twenty-four). Tobacco at this time was generally valued at 10 shillings per hundred pounds, so Fitzhugh’s top price was equal to £25.³⁴

There is no way of telling how many slaves were brought to Virginia by interlopers and how many came legally from Barbados. Edmund Jennings, inquiring into the subject in 1708, was told by

³¹ H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1695 . . . 1702* (Richmond, 1913), 175.

³² See chap. 7, note 26.

³⁴ Davis, *Fitzhugh*, 127.

³³ C.O. 5/1308, No. 9.

“some ancient Inhabitants conversant in that Trade . . . that before the year 1680 what negroes were brought to Virginia were imported generally from Barbados.”³⁵ It may be that many continued to come by that route. Although the Royal African Company had promised at its founding in 1672 to supply Virginia and Maryland as well as the islands, it sent only a few shiploads before the end of the century. During the 1670s somewhat more than 1,000 may have been landed, and in the 1680s perhaps another 1,000 or 1,500—if the seven or eight captains instructed to go to Virginia actually went there. In the 1690s, however, a list of fifty-four ships sent out between October 25, 1693, and February 15, 1698/9, shows only one consigned to Virginia.³⁶

The company's figures for slaves sent to Virginia do not comport with hints in the colony records of the rate of importation. Up until 1699 slaves, like other immigrants, carried a headright worth fifty acres of land, and a count of slaves mentioned in patents for land shows fewer for the 1670s (421) and 1680s (629) than the numbers presumably carried by the company alone, but the number for the 1690s, when the company probably delivered few, if any, was 1,847.³⁷ It is impossible to say whether the discrepancies mean that the company records are unreliable or that many Virginians waited until the 1690s to claim land with the headrights of slaves they had imported in the 1670s and 1680s.

The extent to which slaves were replacing servants during the last decades of the century can be estimated with more assurance from the lists of tithables for Surry, the only county where the names of all the tithables survive (rather than the mere number of tithables per household). Of Surry tithables who belonged to another man's household, slaves amounted to 20 percent in 1674, 33 percent in 1686, 48 percent in 1694, and 48 percent in 1703.³⁸ Surry, as we have seen, was one of the poorer regions of Virginia. In the rich counties on the York the proportion must have been larger. To

³⁵ Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 89.

³⁶ C.O. 1/31, f.32; C.O. 1/34, f.109; Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 55; T. 70/61, pp. 3-4, 6, 30, 57, 83, 165-70.

³⁷ Craven, *White, Red, and Black*, 86. It is possible that part of the slaves brought by the company in the 1670s and 1680s wound up in Maryland.

³⁸ Surry II, 62-64; Surry III, 67-69; Surry V, 21-23, 287-90. Since some of the tithables listed in other men's households were boarders, these percentages can be considered low.

achieve such a large slave labor force by the end of the seventeenth century Virginians must have been buying at least as many slaves from interlopers and from Barbados as they got from the Royal African Company. And with the end of the company monopoly in 1698, private traders immediately began to bring many more.

If half the labor force was already enslaved by the end of the seventeenth century, much more than half must have been in that position by 1708, for official records show that in the preceding ten years 5,928 slaves were brought by private traders and 679 by the company.³⁹ And the company's papers testify to a great demand for slaves that raised the Virginia price far enough above the West Indies price to outweigh the costs of the longer voyage. The company's letters to captains in 1701 began advising them to head for Virginia rather than Jamaica, if they could get there in May, June, or July when the demand was greatest.⁴⁰ In 1704 they noted that Virginians were paying £30 to £35 a head as against £23 to £27 in Jamaica.⁴¹

But the planters in Virginia, as in the West Indies, were more eager to buy slaves than to pay for them. During the first five years of the new century, they overextended their credit, and the company was faced with a multitude of protested bills of exchange.⁴² By 1705 the Virginia assembly was so disturbed by the rising indebtedness that it tried to slow down the traffic, dropping an import duty on servants while retaining one on slaves.⁴³ But by then the

³⁹ Donnan, *Documents*, 172–73. ⁴⁰ T. 70/58, Public Record Office.

⁴¹ To Charles Chaplin et al., Dec. 7, 1704. *Ibid.*

⁴² To Gavin Corbin (the company's agent in Virginia), April 26, May 15, 1705; Feb. 20, 1705/6; March 27, May 27, Sept. 30, Nov. 18, 1707; Feb. 24, April 9, June 4, 1709; March 23, April 18, 1710; Aug. 23, 1711. T. 70/58. With their letters the company returned the protested bills of exchange, numbering 274.

⁴³ Hening, III, 235. The import duty may also have been aimed at the old goal of reducing tobacco production (and raising prices) by reducing the growth of the labor force. And some planters who had bought large numbers of slaves may have favored it in order to increase the value of the slaves they had acquired. See Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 132; Donnan, *Documents*, IV, 145, 151–52. The history of import duties on slaves in eighteenth-century Virginia is complex. See especially Thad W. Tate, Jr., *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Charlottesville, 1965), 29–33; John M. Hemphill, "Virginia and the English Commercial System, 1689–1733" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 1964), 34–35, 65–66, 88–91; and Darold D. Wax, "Negro Import Duties in Colonial Virginia," *VMHB*, LXXIX (1971), 29–44.

conversion to slave labor had already been made. According to Edmund Jennings, writing in 1708, virtually no white servants had been imported in the preceding six years.⁴⁴ This was not the end of white servitude in Virginia, but henceforth white servants were as much the exception in the tobacco fields as slaves had been earlier. Between 1708 and 1750 Virginia recorded the entry of 38,418 slaves into the colony.⁴⁵

Virginia had developed her plantation system without slaves, and slavery introduced no novelties to methods of production. Though no seventeenth-century plantation had a work force as large as that owned by some eighteenth-century planters, the mode of operation was the same. The seventeenth-century plantation already had its separate quartering house or houses for the servants. Their labor was already supervised in groups of eight or ten by an overseer. They were already subject to "correction" by the whip. They were already often underfed and underclothed. Their masters already lived in fear of their rebelling. But no servant rebellion in Virginia ever got off the ground.

The plantation system operated by servants worked. It made many Virginians rich and England's merchants and kings richer. But it had one insuperable disadvantage. Every year it poured a host of new freemen into a society where the opportunities for advancement were limited. The freedmen were Virginia's dangerous men. They erupted in 1676 in the largest rebellion known in any American colony before the Revolution, and in 1682 they carried even the plant-cutting rebellion further than any servant rebellion had ever gone. The substitution of slaves for servants gradually eased and eventually ended the threat that the freedmen posed: as the annual number of imported servants dropped, so did the number of men turning free.

The planters who bought slaves instead of servants did not do so with any apparent consciousness of the social stability to be gained thereby. Indeed, insofar as Virginians expressed themselves on the subject of slavery, they feared that it would magnify the danger of insurrection in the colony. They often blamed and pitied themselves for taking into their families men and women who had every reason to hate them. William Byrd told the Earl of Egmont

⁴⁴ C.O. 5/1316, f.53.

⁴⁵ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, 769; Donnan, *Documents* IV, 175-220.

in July, 1736, that “in case there should arise a Man of desperate courage amongst us, exasperated by a desperate fortune, he might with more advantage than Cataline kindle a Servile War,” and make Virginia’s broad rivers run with blood.⁴⁶ But the danger never materialized. From time to time the planters were alarmed by the discovery of a conspiracy among the slaves; but, as had happened earlier when servants plotted rebellion, some conspirator always leaked the plan in time to spoil it. No white person was killed in a slave rebellion in colonial Virginia.⁴⁷ Slaves proved, in fact, less dangerous than free or semi-free laborers. They had none of the rising expectations that have so often prompted rebellion in human history. They were not armed and did not have to be armed. They were without hope and did not have to be given hope. William Byrd himself probably did not take the danger from them seriously. Only seven months before his letter to Egmont, he assured Peter Beckford of Jamaica that “our negroes are not so numerous or so enterprising as to give us any apprehension or uneasiness.”⁴⁸

With slavery Virginians could exceed all their previous efforts to maximize productivity. In the first half of the century, as they sought to bring stability to their volatile society, they had identified work as wealth, time as money, but there were limits to the amount of both work and time that could be extracted from a servant. There was no limit to the work or time that a master could command from his slaves, beyond his need to allow them enough for eating and sleeping to enable them to keep working. Even on that he might skimp. Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, accounted a humane man, made it a policy to give his slaves less food than they needed and required them to fill out their diet by keeping chickens and by working Sundays in small gardens attached to their cabins. Their cabins, too, he made them build and repair on Sundays.⁴⁹ Carter’s

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 131–32.

⁴⁷ Tate, *Negro in Williamsburg*, 200–208. For examples of conspiracies see *WMQ*, 1st ser., X (1901–2), 178; *Executive Journals*, I, 86–87, 510–11; III, 234–36. Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (New York, 1972), analyzes the forms of resistance offered by slaves and concludes that it was the most “acculturated” slaves who proved most rebellious. One might say, in other words, that the more slaves came to resemble the indigent freemen whom they displaced, the more dangerous they became.

⁴⁸ *VMHB*, XXXVI (1928), 122.

⁴⁹ Hunter D. Farish, ed., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian* (Williamsburg, 1957; Charlottesville, 1968), 38, 96, 202–3.

uncle, Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, made his slaves buy part of their own clothes out of the proceeds of what they grew in their gardens.⁵⁰

Demographically, too, the conversion to slavery enhanced Virginia's capacity for maximum productivity. Earlier the heavy concentration in the population of men of working age had been achieved by the small number of women and children among the immigrants and by the heavy mortality. But with women outliving men, the segment of women and their children grew; and as mortality declined the segment of men beyond working age grew. There was, in other words, an increase in the non-productive proportion of the population. Slavery made possible the restoration and maintenance of a highly productive population. Masters had no hesitation about putting slave women to work in the tobacco fields, although servant women were not normally so employed. And they probably made slave children start work earlier than free children did.⁵¹ There was no need to keep them from work for purposes of education. Nor was it necessary to divert productive energy to the support of ministers for spiritual guidance to them and their parents. The slave population could thus be more productive than a free population with the same age and sex structure would have been. It could also be more reproductive than a free population that grew mainly from the importation of servants, because slave traders generally carried about two women for every three men,⁵² a larger proportion of women by far than had been the case with servants. Slave women while employed in tobacco could still raise children and thus contribute to the growth of the productive proportion of the population. Moreover, the children became the property of the master. Thus slaves offered the planter a way of disposing his profits that combined the advantages of cattle and of servants, and these had always been the most attractive investments in Virginia.

The only obvious disadvantage that slavery presented to Virginia masters was a simple one: slaves had no incentive to work. The difference, however, between the incentive of a slave and that of a servant bound for a term of years was not great. The servant had

⁵⁰ Landon Carter, *Diary*, Jack P. Greene, ed., (Charlottesville, 1965), I, 484.

⁵¹ From 1680 to 1705 imported Negro children were tithable at the age of twelve and imported "Christian servants" at the age of fourteen. In 1705 the age was changed to sixteen for both. Hening, II, 479-80; III, 258-59.

⁵² Davies, *Royal African Company*, 299.

already received his reward in the form of the ocean passage which he, unlike the slave, had been so eager to make that he was willing to bind his labor for a term of years for it. Having received his payment in advance, he could not be compelled by threats of withholding it. Virginia masters had accordingly been obliged to make freer use of the lash than had been common in England. Before they obtained slaves, they had already had practice in extracting work from the unwilling. Yet there was a difference. If a servant failed to perform consistently or ran away, if he damaged his master's property either by omission or commission, the master could get the courts to extend the term of his servitude. That recourse was not open to the slaveowner. If the servant had received his reward in advance, the slave had received the ultimate punishment in advance: his term had already been extended.

Masters therefore needed some substitute for the extended term, some sanction to protect themselves against the stubbornness of those whom conventional "correction" did not reach. Their first attempt in this direction was an act, passed in 1661, that is sometimes cited as the first official recognition of slavery in Virginia. In it the assembly tried to handle the most common form of servile intractability, by making a servant who ran away with a slave responsible for the loss incurred to the master by the absence of the slave. The law read, "That in case any English servant shall run away in company with any negroes who are incapable of making satisfaction by addition of time, *Bee it enacted* that the English so running away in company with them shall serve for the time of the said negroes absence as they are to do for their owne by a former act [the act requiring extra service for double the length of the absence]." ⁵³

Though this measure tells us something about the relationship between servants and slaves in these early years, it was a deterrent more to servants than to slaves. And it did nothing for the master who could not get what he considered an adequate amount of work out of his slave by the methods that had sufficed for servants. One way might have been to offer rewards, to hold out the carrot rather than the stick. A few masters tried this in the early years, as we have seen, offering slaves freedom in return for working hard for a few years, or assigning them plots of land and allowing them time to grow tobacco or corn crops for themselves.⁵⁴ But to offer rewards of this kind was to lose the whole advantage of slavery. In the end,

⁵³ Hening, II, 26.

⁵⁴ See above, chap. 7, pp. 154-57.

Virginians had to face the fact that masters of slaves must inflict pain at a higher level than masters of servants. Slaves could not be made to work for fear of losing liberty, so they had to be made to fear for their lives. Not that any master wanted to lose his slave by killing him, but in order to get an equal or greater amount of work, it was necessary to beat slaves harder than servants, so hard, in fact, that there was a much larger chance of killing them than had been the case with servants. Unless a master could correct his slaves in this way without running afoul of the law if he misjudged the weight of his blows, slaveowning would be legally hazardous. So in 1669 the assembly faced the facts and passed an act that dealt with them forthrightly:

An act about the casuall killing of slaves.

Whereas the only law in force for the punishment of refractory servants resisting their master, mistress or overseer cannot be inflicted upon negroes [because the punishment was extension of time], nor the obstinacy of many of them by other than violent means suppressed, *Be it enacted and declared by this grand assembly*, if any slave resist his master (or other by his masters order correcting him) and by the extremity of the correction should chance to die, that his death shall not be accounted Felony, but the master (or that other person appointed by the master to punish him) be acquitted from molestation, since it cannot be presumed that pre-pensed malice (which alone makes murder Felony) should induce any man to destroy his own estate.⁵⁵

With this act already on the books in 1669, Virginia was prepared to make the most of slavery when slaves began to arrive in quantity. Later legislation only extended the principles here recognized, that correction of slaves might legally be carried to the point of killing them. The most important extensions had to do with runaways. As the numbers of slaves increased and the plantation quarters were placed farther from the house of the master, runaway slaves would frequently hide out in the woods, visiting the quarters by night, where their friends or families would shelter and share food with them. To eliminate this problem, the assembly provided that the names of such outlying slaves should be proclaimed at the door of every church in the county, after divine worship, and then if the runaways did not turn themselves in, it would “be lawful for any person or persons whatsoever, to kill and destroy such slaves by such

⁵⁵ Hening, II, 270.

ways and means as he, she, or they shall think fit, without accusation or impeachment of any crime for the same.”⁵⁶ The public would compensate the master for the loss of slaves thus killed. If one was captured alive, the owner might apply to the county court “to order such punishment to the said slave, either by dismembering, or any other way, not touching his life, as they in their discretion shall think fit, for the reclaiming any such incorrigible slave, and terrifying others from the like practices.”⁵⁷

This was no idle threat. Though the words of the law—“reclaiming,” “dismembering,” “discretion”—seem to soften the shock, the law authorizes not merely an open season on outlying slaves, but also the deliberate maiming of captured slaves, by judicial order. One gets a glimpse of the law in action in the records of the Lancaster County court for March 10, 1707/8:

Robert Carter Esq. Complaining to this Court against two Incorrigible negroes of his named Bambarra Harry and Dinah and praying the order of this Court for punishing the said Negroes by dismembering them It is therefore ordered That for the better reclaiming the said negroes and deterring others from ill practices That the said Robert Carter Esq. have full power according to Law to dismember the said negroes or Either of them by cutting of[f] their toes.”⁵⁸

Such was the price of slavery, and Virginia masters were prepared to pay it. In order to get work out of men and women who had nothing to gain but absence of pain, you had to be willing to beat, maim, and kill. And society had to be ready to back you even to the point of footing the bill for the property you killed.

It has been possible thus far to describe Virginia’s conversion to slavery without mentioning race. It has required a little restraint to do so, but only a little, because the actions that produced slavery in

⁵⁶ Hening, III, 460 (1705). This superseded a law passed in 1680 empowering “persons that shall by lawful authority be employed to apprehend” an outlying Negro to kill him if he resisted. Hening, II, 482.

⁵⁷ Hening, III, 460–61. In 1723 the law was expanded to allow the dismemberment of any slave “notoriously guilty of going abroad in the night, or running away and lying out, and cannot be reclaimed from such disorderly courses.” At the same time it was specified that no one was to be prosecuted for the death of a slave occurring as a result of dismemberment or correction. Hening, IV, 132–33.

⁵⁸ Lancaster VIII, 185. This Robert Carter was the grandfather of Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, mentioned above.

Virginia, the individual purchase of slaves instead of servants, and the public protection of masters in their coercion of unwilling labor, had no necessary connection with race. Virginians did not enslave the persons brought there by the Royal African Company or by the private traders. The only decision that Virginians had to make was to keep them as slaves. Keeping them as slaves did require some decisions about what masters could legally do to make them work. But such decisions did not necessarily relate to race.

Or did they? As one reads the record of the Lancaster court authorizing Robert Carter to chop off the toes of his slaves, one begins to wonder. Would the court, could the court, could the general assembly have authorized such a punishment for an incorrigible English servant? It seems unlikely that the English government would have allowed it. But Virginians could be confident that England would condone their slave laws, even though those laws were contrary to the laws of England.

The English government had considered the problem in 1679, when presented with the laws of Barbados, in which masters were similarly authorized to inflict punishment that would not have been allowed by English law. A legal adviser, upon reviewing the laws for the Lords of Trade, found that he could approve them, because, he said “although Negroes in that Island are punishable in a different and more severe manner than other Subjects are for Offences of the like nature; yet I humbly conceive that the Laws there concerning Negroes are reasonable Laws, for by reason of their numbers they become dangerous, and being a brutish sort of People and reckoned as goods and chattels in that Island, it is of necessity or at least convenient to have Laws for the Government of them different from the Laws of England, to prevent the great mischief that otherwise may happen to the Planters and Inhabitants in that Island.”⁵⁹

It was not necessary to extend the rights of Englishmen to Africans, because Africans were “a brutish sort of people.” And because they were “brutish” it was necessary “or at least convenient” to kill or maim them in order to make them work.

The killing and maiming of slaves was not common in Virginia. Incidents like Robert Carter’s application to dismember his two slaves are rare in the records. But it is hard to read in diaries and letters of the everyday beating of slaves without feeling that the casual, matter-of-fact acceptance of it is related to a feeling on the

⁵⁹ C.O. 1/45, f.138.

part of masters that they were dealing with “a brutish sort of people.” Thomas Jones, of Williamsburg, was almost affectionate about it in writing his wife, away on a visit, about her household slaves. Daphne and Nancy were doing well, “But Juliet is the same still, tho I do assure you she has not wanted correction very often. I chear’d her with thirty lashes a Saturday last and as many more a Tuesday again and today I hear she’s sick.”⁶⁰

Possibly a master could have written thus about a white maid-servant. Certainly there are many instances of servants being severely beaten, even to death. But whether or not race was a necessary ingredient of slavery, it *was* an ingredient. If slavery might have come to Virginia without racism, it did not. The only slaves in Virginia belonged to alien races from the English. And the new social order that Virginians created after they changed to slave labor was determined as much by race as by slavery.

⁶⁰ Oct. 22, 1736. *VMHB*, XXVI (1918), 285.



TOWARD RACISM

VIRGINIA slaves were introduced into a system of production that was already in working order. The substitution of slaves for servants probably increased the productivity and almost certainly increased the profitability of the plantation system. But slavery required new methods of disciplining the labor force, methods that were linked to racial contempt. If we are to understand that contempt and the role it played in the history of Virginia—and I think in American history—we must probe not only the differences but also the resemblances between servants and slaves in the plantation system and in the consciousness of those who ran it.

