

CHAPTER 1

BLACK SLAVE MASTERS?

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

The first Africans to arrive at Jamestown, Virginia were not slaves, but indentured servants, having specified periods of servitude. Indentured servants were not slaves. This distinction is critical. In 1619, indentured servants, white or black, received precisely the same treatment. At the conclusion of their period of servitude, each was entitled to freedom, citizenship, and a land grant of fifty acres. Throughout the colonial period, the basis of land disposition was grants, as all land was held in trust for the King and dispensed by the local government in accordance with his wishes. Land grants in Virginia were issued in accordance with a “headrights” system. Under this system, every person who paid his own way to Virginia would be entitled to fifty acres of land – a headright.

Many Englishmen indentured themselves for a period of years, usually seven or less, in exchange for passage to the new world. A father could sell (indenture) a family of four and, all things being equal, qualify for a parcel of 200 acres. At the conclusion of the period of servitude, each family member was granted title to fifty acres, given their freedom, and subsequently enjoyed all the rights and privileges of other citizens in the community. There was no stigma attached.

There were both economic benefits and civic challenges associated with this practice ~ British law protected the rights of the individual; the master’s power over his indentured servants was limited; and a specific skill must be taught. However, white indentureds could (and often did) slip off to a new colony. A permanent solution had to be found. One was; the Virginia Company changed

the rules to allow anyone to pay any person's transportation to the colony in exchange for a period of indentured servitude. The knowledge of a skill of any kind was not included in this contract. Whoever paid the cost would receive fifty acres of land for each passage purchased. This gave wealthy businessmen the ability to import new workers and negotiate the right to claim the fifty acres. Bonded servants would now get nothing but a trip and often found themselves without rights or freedom. As white indentured servant Thomas Best wrote from Virginia in 1623, "My master Atkins hath sold me for 150 pounds sterling like a damned slave." ¹

How did this state of affairs come about? How could people who came here to escape bondage institutionalize it?

BLIND PEOPLE HAVE ONE ADVANTAGE – THEY CAN'T SEE UGLY

Jamestown, Virginia: August 1619 – Into Chesapeake Bay sailed a vessel ~ "...a Dutch man-of-warre that sold us twenty Negars." ~ John Rolfe, Virginia tobacco farmer

That these Blacks were indentured servants, not slaves, is supported by an entry in the same diary that referenced their arrival:

“...Young maids [90 white females] to make wives for so many of the former tenants [colonists]” were priced by the Virginia Company at not less than “one hundredth and fiftie [pounds] of the best leafe Tobacco.” ²

Thus began what has become arguably one of the most intriguing relationships of the past two centuries.

According to British law, every Christian was equal before the law at that time. Judgment was based not on race, but upon being Christian or non-Christian.

Blacks, if they became Christian and were baptized, were allowed, as were other British citizens, to earn their freedom. These bound servants – black or white; male or female – were considered simply a source of cheap labor, and once the term was served no stigma remained.

Here, history takes a bizarre turn. When I came upon this one particularly astonishing bit of information, I was flabbergasted. Not once had I ever heard so much as a whisper of this, and it flew in the face of everything I knew – everybody knew – about the origins of slavery in the English colonies. Talk about political incorrectness!

Using the method of claiming the fifty acres of an imported servant, one colonist, Anthony Johnson, by indenturing his own family members, was able to secure 250 acres of land. His sons, by the same strategy, gained an additional 650 acres. The Johnsons settled on “Pungoteague Creek” on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and thrived for almost forty years. Johnson raised livestock, prospered, and as was customary with prosperous landowners, indentured one black and several white servants. He sued in court and won several cases, but one case in particular would set the stage for a dramatic shift in the work force, indelibly change the American landscape, and impact relationships between Blacks and Whites for centuries.

There are several reports as to the origin of this landmark case. One report says John Casor, the black indentured servant, “swindled” Johnson out of the remainder of his servitude; another says he “convinced” a white neighbor, Robert Parker, that he was being illegally detained; and still another says the family convinced Johnson to free Casor. Whatever the reason, Johnson was not satisfied with the result and took Casor and Parker to court, alleging that Casor had not been purchased as a servant, but as a slave. Understand the true

significance of this case – Johnson did not sue to have John Casor fulfill some measure of a debt of servitude. Instead, he insisted the court grant his petition "hee had ye Negro for his life." He was claiming the services of John Casor for the remainder of Casor's natural life. To my knowledge, there is no earlier record of judicial support given to slavery in Virginia except as a punishment for crime. Anthony Johnson was asking the court to award him John Casor (who had committed no crime) as a slave. Though Parker and one other influential landowner, both white, sided with Casor, the court ruled for Johnson.

Quoted in the original language taken from the original documents is the decision of County Court:

Court of Northampton; Eight Mar, Anno 1654 ...

