

Scott Terlouw

*God's Own Country:
Race, Religion, and the Development of Slavery in Colonial Virginia*

ABSTRACT: *This essay focuses on the centrality of slavery to the creation of white American identity in colonial Virginia. Using legislation from the Virginia Colonial Assembly stored at the British National Archives in London and accessible via the Adam Matthew "CO 5 Colonial America" database, it first discusses the growth of slavery within the larger context of servitude, then the deliberate connection of enslavement with race in colonial law, and finally the role of religion in upholding slavery. It argues that the development of slavery throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflected changes in concepts of servitude, race, and religion and contributed to the formation of white colonial identity.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; American colonial history; British colonies; Virginia; colonialism; slavery; identity; race; religion; legislation*

Introduction

From the arrival of the first enslaved Africans at Jamestown in 1619 to the massive slave estates of the American Founding Fathers, slavery has been woven into the fabric of the American experience. The arrival of the first African slaves in Virginia marked a shift in the development of white colonial identity. Throughout colonial Virginia, *whiteness* became central to the development of a distinctly *American* identity, tied to concepts of freedom and liberty. As Virginia legislation explicitly tied *blackness* to slavery, the lived experiences of both white colonists and enslaved people reveal the many ways early American colonists bent concepts like race and religion to suit the exploitation of their fellow man. This essay argues that the development of slavery throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflected changes in colonial concepts of servitude, race, and religion.

Using evidence from Virginia's colonial legislation, it became apparent how colonial law bound slavery to skin color and justified enslavement on the basis of religious Scripture. This essay explores how the development of slavery as an institution shaped the ways white Virginians defined their own identity and concepts of personhood and liberty, as well as the methods used to enslave non-whites within the colony. It utilizes primary sources from the colony of Virginia stored in the British National Archives in London and accessible via the Adam Matthew *CO 5 Colonial America* database. The documents referenced below range from 1662 to 1736, capturing a time span of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when slavery both grew and was cemented under colonial law. By looking at early documentation of colonial slave codes, I hoped to understand the methods by which colonial administrators both justified and codified the treatment of the enslaved. I set out hoping to find letters and first-hand accounts of slave experiences, but upon searching the database, it was from colonial legislation that I drew most of the evidence for this essay. This was revealing. White colonists, particularly administrators and the colonial elite, did not take the time to write personal accounts of their slaves' experiences. Slaves, in the white

colonial mindset, were property, and a slaveholder would no more write of his livestock than he would of his slave. What emerged was a picture of dehumanization through numeration, as slaves' births and deaths were counted on lists and ledgers, void of humanity.¹ The lived experience of the enslaved in the Virginia colony has largely been left out of the historical record, as their voices were never recorded. What is left is a look into the hearts and minds of white Virginians and how the brutalization of an entire group of people was commonplace, an enshrined part of colonial life. The lack of resources from non-white voices led me to shift the direction of this essay. Rather than focus entirely on the lived experiences of the slaves themselves (which are largely absent from the historical record), I chose to center this essay around the startling ways white colonists upheld the institution of slavery.

By analyzing the language of colonial legislation, the relationship between colonists and the enslaved paints a fascinating picture of cognitive dissonance. Couched in the language of the law, what emerged was a glimpse into the minds of white, colonial Virginians. In these documents, white colonists were always careful to uphold themselves as honest, hard-working Christians, while at the same time damning an entire group of trafficked people to slavery. Colonial law both justified and ameliorated guilt for the treatment of African slaves. For instance, when comparing laws that listed punishments for indentured servants compared to those which stipulated punishments for black slaves, far more than just the difference in treatment stood out. Laws that permitted the causal killing of slaves illustrated the deep insecurity and fear surrounding race upon which the colony was founded. White colonists had to hold the moral high ground, while at the same time protecting themselves from the very real possibility of slave uprisings. White colonists used daily violence and a culture of oppression to ensure that their slaves remained obedient; at the same time, they used Scripture to project their moral and spiritual authority over the enslaved.