Ideally, from the point of view of the master, slavery should have made it possible to turn the slave's every waking hour to the master's profit. In an industrial society, where it is possible to engage in productive tasks at any time, it is tempting to think of masters thus directing their slaves. But absolute power did not in itself make for continuous employment in a pre-industrial society. We have already seen that sixteenth-century Englishmen were often idle, if only because there were times when nothing could be done. The tobacco plantation probably made fuller use of its workers' time than previous English agricultural enterprises had. But even on a plantation it was simply not possible to employ either servants or slaves usefully every day of the year.

Rain halted work on a Virginia plantation just as it did on any English farm. And for days after a rain the ground might be too heavy to hoe without damage to the soil or the crop. Freezing weather similarly closed down most activities. Sometimes weather that precluded field work might permit cutting wood, building fences, or scouring ditches. But often the workers were left without



work. Landon Carter, who kept the most complete record we have of the day-to-day operations of a Virginia plantation, and who strove always to show a profit, repeatedly bemoaned the idleness imposed by the weather. "No working yesterday nor today," he writes, or "Not one day as yet from the 23 January to this day that the earth could be touched with hoe, spade or plow, that is 11 days together:" or "The Skye very heavy and the air very Cold . . . We can do no kind of work to any advantage."¹

Landon Carter was probably not a typical Virginia planter. The very fact that he kept so voluminous a record of his activities suggests that he was not. And other planters, one at least hopes, were not as egotistical. Carter's diaries are a continuous demonstration that whatever happened he was right and everyone around him wrong. He may have been atypical also in the great variety of crops that he tried to grow in addition to corn and tobacco. But all Virginia planters went in for some diversity. Nearly all planted corn, kept cattle and hogs and sometimes sheep. Carter's idiosyncrasies were mainly of a sort that would have magnified the amount of work he expected from his slaves. He used his systematic record keeping, as Robert Loder had done in the preceding century in England, to step up the productivity of his laborers. He had each slave tend twice as many plants as other masters required.² And he stuck as far as possible to the hoe when other Virginians were turning to the plow, because, he said, "Carts and plows only serve to make Overseers and people extremely lazy and it is a certain truth that wherever they are in great abundance there is the least plantation work done there for both Overseers and Negroes imagine this or that work will be quickly done with the plows and Carts and of course are very little solicitous to do their proper parts of the business."³ If Carter was atypical, it was not in demanding less of his slaves. If he had to let them loaf for days at a time, probably other planters did too.

Neither the slave's life nor the servant's was one endless round

¹ *Diary*, I, 158, 200, 253. Cf. Hartwell, Blair, and Chilton, *Present State of Virginia*, 9; Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 76, says ". . . in wet or cold weather there is little occasion for their working in the fields, in which few will let them be abroad, lest by this means they get sick or die, which would prove a great loss to their owners, . . ." John Hammond had written in 1656 that in Virginia servants did no work "all winter except dressing their own victuals and making of fires." *Leah and Rachel*, Force, *Tracts*, III, No. 14, p. 12.

² Carter, *Diary*, I, 448.

³ *Ibid.*, 386.

of toil, because it could not be. And when he was not working, the slave enjoyed one advantage over the servant: since the planters bought slave women as well as men, he could have some sort of family life. True, it could be broken any time at the whim of his master. But the slave, like the servant, in spite of his legal impotence was not entirely without the means of magnifying a part of his life that he could call his own. Like the servant he could find ways of avoiding work even on days when the weather was fair. In fact, his attitude toward work and his success in evading it were so much like that of the servant that Landon Carter's complaints about his lazy, unfaithful slaves sound for all the world like Robert Loder's tirades against his lazy, unfaithful servants.⁴

A favorite ruse was to feign sickness, even though this was a peculiarly hazardous one on Carter's plantation. Carter fancied himself a physician and seems to have been obsessed with an urge to cleanse the digestive tract of every person who came near him, by purges, emetics, and enemas administered in heroic proportions. At the slightest complaint he would lay down a barrage of these supposed remedies that left the victim half dead for several days, after which Carter would congratulate himself on his victory over the forces of bile. In spite of these ministrations—or possibly as a long-term result of them—Carter's slaves were continually visited by sickness, but never, he noted, on Sundays, when Virginia custom freed them from field work anyhow.⁵

Carter frequently found it necessary to entrust tasks to slaves without the supervision of an overseer or foreman. Then he would record how poorly the job had been done or how inordinately long it took. Old men slept and boys played, when the master's eye was not upon them. "Where the General is absent," he observed, "Idleness is Preferred to all business." Everywhere he went he saw evidence of "the same damned idleness."⁶ Like Robert Loder he kept track of how much his people got done in a day, how many rows of corn they hilled, how many tobacco plants they topped or wormed. That way he could catch the shirkers and have them whipped. After recording how he had stepped up the output of his threshers, he noted, in words that echoed Loder, "This I minute down to shew that things are often judged impossible when obstinacy alone is the Cause of it."⁷

⁴ For examples, I, 147, 159, 177, 295, 300, 302, 303, 347, 355.

⁵ P. 174.

⁶ Pp. 235, 417, 568.

⁷ P. 138.

But there was a limit to the speedup he could achieve even under close supervision. He observed that “negroes tyre with the Continuance of the same work,” and he resolved to vary their tasks by putting larger numbers to work on lengthy jobs so that they might be done faster and get on to something fresh.⁸ In a hot spell in July he admitted, “I can’t make my people work or do anything.”⁹ In 1757, when he began to reap his first corn crop, he had “but very few reapers, so many Complaining of last year’s reaping.”¹⁰

Such observations suggest that work could not always be got from men simply by use of the lash. Sometimes “correction” was actually counterproductive. When Carter’s gardener disobeyed his instructions repeatedly and he struck the man across the shoulders with a cane (“which did not raise the least swelling”), the man refused to get up the next morning and would do nothing. Two weeks later when Carter gave him “one small rap” across the shoulder, he feigned total paralysis of his arm and could scarcely stand up. This time Carter discovered that the reason he could not stand was that he was drunk.¹¹ Indeed, drunkenness was a not uncommon problem on Carter’s plantation. Since slaves were not furnished with liquor except at Christmas, this fact in itself suggests that they enjoyed a greater degree of independence than the laws allowed or their master would have liked.

What all these instances add up to is that the daily life of a slave differed from that of a servant less drastically than at first sight it appears to have. Slaves were the labor force of a plantation much as servants had been, and what is more important for an understanding of the role of race, masters, initially at least, perceived slaves in much the same way they had always perceived servants. Both displayed the same attitudes and habits: they were shiftless, irresponsible, unfaithful, ungrateful, dishonest; they got drunk whenever possible; they did not work hard enough or regularly enough.

These were the complaints that masters in every age have made against servants. And they were precisely the complaints that English economists and statesmen were making against the English poor during the years when slavery was becoming the prevailing form of labor in Virginia. As we have earlier observed, English attitudes toward the supposedly surplus population of the island changed markedly during the course of the seventeenth century. By the third quarter it was becoming a commonplace that the riches of

⁸ P. 147.

⁹ P. 274.

¹⁰ P. 161.

¹¹ Pp. 369, 378.



a country lay in the multitude of its people, because labor was the source of wealth. England, with a seeming abundance of people, especially in and around London, should have been rich. But Englishmen could not help seeing how much richer the Dutch had become with fewer people. What was the reason for England's failure to profit by her masses? The answer, offered in a chorus, was the "exacting humour and evil disposition," the perversity, the stubborn, immoral idleness of England's poor.¹²

Virginia's conversion to slave labor and the use of slaves in other American colonies must be viewed in the context of contemporary English attitudes toward the poor and schemes for putting them to work. According to the men who wrestled with the problem of England's poor, half the English population consisted of wage earners, and all of them would rather drink than eat and rather starve than work. Worse than the wage earners were those who had never learned any trade but begging and stealing. In 1717 Lawrence Braddon estimated that there were a million and a half of them, no more than a fifth of whom were incapable of labor.¹³ With so many needlessly idle hands England must be the laughingstock of Europe because of "the multitudes of People which in England Cheat, Roar, Rob, Hang, Beg, Cant, Pine, and Perish; which otherwise might help to encrease and maintain the Wealth and strength of these Kingdomes."¹⁴

Almost everything Englishmen said about their employed and unemployed poor we have already seen in the Virginians' similar complaints about their servants, slaves, and indigent freedmen. The English poor were "vicious, idle, dissolute." They were addicted to "Laziness, Drunkenness, Debauches, and almost every Kind of Vice," to "mutinous and indecent Discourses." They were "Miserable, Diseased, Ignorant, Idle, Seditious and (otherwise) vicious."¹⁵

¹² Thomas Manley, *Usury at Six per Cent Examined* (London, 1669), 19. For similar expressions see below and also references in chap. 9, note 28. The best secondary studies are Dorothy Marshall, *The English Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1926), and Furniss, *Position of the Laborer*.

¹³ *An Abstract of the Draught of a Bill for Relieving, Reforming, and Employing the Poor* [London, 1717], ix.

¹⁴ Coke, *Discourse of Trade*, 16.

¹⁵ Furniss, *Position of the Laborer*, 128–30; *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Encrease and Miseries of the Poor of England* (London, 1738), 9; R. D., *Bread for the Poor* (Exeter, 1698), 4; *The Regular Government and Judicious Employment of the Poor* (London, 1721), introduction.

Virginia had originally been thought of as a receptacle for these wretches; but as the idea came to prevail that people are or ought to be a source of wealth, the problem in England, as in Virginia, was to hold them down and extract the maximum labor from them.

For Englishmen, as for Virginians, some kind of involuntary servitude seemed a possible solution to the problem. England had taken a step in this direction under Elizabeth when Parliament in 1576 provided for the building of "houses of correction" in which beggars could be put to work.¹⁶ The motives at that time had been to place the beggars where they could not steal and also to lower the danger of insurrection. During the seventeenth century Europeans took a similar course but on a larger scale. In a movement that Michel Foucault has called "the great confinement," they everywhere founded institutions in which the sick, the criminal, and the poor were indiscriminately taken in charge. The purpose was not merely to get them out of the way but to make them contribute what they could to the national wealth. Imprisonment, instead of being a temporary matter, preliminary to trial, became the mode of extracting work from the criminal, the insane, and the poor alike. Indeed, crime and insanity seemed only extreme forms of the vice and ignorance that distinguished the poor from their betters. Work was the proper cure for all, and it could best be administered by incarceration.¹⁷

After 1660 the English too were caught up in these larger aspects of getting work from the poor and revived their interest in houses of correction. Workhouses (as they were now called) were still desirable for the old reasons, but the emphasis now was on making the poor add to the nation's wealth by producing manufactures for export. If private employers could not keep the population at work, the government should do it. Proposals sprang up on all sides for government-sponsored workhouses, where the poor could be

¹⁶ Elizabeth I, c. 3, Tawney and Power, *Tudor Economic Documents*, II, 331-34.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York, 1965), 38-65; George Rosen, *Madness in Society* (New York, 1969, Torchbook ed.), 151-71; Nigel Walker, *Crime and Insanity in England*, vol. I, *The Historical Perspective* (Edinburgh, 1968), 43-44; George Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure* (New York, 1939), 63-71; E. J. Hundert, "History, Psychology, and the Study of Deviant Behavior," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, II (1972), 453-72. I am indebted to Professor Hundert for valuable suggestions.

supplied at public expense with flax, hemp, and wool for spinning and where they could be kept forcibly at the job.¹⁸

The proponents of workhouses generally saw them as educational institutions in which the poor, and especially the children of the poor, would learn habits of work. And like all advocates of education they expected great things. Sir Mathew Hale thought that workhouses would bring the poor “and their children after them into a Regular, Orderly and Industrious course of life, which will be as natural to them as now Idleness, and Begging, and Theeving is.”¹⁹ But the kind of education envisaged seems to have had little to do with the work ethic that we associate with the rise of modern capitalism and little to do with learning anything except work. The idea was to “inure” children to work, get them so used to it at an early age that when they grew older they would be unable to think of anything else. Sir William Temple would have set them to work at four years, John Locke at three.²⁰ Thomas Firmin, who established a scheme for employing the poor in their own homes as well as in workhouses, had a more liberal proposal than most. He was in favor of teaching poor children to read but no more than that. They should be set to work at seven years, for there was no point, after they reached that age, in having them “poring upon a Book.”²¹

The English economists tended to agree with Governor Berkeley of Virginia that learning was a dangerous thing. It bred not only sedition but laziness if acquired by the children of the poor, “for few that have once learnt to Write and Read, but either their Parents, or themselves, are apt to think, that they are fit for some Preferment,

¹⁸ Furniss, *Position of the Laborer*, 84–95; Marshall, *English Poor*, 127–32; Sir Matthew Hale, *A Discourse Touching Provision for the Poor* (London, 1683), 25–30; Henry Pollexfen, *A Discourse of Trade and Coyn* (London, 1697), 49; Charles Davenant, *An Essay on the East India Trade* (London, 1696), 27; Josiah Child, *A New Discourse of Trade* (London, 1693), 55–79.

¹⁹ Hale, *Discourse*, 32–33.

²⁰ Furniss, *Position of the Laborer*, 114–15; C. R. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962), 221–24; H. R. Fox Bourne, *The Life of John Locke* (London, 1876), II, 377–90; cf. E. J. Hundert, “The Making of Homo Faber: John Locke between Ideology and History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXXIII (1972), 3–22.

²¹ Thomas Firmin, *Some Proposals for Implying of the Poor* (London, 1672), 5–10. Pollexfen also proposed seven as the age for starting work. *Discourse of Trade and Coyn*, 54.

and in order to it, despise all Labouring Employments and live Idle, rather than disparage themselves by Work.”²² By the next century Bernard Mandeville maintained that regular schooling was only another form of idleness for the poor.²³

Whether from regular schooling or from lack of it, the children of the poor continued to distress their keepers. The failure of the efforts to inure them to work is evident in the repetition throughout the next century of the same contemptuous complaints about the fecklessness of laborers and the need to overcome “their obstinate Wills, and their encroaching sluggish intemperate Bents.”²⁴ It occurred to a few people that it might be possible to entice the poor into greater zeal for work by making them less poor, by paying them higher wages or by lowering the price of food. But most of the self-appointed economists were convinced that laborers would work only when hungry. Higher wages or cheaper food would only mean more time lost in drunkenness.²⁵ “Every one but an idiot knows,”

²² Pollexfen, *Discourse of Trade and Coyn*, 48; see also John Bellers, *Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry*, 16; *Enquiry into the Causes of the Encrease and Miseries of the Poor*, 61; Furniss, *Position of the Laborer*, 148–50.

²³ Marshall, *English Poor*, 24. The kind of education favored by the labor reformers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is most vividly described by one of them, Andrew Yarranton, who had visited Saxony and there discovered the ideal form of school for the poor. He described it for the emulation of Englishmen: “First, There is a large Room, and in the middle thereof a little Box like a Pulpit. Secondly, There are Benches built round about the Room as they are in our Playhouses; upon the Benches sit about two hundred Children spinning, and in the Box in the middle of the Room sits the Grand Mistress with a long white Wand in her hand. If she observes any of them idle, she reaches them a tap; but if that will not do, she rings a Bell which by a little Cord is fixt to the Box, and out comes a Woman; she then points to the Offender, and she is taken away into another Room and chastised. And all this is done without one word speaking. And I believe this way of ordering the young Women in Germany is one great cause that the German Women have so little of the twit twat. And it is clear, that the less there is of speaking, the more there may be of working.” Yarranton, *England’s Improvement by Sea and Land*, 45–46.

²⁴ *The Manufacturer’s Plea for the Bounty on Corn at Exportation* (London, 1754), 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, passim; Coke, *Discourse of Trade*, 14–15; Manley, *Usury at Six per Cent*, 23–26; Joshua Gee, *The Trade and Navigation of Great Britain Considered* (London, 1729), 38; Furniss, *Position of the Laborer*, 117–56; N. G. Pauling, “The Employment Problem in Pre-Classical English

said Arthur Young, "that the lower classes must be kept poor, or they will never be industrious."²⁶

The object, then, was not the elimination of poverty but the discipline of the poor. In spite of the contempt in which they were held, there was no suggestion that their numbers should be reduced. Just as the Virginia planter who deplored the laziness of his slaves continued to buy more and encouraged the multiplication of those he had, so the English authors advocated acts to facilitate the naturalization of immigrants, especially poor immigrants, as well as acts to promote early marriage among the poor.²⁷

In practice the discipline of the poor in England stopped short of actual enslavement. Parliament did not even discuss a motion by one of its members in 1670 "that as an expedient to make servants more tractable we might bring into this kingdom the use of Negro slaves."²⁸ And neither the workhouse nor its successor, the factory, enslaved its occupants, at least in any legal sense. But they can be seen as a step in that direction, and there were plenty of voices outside Parliament crying for the next step. Bishop Berkeley, who carried John Locke's epistemology a step further, also made an advance in his social philosophy by proposing that "sturdy beggars . . . be seized and made slaves to the public for a term of years."²⁹ James Burgh, another champion of reform, wanted a set of press gangs "to seize all idle and disorderly persons, who have been three times complained of before a magistrate, and to set them to work during a certain time, for the benefit of great trading, or manufacturing companies."³⁰ Francis Hutcheson, the moral philosopher, thought that perpetual slavery should be "the ordinary punishment of such idle vagrants as, after proper admonitions and tryals of temporary servi-

Economic Thought," *The Economic Record*, XXVII (1951), 52-65; E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism"; Keith Thomas, "Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society," *Past and Present*, No. 29 (1964), 50-66; Sidney Pollard, "Factory Discipline in the Industrial Revolution," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., XVI (1963), 254-71.

²⁶ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963, Vintage Books), 358.

²⁷ Bellers, *Proposals*, 2; Pollexfen, *Discourse of Trade and Coyn*, 53; Braddon, *Abstract*, xiv-xv; Coke, *Discourse of Trade*, passim; Rusche and Kirchheimer, *Punishment and Social Structure*, 28.

²⁸ Basil D. Henning, ed., *The Parliamentary Diary of Sir Edward Dering, 1670-1673* (New Haven, 1940), 33.

²⁹ Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 270.

³⁰ *Political Disquisitions* (London, 1774-75), III, 220-21.

tude, cannot be engaged to support themselves and their families by any useful labours.”³¹

The most comprehensive proposal came from Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, a Scottish prophet of the Enlightenment. Fletcher attacked the Christian church not only for having promoted the abolition of slavery in ancient times but also for having perpetuated the idleness of the freedmen thus turned loose on society. The Church by setting up hospitals and almshouses had enabled men through the succeeding centuries to live without work. As a result, Fletcher argued, his native Scotland was burdened with 200,000 idle rogues, who roamed the country, drinking, cursing, fighting, robbing, and murdering. For a remedy he proposed that they all be made slaves to men of property. To the argument that their masters might abuse them, he answered in words which might have come a century and a half later from a George Fitzhugh: “that the most brutal man will not use his beast ill only out of a humour; and that if such Inconveniences do sometimes fall out, it proceeds, for the most part, from the perverseness of the Servant.”³²

None of these proposals for enslavement came to fruition; but they suggest that the English poor of this time seemed to many of their betters to be fit for slavery. The contempt that lay behind these proposals and behind many of the workhouse schemes is not easy to distinguish from the kind of contempt that today we call racism. The stereotypes of the poor expressed so often in England during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were often identical with the descriptions of blacks expressed in colonies dependent on slave labor, even to the extent of intimating the subhumanity of both: the poor were “the vile and brutish part of mankind”; the black were “a brutish sort of people.”³³ In the eyes of unpoor Englishmen the poor

³¹ Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1755), II, 202; David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1966), 374–78. I am indebted to Professor Davis for several valuable suggestions.

³² Andrew Fletcher, *Two Discourses concerning the Affairs of Scotland: Written in the Year 1698* (Edinburgh, 1698), second discourse (paged separately), 1–33, esp. 16.