The first section of this essay looks at the ways "servant" and "slave" became separated under colonial law, and the way this reflected changes in the concepts of servitude in the colony. Next, it addresses how race became central to the legalization of slavery in the colony; it also seeks to bring Native American experiences into the narrative of slavery by looking at how Native Americans fit into both the system of indentured servitude and slavery practiced in the Virginia colony. The final section of this essay turns to religion and the many ways white Virginians used Christianity to justify and uphold the evils of slavery.

I. Slavery and Indentured Servitude

Colonial Virginia was built upon the backs of forced labor, both indentured and enslaved. The treatment of white indentured servants, however, was markedly

¹ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

different from that of African slaves. While both were vital to setting up a colony in the New World, far away from the comforts of England, labor from white indentured servitude would be replaced by the emerging slave economy. Tobacco and other cash crops were grown on the backs of slave labor, as white colonists imported enslaved men and women from the western coast of Africa for work in the fields of Virginia. Many of these slaves worked alongside white indentured servants, European men and women too poor to make their own way to the colonies and start an independent life.

While their work may have been similar, both the treatment and legal status of the two classes of laborers could not have been more different. White indentured servants were protected under colonial law from abuse at the hands of their masters, and the law stipulated that, should a master behave improperly or abuse a servant, it had to be ensured that “the servant have remedy for his grievances”² in a court of law. Slaves had no such recourse under colonial law and were not considered legal persons in their own right. The protections afforded white servants under Virginia law are clear in the punishments of unruly servants, who would be punished with additional time added to their servitude, or, at worst, time in the stocks or lashings.³ For African slaves, however, lashings were always stipulated as punishments for unruly behavior, along with brandings, beatings, and other forms of physical violence.⁴

Rather than purchase indentured servants whose terms of service were limited, it proved more lucrative for Virginia planters to purchase vast numbers of slaves who would serve for life. Compared to the cost of an indentured servant, slaves were more expensive upfront; however, the enslaved were not paid wages and remained the personal property of their owners in perpetuity. Furthermore, the enslaved had no legal personhood that protected them from abuse at the hands of their enslavers. As colonial law enshrined slavery as a lifetime condition, enslaved Africans suffered at the hands of their white owners, who perpetrated upon the enslaved acts of violence and abuse with the knowledge that the Virginia law protected the rights of white men to do with their property as they saw fit.⁵

A quality shared by both servants and the enslaved, however, was their status as taxed members of the community. This was evident in that *both* servants and the enslaved were considered taxable and tithable; however, neither group was

² “Cruelty of masters prohibited, 23 Mar 1662,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662–1697, from The British National Archives, *CO 5 Colonial America* [database], accessed May 18, 2022. All subsequent references pertain to the same database and were accessed on the same date.

³ “Against unruly servants, 23 Mar 1662,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662–1697.

⁴ “An act for punishment of fornication, and several other sins and offences, 24 Sep 1696,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662–1697.

⁵ “An act about the casual killing of slaves, 20 Oct 1669,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662–1697.

responsible for the taxes owed to the county or parish, rather it was their masters who were responsible for paying those fees on their behalf.⁶

The condition of bondage for indentured servants and the enslaved was contingent upon different factors. White men and women were kept as servants for a pre-determined length of time, most often not exceeding a decade. Enslaved Africans in Virginia, however, had their freedom made dependent on the condition of the child's mother.⁷ By cementing enslavement as a status for life, colonial legislation removed any possibility for enslaved Africans to achieve their freedom without the intervention of their white enslavers. To contemporary Europeans, the idea that a white Christian should keep another white Christian as anything but a servant was unthinkable, but from the establishment of colonial Virginia, colonial law enshrined the slavery of black Africans at the hands of white colonists. Race, therefore, became the contingent factor upon which enslavement was founded.