³³ Sir William Petty, *The Economic Writings of Sir William Petty*, C. H. Hall, ed. (Cambridge, 1899), I, 275. Pierre van den Berghe, in *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1967), 31–33, has outlined two types of race relations, paternalistic and competitive, differing in the stereotypes attributed under each to the “inferior” race or caste. The stereotypes of the English poor and of eighteenth-century blacks do not fit

bore many of the marks of an alien race.

To be sure, poverty was not genetically hereditary, but workhouses and their schools were designed to make it culturally hereditary. The poor were not born of another color than the rest of the population, but legislation could offer a substitute for color; and to this kind of legislation Parliament was not averse. Since the rags worn by the poor might not sufficiently designate their differentness, an act of 1697 required them (as recipients of poor relief) to wear a prominent red or blue "P" on the right-hand shoulder.³⁴ And since they were not only troublesome, but also "nauseous to the Beholders,"³⁵ they could be segregated, along with other vicious, insane, diseased, or impotent persons within the walls of the workhouses, hospitals, prisons, and asylums constructed to enclose them—the ghettos of the poor—or else they could be shipped to the plantations and contribute their share to the national income there.

The English poor seem to have borne it all without violent protest. During the period when they were the object of so many plans and projects, they offered no resistance beyond the laziness, drunkenness, licentiousness, and insubordination expected of them. Nature was at its old business of imitating art, and it was only natural that they should conform to the image imposed on them. For the subject race to accept the role assigned it is a common enough phenomenon.

The members of this inferior breed of Englishmen who were shipped to Virginia could scarcely have been surprised to find that the men in charge of their lives in the New World viewed them with the contempt to which they were accustomed. In 1668 the Virginia burgesses had even called for the erection in every county of

perfectly into either but more nearly into the competitive type, in which the lower caste is seen as "Aggressive, uppity, insolent, oversexed, dirty, inferior, despicable, and dangerous." All these attributes except "oversexed" were applied to the poor and to blacks. The characteristics attributed under the paternalistic type of race relations, according to van den Berghe, are "Childish, immature, exuberant, uninhibited, lazy, impulsive, fun-loving, good humored, inferior but lovable." Of these only laziness and inferiority were ascribed either to the English poor or to Virginia blacks in the eighteenth century.

³⁴ Marshall, *English Poor*, 102–3. Such a measure had been recommended by Thomas Firmin in 1672. *Some Proposals for Employing of the Poor*, 14–15.

³⁵ John Cary, *A Discourse on Trade* (London, 1745), 121; cf. Joshua Gee, *Trade and Navigation of Great Britain*, 42–43.

workhouses on the English model. And they had empowered the county courts "to take poore children from indigent parents to place them to worke in those houses," a move that may have been motivated less by the spread of poverty than by the perennial shortage of labor.³⁶ For indigent, debt-ridden parents, when freed of responsibility for their children, were also free to be pressed back into the servant ranks. Thus Virginians shared not only English contempt for the poor but also English ideas of what to do about them.

Although a degree of racial prejudice was doubtless also present in Virginia from the beginning, there is no evidence that English servants or freedmen resented the substitution of African slaves for more of their own kind. When their masters began to place people of another color in the fields beside them, the unfamiliar appearance of the newcomers may well have struck them as only skin deep. There are hints that the two despised groups initially saw each other as sharing the same predicament. It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together. It was not uncommon for them to make love together. In Bacon's Rebellion one of the last groups to surrender was a mixed band of eighty Negroes and twenty English servants.³⁷

The first slaves who reached Virginia came mainly from Barbados, where they could have learned some English, so that communication between servants and slaves was less of a problem than it would have been later when slaves came directly from Africa. And their shared experiences in field and quartering house must soon have adjusted their initial strangeness to each other. Today the racism of many poor and lower-class American whites is so notorious that we tend to think of it as natural. But in Brazil, as Carl Degler has shown, class and color divisions tend to be confounded. While social prestige attaches to whiteness, it also attaches to wealth: well-to-do blacks may rank above whites, and many poor blacks are themselves uncertain whether prejudice against them is the result of their color or their poverty.³⁸

In Virginia too, before 1660, it might have been difficult to distinguish race prejudice from class prejudice. And as long as slaves formed only an insignificant minority of the labor force, the com-

³⁶ Hening, II, 266-67. ³⁷ Coventry Papers, LXXVII, 301.

³⁸ Carl Degler, *Neither Black nor White: Slavery and Race Relations in Brazil and the United States* (New York, 1971).



munity of interest between blacks and lower-class whites posed no social problem. But Virginians had always felt threatened by the danger of a servile insurrection, and their fears increased as the labor force grew larger and the proportion of blacks in it rose. Although the replacement of servants by slaves reduced the annual increment of poor freemen, the numbers already on hand were still sufficient to keep the threat of another Bacon in everyone's mind. If freemen with disappointed hopes should make common cause with slaves of desperate hope, the results might be worse than anything Bacon had done.

The answer to the problem, obvious if unspoken and only gradually recognized, was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt. Bacon himself had given the first lessons in the social usefulness of racism. He had had no special bias against blacks. Once committed to rebellion, he had welcomed servants and slaves alike to his forces. Bacon's racism was directed against Indians, and lower-class Virginians needed no instruction in hating Indians. Though by 1676 they were doubtless prejudiced against blacks as well and perhaps prejudiced in a somewhat greater degree than they were against Irishmen, Spaniards, Frenchmen, and other foreigners, the Englishmen who came to Virginia, of whatever class, learned their first lessons in racial hatred by putting down the Indians.

They had begun with the murder of Wingina at Roanoke in 1586. They had continued at Jamestown in the guerrilla raids of the early years, the wars of extermination in the 1620s, and the final reduction of the Virginia Indians in the 1640s. After the invasion of the Susquehannahs in the 1670s they had been ready and eager to follow Bacon in another war of extermination. That Bacon was not more successful in exterminating Indians or in keeping the anger of Virginia's freemen directed toward race war rather than class conflict was largely owing, as we have seen, to Berkeley's refusal to cooperate.

But if Bacon failed in his instinctive attempt to subdue class conflict by racism, his was the wave of the future that would sweep Virginians into their paradoxical union of slavery and freedom in the eighteenth century. And the rebellion did make Virginians connect their most powerful racial hostilities, publicly and officially, with slavery. Although Bacon was out to kill Indians, he was also out to enslave them. The June assembly in 1676 had given him and his men, in effect, a slave-hunting license by providing that any

enemy Indians they caught were to be their slaves for life;³⁹ and the first assembly after the rebellion specifically ordered that soldiers who had captured Indians should “reteyne and keepe all such Indian slaves or other Indian goods as they either have taken *or hereafter shall take*.” The order was reenacted in April, 1679.⁴⁰ If it requires a greater degree of hatred or contempt to enslave a man rather than simply to keep him a slave, the Virginians clearly had it by 1676. They had made a deliberate public decision to enslave Indians.

Only six years earlier they had made a deliberate public decision not to enslave Indians. In 1670 the question had been raised whether Indians sold in Virginia by other Indians (who had captured them in tribal wars) should be slaves for life or for a term of years. At that time it was decided that servants who were not Christians and who were brought into the colony by land (Indians from other regions) should serve for twelve years or (if children) until thirty years of age. The same act stated that non-Christian servants brought “by shipping” (Negroes) were to be slaves for life.⁴¹ Thus Africans purchased from traders were assumed to be slaves but Indians were not. In 1682 the assembly eliminated the difference, making slaves of all imported non-Christian servants.⁴² Since only Indians and Africans fitted this description and since the assembly had already decided in 1667⁴³ that conversion to Christianity after arrival did not alter the status of a slave, the act of 1682 set the further development of slavery on a squarely racial foundation. Indians and Negroes were henceforth lumped together in Virginia legislation, and white Virginians treated black, red, and intermediate shades of brown as interchangeable. Even the offspring of a mixed Indian and white couple were defined as mulattoes.⁴⁴ It had been the original intention of the founders to exploit native labor. And as Virginians began to expand their slave holdings, they seem to have had Indians as much in view as Africans. If the natives of Virginia were insufficient in number, substitute natives from other regions could be brought in, whether from other parts of America or from Africa. They were both, after all, basically uncivil, unchristian, and, above all, unwhite.

³⁹ Hening, II, 346.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 404, 440. Emphasis added. Cf. *ibid.*, IV, 10.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II, 283.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 490–92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 252. But Indian blood was evidently considered less potent than that of blacks, since not only a black parent but even a black grandparent or great-grandparent was enough to make a person qualify as mulatto.

Indians, whether captured within the colony or brought from without, never became available in sufficient numbers to form a significant part of Virginia's labor force. But the act of 1682 did result in the importation of many more Indian slaves than has usually been recognized. A law passed two years earlier had made slaves tithable at the age of twelve and required the owner of slave children to bring them to the county court to have their ages judged (within three months of passage of the act or three months after their arrival).⁴⁵ In Henrico County, as a result, in the year from April, 1683, to April, 1684, thirty-three Indian children, ranging in age from four to eighteen, were registered. In the same period no Negro children were registered. Henrico, located at the head of navigation on the James River, seems to have had more access to Indian slaves than most other counties. In Northumberland County in the two years after passage of the act, the court judged the ages of two Indians and three Negro children. In York County the figures were four Indian and twelve Negro; in Accomack four Indian and nine Negro.⁴⁶

It seems clear that at the time when Virginians were beginning to buy Negro slaves in large numbers, they were also buying Indians. Indians were thus seen within the settlements more commonly than they ever had been before, and they were seen as slaves. Under these circumstances it was easy for Virginians to extend to blacks some of the bad feelings they harbored toward Indians. The new blacks were also at a disadvantage in coming for the most part directly from Africa and being therefore unable to communicate readily with English servants. The Indians too were outlanders, probably mostly from Carolina. Both were slaves and only they were slaves. It would have been natural not only for their owners but also for their fellow servants to lump them together in a lowest common denominator of racist hatred and contempt.

Obviously it was to the advantage of the men who ran Virginia to encourage such contempt in the colony's white servants and poor freemen. How clearly the advantage was perceived is impossible to say; but if Negro slavery came to Virginia without anyone having to decide upon it as a matter of public policy, the same is not true

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 479.

⁴⁶ Figures drawn from Henrico II, Northumberland III, York VI, Accomack IX. In the next century Virginians employed the friendly Tuscarora to capture slaves from enemy tribes, offering "the usual price of slaves for every woman and child delivered as captives." Oct. 24, 1711. *Executive Journals*, III, 287, 295.

of racism. By a series of acts, the assembly deliberately did what it could to foster the contempt of whites for blacks and Indians. In 1670 it forbade free Negroes and Indians, "though baptised," to own Christian servants.⁴⁷ In 1680 it prescribed thirty lashes on the bare back "if any negroe or other slave shall presume to lift up his hand in opposition against *any* christian."⁴⁸ This was a particularly effective provision in that it allowed servants to bully slaves without fear of retaliation, thus placing them psychologically on a par with masters. And in 1705, when the assembly ordered the dismemberment of unruly slaves, it specifically forbade masters to "whip a christian white servant naked, without an order from a justice of the peace."⁴⁹ Nakedness, after all, was appropriate only to a brutish sort of people, who had not achieved civility or Christianity.

But the term "Christian white servant" points to one of the complications Virginians had to overcome in emphasizing racial differences. There had always been in Virginia a rough congruity of Christianity, whiteness, and freedom and of heathenism, non-whiteness, and slavery. The early acts defining the servitude of Negroes and Indians had assumed that they would both normally be non-Christian. Yet neither Indians nor Negroes were immune to Christianity, and one ostensible aim of the founders of Virginia had been to convert the Indians. Although there had been little effort to carry out the aim, missionary zeal might someday effect it. And Africans, uprooted from their own environment, could be highly susceptible to the religion of their masters. By becoming Christian would they not become free?

Before the 1660s it seems to have been assumed that Christianity and slavery were incompatible. Negroes and Indians held in slavery who could prove that they had been baptized sometimes sued for their freedom and won it. Negroes who can be identified in the records as free generally had both a forename and a surname, implying baptism, instead of being designated simply as Mingo, Frank, Jack, and so on. The assembly in 1662 ordered the release of a Powhatan Indian who had been wrongly sold into servitude for life, "he speaking perfectly the English tongue and desiring baptism."⁵⁰

As slavery became more profitable, the assembly moved to protect masters by building a wall between conversion and emancipation. As we have seen, it specifically provided that baptism should

⁴⁷ Hening, II, 280.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 481, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 448.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 155.

not affect the bondage of either Negroes or Indians.⁵¹ The avowed object was to encourage masters in Christianizing their slaves by eliminating the danger of losing a slave through his conversion. But the effect, whether intended or not, was to remove the most powerful motive for a slave to wish for baptism. And masters, perhaps from a lingering uneasiness about holding Christians in slavery, were content to be served by pagans. When the act was passed in 1667, slaves were probably still expected to attend church like everyone else, and the expectation may have continued for some years longer. But after slaves began to arrive in large numbers, it seems to have been abandoned.⁵² Masters were reluctant to have their slaves become Christians, one minister noted, "because they say it often makes them proud, and not so good servants." Virginia slaves for the most part went unbaptized, despite hints from the mother country that they should be.⁵³ The prestige that went with being Christian instead of heathen could thus be reserved normally for the free and the white. But since the congruity could never be perfect, slaves were contrasted in the enactments not simply with Christian servants but with "Christian white servants."

The assembly's efforts to distinguish such servants from slaves went well beyond exempting them from being whipped naked. In an act that created perhaps the most invidious distinction between them, the assembly specifically protected the property of servants while confiscating what belonged to slaves. During the seventeenth century it had been common for masters to give a cow or a pig to a favored slave or to allow slaves to acquire such property by extra efforts of their own. But in 1705, in the same act that authorized the

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁵² The change may be reflected in the different steps taken by the assembly to make its acts about slaves known. In 1682 it provided for a twice yearly reading of the acts in church in the midst of services (after the second lesson). But in 1705 the acts were to be read after the service, at the door of the church. The change may imply that slaves were no longer allowed inside the church but might gather outside, or it may mean that masters tended to spend more time in the churchyard than in church, or it may mean that Commissary James Blair had objected to the interruption of divine service.

⁵³ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1695-1702*, 174; Journal of Francis Louis Michel (1702), *VMHB*, XXIV (1916), 116; Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 70; Pargellis, "Account of the Indians in Virginia," 242; M. W. Jernegan, *Laboring and Dependent Classes in Colonial America, 1607-1783* (Chicago, 1931), 24-44.

dismemberment of unruly slaves, the assembly provided that servants were to have the sole use, benefit, and propriety of any property they owned or that came into their possession by gift or any other lawful means, but that "all horses, cattle, and hogs, now belonging, or that hereafter shall belong to any slave, or of any slaves mark . . . shall be seized and sold by the church-wardens of the parish, wherein such horses, cattle, or hogs shall be, and the profit thereof applied to the use of the poor of the said parish."⁵⁴ Thus even the small property previously allowed to slaves who had the excess energy and industry to work for it was to be handed over to poor whites—a highly effective device for dissociating the two.

It was in the area of sexual relations that the authorities were most assiduous to separate the races. Up to and perhaps through the 1660s it is difficult to document any indisputably racist feeling about miscegenation. A famous instance, often cited, is the case of Hugh Davis in 1630, ordered to be whipped "before an assembly of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a negro."⁵⁵ But this could reflect religious rather than racial feeling: that a Christian should not lie with a heathen. Or it could be a case of sodomy rather than fornication. The specific order for "an assembly of Negroes" may signify only the court's intention to impress the mores of a Christian community upon the heathen in its midst. We have seen that in 1649 a pair of interracial fornicators were required to do penance like any other couple. And court records show the usual fines or whipping for fornication, regardless of the sinners' color, up to 1662.⁵⁶ In that year an act to determine the status of the children of a Negro woman by an English father declared that children should be slave or free according to the condition of the mother.⁵⁷ Even this cannot be seen unequivocally as dictated by racism. English ideas of property rights and the prudential consideration of keeping a child with its mother and reimbursing the mother's master for its support could have been involved. The act could even have offered an incentive to miscegenation by relieving the English father of a mulatto bastard from paying for its support as he would have to do in the case of a child borne by an English woman. Probably in order to deter men from seizing this open invitation to inexpensive sin, the act included a clause imposing double penalties on

⁵⁴ Hening, III, 459–60.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 146.

⁵⁶ See chap. 7, note 77.

⁵⁷ Hening, II, 170.

Christians for fornication with Negroes. This again could be seen as prompted by moral concern and perhaps also by religious scruples about copulation between Christian and heathen. In any case, the act said nothing about interracial marriages.

Such marriages were by no means unknown in Virginia. In Northumberland County in 1656 Elizabeth Kay, a mulatto woman whose father had been free, sued for her freedom through an attorney, William Greensted, who was apparently white. After the suit succeeded, Greensted married her.⁵⁸ In Northampton County Francis Payne, a free Negro, was married to a white woman named Aymey, who remarried with a white man, William Gray, after Payne's death. Aymey's second marriage was evidently less successful than the first, for she was soon complaining to the court that her new husband was beating her and wasting the estate she brought him.⁵⁹

Another case of mixed marriage appears in the Norfolk County records, where a question was raised in 1671 as to whether Francis Skipper's wife was tithable. The court decided that since she was a Negro she was indeed tithable. Skipper, who appears in the records at various times, was never identified as a Negro and was almost certainly white. He was executed for murder in 1679, but Ann was still living as a widow in Norfolk in 1691.⁶⁰ A more remarkable case was that of Hester Tate, an English servant of James Westcomb in Westmoreland County, who was legitimately married to James Tate, a slave of Patrick Spence. In 1691 the couple had four mulatto children, three of whom were in that year apprenticed to Spence and the other to Westcomb.⁶¹ In that same year the assembly took action

⁵⁸ Warren M. Billings, "The Cases of Fernando and Elizabeth Key: A Note on the Status of Blacks in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., XXX (1973), 467-74.

⁵⁹ Northampton X, 220-21; XII, 59, 69. Francis Payne is identified as Negro in the records. That Aymey was white is evident from the fact that she was never included in the tithe lists. That William Gray was white is evident from the fact that in 1666, when he was a servant to John Michaels, he was listed with Michaels' other white servants, Michaels' Negroes being listed separately.

⁶⁰ The pair were married at least as early as February 2, 1667/8, when they sold 100 acres of land. Norfolk V, 28. The court's ruling that she was tithable is in Norfolk VI, 73, other references *ibid.*, 73a, 84a, 89, 92, 112a, 115a, 122a; Norfolk IX, 231; VII, 67, 74. Evidence of Skipper's execution in 1679 is in Norfolk VII, 95, and IX, 130.

⁶¹ Westmoreland VI, 40, 41.

“for prevention of that abominable mixture and spurious issue which hereafter may encrease in this dominion, as well by negroes, mulattoes, and Indians intermarrying with English, or other white women, as by their unlawfull accompanying with one another.”⁶²

The act provided extensive punishments for miscegenation in or out of wedlock. A white man or woman who married a Negro, mulatto, or Indian was to be banished from the colony. That the act ran counter to the wishes of some inhabitants is suggested by a petition to the council in 1699, by “George Ivie and others, for the Repeale of the Act of Assembly, Against English people’s Marrying with Negroes Indians or Mulattoes.”⁶³ George Ivy was a resident of Norfolk, the son of a planter of the same name, from whom he had inherited a hundred acres of land in 1689.⁶⁴ The council referred his petition to the House of Burgesses, which ignored it. In the same session the burgesses also rejected a proposal from the justices of Surry County asking that the law in question be strengthened.⁶⁵ That the justices should have made the proposal argues that they thought mixed marriages were too common in Surry, which like Norfolk was a poor man’s county. Though the assembly rejected the proposal, six years later it did alter the law, to provide a less drastic but more effective deterrent to racial intermarriage among ordinary people. Instead of banishment, which would deprive the colony of a potential laborer (or two), the assembly imposed six months’ imprisonment and a fine of £10. At the same time it levied a fine of 10,000 pounds of tobacco on the minister who presided at the marriage.⁶⁶

Both the original act of 1691 and the 1705 revision gave less attention to intermarriage than to the illicit relations of white women with black or mulatto men. A free white woman who had an illegitimate child by a black or mulatto father was to be fined £15. If she could not pay, she was to be sold for a five-year term. The child, though free because its mother was free, was to spend the first thirty years of its life in servitude for the benefit of the parish (again the white poor would profit). If the woman was a servant, she was to serve her master an extra two years, as the law provided for servants

⁶² Hening, III, 86–87.

⁶³ H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Legislative Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, 1918), I, 262.

⁶⁴ Norfolk IX, 86a; X, 94, 105, 181, 188.

⁶⁵ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1695–1702*, 148.

⁶⁶ Hening, III, 453–54.

having bastards, and then she was to be sold for another five years. The proceeds of this sale would be divided equally among the king, the parish, and the informer. All these provisions were repeated in the revision of 1705.

Women were still scarce in Virginia in 1691 and doubtless continued to be for another twenty or thirty years. At the turn of the century there were probably about three men for every two women.⁶⁷ The laws against miscegenation were aimed at confining the affections of these rare white women to white men. And there seems to have been good reason for concern. In Westmoreland from 1690 to 1698 fourteen white women were punished for having a total of nineteen illegitimate children, of which at least four were mulatto. In Norfolk in the same period thirteen women were punished for the same number of children, of whom at least three were mulatto. In Lancaster County from 1702 to 1712 twenty-six white women were punished for a total of thirty-two illegitimate children, of which nine were mulatto. It would appear that black men were competing all too successfully for white women, even in the face of the severe penalties.⁶⁸

The result of such unions could be a blurring of the distinction between slave and free, black and white. The children would ultimately become free and might constitute an intermediate class, neither black nor white. By providing severe punishments for white women who gave themselves to blacks, the authorities not only discouraged the fraternization of slaves and poor whites but also assisted white freemen to find wives.

The laws said nothing about black women who had illegitimate children by white fathers, perhaps because few black women were free and the children of slave women were neither legitimate nor illegitimate, no matter who the father was. Given the power of white masters over women slaves, it is altogether likely that many black women bore mulatto children. But since the mother was a slave, the child, in spite of his intermediate color, would be a slave. Such mulattoes would therefore not constitute an intermediate class. They must be seen as black. And the assembly took pains in all its laws to identify them with blacks and to deny them any benefit from a free paternity.

⁶⁷ This was the ratio in Maryland in 1704. *Archives of Maryland*, XXV, 256.

⁶⁸ Westmoreland VI, Norfolk IX and X, Lancaster VIII.

The class of free Negroes and mulattoes already in existence could not be eliminated without more draconian measures than the assembly was willing to undertake. But the class could be prevented, or at least hindered, from growing. In 1691 the assembly forbade masters to free slaves unless they paid for the transportation of them out of the colony.⁶⁹ Later the assembly flatly forbade emancipation except by approval of the governor and council for some signal public service (such as revealing a slave conspiracy) and authorized the seizure and sale as a slave again of any Negro, mulatto, or Indian whose owner attempted to free him.⁷⁰

Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians already free did manage to stay in the colony and to cling to their freedom. But it was made plain to them and to the white population that their color rendered freedom inappropriate for them. In spite of being free, they were denied the right to vote or hold office or to testify in court proceedings.⁷¹ And their women, unlike white women, were subject to taxation, whether they worked in the fields or not. These handicaps, together with the penalties for miscegenation, successfully dissociated them from whites, however poor. Consolidated in a single pariah group, regardless of ancestry, language, religion, or native genius, they remained a small factor in Virginia's free society.

⁶⁹ Hening, III, 87. This provision originated in the council. *Legislative Journals of Council*, I, 149-51.

⁷⁰ Hening, IV, 132 (1723). The act requiring transportation of manumitted slaves was omitted from the comprehensive revision of laws in 1705. In 1713 the council, prompted by the manumission of sixteen slaves in the will of John Fulcher of Norfolk County, proposed that the assembly "provide by a law against such manumission of slaves, which may in time by their increase and correspondence with other slaves may [sic] endanger the peace of this Colony." *Executive Journals*, III, 332. But the assembly apparently did not enact the provision until 1723.

⁷¹ Hening, III, 250-51, 298. Cf. Emory G. Evans, ed., "A Question of Complexion: Documents concerning the Franchise in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *VMHB*, LXXI (1963), 411-15. John H. Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619-1865* (Baltimore, 1913), is based on original sources and remains an excellent treatment of the subject.



TOWARD POPULISM

As Virginians nourished an increasing contempt for blacks and Indians, they began to raise the status of lower-class whites. The two movements were complementary. The status of poor whites rose not merely in relation to blacks but also in relation to their white superiors. Virginia had always been advertised as a place where the poor would be redeemed from poverty. And during the 1630s, 1640s, and 1650s it may actually have served that purpose, though more met death than success. With the decline in mortality and rise in population the numbers of poor freemen grew too large, and the scruff and scum of England became the rabble of Virginia. But as Indians and Africans began to man the large plantations and the annual increment of freedmen fell off, the economic prospects of the paleface poor began to improve.

This is not to say that poverty disappeared from white Virginia with the introduction of slavery. A class of homeless men continued to drift about the colony, cheating the tax collectors and worrying the authorities. They crop up from time to time in petitions against them from the proper people of different counties. Accomack, which had complained earlier, joined with Lancaster and Gloucester in 1699 to request "that a law may be made to punish Vagrant Vagabond and Idle Persons and to assess the Wages of Common Labourers."¹ In 1710 Henrico County proposed a workhouse for them.² But the assembly apparently did not consider the problem worth acting on

¹ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1695-1702*, 158.

² H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1702/3-1705, 1705-1706, 1710-1712* (Richmond, 1912), 270.

until 1723, when it passed an act modeled after the Elizabethan poor law. The preamble noted that “divers Idle and disorderly persons, having no visible Estates or Employments and who are able to work, frequently stroll from One County to another, neglecting to labour and, either failing altogether to List themselves as Tythables, or by their Idle and disorderly Life [render] themselves incapable of paying their Levies when listed.” The act, which was renewed and enlarged from time to time thereafter, empowered county courts to convey vagrants to the parish they came from and to bind them out as servants on wages by the year. If the vagrant were “of such ill repute that no one will receive him or her into Service,” then thirty-nine lashes took the place of servitude.³

The law was probably prompted by the immigration of convicts during the preceding five years. Parliament in 1717 had authorized English criminal courts to contract for transportation to the colonies of convicted felons, to serve for terms of seven or fourteen years, depending on the seriousness of their crime; and a year later the infamous Jonathan Forward began a long and profitable career of carrying convicts to Virginia and Maryland, collecting from the British government a fee of £5 sterling for each of them and from the planters as much as they would pay, usually averaging £8 to £10. Virginia tried to protect herself by an act requiring both the importer and the purchaser to give bonds for the good behavior of these dubious immigrants and to register with the county court their names and the crimes for which they were transported. But the Privy Council disallowed the law, and the demand for labor in Virginia insured a ready market.⁴

Though it can be estimated that some twenty thousand convicts were carried to Virginia and Maryland during the rest of the century, and though they undoubtedly included some habitual criminals,⁵ the unredeemable were not so many but that they could be dealt with by traditional methods: the law that confined them to their parish and empowered the courts to put them to work was

³ Waverly K. Winfree, *The Laws of Virginia: Being a Supplement to Hening's The Statutes at Large, 1700-1750* (Richmond, 1971), 253; Hening, IV, 208-14; VI, 29-33; Howard Mackey, “The Operation of the English Old Poor Law in Colonial Virginia,” *VMHB*, LXXIII (1965), 29-40.

⁴ Winfree, *Laws of Virginia*, 217-22; Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 87, 210-12; Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 119-21.

⁵ Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, 116-17, 311, 325. Given the severity of English penal laws, it seems likely that many were not habitual criminals.

more effective in Virginia than in England because of Virginia's unlimited demand for labor and the close supervision of plantation labor by overseers. Those whom no one would venture to employ could be disposed of by that other traditional method, the military expedition. When recruits were needed to fight the French or the Spanish or the Indians, Virginians knew where to find them. In 1736 they shipped off a batch to Georgia to guard the frontiers; in 1741 they recruited several hundred for the English expedition against Cartagena.⁶ And when George Washington began his military career in 1754 by attacking the French in the Ohio Valley, he was leading, by his own statement, a company composed of "those loose, Idle Persons that are quite destitute of House and Home."⁷ Indeed, the Virginia assembly in ordering the troops raised had specified that military and naval officers could impress only such "able-bodied men as do not follow or exercise any lawful calling or employment, or have not some other lawfull and sufficient support and maintenance." And lest there be any doubt, the law added that no one was to be impressed who had a right to vote in elections to the House of Burgesses.⁸

Virginia parishes acknowledged the same responsibility that rested on English parishes to care for the destitute who were physically incapable of supporting themselves. But the numbers involved in Virginia were minuscule by comparison with England, because the conversion to slave labor transferred from the parish to the plantation the responsibility for the unproductive and unemployable elements of the laboring class: the aged, the disabled, and the young.⁹ Though a master could extract as much labor from his slaves as he could drive them to, he must feed and clothe them whether they could work or not. And society did not allow him to shift the responsibility. The laws against manumission had as an object not only

⁶ *VMHB*, XXXVI (1928), 216-17; *WMQ*, 1st ser., XV (1907), 224; Jones, *Present State of Virginia*, 87, 210-12; Fairfax Harrison, "When the Convicts Came," *VMHB*, XXX (1922), 250-60; John W. Shy, "A New Look at Colonial Militia," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., XX (1963), 175-85. Another recourse was the royal navy. When warships in Virginia waters needed seamen, the council authorized the captains to impress "vagrant and idle persons and such as have no visible Estate nor Employment." *Executive Journals*, III, 213, 215 (1709), 531 (1720). See also *ibid.*, I, 49.

⁷ R. A. Brock, ed., *The Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie*, Virginia Historical Society, *Collections*, n.s., III and IV (Richmond, 1883-84), I, 92.

⁸ Hening, V, 95, 96; VI, 438-39; *Executive Journals*, III, 213, 531.

⁹ Mackey, "Operation of the English Old Poor Law," 30.

the limitation of the free black population but the restraint of masters who might be tempted to free a slave when he became too decrepit to work, whether the cause were age, accident, or abuse. Slavery, more effectively than the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers, made the master responsible for the workman and relieved society at large of most of its restive poor.

As the ranks of the free ceased to swell so rapidly, the number of losers among them declined; and in the eighteenth century as the rich grew richer, so did the poor. The most concrete evidence comes from the tithable records. As noted earlier, the most pronounced trend in these records during the third quarter of the seventeenth century was the increase in the number of one-man households, without servants or slaves. After leveling off in the last quarter of the century, the trend was in the opposite direction. In Lancaster (the only county for which both seventeenth- and eighteenth-century lists survive) 13 percent of the households had only one man in 1653, 32 percent in 1675, 38 percent in 1699, and 19 percent in 1745. If we compare surviving seventeenth-century records (see table in chapter 11) with surviving eighteenth-century records (see table below), it would appear that one-man households were decreasing, while large households with more than five tithables were increasing. The gap between the very rich and the not-so-rich had widened, but there were more of the rich and fewer of the not-so-rich.¹⁰

The same trend is observable in other figures. During the first half of the eighteenth century, while big planters were building the great mansions of tidewater Virginia and accumulating vast numbers of slaves, the moderately successful small farmer was also gaining a larger place even in this richest area of the colony. Property holdings in the tidewater declined in average size per owner from 417

¹⁰ The figures are drawn from miscellaneous lists and records of tithables in the Virginia State Library and from *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, VII (1926), 179-85. The counties are listed roughly from north to south. The decline in the number of one-man households may have resulted not only from the decrease in the annual numbers of new freedmen but also from an increase in native-born children over fifteen who remained with their parents on family farms. But native-born sons reaching adulthood and setting up on their own would also be responsible for many of the one-man households. And sons of small planters would probably have started from a somewhat more secure economic base than newly freed servants.

acres in 1704 to 336 acres in 1750, while the number of property owners increased by 66 percent.¹¹

Tithables per Household

County and year	Average number of tithables per household	Percent of one-man households	Percent of households with 2 to 5 tithables	Percent of households with over 5 tithables
Loudoun 1760	2.67	45	44	11
Prince William (<i>Dillingen Parish</i>) 1747	2.7	38	53	9
Orange 1755	4.22	25	48	27
Lancaster 1745	4.34	19	54	26
York (<i>York-Hampton Parish</i>) 1763	6.03	22	45	33
Goochland 1754	3.46	31	53	16
Chesterfield 1756	3.17	41	43	16
Amelia 1753	3.31	39	45	16
Norfolk 1754	2.79	46	43	16
Lunenburg 1748	1.95	64	30	6
TOTALS	3.21	40	45	15

Wills proved in court also point to improved circumstances for the small man. A study covering the period 1660–1719 in four counties (Isle of Wight, Norfolk, Surry, and Westmoreland) divides

¹¹ D. Alan Williams, "The Small Farmer in Eighteenth-Century Virginia Politics," *Agricultural History*, XLIII (1969), 91–101.

the testators into lower, middle, and upper class on the basis of the value of property devised. In each county lower-class testators decreased, while middle- and upper-class testators increased.¹² A more detailed study embracing the whole Chesapeake region shows a similar growth in the value of testators' estates from 1720 to the 1760s. The number of persons with estates valued at £100 or less constituted 70 percent of those found around 1720. In the 1760s such persons accounted for only 41.4 percent, with a corresponding increase in those valued over £100.¹³

The figures of tithables, landholdings, and estate values do not mean that the small man was disappearing from Virginia. On the contrary, small planters continued to make up the great majority of the free population.¹⁴ But the figures do suggest that the small man was not as small as he had been and that the chances of becoming bigger had increased since the seventeenth century.

The change did not come entirely from forces arising within the colony. During the second quarter of the eighteenth century a marked growth in the world market for tobacco lent stability to its price and improved the position of the small man at the same time that it improved the position of the large man. Tobacco production advanced in this period even more rapidly in the poorer regions on the south side of the James and in the piedmont than it did in the richer York River area.¹⁵ But Virginia had enjoyed large economic opportunities during part of the seventeenth century without giving

¹² James W. Deen, Jr., "Patterns of Testation: Four Tidewater Counties in Colonial Virginia," *American Journal of Legal History*, XVI (1972), 154-76.

¹³ Aubrey C. Land, "The Tobacco Staple and the Planter's Problems: Technology, Labor, and Crops," *Agricultural History*, XLIII (1969), 69-81, esp. 78-79. In 1766 John Wayles noted that in the preceding twenty-five years, "many Estates have increased more than tenfold." J. M. Hemphill, ed., "John Wayles Rates his Neighbours," *VMHB*, LXVI (1958), 302-6.

¹⁴ Aubrey C. Land, "Economic Base and Social Structure: The Northern Chesapeake in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History*, XXV (1965), 639-54; "Economic Behavior in a Planting Society: The Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *Journal of Southern History*, XXXIII (1967), 469-85, esp. 472-73; Brown and Brown, *Virginia, 1705-1786*, 32-62.

¹⁵ Jacob M. Price, "The Economic Growth of the Chesapeake and the European Market, 1697-1775," *Journal of Economic History*, XXIV (1964), 496-511; Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly, 1674-1791, and of Its Relationships to the British and American Tobacco Trades* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1973), I, 266; Brown and Brown, *Virginia, 1705-1786*, 7-31.

the small man a comparable benefit. The difference this time was slavery.

It would be difficult to argue that the introduction of slavery brought direct economic benefits to free labor in Virginia. Since the tobacco crop expanded along with the expansion of the slave population, slavery could scarcely have contributed to any improvement in the prices the small planter got for what he grew. And though the reduction in the annual increment of freedmen did reduce the competition among them for land and for whatever places society might have available, the avarice of their superiors could well have resulted in squeezing out small men as they were squeezed out of Barbados in the preceding century. Instead—and I believe partly because of slavery—they were allowed not only to prosper but also to acquire social, psychological, and political advantages that turned the thrust of exploitation away from them and aligned them with the exploiters.

The fear of a servile insurrection alone was sufficient to make slaveowners court the favor of all other whites in a common contempt for persons of dark complexion. But as men tend to believe their own propaganda, Virginia's ruling class, having proclaimed that all white men were superior to black, went on to offer their social (but white) inferiors a number of benefits previously denied them. To give the remaining white servants a better start in life, the assembly in 1705 required masters to provide servants, at the conclusion of their term, with ten bushels of Indian corn, thirty shillings in money, and "a well fixed musket or fuzee, of the value of twenty shillings, at least," a somewhat more useful, if not more generous, provision than the three barrels of corn and suit of clothes previously required by "the custom of the country." Women servants under the new act were to get fifteen bushels of corn and forty shillings in money. In addition, at the insistence of the English government, servants on becoming free were entitled to fifty acres of land, even though they had not paid for their own transportation.¹⁶

¹⁶Hening, III, 304, 451. The value of freedom clothes had probably amounted in most cases to somewhat less than the 40 shillings equivalent thus required, though the Norfolk County court in 1657 awarded 250 pounds of tobacco as a substitute for freedom clothes. Norfolk IV, 110. In similar cases the Northampton court in 1651 awarded 200 pounds in lieu of freedom clothes and in 1672, when the price of tobacco was down to a penny a pound or less, 400 pounds, and in 1675, 450 pounds in lieu of both corn and clothes. Northampton IV, 160a; X, 166; XII, 47. A York inventory of 1648 valued ten servants' suits at 1,000 pounds. York II, 390.

For men already free the assembly made what was probably its most welcome gesture by drastically reducing the poll tax. The annual levy paid by every free man in Virginia, for himself and his servants, was in three parts: public, county, and parish. The first and sharpest reduction came in the public levy, the amount collected for support of the colony government. From 1660 to 1686 the average annual public levy was 45 pounds of tobacco per person; from 1687 to 1700 it was 11 pounds; and from 1701 to 1750 it was 4.6 pounds.¹⁷ The reduction was made possible in part by the increase (as tobacco production rose) in revenue from the two-shilling-per-hogshead export duty on tobacco and in part by the income from new duties imposed on the importation of liquors, servants, and slaves. Parish and county levies did not drop as dramatically as the public levy; but they too were reduced, especially in years when the public revenues yielded a large enough surplus to pay the burgesses, a major expense that had hitherto been paid by county levies. As the tables below indicate, the total burden of direct taxes borne by a Virginian in the eighteenth century seldom amounted to half that paid by his counterpart in the seventeenth century.¹⁸ He may still have paid the difference indirectly through the customs duties, but he did not feel the pain as his forebears had.

As the small man's economic position improved, he was also enjoying the benefits of a shift in social and political attitudes that coincided with the rise of slavery. The shift seems to have begun with the efforts of the crown, after Bacon's Rebellion, to restrain the covetousness of Virginia's provincial magnates. Those efforts, as we have seen, were largely unsuccessful and initiated a power struggle between the royal governors of Virginia and the assembly. After Effingham's departure the struggle continued, as successive gov-

¹⁷ Figures derived from Norfolk IV and VI; *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1659/60-1963*; Henning, II-VI; Winfree, *Laws of Virginia*.