II. Slavery and Race

Colonial belief in the superiority of the white race over non-whites underpinned all language that surrounded slavery. By exploring the way that Virginia legislation laid out the societal and legal expectations meted out to whites, blacks, and Native Americans, it is apparent how white Virginians used race as a means to both organize the hierarchy of the colony as well as justify abuses perpetrated by whites upon the enslaved. By looking at the lived experiences of non-whites in colonial Virginia, it also becomes apparent how white colonists viewed their place in the colonial hierarchy. White men in Virginia viewed it as their duty to uphold order within the colony. Slavery as an institution intrinsically connected to race, and the visibility of a slave population was central to the development of the colonial sense of white identity. In many ways, white Virginians defined themselves—and their rights and liberties—*against* those of the enslaved. Even when free, non-whites were not permitted to keep a white Christian as a slave or servant,⁸ as if race and servitude were bound together; it would have never been appropriate in the eyes of white colonists for a non-white to keep a white person as a servant, based on the inherent worth given to white people and denied to the enslaved. Non-whites were, however, able to keep others of “their own complexion” as servants and enslaved labor. Thus, even for free people of color, race was an inescapable fact of life. The condition of slavery was inexorably tied to skin color, leaving white colonists free to abuse non-whites based on the codification of white skin as superior, both morally and legally, to black skin.

⁶ “An act concerning titheables born in the country 24 Sep 1672,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662-1697.

⁷ “An act for punishment of fornication, and several other sins and offences, 24 Sep 1696,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662-1697.

⁸ “An act declaring no Indians nor negroes to buy Christian servants, 3 Oct 1670,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662-1697.

White identity also centered around a need for white men to protect their community, either from unruly slaves or enemy native tribes. White men were required to carry their "Arms, Ammunitions, and Accoutrements"⁹ when they gathered on Holy Days, to enforce order in the case of a slave insurrection. White identity became focused around the premise that, without white men, order would dissolve, chaos would reign in the New World, and "savage" natives and enslaved blacks would indiscriminately destroy the white way of life. Skin color also became a way by which whites organized the social relations of their colony: to protect the racial integrity of the colony, ministers were forbidden from marrying whites and non-whites.¹⁰ White identity became contingent upon the ability to enslave and keep non-whites who were deemed property or, at the very least, potential property. White identity defined itself in contrast to the experience of black slaves, as colonists outlined in legislation the numerous freedoms they, as white Britons, were entitled to, while in the same breath curtailing any liberties enjoyed by non-whites. Punishments that stipulated thirty lashes for any non-white that should strike a white colonist stood in stark contrast to the fines and other punishments for white colonists guilty of the same crime.¹¹ Freedom under the law was vital to the sense of independence held by white colonists, and the denial of these rights to the enslaved cemented white colonists' sense of entitlement and ownership over the New World.

That enslaved Africans suffered daily violence at the hands of their white colonial masters cannot be overstated. Brutality and oppression were a way of life on a slave plantation in colonial Virginia, and the heavy workload, poor living conditions, and abuse led to increased mortality and lower birth rates among the enslaved. According to a ledger of births and deaths in Virginia between 1725 and 1726, slave births occurred at half the rate of white births, and slave mortality was double what it was for white colonists.¹² Movement of non-whites was highly restricted under colonial law, with black people forbidden from gathering, "especially on Holy Days wherein they are exempted from Labour."¹³ Such gatherings of non-whites were a source of fear for white Virginians, as the large black population in some locations outnumbered the white population. The

⁹ "Proclamations concerning the assembly, the militia and slavery, 29 Oct-1 Nov 1736," Virginia to the Board of Trade, 1736-1740.

¹⁰ "An act concerning servants and slaves, 23 Oct 1705," A collection of all the Acts of assembly, now in force, in the colony of Virginia, 1662-1740.