¹⁸ Figures for county and public levies derived from Norfolk IV, VI, XI-XIV; Lancaster III, IV, VI, VII, XI, XII; Surry IV, V, VIII-X; Northumberland XIII, XIV; figures for parish levies from C. G. Chamberlayne, ed., *The Vestry Book of Christ Church Parish, Middlesex County, Virginia, 1663-1767* (Richmond, 1927); *The Vestry Book and Register of St. Peter's Parish, New Kent and James City Counties, Virginia, 1684-1786* (Richmond, 1937); *The Vestry Book of Petsworth Parish, Gloucester County, Virginia* (Richmond, 1933). George Mason in 1753 estimated that the total of public, county, and parish levies, one year with another, did not amount to more than eight shillings sterling per poll. Robert A. Rutland, ed., *The Papers of George Mason, 1725-1792* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1970), I, 29.

ernors strove to effect royal policies, many of them designed to benefit both the crown and the ordinary planter at the expense of the big men who continued to dominate the scene. But the 1690s saw a radical change in the character of the conflict. New personalities and new tactics on both sides combined with a crucial change in the intellectual climate to transform Virginia politics in unexpected ways. While the assembly was generating measures to align white

Average Annual Combined County and Public Levy in Four Counties in the 1660s, 1690s, and 1740s or 1750s

County	1660s	1690s	1740s or 1750s
Norfolk	81.4	53.5	18.5
Lancaster	59.2	45.8	10
Surry	?	35	5
Northumberland	?	45	10.5

Average Annual Parish Levy in Three Parishes in the 1690s and 1740s

Parish	1690s	1740s
Christ Church, Middlesex	41	31
St. Peters, New Kent	42.5	34
Petsworth, Gloucester	45	30

men of every rank against colored men of every tint, and while magnates were tilting with governors, it became imperative for everyone who aimed at power to court the good will of the small freemen who made up the bulk of the voting population. The end result was to bring the small man, not into political office, but into a position that allowed him to affect politics as never before.

The change in intellectual climate originated in England. Effingham's departure from Virginia coincided with England's Revolution of 1688, when James II was deposed because of his attempts to magnify the executive power and William of Orange was invited to take his place. The result of that revolution, whatever else it did, was to

shift the balance of power between king and Parliament in the direction of Parliament. The king did not become a cipher. William did not accept the throne in order to sink it. And the philosopher of the revolution, John Locke, who did not fancy legislative tyranny more than any other kind, recommended for the executive a strong and independent role in the government. But Locke made it clear to Englishmen that the legislature must be supreme and that the executive must be limited by the laws that the legislative branch enacted.¹⁹ In fact, the legislature had not only determined who should sit on the throne in 1688, but in 1701 it transferred the line of succession from the House of Stuart to the House of Hanover. Even affirmations of loyalty to King William or Queen Anne or King George could thus mean acknowledgment of the supremacy of Parliament, while Jacobitism, that is, loyalty to the Stuarts, meant rebellion against the lawful government.

The colonists readily gave their allegiance to the new king, presumably acquiescing thereby in the supremacy of Parliament over him. But Parliament made no attempt to exercise its new supremacy in America for many decades. English colonial policy after the Revolution of 1688, as before, emanated from the executive branch, and the precise relationship of the British legislature to the colonies was not defined. The primary impact of the revolution on England's relations with her colonies was not in the mechanics of government but in the frame of mind it induced in the Englishmen who directed colonial policy.²⁰ In the colonies, as we noted earlier, James II had attempted to tighten his hold by dismissing the representative assemblies of the northern colonies and consolidating them into a single province. During the revolution the colonists had tumbled this Dominion of New England, in which all powers were vested in the provincial executive, just as Englishmen had put an end to James's efforts to magnify the power of the executive in England. When William became king, he could scarcely have attempted to repudiate the revolution by restoring the Dominion or by subordinating the colonial legislatures to the colonial executive powers, even though the governors were the conduit through which British control of the colonies still flowed. Moreover, in 1696, to bring some order into the direction of colonial affairs, William established the Board of Trade

¹⁹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Peter Laslett, ed., (Cambridge, 1964), 375-87.

²⁰ The best study of the effects of the Revolution in the colonies is Lovejoy, *The Glorious Revolution in America*.

and appointed John Locke himself as one of the eight working members.²¹ The revolution thus created in both England and the colonies a psychological environment in which legislative powers held a presumptive advantage over executive prerogatives.

It was not at first clear how the change would affect the distribution of power in Virginia, for legislative and executive powers were mingled there, as in other colonies. The council not only advised and consented to the governor's actions, including his vetoes of legislative measures, but also served as the upper house of the legislature and as the supreme court of the colony. For a governor to try to control his council, as all governors tried to do, might henceforth be interpreted as a sinister effort to subordinate the legislative to the executive power and to concentrate too much power in a single unchecked executive.

In this uncertain atmosphere there emerged on the political scene in Virginia a man who knew how to manipulate people and politics with a skill no previous Virginian had shown. James Blair had been a young Scottish clergyman in 1681 when, along with eighty others, he had refused to take an oath that would have acknowledged the Catholic James II, upon his accession, as head of the Scottish church. Blair was therefore ejected from his benefice and made his way to London, where he was befriended by Henry Compton, Bishop of London. In 1685 the bishop sent him to Virginia, recommended to the church of Varina Parish in Henrico County. Soon after establishing himself there, Blair displayed his prowess in social diplomacy. Virginia ministers did not rank high in the colony's social scale, partly because of the insecurity of their position. Since they could be dismissed at the whim of their vestries, planters of large means were reluctant to match their daughters with them. Blair had no estate of his own, and it thus suggests something of his native ability that within two years he won the hand of Sarah Harrison, daughter of the biggest man in Surry County and one of the biggest in the colony, despite the fact that she was already pledged to another. The marriage placed him at once in the top circle of Virginia gentry, the only clergyman who had ever attained such a place.²²

Blair's superior, the Bishop of London, also recognized his talents and in 1689 appointed him as his commissary or agent in Virginia,

²¹ Peter Laslett, "John Locke, the Great Recoinage and the Origins of the Board of Trade: 1695-1698," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., XIV (1957), 370-402.

²² Parke Rouse, Jr., *James Blair of Virginia* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1971), 3-44.

with authority over the rest of the Virginia clergy. In this position Blair found that his efforts to raise the moral standards of his colleagues came to little, because the Virginia clergy at the time contained a high proportion of misfits, drunkards, and libertines who had come to the colonies because no parish in England would have them.²³ Perceiving that this situation might be remedied by educating native Virginians, whose families and reputations would be known in advance, Blair proposed the establishment of a college, went to England to secure backing, got it, and returned in 1693 to found the College of William and Mary.

There can be no doubt of Blair's abilities. His letters, written in support of whatever cause he argued, were always couched in convincing terms. And he generally got what he wanted, because he had the ability to make the most outrageous charges against his enemies seem plausible. His enemies included, successively, nearly every governor of Virginia for the fifty years that followed his return to the colony in 1693. That enmity, more than any other single factor, dictated the style of Virginia politics during those years.

Sir Edmund Andros, who became governor during Blair's absence, was the first to tangle with him. Blair had been on good terms with Andros' immediate predecessor, Francis Nicholson—probably because the two had had too brief a time to become acquainted—and he had carried to England Nicholson's recommendation that a clergyman be appointed to the council. There was not much doubt about which clergyman was meant, and in 1694 Andros received instructions from the king to swear the Scotsman in as a councillor.²⁴ By then Blair was already nettled because Andros was insufficiently zealous in support of the new college and of the clergy. Before long the council was treated to what the clerk recorded as "undecent reflections reiterated and asserted with passion by Mr. James Blair."²⁵ Andros responded by suspending Blair from the council. Blair wrote letters to England and was rewarded with an order from the king, restoring him to his seat.²⁶ For the next year he sat in it and found some reason to quarrel with the governor at nearly every meeting. At the same time he was building a coalition of supporters and feeling out the weak points of his adversary.

²³ William S. Perry, ed., *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church*. Vol. 1: *Virginia* (Hartford 1870), 30, 38.

²⁴ Rouse, *Blair*, 83; *Executive Journals*, I, 315.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 324.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 352.

It was not difficult to devise a line of attack. Sir Edmund Andros, a military man whose sympathies lay entirely on the side of royal prerogative as opposed to Parliamentary power, had been James II's choice for governor of the Dominion of New England. He had angered the New Englanders by telling them that they had no more rights than slaves; and they had seized him and shipped him back to England when William took the throne. Although William had exonerated him and sent him to Virginia, he was nevertheless vulnerable, in the post-revolutionary atmosphere, to the charge of seeking excessive, arbitrary powers. In 1697 Blair took off for London again, ready with a convincing case against the governor. He not only enlisted the support of his patron, the Bishop of London, but went directly to the man who could speak most effectively against arbitrary government. Blair presented John Locke at the Board of Trade with a detailed criticism of the political structure that supplied Virginia's governors with dangerous, uncontrollable, arbitrary powers, powers that Andros in particular, he said, had been all too ready to use.²⁷

Not surprisingly, a conspicuous example of arbitrary power in Blair's demonstration was the governor's ability to suspend from office a councillor who displeased him. But Blair did not confine himself to personal grievances. He mapped out the avenues by which all the most lucrative offices in Virginia accrued to a few big men. The governor's control of the council was almost absolute, as Blair put the case, because by his influence in the selection of the royally appointed councillors and his power of suspending them he could confer or deny access to the excessive rewards that lay open to the council.²⁸ There may have been something of the dog in the manger about Blair, for as the bishop's commissary he could scarcely have

²⁷ Some preliminary drafts and documents prepared by Blair are in Ms. Locke e 9 in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. One of these is printed in Michael Kammen, ed., "Virginia at the Close of the Seventeenth Century: An Appraisal by James Blair and John Locke," *VMHB*, LXXIV (1966), 141-69. A larger version, emended by Henry Hartwell (another disgruntled councillor) and Edward Chilton (formerly clerk of the council), was published as *The Present State of Virginia and the College*, cited several times above.

²⁸ In one of the documents in Ms. Locke e 9, Blair put the case more succinctly than in the published versions: "Sir: If you wud know how many places in Virginia are held by the same men, it is but proposeing the following Questions to anyone who knows the Country.

1. What are tne names of the present Council of Virginia?
 2. Who make the house of peers in Virginia?
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expected to hold many more offices beyond that of councillor. And those who supported him may have been moved by a feeling that they had not had a large enough share of the spoils. Nevertheless, whatever his motivation, Blair's analysis was not without merit; and with the assistance of Locke and the bishop, he persuaded the Board of Trade to arrange for the recall of Andros and the reappointment of his own presumably reliable friend, ex-Governor Francis Nicholson. Included in Nicholson's instructions, along with other provisions derived from Blair's indictment, was a prohibition against councillors' also holding office as collectors.²⁹ Stripped of their largest fringe benefit, councillors would have less incentive to dance to whatever tune a governor called. Henceforth governors would have to win their support in other ways—or look for support elsewhere.

Although Blair was not at once appointed to Nicholson's council, he probably expected to play the role of Richelieu in the new regime. And he was in an excellent position to manage it. The importance of family connections, which had never been negligible in Virginia politics, was magnified by the new independence of the council; and Blair had plenty of family. He had acquired a new set of political allies during his absence in England by the marriage of his wife's sister to Philip Ludwell II, the son of the man who had outwitted so many previous governors. The younger Ludwell had already stepped into his father's shoes, and the family had other marital connections that carried a heavy weight in politics. When Blair rejoined the council in 1701, his father-in-law, Benjamin Harrison II,

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3. Who are the Lords Lieutenants of the severall Counties in Virginia?
 4. Who are the Judges of the Court of Common Pleas?
Who are the Judges in Chancery?
Who are the Judges of the Court of Kings Bench?
And soe for Exchequer Admiralty Spirituality.
 5. Who are the Naval Officers in Virginia?
 6. Who are the Collectors of the Revenue?
 7. Who sell the Kings Quitrents?
 8. Who buy the Kings Quitrents?
 9. Who is Secretary of Virginia?
 10. Who is Auditor of Virginia?
 11. Who are the Escheators in Virginia?"

²⁹ *VMHB*, IV (1896–97), 52; *Executive Journals*, I, 440. The wording of the instructions is not altogether clear on this point, but the words were interpreted, and apparently intended, to convey such a prohibition.

was already a member, and Colonel Lewis Burwell of Gloucester, whose daughter was married to Benjamin Harrison III, was another member. So was Robert “King” Carter, whose daughter was married to Burwell’s son. In the following year, when Burwell retired from the council, Philip Ludwell II and William Bassett, another Burwell relative, were appointed.³⁰ With this array of relatives beside him and with his consummate skill in manipulating people, Blair could count on a good deal of backing in any political dispute. And disputes were not long in coming, for Blair quickly began to see in Nicholson another Andros, an enemy of the college and of the clergy, and a tyrant in the making.

Nicholson, for his part, did not fancy Blair as an *éminence grise* in his administration. Nicholson had a forthright disposition and a violent temper that frequently crops up in the records. Like Andros he was a military man, with the military man’s assumption that people ought to do what he told them to. When Blair crossed him, he fought back hard and effectively, by tactics that Andros had not attempted. He tried to forge a marital alliance of his own with Lucy Burwell, daughter of the councillor, with whom he fell genuinely in love. When she spurned him, Nicholson blamed Blair and the whole Blair connection.³¹ Indeed, he apparently concluded that the first gentlemen of Virginia were all a parcel of rogues and that the councillors in particular “had got their estates by cheating the people,” an opinion that may have held more than a grain of truth.³² In this situation, with a hot-tempered governor tackling an alliance of Virginia’s top families, the small planters were drawn into the fray by both sides and emerged as a force in Virginia politics.

Since most of the evidence that survives about the battle was written by Blair and his friends, it must be treated with caution. As they described him, Nicholson was a would-be despot, grasping for power by means of a standing army recruited from the lowest ranks. Nicholson, according to Blair, proposed to “take all the servants as Cromwell took the apprentices of London into his army, and indeed he has upon many occasions to my knowledge preached up the doctrine that all the servants are kidnapped and have a good action against their masters.” Blair went on to claim that he had heard Nicholson say that once he had got “an army well fleshed in blood

³⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 274; Rouse, *Blair*, 133, 267–68.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 135; Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 102.

³² Charges against Nicholson brought by members of the council, *VHMB*, III (1895–96), 373–82, esp. 376; Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 98.

and accustomed to booty there would be no disbanding of them again if they were commanded by a man that understood his business. . . ." And in case anyone missed the point, Blair added, "Several persons have told me they have heard him say Bacon was a fool and understood not his business."³³ A rebellion against the ruling Virginians conducted by the governor himself, and a governor experienced in arms, with a legitimate army at his back, would be formidable indeed.

Actually Nicholson may only have been trying to carry out instructions from the Board of Trade directing him to see that all planters *and* all Christian servants be armed in preparation for attacks by the French and Indians in the impending war. The House of Burgesses explained why it would be dangerous to arm Virginia's servants, but Nicholson apparently kept trying, for the records show the council again demurring to the proposal two years later.³⁴ According to Blair, the governor was bent on arming the servants in order to forward his own sinister purposes.

Blair's suspicions of the governor seemed to be substantiated when Nicholson reorganized the militia so that it could better cope with the expected French attack. In order to build a more effective, disciplined force, he had the militia in every county select one-fifth of their number, "young, brisk, fit, and able," to form elite companies.³⁵ According to Blair, the men of these companies were not merely the "youngest and briskest" but also "the most indigent men of the Country," and Nicholson allowed them to pick their own officers. "Now I could not but think with terror," said Blair, "how quickly an indigent army under such indigent officers with the help of the Servants and Bankrupts and other men in uneasy and discontented circumstances (upon all which I have heard him reckon) so well arm'd and Countenanced by a shew of authority could make all the rest of Virginia submit."³⁶ When the governor held a giant festival at Williamsburg to celebrate the accession of Queen Anne, it looked like part of the same sinister strategy, for Nicholson brought his militia companies in for a free feast and as much liquor as they could hold—and this in June when industrious planters were busy with their crops.³⁷

³³ Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 107, 109–10.

³⁴ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1695–1702*, 188; *Executive Journals*, II, 184.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 174.

³⁶ Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 111.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

The question of who should and should not be armed in Virginia was only one issue in the struggle between the governor and the council. Behind the accusations against Nicholson seems to have been the conviction of the councillors that he intended to bypass them and rest his regime directly on his popularity with the people at large. In a petition for his recall the council charged that he not only sought to gain “the good opinion of the Comon people but also to beget in them such jealousies and distrusts of the Council, as might render them incapable to withstand his arbitrary designs.”³⁸ Nicholson was apparently appealing to the small planters for help against the barons who threatened to best him as they bested Andros. If he could win the small planters, Nicholson might get into the assembly a set of burgesses who would consistently support him in issues that the council opposed. With governor and burgesses aligned together, the councillors might find themselves taking a back seat. To keep that from happening, they had to discredit Nicholson with both the voters in Virginia and the government in England. And James Blair had found the way.

In crying up the threat of Nicholson’s plans for an army, Blair had a point that would count strongly against the governor among the men in England who had supported the Revolution of 1688. John Locke’s patron, the Earl of Shaftesbury, had been one of the first to expound the dangers of a standing army; and he had done so in defense of the House of Lords, a body corresponding in part at least to the council in Virginia. A monarch, Shaftesbury had argued, who did not rule through his nobility, must rule through an army. “If you will not have one,” he told the peers in 1675, “you must have t’other.” Rule through the Lords meant liberty; rule through an army meant tyranny. Hence “Your *Lordships* and the *People* have the same cause, and the same Enemies.” The people must therefore recognize every attack on the Lords as a move toward military rule and tyranny. The argument was easily extended to include the House of Commons along with the House of Lords, and after 1688 opposition to a standing army became a hallmark of belief in the principles of the revolution.³⁹

Thus Blair and his friends could win support in England by making it appear that Nicholson was seeking to subvert English

³⁸ *VMHB*, III (1895–96), 377.

³⁹ J. G. A. Pocock, “Machiavelli, Harrington, and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century,” *WMQ*, 3rd. ser., XXII (1965), 549–83, esp. 558.

liberty (that is, the supremacy of the legislative branch) both by debasing the council and by building an elite corps—a standing army. The two obviously went together. If Virginians were not yet sufficiently versed in the principles that made this diagnosis plausible in England, they needed no instruction in the dangers of arming the indigent. If Nicholson did indeed seek to arm not only the indigent but also the Christian servants, he was being singularly obtuse about the colony's history and traditional psychology. And he had clearly overreached himself if he persisted (as the records seem to indicate) after the burgesses had explained their objections:

The Christian Servants in this Country for the most part consists of the Worser Sort of the people of *Europe* And since the Peace [of Ryswick, 1697] hath been concluded Such Numbers of *Irish* and other Nations have been brought in of which a great many have been Soldiers in the late Warrs That according to our present Circumstances we can hardly governe them and if they were fitted with Armes and had the Opertunity of meeting together by Musters We have just reason to feare they may rise upon us.⁴⁰

Whether or not Nicholson actually did threaten the planters with arming the servants, Blair and the council tried their best to fan suspicions. They knew that the small planters feared a servile insurrection as much as the large planters did, because the Christian servants whom Nicholson was supposed to arm belonged mainly to the small planters, who could not afford slaves.⁴¹ And if Blair's suggestive description of Nicholson's "indigent army" under "indigent officers" brought to mind such men as the colony got rid of later by military expeditions—the shiftless, troublesome crowd of men traditionally feared by the rest of the population—then too the small planters as well as the large would feel uneasy about the new elite corps of militia. Nicholson's appeal to the common people for support would be demolished if his opponents could establish the idea that the governor wanted to rule them through his indigent army. Blair tried to get the idea across. He reported that Nicholson proposed to "Govern the Country without assemblies." The governor, said Blair, gave his opinion of English liberties with the expression, "Magna Charta, Magna F—a," and threatened to hang his opponents with Magna Charta about their necks.⁴²

It was an accusation to shock Englishmen, but at the time it was

⁴⁰ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1695–1702*, 188.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* ⁴² Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 106, 109.

probably more effective in England than in Virginia. A governor who courted the indigent masses was distinctly out of step with post-revolutionary thought and post-revolutionary politics in England, where the legislature was the center of power and legislators and the property owners who elected them were the men to court. If it could be shown that Nicholson's tactics had alienated the assembly, it would be prima facie evidence that he was unfit to govern. And in 1702 the assembly gave signs of alienation. When Nicholson, on orders from the king, asked the burgesses for money to assist New York against French invasion, they refused to comply. In England the refusal seemed to confirm the charges against the governor.⁴³

One anonymous English friend chided him on his imprudence and suggested a more suitable strategy. It would not do, the writer said, to "speak so much of the Prerogative and so little of the law, and in truth the course must be steered now very evenly between Prerogative and Property, and with a due respect to the latter as well as the former, or our English Parliaments, such sure is the universal disposition of the nation, will vent their indignation." It was said, he heard, "that by your rough and Naballike Treatment of both Council and Assemblies you have lost all interest in them, and that this has already appeared in that you could not get them to comply with the instructions about New York." And the writer went on to censure his friend for gathering so many common people in the extravagant celebration at Williamsburg, where one witness declared that "he saw 500 drunk for one sober." The common people, the writer advised, "are never more innocent and usefull than when asunder, and when assembled in a mob are wicked and mad."⁴⁴

With the way prepared by letters detailing Nicholson's reckless appeal to the mob, Blair sailed for England in 1703, and by the spring of 1705 he had secured the governor's recall, just as he secured the recall of Andros seven years earlier.