¹¹ "An act concerning servants and slaves, 23 Oct 1705," A collection of all the Acts of assembly, 1662-1740; "An act declaring the negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves within this dominion to be real estate, 23 Oct 1705," A collection of all the Acts of assembly, now in force, in the colony of Virginia, 1662-1740.

¹² "An account of all births and deaths of free people and slaves within the Colony of Virginia, 15 Apr 1725-15 Apr 1726," Virginia to the Board of Trade, 1726-1727.

¹³ "Proclamations concerning the assembly, the militia and slavery, 29 Oct-1 Nov 1736," Virginia to the Board of Trade, 1736-1740.

possibility of a slave revolt was always at the forefront of the colonial imagination. In order to prevent organized rebellions, numerous acts were passed by the colonial legislature throughout the seventeenth century which established the illegality of enslaved black people to gather.¹⁴

The presence of Native Americans complicated the racial hierarchy of white Virginians. Native Americans' position within the colonial hierarchy was complex and highly interconnected with trade relations between native tribes and colonial settlers. White colonists enslaved Indians; however; more often than not, this relationship mirrored the indentured servitude of white servants rather than the chattel slavery forced upon Africans. Indian women, in particular, were kept as household servants by white Virginians and were not classified as the personal property of their masters.¹⁵

While both enslaved Africans and Native Americans were considered taxable members of the community (again, these taxes and tithes would be owed to the parish by their masters),¹⁶ the conditions under which a Native American would be enslaved differed from the experience of black Africans. Most enslaved Africans in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were captured and shipped across the Atlantic in brutal conditions. Native Americans, like Africans, were more often captured as part of tribal warfare and sold by their own race into bondage. Unlike Africans, however, enslaved Native Americans still resided on or near their ancestral land. In cases where Native Americans were shipped long distances, networks of existing tribal relations ensured that Native Americans had a community to turn to for protection in a way that enslaved Africans did not. Perhaps as a way of lessening the colonists' direct involvement (and therefore culpability) in the Indian slave trade, colonial law codified that "all Indians which shall hereafter be sold by our neighbouring Indians"¹⁷ should be considered slaves, revealing most Native American slaves were sold into slavery by other Native Americans. Similar to the enslavement of Africans, it was their own people (or, at least, people that the colonists viewed as a single group) who captured and sold other Native Americans to white Virginians as slaves.

Kinship groups and tribal customs protected Native Americans from the worst abuses suffered by enslaved black people, as good trade relations had to be maintained between white colonists and native tribes. These relations were contingent upon the decent treatment of natives in the service of white masters; should white Virginians have gained the reputation among the tribal nations that

¹⁴ "Proclamations concerning the assembly, the militia and slavery, 29 Oct-1 Nov 1736," Virginia to the Board of Trade, 1736-1740; "An act for suppressing outlying slaves, 16 Apr 1691," Virginia: Abstracts of laws, 1662-1702.

¹⁵ "An act declaring Indian women servants tithable, 10 Nov 1682," Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662-1697.

¹⁶ "What persons are tithable 23 Mar 1662," Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662-1697.

¹⁷ "An act to repeal a former law making Indians and others free, 10 Nov 1682," Virginia: Abstracts of laws, 1662-1702.

they captured, sold, and abused native people on a massive scale (as was done with Africans), colonial trade relations would have suffered. Economic and trade motivations were crucial for the removal of Native Americans from the institution of slavery throughout the eighteenth century, as colonists relied more heavily on imported enslaved Africans than Native Americans as a source of enslaved labor.