It is not impossible that some of Blair's charges against Nicholson were valid. Nicholson's bluff manner, his violent temper, and his military cast of mind lent substance to them. But there was probably some justice also in the comment of one of the governor's friends that Blair and his crowd were simply disgruntled by the governor's

⁴³ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1695-1702*, 245-46, 259-60, 313-16; Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 70-71.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

refusal to let them run the colony as they chose. When he would not, "they Left no stone unturned to perplex the affaires of Government, setting up for Liberty and property men but ware soone discovered."⁴⁵ "Liberty and property men" in contemporary political parlance meant champions of legislative supremacy, and on that, their own chosen ground, Nicholson proved able to best his opponents—at least in Virginia. Frustrated in the council by Blair, he had turned to the burgesses and competed with the council to influence elections to the House. In the election of 1703 he seems to have outdone them in lining up votes, for the burgesses elected that year for the most part supported him against the council in subsequent sessions. He was even able to get from them in the session of 1705 a resolution denying the allegations of the council against him. But his vindication came too late to save him from Blair's persuasive talents in England.⁴⁶

It seems unlikely that the burgesses and voters would have backed the governor if they actually thought he had curried favor with the despised and feared part of the population. Although men in England may have believed the councillors' accusation, Virginians apparently knew better. Nicholson's success with the burgesses argues that his appeal was not to the shiftless and shifting indigents of Virginia but to small planters, men who expressed through their votes their satisfaction with a governor who was willing to court them instead of their lordly neighbors. Under Nicholson a new excitement had appeared in elections to the House of Burgesses. The governor had injected a new element into the political game. The ordinary planters had begun to sense their importance. If huge holdings of land were concentrated in the hands of a few, and if the colony still had a portion of landless rovers, there was still enough land to give the majority of men a little, enough to enable them to

⁴⁵ Robert Quary to William Blathwayt, Sept. 2, 1702. Alderman Library, Charlottesville.

⁴⁶ *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1702-1712*, 107-8. D. Alan Williams, "Political Alignments in Colonial Virginia Politics, 1698-1750" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1959), 48-76. This excellent dissertation is the most perceptive study of Virginia politics during these years. Many of the documents in the dispute between Nicholson and Blair have been printed in *VMHB*, VIII (1900-1901), 46-64, 126-46, 260-78, 366-85, and in Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, passim. They demonstrate that Nicholson's following in Virginia was not inconsiderable, even among the clergy.

vote. Suddenly they found that their votes mattered. The men who wished to rule Virginia could no longer do it without heed for them.

After Nicholson's departure and the death (within a year) of his successor, the council was able for a time to resume its dominance of the government, but Nicholson's struggle for the support of the assembly was a lesson not lost on Blair and his friends: control of Virginia would ultimately depend on control of the House of Burgesses. Not that the burgesses had been a negligible factor till now. The Ludwells and Beverleys had used them effectively on many occasions, as we have seen, in thwarting a Jeffreys or an Effingham. But henceforth it might be necessary to go beyond the burgesses to the voters who put them in office. Elections would have to be managed to see that the right people got in.

That a change was coming over Virginia politics was apparent as early as 1699, when the first assembly under Nicholson passed a law forbidding candidates to do what they had probably just been doing, to "give, present or allow, to any person or persons haveing voice or vote in such election any money, meat, drink or provision, or make any present, gift, reward, or entertainment . . . in order to procure the vote or votes of such person or persons for his or their election to be a burgess or burgesses."⁴⁷ It is, of course, no sign of democracy when candidates buy votes, whether with liquor, gold, or promises. But when people's votes are sought and bought, it is at least a sign that they matter.

They had probably begun to matter before Nicholson started his contest with the council for their votes. Before the end of the seventeenth century there were more big men than the council or the House of Burgesses had room for, and the law against treating suggests that the voters were already being courted by rival aspirants to public office. That in itself should have given them ideas. When the king's governor himself contended with local magnates for their votes, the small planters could scarcely fail to feel their stature rising. And they were reminded of it at every election. In spite of the law, which remained on the books throughout the colonial period, candidates continued to "swill the planters with bumbo" in hot pursuit of their votes. The election contests meant more than a few free drinks for the small planter. They sharpened his political intelligence and placed him closer than ever before to the seats of power.

The small man's new position was exhibited (and exaggerated)

⁴⁷ Hening, III, 173.

in the laments of the royal governor who succeeded Nicholson and continued to challenge the Virginia barons for control of the colony. Alexander Spotswood, another British military officer, who held the governor's chair from 1710 to 1723 (when James Blair again made a successful trip to England), had instructions that would have brought benefits to the small man, if successfully carried out, for they would have eliminated the accumulation of land by men who had no intention of cultivating it themselves. He was to see that all land grants required the owner of a tract to cultivate three acres for every fifty in it. Failure would result in its reversion to the crown.⁴⁸ Spotswood assumed that his principal opposition would come from the powerful gentlemen who sat on the council and who had been busy gobbling up land. He was not entirely mistaken, for he later found that Blair had a majority of the members in his camp, and any effort to change the situation was blocked by a clause in his instructions that required the consent of a majority of the council for dismissal of a member.⁴⁹ But Spotswood's greatest difficulty came from the burgesses. To his dismay, he discovered at the first election after his arrival "a new and unaccountable humour which hath obtained in several Countys of excluding the Gentlemen from being Burgesses, and choosing only persons of mean figure and character."⁵⁰

Spotswood was right about the new humor of the voters but probably not about the quality of the men they elected. The new burgesses were, as usual, an affluent lot of landowners looking out for their own interests.⁵¹ But they were also men who knew how to please the men who elected them.⁵² It was a time of low tobacco prices, and as the burgesses gauged public opinion, taxes concerned the voters more than land. Accordingly these tribunes of the people could safely agree to a long and complicated law that seemed to

⁴⁸ Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *Royal Instructions to British Colonial Governors, 1670-1776* (New York, 1935), I, 589-90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 60; Spotswood, *Official Letters*, II, 154-55; Williams, "Political Alignments," 171; Rouse, *Blair*, 194-97. On the council's attitude to the instructions on land see *Executive Journals* III, 194-95, 221.

⁵⁰ Spotswood, *Official Letters*, I, 19. On the growth in power of the House of Burgesses during and after Spotswood's time see Jack P. Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689-1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963).

⁵¹ Williams, "Political Alignments," 126-27.

⁵² Cf. John C. Rainbolt, "The Alteration in the Relationship between Leadership and Constituents in Virginia, 1660 to 1720," *WMQ* 3rd ser., XXVII (1970), 411-34.

comply with the governor's instructions (but which put all existing grants beyond question, no matter what errors might have been committed in the surveying and parenting of them). But when he asked for money to raise troops against another impending French and Indian attack, they declined.⁵³ Spotswood blamed his failures on the ignorance and plebeian character of the assemblymen, who strove "to recommend themselves to the populace upon a received opinion among them, that he is the best Patriot that most violently opposes all Overtures for raising money."⁵⁴ At the next election in 1712 the new turn in politics was even more evident. "The Mob of this Country," wrote Spotswood, "finding themselves able to carry whom they please, have generally chosen representatives of their own Class, who as their principal Recommendation have declared their resolution to raise no Tax on the people, let the occasion be what it will."⁵⁵

Although Spotswood underestimated the social quality of the men elected, he was not mistaken about the tenor of their politics. And he was ready with a solution. The trouble came, he believed, from "a defect in the Constitution, which allows to every one, tho' but just out of the Condition of a Servant, and that can but purchase half an acre of Land, an equal Vote with the Men of the best Estate in the Country."⁵⁶ As long as this situation prevailed, he was sure, "the meaner sort of People will ever carry the Elections, and the humour generally runs to choose such men as are their most familiar Companions, who very eagerly seek to be Burgesses merely for the lucre of the Salary, and who, for fear of not being chosen again, dare in Assembly do nothing that may be disrelished out of the House by the Comon People."⁵⁷ But when Spotswood proposed to the men of best estate, sitting on the council, that they remedy the evil by raising the qualifications for voting, some discreetly thought it was not a proper time for such a move, and others frankly declared themselves satisfied with the situation.⁵⁸

When Spotswood tried to outwit the "vulgar mob" by tampering with their representatives after the election, he in effect cut himself out of the political game. In 1713 he inveigled the burgesses into passing a measure that was unpopular with the small planter. The act

⁵³ Hening, III, 517-35; IV, 37-42; Williams, "Political Alignments," 129-30, 144-45; *Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1702-1712*, 340-49.

⁵⁴ Spotswood, *Official Letters*, I, 140.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 1-2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 124.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Executive Journals*, III, 392.

provided for tobacco inspection and the destruction of tobacco that did not meet standards, and it created forty inspectors who were to receive fees that were estimated at £250 annually.⁵⁹ Twenty-five burgesses were rewarded with these plums, and Spotswood had already found other government offices for four more. A majority of the burgesses were thus in his debt, and during the rest of the session the measures he proposed went through easily.⁶⁰ But populist politics were already too strongly entrenched to be defeated by such crude tactics.

Queen Anne died in 1714, and the accession of a new monarch required new elections. The Virginia councillors, perceiving Spotswood's vulnerability with the people, campaigned for candidates who opposed him and the "court party" they accused him of forming. The result was not even close. Only seventeen members of the former House were reelected, and only two of them had accepted inspectorships.⁶¹ It was nearly a clean sweep of Spotswood's supporters, a conclusive victory for the vulgar mob and for the councillors who had busied themselves in the campaign. Spotswood later complained that he had been "branded by Mr. Ludwell and his Adherents (who set themselves up for Patriots of the People,) for endeavouring to oppress the people by extending the Prerogative of the Crown."⁶² But Spotswood and every other governor who tried to carry out British policy lent validity to the charge by wrapping themselves in the royal prerogative when challenging actions of the legislature. Prerogative after 1688 was a dubious weapon. For a dozen years Spotswood used it to no avail in the effort to free his administration from the grip that the Blairs, Burwells, and Ludwells held on Virginia politics. In 1722 he finally gave up trying to carry out his instructions from England and joined his opponents. It was too late to retrieve his career as governor, for they had already succeeded in arranging his recall. But before he left office he made up for lost opportunities by cultivating the men who had opposed him and by sealing their friendship in a flood of huge land grants in the west for them and for himself.⁶³ The requirement for cultivating three acres out of fifty was quietly ignored.

It will be evident, in spite of Spotswood's accusations, that the

⁵⁹ Winfree, *Laws of Virginia*, 75-90; Williams, "Political Alignments," 142-44; Spotswood, *Official Letters*, II, 49.

⁶⁰ Williams, "Political Alignments," 149-58.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 159-63.

⁶² Spotswood, *Official Letters*, II, 152.

⁶³ *Executive Journals*, III, 538-41, 546-48, 551.

new politics did not really constitute a surrender to the mob but a new triumph for the men who had dominated Virginia from the beginning. Some of the measures that Spotswood sponsored, on instruction from England, were designed to clip the wings of the Virginia barons and to favor the small man. But the burgesses would have none of them. In every popular contest Spotswood lost. How, then, did Virginia gentlemen persuade the voters to return the right kind of people to the House of Burgesses? How could patricians win in populist politics? The question can lead us again to the paradox which has underlain our story, the union of freedom and slavery in Virginia and America.



TOWARD
THE REPUBLIC

G OVERNOR Spotswood's explanation of the way Virginians gained office in the assembly was that they lowered themselves to the level of the mob, catering to the passions and prejudices of the louts whom they filled with drink.¹ At first sight this diagnosis seems to be supported in the classic portrayal of a Virginia election, Robert Munford's play, *The Candidates*, written in 1770.² The play opens with the hero, Wou'dbe, grumbling about the campaign he must undertake to please the voters.

Must I again be subject to the humours of a fickle croud? Must I again resign my reason, and be nought but what each voter pleases? Must I cajole, fawn, and wheedle, for a place that brings so little profit?

The questions are rhetorical, and the play furnishes several vignettes of candidates cajoling, fawning on, and wheedling the freeholders. These very arts, we have already suggested, are testimony to the fact that the voters mattered, that they had to be won. But the larger lesson of the play is that cajoling, fawning, and wheedling did not win them. In spite of his opening speech, Wou'dbe does none of these things. When asked by the voters whether he will achieve this or that impossible goal for them, he says honestly that he cannot. He leaves it to his rivals to lie and flatter. For a time it looks as though he may lose, but then Worthy steps in. Worthy is evidently

¹ Spotswood, *Official Letters*, I, 140; II, 50, 128, 134-35.

² Jay D. Hubbell and Douglass Adair, eds., "Robert Munford's *The Candidates*," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., V (1948), 217-57.

a bigger man than any of the other candidates. He has sat in the House before but at first declined to stand in this election. He now changes his mind, at the same time declaring his support of Wou'dbe as a running mate (there are two seats to be filled). With his entry the voters have no hesitation in turning down the flatterers and elect Wou'dbe and Worthy forthwith.³

From this result we may perhaps conclude that Virginia politics was a compound of social deference and demagoguery. But demagoguery in this particular election failed; and the social prestige that succeeded could not have operated so powerfully unless the small planters, who made up the great majority of the voters, were persuaded that their interests would be well served by big men. Such a persuasion required that the two should perceive themselves as sharing interests that were more important, at least for political purposes, than those that divided them. Class consciousness was strong in Virginia. The weight carried by Worthy in the election testifies to the author's awareness of its strength. But Worthy's victory also testifies to the author's belief that Virginia's freeholders could be counted on to support worthy men in the end. The larger answer to the question of how patricians could win in populist politics is that Virginians, great and small, had begun to perceive a common identity.

This sense of common identity was based on common interests, some new, some old. The voters who elected the Worthies and Wou'dbes were not the drifting freedmen of Bacon's time. With the decline of immigrant free labor and the opening up of new areas, relatively free of Indian danger, the mass of white Virginians were becoming landowners. In any case only landowners could now be voters. The English government had itself insisted on that restric-

³ For three scholarly accounts of eighteenth-century Virginia electoral politics see Charles Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1952); Lucille Griffith, *The Virginia House of Burgesses, 1750-1774* (University, Ala., 1970), 45-127; and Brown and Brown, *Virginia, 1705-1786*, 169-214 and passim. The Browns have demonstrated the absence of class alignments in Virginia politics and have emphasized that membership in an upper class did not guarantee a candidate's election. My analysis of Virginia politics and of the absence of class alignments differs from that of the Browns but does not appear to me to be incompatible either with their findings or with those of Griffith and Sydnor. The Browns have been careful to point out (p. 227) that candidates were generally men of substance, a conclusion supported by both Griffith and Sydnor, who see Virginia politics as more dominated by such men than the Browns will allow.

tion. Though the amount of land was not at first specified,⁴ Virginians could not be content with the small plots of a peasantry. Fifty acres per working hand was the standard ratio in Virginia's system of rotating tobacco, corn, and trees;⁵ and few landowners had less than a hundred acres, especially in new counties on the frontier, where small men congregated to become rich in acres though poor in pocket. Even in an old county like Surry, the majority of new land grants in the 1690s were for tracts of more than 250 acres.⁶ The owners of such grants had every reason to join forces with their more powerful neighbors against attempts from across the sea to regulate or adjust or restrict their titles. Small men could worry as much as large about losing their land for failure to pay quitrents or even for failure to cultivate the required three acres in fifty.⁷

Other common interests between large planter and small had existed from the beginning—for one, the fact that both depended on the same single crop. Whatever affected tobacco and its price

⁴ The first specification of an amount seems to have been in 1736, when it was fixed at 100 acres of unimproved land or "twenty-five acres with a house and plantation." Hening, IV, 475.

⁵ Carman, *American Husbandry*, 165.

⁶ Kelly, "Economic and Social Development of Surry County," 130. In the 1704 rent roll of all Virginia landowners the average holding was 417 acres. Williams, "Small Farmer in Eighteenth-Century Virginia Politics," 93. In Prince William County on the upper Potomac in 1737 the majority of landowners held over 400 acres. Brown and Brown, *Virginia, 1705-1786*, 14.

⁷ Not only large land speculators but many ordinary owners may have found it difficult to keep the legal three acres per fifty under cultivation; for while planters needed fifty acres per working hand, a man could tend no more than three or four acres in tobacco by himself, and two was probably a more common figure. He might tend another acre or two in corn, but probably the requirement of three acres out of fifty was stated in the law as about what one man could be expected to cultivate on a tobacco plantation. Yet most landowners probably had more than fifty acres for every tithable in their families. A comparison of the 1704 rent roll with the list of tithables for that year shows approximately one working hand per 100 acres of land owned. Fifty years later the working population of the tidewater was denser, but in the newer piedmont counties, where plantations averaged 375 acres, the workers were fewer, about one hand to 125 acres. (Williams, "Small Farmer in Eighteenth-Century Virginia Politics," 93.) The figures suggest that many Virginia voters would have felt as threatened as, say, members of the council by a strict enforcement of the land laws.

affected both. It was this that had made possible the plant-cutting riots in 1682. But common interests could not become bonds of common identity while the tensions that had surfaced in Bacon's Rebellion continued to agitate the colony. Once the small planter felt less exploited by taxation and began to prosper a little, he became less turbulent, less dangerous, more respectable. He could begin to see his big neighbor not as an extortionist but as a powerful protector of their common interests.

Their interests were not, to be sure, identical. The small man might be more hard pressed to pay taxes out of his small crop and therefore be particularly keen for low taxes; but since direct taxes were by poll and since the big man's tobacco was grown by slaves on whom he had to pay the tax, low taxes were a direct benefit to him too. The small man was frequently a debtor, but the large man, his creditor, was likely also to be in debt, either to London merchants or to other large men. The large man might make a profit from the small man by marketing tobacco for him, but both were sellers in the end. The very fact that the large man stood to lose along with the small man in a prolonged depression of tobacco prices made him seem all the more appropriate as a spokesman for the whole country.

What was more important for the future, the common interests that enabled the small planter to trust the large, also encouraged the large planter to trust the small. Large planters had been willing to follow Nicholson's lead in drawing the small planter into the political game, because they perceived that in a contest with higher authority they were likely to be on the same side. Spotswood complained that Virginians stuck together, that "He is the lover of this Country who in all Controversies justifies the Virginian and in all Dealings is ready to help him to overreach the Foreigner; He is the Patriot who will not yield to whatever the Government [i.e., the governor] proposes, and can remain deaf to all Arguments that are used for the raising of Money."⁸

By 1722 Spotswood himself had joined the company of Virginia patriots. When he gave up his contest with the leading planters, he inaugurated thirty years of harmony, during which royal governors seldom quarreled with their assemblies. The harmony was largely the result of England's willingness, for the time being, to let Virginians run the colony their own way. But the small planter did

⁸ *Official Letters*, II, 50.

not thereby lose the position he had attained in Virginia politics. Even though he was no longer needed in contests with the royal governor, the big men continued to court his approval at election time in minor contests with each other. He continued to give them his votes, and they continued to instruct him and themselves in political principles that magnified his importance. They could afford to do so because he did have interests comparable with their own.

Put another way, they could afford it because their prosperity no longer depended on wringing the last possible penny from him. Although government office in Virginia continued to be more lucrative than in many other colonies, it was no longer a principal way to wealth. A new generation of magnates were multiplying the capital they inherited from their more aggressive parents, but they did not have to antagonize the lesser freemen in the process. They could be Virginians in a way that their predecessors never were. The difference lay not only in the prosperity that came to large men and small alike after the tobacco market began to rise. The difference lay in the new confidence that the two felt in each other and in their colony. As their fortunes rose, the most successful did not think so much of exchanging life in Virginia for life in the old country.

For seventeenth-century Virginians the security of high position had been associated with England and English ways of living. Some had tried to overcome the feeling. Governor Berkeley had dreamed of making the colony more deserving of patriotic devotion by making it more like England. But Berkeley's scheme never came close to success, and Virginians who reached the top in the seventeenth century went on feeling not quite satisfied, not quite settled. Many had in fact been immigrants who continued to think wistfully of the land they left behind. William Fitzhugh, for example, who cheered on other well-supplied immigrants with calculations of the comfortable income to be had from tobacco, nevertheless kept thinking of investing his Virginia winnings in some safe English country estate, where he would retire to live out his days in peace.⁹ Few of those who made it in the seventeenth century, Fitzhugh included, became as committed to Virginia as Berkeley was, and they showed where they stood by the way they lived. They had too little confidence in the colony to sink their earnings in houses like the one Berkeley built at Green Spring or even like

⁹ Davis, *Fitzhugh*, 175-176, 202-3, 218, 221, 253, 279-80.



those he arranged for in Jamestown (which Bacon burned to the ground). At the opening of the eighteenth century the typical planter, even though successful, still lived in something small and wooden. Permanent buildings were somehow inappropriate. Permanent buildings were for permanent places, like England.

Most of the successful nevertheless stayed on; and their children and grandchildren, born in the colony and borne up by its new labor force, discovered a commitment to Virginia that their forebears had never known. They became the patriots who thwarted Spotswood at every turn and finally thwarted George III. In the second quarter of the eighteenth century they built the great mansions, many of which still stand along the rivers of the tidewater and in the lower piedmont area above the falls or “freshes.” Within the space of thirty years dozens of houses to equal or surpass Green Spring went up. It was at this time that the Pages built Rosewell, the Harrisons built Berkeley, the Lees built Stratford, the Carters built Sabine Hall, Nomini Hall, and Carter’s Grove, and William Byrd II, after spending most of his life in London, built Westover. Far up the Potomac, Lawrence Washington started Mount Vernon, while his worshipping young brother George looked on; and Peter Jefferson, about the same time, moved his family, including three-year-old Thomas, into Tuckahoe, built above the falls of the James by his wife’s parents, the Randolphs.¹⁰

The men who built the great houses and lived in them still thought of themselves as Englishmen and aped the style of the English country gentleman.¹¹ They read English newspapers and imported the latest English fashions; but with a few exceptions like Byrd they were content to be Englishmen in Virginia, without continually sighing for the security of the mother country. The commitment to Virginia that they expressed in bricks and mortar grew with the change in labor that made Virginia forever unlike England. The safe investment that a William Fitzhugh hoped for in an English estate would have come from the rents that other Englishmen would pay for land. Virginia’s great planters too could count on getting some rent from their immense quantities of land, but their fortunes rested less on extracting rents from tenants or taxes from freemen

¹⁰ Thomas T. Waterman, *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706–1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1945), passim.

¹¹ Louis B. Wright, *The First Gentlemen of Virginia: Intellectual Qualities of the Early Colonial Ruling Class* (San Marino, Calif., 1940), passim.

than on the labor they extracted from African men and women permanently enslaved to them. They no longer needed to exploit other Englishmen in the ways their fathers had.

Thus by the second quarter of the eighteenth century Virginians had established the conditions for the mixture of slavery and freedom that was to prevail for at least another century: a slave labor force isolated from the rest of society by race and racism; a body of large planters, firmly committed to the country, who had become practiced in politics and political maneuvering; and a larger body of small planters who had been persuaded that their interests were well served by the leadership of their big neighbors. The way was now prepared for the final ingredient that locked these elements together in a vital combination and enabled Virginians large and small to join with other Americans in devotion to freedom and equality, in abhorrence of slavery—and in the preservation of slaveholding.

That ingredient was a conglomeration of republican ideas that had gained popularity in England at the time of the Commonwealth. In England the ideas had not in the end prevailed, but they continued to be studied and refined and proclaimed by men who have come to be known as the eighteenth-century commonwealthmen.¹² The commonwealthmen were not conspirators, hoping to overthrow the monarchy and restore the republic of the 1650s. But they were admirers of the Roman republic if not the English one, and caustic critics of the English monarchy. Along with other Englishmen they paid tribute to John Locke and the Revolution of 1688; but their favorite political philosophers were James Harrington and Algernon Sydney, who had championed the cause of republican government and suffered (the one imprisoned, the other executed) at the hands of Charles II.

The commonwealthmen believed that a monarch, if not curbed, would inevitably turn tyrant and reduce his subjects to slavery. In eighteenth-century England they saw in every exercise of executive power the signs of a drift toward tyranny and slavery, which they called on their countrymen to arrest. They suspected the army. They despised the churchmen who unflaggingly supported every infringement of liberty. They wanted to extend the suffrage and make representatives more responsive to the people. Above all, they

¹²From Caroline Robbins' study of them, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959).

wanted a wide distribution of property to create an enlarged enfranchised yeomanry who would see to it that government stuck to its proper business of protecting liberty and property. Their countrymen paid them little heed, and their names have not survived in fame: John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, Robert Molesworth, Francis Hutcheson, James Burgh—these are scarcely household names today. But in the American colonies they were known and admired. In Virginia their ideas gradually gathered strength in a movement whose beginnings are difficult to discern but which became more and more palpable as the century advanced, until Virginians spoke in a language that would have astonished and disgusted William Berkeley.

Governor Berkeley had rejoiced in 1671 that he had kept heresy and sedition out of Virginia. When his people rose up against him five years later, he must have been relieved at least that Bacon was no Cromwell and that the rebellion bred no republican ideas of the kind that had disfigured England for him in the 1650s. He wished, as we have seen, that Virginia ministers would “pray oftener and preach less.” And he hoped that there would be no printing press or free school “these hundreds years” to nourish the treasonous learning that preachers, and schools, and printing presses fostered.¹³ He did not get his wish.

In 1730 William Parks, a printer who had already started a press in Maryland, established one in Williamsburg, now the capital of Virginia. Two years later the burgesses authorized him to publish their votes and proceedings.¹⁴ And in 1736 he started Virginia’s first newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*. He filled it mainly with news taken from the London papers and from other colonial ones, along with those tedious essays in which eighteenth-century authors tried to imitate the *Spectator*. But he also made it a forum to which legislators and would-be legislators could carry the debate on public policies outside the doors of the House of Burgesses. Although only scattered issues of the *Gazette* are extant from before the 1770s, they do reveal appeals to the public for and against an ingenious scheme to let the French buy tobacco in Virginia (February–April, 1738), for and against a tobacco-inspection law (August–December, 1738), and for and against the relief of dissenters from parish levies (March–

¹³ Hening, II, 517.

¹⁴ H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia, 1727–1734, 1736–1740* (Richmond, 1910), 121.

April, 1752). There was nothing seditious about any of these discussions, and it is difficult even to know who the readers of the *Gazette* may have been. But to publish the proceedings of the assembly and to carry arguments over public policy to the press could scarcely diminish the expectation of popular participation in politics.

Popular participation in politics did not necessarily indicate the presence of republican ideas in Virginia, but it did carry that implication for many eighteenth-century Englishmen; and governors who were vexed by it did make the connection. Nicholson, who had tried some appeals to the people himself, allegedly called the Virginians “a rich, populous, and obstinate People of Commonwealth Principles.”¹⁵ And in some of the products of William Parks’ press Nicholson, had he still been around, would have seen justification both for his accusation and for William Berkeley’s denunciation of printing. In 1745, for example, the rising in Scotland led by the young Stuart pretender to the throne offered republican-minded Virginians an opportunity to oppose rebellion and yet safely support revolution. Loyalty to the Hanovers against the deposed House of Stuart meant acceptance of the right of the people to replace a monarch who failed to protect their liberty and property. The *Gazette* accordingly reported how the people of Norfolk, Virginia, celebrated news of the Pretender’s defeat in a parade with banners bearing the slogan “Liberty and Property.” And on the same occasion a writer for the *Gazette* taught republican principles to his readers with two appropriate lessons from Scripture. In the disobedience of the people of Israel to Saul he found “an early Instance against passive Obedience”; and in their choice of David as king, despite the fact that Saul had lawful heirs, he found “an early Instance against hereditary Succession to the Crown when ’tis against the Good of the People to permit it.” Thus he celebrated the defeat of a rebellion by urging the right of revolution whenever the “good of the people” called for it.¹⁶

It is not unlikely that the author of this bit of exegesis was a young Virginia-born clergyman, who preached more than he prayed. William Stith, rector of Henrico Parish and chaplain to the House of Burgesses, had stepped into James Blair’s place, not as com-

¹⁵ *Executive Journals*, II, 393; Perry, *Historical Collections*, I, 106–7; Beverley, *History and Present State of Virginia*, 112, 113. Cf. Burk, *History*, II, 326.

¹⁶ *Virginia Gazette*, June 23–July 26, July 24–31, 1746.

missary or councillor but as self-appointed political docent to Virginia. In a sermon to the burgesses, which Parks printed as a pamphlet, Stith had already denounced the rebellion of the Pretender by extolling the Revolution of 1688 as “the wisest, best-conducted, and most happy Event, that any where appears upon the British Annals.” The British Constitution, as Stith explained it, was distinguished by the limits it placed on the executive. And he added a novel explanation of the maxim “The King can do no wrong.” What was meant here was that the Constitution prevented the king from wrongdoing: “This is to say, his Prerogative can never extend so far, as to injure and oppress his People.”¹⁷ If their king was so limited, Virginians could draw their own conclusions about the powers he was entitled to delegate to his colonial governors.

Stith continued his indoctrination of Virginians in 1747 by writing a history of the colony under the Virginia Company (1606–24), which again William Parks printed for him. Although the period was remote, Stith discovered in it relevant lessons about the dangers of prerogative power and the blessings of liberty. He announced in the preface that his purpose was to “un-solomonize that silly Monarch,” James I. He displayed the hardships of Virginians under the tyranny of Governor Argall and exulted when “the People were again restored to their Birthright, the Enjoyment of British Liberty,” by the calling of the first representative assembly. And he offered other hints of the defects of absolute monarchy in his account of the different Indian tribes. The Chickahominies, he reported, were “a stout, daring and free People,” who “were governed in a Republican Form” and consequently “took all Opportunities of shaking off Powhatan’s Yoke, whom they looked upon and hated, as a Tyrant.” The superiority of republican government was evident in their prosperity, for though their land was poor they made more plentiful crops and had greater abundance of provisions than any other tribe. “Such a happy Influence,” concluded Stith, “had Liberty, and such visible Incitement did firm Property give to the Industry of even that lazy and improvident People.”¹⁸

When the harmony between Virginia’s burgesses and governors was finally disrupted in 1753 by Governor Robert Dinwiddie’s at-

¹⁷ William Stith, *A Sermon Preached before the General Assembly at Williamsburg, March 2, 1745/6* (Williamsburg, 1745/6), 19–20.

¹⁸ William Stith, *The History of the First Discovery and Settlement of Virginia* (Williamsburg, 1747), vi, 130–31, 160–61.



tempt to exact a fee of a pistole (about 17 shillings) for every land patent, Stith took a hand in arousing popular opposition to the governor. "Liberty and property and no pistole" was Stith's slogan.¹⁹ And Dinwiddie reported to his superiors that the House of Burgesses in opposing him showed themselves to be "very much in a Republican way of thinking."²⁰

How widely republican ideas were disseminated in the years between Nicholson and Dinwiddie we can only guess. If it were not for Stith and the *Gazette*, we might even dismiss Dinwiddie's report as the kind of exaggeration that political contests often generate. But the governor's diagnosis gains credence by the fact that many who stood against him in the pistole-fee dispute also stood against the British Parliament a dozen years later when the colonies' ultimate quarrel with England began. The Virginia House of Burgesses then took the lead in arousing colonial opposition to the Stamp Act; and in the years that followed Virginians stayed at the forefront of resistance to England and took the leading roles in creation of the American republic. By 1776 there could be no doubt that Virginians were "very much in a republican way of thinking."

Who taught them, besides Parks and Stith, will remain something of a mystery. In spite of Governor Berkeley's fulminations against printing presses and preachers, we can scarcely give Parks and Stith the whole credit. Nor can we lay the charge to that other instrument of sedition condemned by Berkeley, the school. Although a number of Virginians, more charitably inclined to education than the governor, left bequests for the founding of schools, and though some were opened, Virginia by 1776 was still short of them, and a large proportion of the small planters remained illiterate.²¹ The wealthiest families sometimes sent their children to England for education, where a few may have attended the popular academies run by dissenters from the Anglican establishment. There they could have imbibed some of the notions of the eighteenth-century commonwealthmen. But most attended the "public" schools or, if old enough, Oxford or Cambridge, or more likely studied law at the Inns of Court, where their teachers would not have been selected

¹⁹ Morton, *Colonial Virginia*, II, 625; Griffith, *Virginia House of Burgesses*, 25.

²⁰ Brock, *Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie*, I, 100, 103, 236.

²¹ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York, 1974), 72-93.

for republican sympathies. In any case, the number who went to England was small; and parents generally complained that the principal lesson learned there was extravagance. Most Virginians got whatever schooling they received at home, from their parents or, if their parents were wealthy enough, from a private tutor. Some went on to William and Mary (where from 1752 until his death in 1755 William Stith was president) or to the northern colleges. There the young Virginians may have met the writings of the English commonwealthmen and a sympathetic presentation of the classical republicans of Greece and Rome.²²

Those who went north could have returned with some of the leaven of dissent. But those who stayed behind could also have been infected with it by the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who descended on Virginia's back-country counties in the eighteenth century. Or they could have got it from other puritanical immigrants. Because of the scarcity of reputable Anglican ministers, Virginia had always been prone to invasion by dissenting missionaries of higher character and more democratic political philosophy. The Quakers had attracted men of all classes, including county commissioners, in the seventeenth century; and in the eighteenth the Baptists made inroads everywhere. Quakers, Baptists, and Presbyterians all sought souls, not political converts; but James I's maxim, "No bishop, no king," still held true. Dissenters from the Church of England had a proclivity for preaching rather than praying, and for books, schools, and colleges. In 1776 they founded the first college in Virginia after William and Mary, and they named it Hampden-Sydney, for two republican heroes.²³

But most of the men who ran Virginia were not dissenters, and neither were those who ran the American republic in its first years. They may have learned something from the dissenters, but they probably learned more from their own libraries, which were not confined to the volumes that William Parks could supply. Although all Virginia planters were likely to spend more time in the saddle than in the study, they did have books and some read widely.²⁴ William Byrd recorded his daily sessions with Latin and Greek au-

²² E. S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home* (Williamsburg, 1952), 5-28.

²³ Chap. 7, note 48; W. M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, N.C., 1930). Cf. Rhys Isaac, "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *WMQ*, 3rd ser., XXI (1974), 345-68.

²⁴ See again Wright, *First Gentlemen of Virginia*.

thors. Thomas Jefferson, whose copy of Harrington's *Oceana* came from Byrd's library, was the most bookish of the lot and left us some clues about his reading, in comments on different authors. For example, he called Sydney's *Discourses concerning Government* "the best elementary book of the principles of government . . . in any language."²⁵ Yet we would hardly know of his familiarity with John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* if he had not incorporated passages almost word for word in the Declaration of Independence, apparently unaware that he was doing so. Perhaps other children who grew up in eighteenth-century Virginia also read themselves into republicanism without leaving us a record of their progress.

In Jefferson's own view the education of young Virginians was unlikely to make anything but tyrants of them, especially those who spent their early years, as he did, on one of the great plantations. The children of the planters mingled freely with the children of slaves, and the result, in Jefferson's opinion, was to train them in tyranny. "The whole commerce between master and slave," he wrote in a famous passage, "is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it. . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities." Virginia not only had too few schools, but her great plantations were thus themselves schools of vice and tyranny. "The man must be a prodigy," Jefferson concluded, "who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances."²⁶

If Jefferson was right, he was a prodigy. And so were his friends George Mason, George Washington, James Madison, James Monroe, and a host of other revolutionary Virginians who, whatever their complicity in the preservation of slavery, cannot otherwise by any stretch of the imagination be called depraved. They grew up under the conditions that Jefferson described, yet they displayed none of the boisterous passions, none of the lineaments of wrath, and certainly none of the disposition for tyranny that those con-

²⁵ E. Millicent Sowerby, *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C., 1952-59), III, 13.

²⁶ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, William Peden, ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1955), 162.



ditions were supposed to induce. Washington, to be sure, had a hot temper, and his manner was sufficiently monarchical to make some of his admirers wish to award him a crown; but no man ever had his temper better under control, and anyone who reads his correspondence cannot fail to be impressed by his meekness in submitting to the popular will, even when he thought it mistaken. Jefferson himself, whatever his shortcomings, was the greatest champion of liberty this country has ever had. As for giving loose to his passions, it has indeed been suggested that he carried on a passionate affair with one of his slaves; but if he did, so little did he show his passion that the evidence for it is entirely circumstantial. And Madison, who was to make the most original contributions to republican political thinking of any of the American revolutionists, was at the same time an adroit politician, who organized the first opposition party in the new nation, an accomplishment that could scarcely accord either with ungoverned passions or a predilection for despotism.

It may be coincidence that so many Virginians who grew up after the advent of slavery turned out to be ardent republicans. And it may be coincidence that among their predecessors who lived before slavery became prevalent, so many were unrepublican, unattractive, and unscrupulous, not to say depraved. On the other hand, there may have been more than coincidence involved. Although it seems unlikely that slavery had any tendency to improve the character of masters, it may have had affinities with republicanism that escaped Jefferson's analysis. The presence of men and women who were, in law at least, almost totally subject to the will of other men gave to those in control of them an immediate experience of what it could mean to be at the mercy of a tyrant. Virginians may have had a special appreciation of the freedom dear to republicans, because they saw every day what life without it could be like.

There were other affinities between slavery and republicanism, as we shall see. But, whatever the reason, it is clear that Virginia's great planters were extraordinarily receptive to the "republican way of thinking." And it was that way of thinking which completed the elevation of the small planter and solidified the identity of interest among planters, large and small. Republicanism had always been associated with men who worked in the ground. Aristotle had laid down the axiom that "the best material of democracy is an agricultural population," and that people engaged in other occupations had "no room" for the virtues that were necessary to a republic.²⁷ Har-

²⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VI.

rington and Sydney had elaborated Aristotle's views. In their pages Virginians could read that the liberty of a people depended not merely on constant vigilance against monarchical encroachments but on the wide diffusion of land and virtue and arms. Men who labored on their own land grew not only food but independence. No would-be tyrant could starve them into submission or win their votes with paltry promises. If they were armed with guns as well as land, they would have both the will and the means to defend their country's freedom against usurpation from within and invasion from without. The yeoman farmer, standing foursquare on his own plot of land, gun in hand and virtue in his heart, was thus the ideal citizen of a republic. Thomas Jefferson was echoing an old republican tradition when he argued that "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God," that "the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any state to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts."²⁸

To be sure, Virginia's husbandmen did not all fit the picture that Jefferson drew. In particular they did not seem to many observers to exhibit the virtue that their labors in the soil should have generated.²⁹ Nor did they all qualify as yeoman farmers by owning their own land. There had always been tenancy in Virginia, and it seems to have grown in the last part of the eighteenth century,³⁰ so that many of Virginia's small men did not have the independence that came from being able to bid defiance to landlords. Nevertheless, during the colonial period there were enough who did own land to make Virginia, in the eyes of Virginians at least, a land to fit the

²⁸ Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 164-65. A classic work, much read but still unpublished, is Douglass Adair, "The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicanism, the Class Struggle, and the Virtuous Farmer" (doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 1943).