III. Slavery and Religion

Aside from colonial conceptions of servitude and race, religion played a vital role in the formation of slavery under colonial law. Religion was central to the daily life and experience of Virginians throughout the colonial period; therefore, white colonists had to mold slavery—despite being a clear violation of Christian morality—to fit within the moral guidelines of their faith. Upon their conversion to Christianity, either by birth or during arrival to the plantation, slaves were mandated to attend Sunday church services. During such sermons, slaveholders used the Bible to preach messages of docility and acceptance to the enslaved. Passages outlining the work of Biblical servants and the rights of masters over their households were read to slaves as a means of instruction and justification for the brutal servitude and cruelty of slavery. Furthermore, laws surrounding the conduct of the enslaved, as well as outlining punishments for disobedience, were read out at church services on consecutive Sundays, so that no enslaved person in the parish or on the plantation “may have Pretence of Ignorance”¹⁸ about what was expected of them. Black slaves were expected to attend church as both a means of social control and to facilitate communication between colonial officials and often far-flung plantations. Religious services and Sunday sermons became a way of spreading information, both between the colonial administration and their enslaved workers as well as between the enslaved themselves. The fear that black religious gatherings invoked in the white imagination was a direct result of the organizing and communal principles of Christianity that had been imparted to black Africans by the very people who sought to keep them apart.

It should be noted that not all white Christian Virginians agreed on the morality of enslaving non-whites. Even in the seventeenth century, white colonists debated whether those they enslaved, upon conversion to Christianity, should be freed from bondage. Colonial legislation passed in 1667 sought to clarify the issue, alleviating “doubts [that] have risen whether children that are slaves by birth”¹⁹ are freed upon their baptism. Virginia law stated that the baptism of these enslaved infants did not free them from slavery, as the condition of slavery was passed down by the status of the mother, so from birth, it was skin color that decided a slave’s fate, not conversion to the religion of their enslavers. The 1667 act passed in Virginia, which established that baptism did not confer freedom

¹⁸ “An act concerning servants and slaves, 23 Oct 1705,” A collection of all the Acts of assembly, 1662–1740.

¹⁹ “An act declaring that baptism of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage, 23 Sep 1667,” Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662–1697.

upon enslaved Africans, also explicitly encouraged white slaveowners to baptize those they enslaved,²⁰ citing the moral imperative for Christians to spread their faith to native non-Christians as part of the so-called *civilizing* mission of colonization. Another act, passed fifteen years later, reinforced the moral imperative of white slaveholders to convert the enslaved, specifically *because* the law did not free enslaved blacks upon conversion.²¹ Religion in the Virginia colony was central to white expressions of identity, and by utilizing the Bible to control the lives of the enslaved, white colonists suppressed the cognitive dissonance needed to call oneself both a good Christian *and* an enslaver of one's fellow man.

Conclusion

The complexities in the colonial understanding of race and religion underpinned the laws surrounding servitude and slavery in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial Virginia. White colonists used race as part of a legal framework that justified the differing treatment of white servants and non-white slaves based on the color of their skin. Upon completion of their indenture, whites were permitted to settle in the colony as free men and women. In contrast, enslaved Africans, who worked the same land, were denied this right to freedom solely based upon the color of their skin. Alongside race, religion was used as a means of social control over the enslaved population of the Virginia colony, as white colonists used Christian Scripture as a vindication for the abuses of slavery. Debates on the morality of slavery crept into religious communities, leading many white Virginians to use their faith not simply to defend slavery but to wipe away the stain of enslavement from their immortal soul. The study of the development of slavery as an American institution is critical to understanding the history of mistreatment perpetrated against people of color in the later United States. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as religion and race intersected with Virginia legislation defining servitude and enslavement, people of color were subjected to exploitation and violence that continued past the colonial period and well into the founding of the United States. By 1776, it would seem that the noble pursuit of "Liberty and Justice for All" had only just begun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Scott Terlouw of Orange County, California, earned a B.A. in History (2023) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), and is currently pursuing an M.A. in History at CSUF, where he is a member of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). The essay published here originated in a seminar on Colonial American History offered by CSUF's History Department.*

²⁰ "An act declaring that baptism of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage, 23 Sep 1667," Virginia Acts of Assembly, 1662–1697.

²¹ "An act to repeal a former law making Indians and others free, 10 Nov 1682," Virginia: Abstracts of laws, 1662–1702.