²⁹ Marvin L. Brown, ed., *Baroness von Riedesel and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1965), 85-86; Newton D. Mereness, ed., *Travels in the American Colonies* (New York, 1916), 591-92; Ferdinand-Marie Bayard, *Travels of a Frenchman in Maryland and Virginia*, Ben C. McCary, ed. and trans. (Williamsburg, 1950), 42; Thomas Anburey, *Travels through the Interior Parts of America* (London, 1791), II, 309-11; Elkanah Watson, *Men and Times of the Revolution* (2nd ed., New York, 1856), 71-72; Samuel Kercheval, *A History of the Valley of Virginia* (3rd ed., Woodstock, Va., 1902), 294, 297.

³⁰ Willard F. Bliss, "The Rise of Tenancy in Virginia," *VMHB*, LVIII (1950), 427-41; Jackson T. Main, "The Distribution of Property in Post-Revolutionary Virginia," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLI (1954), 241-58. Cf. Williams, "Small Farmer in Eighteenth-Century Virginia Politics," 93.

picture in the republican textbooks. Even the small farmers themselves seem to have shared the vision. Although few would have gained it from reading, they were willing to be taught by their literate neighbors. A half century or more of populist politics, of being called out to defeat with their votes the designs of royal governors or of rival politicians, had given them an understanding of the political role that yeomen were supposed to play in a republic. Edmund Randolph, remarking on their willingness to stand with their larger neighbors in the contest with England, observed that they “seemed to catch the full spirit of the theories which at the fountain-head were known only to men of studious retirement.”³¹

An easy familiarity between large men and small had grown up over the years. A young English minister who came to Virginia at the end of the eighteenth century was surprised to find that “Those European prejudices are not known which insulate the man of rank and property and make him solitary in the midst of society. The man who made such pretensions to superiority would be despised.”³² Another Englishman, who had lived long in Virginia, noted that the rude manners of the lower class frightened the European “who expects to find in all men those gradations of humble distance to which he may happen to have been accustomed.” But he advised the foreign traveler to put off his haughty airs: let him “accost them like fellow mortals of the same species, and they will be the first to do him a real service.”³³ Thomas Anburey, a captured British officer, on parole during the Revolutionary War, remarked on the way in which the “levelling principle” animated the colony, especially during the war. He cited an episode at Tuckahoe, the plantation of Colonel Thomas Mann Randolph near Richmond. Anburey was enjoying an evening with the colonel when three “peasants” (a word which no native Virginian would have used)

entered the room where the Colonel and his company were sitting, took themselves chairs, drew near the fire, began spitting, pulling off their country boots all over mud, and then opened their business, which was simply about some continental flour to be ground

³¹ Edmund Randolph, *History of Virginia*, Arthur H. Shaffer, ed. (Charlottesville, 1970), 193.

³² Harry Toulmin, *The Western Country in 1783: Reports on Kentucky and Virginia*, Marion Tinling and Godfrey Davies, eds. (San Marino, Calif., 1948), 40. Cf. William Eddis, *Letters from America*, Aubrey C. Land, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), 65.

³³ Tatham, *Historical and Practical Essay on Tobacco*, 60.

at the Colonel's mill: when they were gone, some one observed what great liberties they took: he replied, it was unavoidable, the spirit of independency was converted into equality, and every one who bore arms, esteemed himself upon a footing with his neighbour, and concluded with saying, "No doubt, each of these men conceives himself, in every respect, my equal."³⁴

Firearms were great levelers, and the use of them by ordinary men against established authority was in itself enough to generate leveling thoughts. Republican ideology encouraged such thoughts, and those who drew their ideas from the fountainhead expressed them continually. The wartime phase of republican exaltation of the farmer was an exaltation of the militia, an insistence on an organized armed populace. George Mason was expressing the standard republican view when he drafted for the Fairfax County Committee of Safety a resolution declaring that "a well regulated Militia, composed of Gentlemen Freeholders, and other freemen, is the natural strength and only stable security of a free Government." Mason doubtless expected the "other freemen" to be led by officers drawn from the "gentlemen freeholders." But his own prescription for a well-regulated militia included annual election of officers by the men they commanded, and his argument for such elections was premised on the fact that "We came equals into this world, and equals shall we go out of it. All men are by nature born equally free and independent."³⁵

Other Virginia patricians expressed a similar devotion to equality. One, who cast himself in the columns of the *Gazette* as "the Independent Whig," warned Virginians, after the winning of independence, that their new government could thrive only as long as it suppressed any aristocratic tendencies. "Without *equality*," he explained, "the attachment to the Commonwealth grows weak . . . the people lose sight of their original institutions, and sink into slavery." The Independent Whig wanted none of England's mixed government: "He who talks of *Kings, Lords and Commons*, and is in love with the *constitution* of Britain, is either a fool or a knave." And looking about him, he could announce, "We have no such materials here to build with."³⁶

It speaks volumes about the prevailing sentiments that an ardent

³⁴ Anburey, *Travels*, II, 329-30. ³⁵ Mason, *Papers*, I, 212, 229.

³⁶ *Virginia Gazette; or, The American Advertiser*, Jan. 4, 1783. Cf. Brown and Brown, *Virginia, 1705-1786*, 32-34.

advocate of equality could see neither aristocracy nor materials for aristocracy in Virginia. What blindness affected him and Virginia's other advocates of equality? Surely they could not have wished to make equality a literal fact, to pull down Westover and Mt. Vernon and Carter's Grove, not to mention Monticello, and replace them with farmhouses? It was one thing to be on familiar terms with the lower classes, but did Virginia's patricians wish to promote their own demise? Did not the exhortations to equality invite slaves, servants, and small farmers to turn them out?

The question occurred later to an astute English diplomat, who served in Washington during Jefferson's presidency. During his tour of duty Sir Augustus John Foster visited both the northern and the southern states and was surprised to find in the North a greater attention to social distinctions than in the South. Virginians above all others seemed bent on reducing all men to an equal footing. "Owners of slaves," he observed, "among themselves, are all for keeping down every kind of superiority"; and he attributed this affectation in part to their "being rivals in their own states for the voice of the people, whom they court by dressing and looking like them as much as they can." But he had a further explanation why the South could outdo the North in its zeal for equality. The Virginians, he said, "can profess an unbounded love of liberty and of democracy in consequence of the mass of the people, who in other countries might become mobs, being there nearly altogether composed of their own Negro slaves. . . ." ³⁷

There it was. Aristocrats could more safely preach equality in a slave society than in a free one. Slaves did not become leveling mobs, because their owners would see to it that they had no chance to. The apostrophes to equality were not addressed to them. And because Virginia's labor force was composed mainly of slaves, who had been isolated by race and removed from the political equation, the remaining free laborers and tenant farmers were too few in number to constitute a serious threat to the superiority of the men who assured them of their equality. Moreover, the small farmers had been given a reason to see themselves as already the equals of the large. The majority of households in Virginia, as we have seen, contained more than one tithable, and in such cases the working members of

³⁷ Richard B. Davis, ed., *Jeffersonian America: Notes on the United States of America Collected in the Years 1805-6-7 and 11-12 by Sir Augustus John Foster, Bart.* (San Marino, Calif., 1954), 163, 307.

the household, other than the head, were probably by this time slaves. The small planter's small stake in human property placed him on the same side of the fence as the large man, whom he regularly elected to protect his interests. Virginia's small farmers could perceive a common identity with the large, because there was one, even more compelling than those we have already noticed. Neither was a slave. And both were equal in not being slaves.

This is not to say that a belief in republican equality had to rest on slavery, but only that in Virginia (and probably in other southern colonies) it did. The most ardent American republicans were Virginians, and their ardor was not unrelated to their power over the men and women they held in bondage. In the republican way of thinking as Americans inherited it from England, slavery occupied a critical, if ambiguous, position: it was the primary evil that men sought to avoid for society as a whole by curbing monarchs and establishing republics. But it was also the solution to one of society's most serious problems, the problem of the poor. Virginians could outdo English republicans as well as New England ones, partly because they had solved the problem: they had achieved a society in which most of the poor were enslaved.

The poor had figured largely in the thinking of the men who promoted the founding of Virginia, both the poor who fed the gallops in England and the poor whom the Spanish oppressed in America. In spite of the severe laws by which England dealt with beggars in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, there had been compassion (and no zeal for equality) in the plans of a Richard Hakluyt for redeeming the wretched in the New World. But the seventeenth century had seen the simultaneous rise of republican thinking and of that contempt for the poor which we have already noticed. The two were closely connected. The calls for enslavement of poor and disorderly Englishmen and Scotsmen came not so much from royalists as from the men who drew their inspiration out of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth and out of the revolution that sent James II packing.

John Locke, who wrote the classic defense of the right of revolution, does not seem to have thought of extending that right to the poor. His proposals for working schools where the children of the poor would learn labor—and nothing but labor—from the age of three stopped a little short of enslavement, though it may require a certain refinement of mind to discern the difference. Locke was no republican; but the most admired among England's eighteenth-

century commonwealthmen, admired at least in America, held similarly dichotomous views. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, the authors of *Cato's Letters*, were probably the most eloquent English advocates of equality. "Equality," they insisted, "is the Soul of liberty." And because "Liberty can never subsist without Equality," they wanted government to limit the acquisition of property. The superiority of one man over another, they proclaimed, was the result either of force or folly. But like Locke defending revolution, Trenchard and Gordon seem to have been talking about men who were not poor, for one of their harshest diatribes was against the charity schools that "were breeding up Beggars to be what are called Scholars. . . . putting Chimera's and airy Notions into the Heads of those who ought to have Pickaxes in their Hands."³⁸

Trenchard and Gordon did not propose enslaving beggars, but some of the people we have seen proposing it were equally ardent commonwealthmen, like James Burgh, who wanted to enslave "idle and disorderly persons," and Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, who wanted to enslave 200,000 Scotsmen, roughly the number of slaves in Virginia. Burgh and Fletcher both ranked high in the esteem of American republicans, and especially in the esteem of Virginia's and America's arch-republican, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson encouraged a Philadelphia printer to bring out an American edition of Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* in 1775; and he later hailed in Fletcher a patriot whose political principles were those "in vigour at the epoch of the American emigration [from England]. Our ancestors brought them here, and they needed little strengthening to make us what we are. . . ." ³⁹ In the republican way of thinking, zeal for liberty and equality could go hand in hand with contempt for the poor and plans for enslaving them.

The combination, which to us seems bizarre and unnatural, may become more comprehensible if we take a closer look at the role of the independent yeoman farmer and at the role of the not-so-independent poor in republican thought. We have seen that the commonwealthmen elevated the yeoman farmer and insisted on his independence to resist the encroachments of tyranny. By the same token they distrusted anyone who could be bent to the will of another.

³⁸ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters; or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other important Subjects* (3rd ed., London, 1733), I, 101; II, 16, 86, IV, 243.

³⁹ Sowerby, *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 192; III, 125.

They knew, of course, that society always contained a body of people who remained dependent, women and children, for example. But women and children posed no threat if joined to independent men. Neither did the impotent and aged. And neither did slaves. It was the able-bodied poor, nominally but not actually independent, who spelled danger to liberty. Not only did they contribute nothing to the common welfare, but they sapped the independence of those who had to succor them. What was worse, an ambitious adventurer could buy them with bread, and arm them to attack the liberty of the rest. When Andrew Fletcher proposed enslaving them, it was not to make them wards of the state, which would have aggravated the danger, but to spread them among the independent landholders, whose strength they would thereby increase instead of diminish.

Fletcher did not consider the possibility of transforming the poor into independent yeomen. There were far too many of them and too little land. Fletcher's Scotland already contained many landowners whose holdings were too small to give them the independence they needed in order to play their republican role, and it also contained some large holders who had more than they cultivated. At the same time that he proposed enslaving beggars, Fletcher proposed a complex scheme the effect of which would be to confiscate and consolidate into viable, productive tracts both the excess lands of the over-rich and the too small patches of the inadequate yeomen. In this way everyone who had land would have enough to be a prosperous, independent defender of freedom, bolstered by the labors of the former scruff and scum of Scotland.⁴⁰

Poverty, then, in republican thought, was as much a threat to liberty as the ambition of monarchs and of over-rich landlords. And some British republicans thought it better to enslave the poor than be enslaved by them or by the demagogic leaders that their condition invited. The solution was drastic—there is no reason to suppose that Jefferson, in praising Fletcher, was endorsing it—but the problem it dealt with loomed large among men who thought about freedom, even in America, where the poor appeared to be few. Concern about the dependent poor lay behind two of Jefferson's seemingly irrational phobias that appear at first sight to be unrelated to his views on slavery: his obsessive aversions to debt and to manufacturing. The trouble with debt was that it undermined the independence of the debtor. It opened him to pressure from his creditors

⁴⁰ Fletcher, *Second Discourse on the Affairs of Scotland*, 102–19.

and thereby limited his freedom and his capacity to defend freedom. A nation of men each of whom owned enough property to support his family could be a republic, but a nation of debtors, who had lost their property or mortgaged it to creditors, was ripe for tyranny.⁴¹

Manufacturers—the landless artisans who had only their labor to support them—were even more dangerous than debtors. They were dependent on “the casualties and caprice of customers.” If work was scarce, they had no land to fall back on for a living. They were likely to be, at least periodically, poor and dependent. In their dependence lay the danger. “Dependance,” Jefferson argued, “begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.” Because artisans could lay claim to freedom though they did not have the land-based independence that should go with it, they were “the instruments by which the liberties of a country are generally overturned.”⁴²

Jefferson would have liked the United States to be a country without manufacturers and without poor, without the instruments by which its liberties could be overturned. There seemed at the time to be enough land in America to support an unlimited population of pure yeomen farmers. And yet—would it be possible in the long run to have a society without a body of dependent poor? Jefferson’s friend James Madison did not think so. When Jefferson saw the masses of poor in France, he suggested to Madison that they had a natural right to appropriate the surplus lands held by the French nobility.⁴³ Madison in reply doubted that there would be enough land to give all the people independence in any country as populous as France. “A certain degree of misery,” he concluded, “seems inseparable from a high degree of populousness.”⁴⁴ In other words, the poor ye have always with you, whether in a monarchy or a republic.

Jefferson and Madison differed from their contemporaries in possessing an extraordinarily acute perception both of the perils that beset republican liberty and of the strengths it possessed for meeting those perils. But they were not ahead of their fellow Virginians in perceiving the dangers that lurked in the freedom of the dependent poor. It did not necessarily follow that because of those

⁴¹ For examples of Jefferson’s aversion to debt and corresponding distrust of credit see his *Papers*, Julian P. Boyd, ed. (Princeton, 1950–), II, 275–76; VIII, 398–99, 632–33; IX, 217–18, 472–73; X, 304–5, 615; XI, 472, 633, 636, 640; XII, 385–86.

⁴² *Ibid.*, VIII, 426; *Notes on Virginia*, 165.

⁴³ Jefferson, *Papers*, VIII, 681–83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, IX, 659–60.

dangers the poor must be enslaved. But it did follow that the keepers of republican liberty must be wary of extending a share of it to men who were incapable of defending it and might become a means of destroying it. If the poor were already enslaved, would it not be wise to keep them so? Virginia, in spite of her abundant lands, had already encountered a rebellion of the unenslaved poor in 1676. Since then she had gradually replaced her free labor force with slaves, and by 1776 she enjoyed the situation that Andrew Fletcher had wished to achieve in Scotland. Two-fifths of Virginia's people were as poor as it is possible to get; but they were all enslaved, and all worked productively for private masters, who were thereby strengthened in their independence and able to take the lead in resisting British tyranny. As if to underline the connection, the Virginia assembly voted in 1780 to reward its soldiers in the fight for freedom with a bounty of 300 acres of land *and* a slave.⁴⁵

Virginia's republicans had the decency to be disturbed by the apparent inconsistency of what they were doing. But they were far more disturbed by the prospect of turning 200,000 slaves loose to find a place in their free society. "If you free the slaves," wrote Landon Carter, two days after the Declaration of Independence, "you must send them out of the country or they must steal for their support."⁴⁶ They would be, after all, what they were, poor, and they would exhibit the congenital laziness and immorality of the poor. Jefferson himself thought that slaves could not safely be freed unless they were exiled. And the only serious plan for their emancipation, proposed by St. George Tucker in 1796, would have transformed their slavery into a kind of serfdom, under which they would still be compelled to labor, lest they become "idle, dissipated, and finally a numerous banditti."⁴⁷ But even Tucker's plan seemed too dangerous to receive serious consideration.

One wonders if it might not have been taken more seriously if Virginia's slaves had belonged to the same race as their masters. The fact that they did not made it easier for Virginians to use slavery as a flying buttress to freedom. The English had come to view their poor almost as an alien race, with inbred traits of character that justified plans for their enslavement or incarceration in workhouses.

⁴⁵ Hening, X, 331. ⁴⁶ Carter, *Diary*, II, 1055.

⁴⁷ St. George Tucker, *A Dissertation on Slavery with a Proposal for the Gradual Abolition of It, in the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1796). See also Jordan, *White over Black*, 555-60.



Almost, but not quite. It required continual denunciations from a battery of philosophers and reformers; it even required special badges, to proclaim the differentness of the poor to the undiscerning, who might otherwise mistake them for ordinary men.

In Virginia neither badges nor philosophers were needed. It was not necessary to pretend or to prove that the enslaved were a different race, because they were. Anyone could tell black from white, even if black was actually brown or red. And as the number of poor white Virginians diminished, the vicious traits of character attributed by Englishmen to their poor could in Virginia increasingly appear to be the exclusive heritage of blacks. They were ungrateful, irresponsible, lazy, and dishonest. "A Negroe can't be honest," said Landon Carter and filled his diary with complaints of the congenital laziness and ingratitude of black men.⁴⁸

Racism thus absorbed in Virginia the fear and contempt that men in England, whether Whig or Tory, monarchist or republican, felt for the inarticulate lower classes. Racism made it possible for white Virginians to develop a devotion to the equality that English republicans had declared to be the soul of liberty. There were too few free poor on hand to matter. And by lumping Indians, mulattoes, and Negroes in a single pariah class, Virginians had paved the way for a similar lumping of small and large planters in a single master class.

Virginians knew that the members of this class were not in fact equal, either in property or in virtue, just as they knew that Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians were not one and the same. But the forces which dictated that Virginians see Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians as one also dictated that they see large and small planters as one. Racism became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of the republican ideology that enabled Virginians to lead the nation.

How Virginian, then, was America? How heavily did American economic opportunity and political freedom rest on Virginia's slaves? If Virginia had continued to rely on the importation of white servants, would they have headed north when they turned free and brought insoluble problems of poverty with them? Would they have threatened the peace and prosperity of Philadelphia and New York and Boston, where the poor were steadily growing in numbers anyhow? Would Northerners have embraced republican ideas of equality so readily if they had been surrounded by men in "a certain

⁴⁸ Carter, *Diary*, I, 254, 290-92, 295, 300, 301, 303, 316, 429-30, 576.

degree of misery”? And could the new United States have made a go of it in the world of nations without Virginia and without the products of slave labor? Northern republicans apparently thought not. Some could not condone slavery and talked of breaking loose from the South in their own independent confederation. But the fact is that they did not. They allowed Virginians to compose the documents that founded their republic, and they chose Virginians to chart its course for a generation.

Eventually, to be sure, the course the Virginians charted for the United States proved the undoing of slavery. And a Virginia general gave up at Appomattox the attempt to support freedom with slavery. But were the two more closely linked than his conquerors could admit? Was the vision of a nation of equals flawed at the source by contempt for both the poor and the black? Is America still colonial Virginia writ large? More than a century after Appomattox the questions linger.