Whereas complaint was this daye made to ye court by ye humble petition of Anth. Johnson Negro ag[ains]t Mr. Robert Parker that hee detayneth one John Casor a Negro the plaintiffs Serv[an]t under pretense yt the sd Jno. Casor a Negro is a freeman the court seriously considering & maturely weighing ye premises doe fynd that ye sd Mr. Reboert Parker most unrightly keepeth ye sd Negro John Casor from his r[igh]t of mayster Anth. Johnson as it appeareth by ye Deposition of Capt. Samll Gold smith & many probable circumstances. be it therefore ye Judgement of ye court & ordered that ye sd Jno. Casor negro, shall forthwith bee turned into ye service of his sd master Anthony Johnson and that the sd Mr. Robert Parker make payment of all charges in the suite and execution.³

Hold on! What was that?! To grasp the significance of what I'd just read, I needed to read it slowly and in modern English:

“Whereas complaint was this day made to the court by the humble petition of Anthony Johnson, Negro, against Mr. Robert Parker that he

detains one John Casor, a Negro, the plaintiff's servant under pretense that the said John Casor is a freeman. The court seriously considering and maturely weighing the premises do find that the said Mr. Robert Parker most unrightly keeps the said Negro John Casor from his rightful master Anthony Johnson, as it appears by the Deposition of Capt. Samuel Goldsmith and many probable circumstances. Be it therefore the Judgment of the court and ordered that said John Casor Negro, shall forthwith be turned into the service of his said master, Anthony Johnson, and that the said Mr. Robert Parker make payment of all charges in the suit and execution." (Eighth March, Year 1654)

This is apparently the first legal sanction of slavery (not for a crime) in the New World. From evidence found in the earliest legal documents, Anthony Johnson must be recognized as the nation's first official legal slaveholder. Johnson had been captured in Angola and brought to America as an indentured servant, and herein is the bizarre turn. Anthony Johnson was a black man.

The father of legalized slavery in America was a Black man!

Whoa! I'm thinking to myself – this cannot be! How could a “brother” do that to a “bro?!” How could a black man take away the freedom of another black man? I was disoriented, off balance. After all, I knew, everybody knew, “Whitey” had been the one who chained us. And now I discover the first slave owner was a black man – and the first anti-slavery protest came from a white man?! Surely, this was an aberration. Black people could not possibly possess the inhuman traits of the “white monsters.” Blacks would surely not enslave their own people. No way! Could I be wrong about this? Naaah! But even if it were true, there just could not be another one. Johnson may have been the first, but he was most surely the only one! The danger of knowledge is its tendency to

unsettle. Someone said, “Knowledge is power.” Someone much wiser said, “With much knowledge is much sorrow.”

This from a 1795 court document from Henrico County, Virginia:

“Know all men by these presents that I, James Radford of the County of Henrico for and in consideration of the sum of thirty-three pounds current money of Virginia to me in hand paid by George Radford a **black freeman** of the city of Richmond hath bargained and sold unto George Radford one negro woman [A]ggy, to have and to hold the said negro slave [A]ggy unto the said George Radford his heirs and assigns forever.”

⁴ (emphasis added)

Black slave masters in 1795? Wouldn't a black slave master be headline news? Some scholars, like John H. Russell, PhD, a professor of political science at Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington, believe that in those days “free Blacks owning black slaves was so common as to pass unnoticed, except in the case of court records.” He cites: “Deeds of sale and transfer of slaves to free Negroes, wills of free Negroes providing for a future disposition of slaves, and records of suits for freedom against free Negroes...” as ample evidence that Blacks owning Blacks was a relatively common occurrence. And it didn't stop there. Black slave masters did not die out in colonial times; the practice did not end with the Johnsons, as the 1830 Census indicates.

THE OFFICIAL U.S. CENSUS OF 1830: 3,775 free Negroes owned 12,740 Negro slaves

Of the 10,689 free Blacks who lived in New Orleans in 1830, more than 3,000 were slave masters. Almost 30% of the free blacks in that city owned slaves.

These mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons ~ mixed race, light skinned Negroes ~ owned and, in some cases, rented their black slaves to Whites.

William Johnson, perhaps Mississippi's best known free Black, was a slaveholder. In 1834, this Adams County native owned roughly 3,000 acres in real property. He speculated in farmland, rented real estate, owned a bathhouse, a delivery firm, a toyshop, and he rented out his slaves.⁵

How could this be!? White people owned slaves. Everybody knows that only white people owned black people! Apparently not. Several free black slave masters in South Carolina owned as many as 30 or more slaves. Two other free Blacks owned a plantation and 170 slaves between the two of them!

The U.S. census report of 1860 showed almost 27 million Whites in the country, and fewer than 385,000 individuals reported owning slaves. That is about 1.4 percent of the total white population. Those who did have slaves reported owning five or less. Only the top one percent of the population owned fifty or more slaves.

To put this in perspective, eight million Whites lived in the slave states, and the average white male earned less than \$4,000 per year. In the period between 1825 and 1830, the average price for young adult male slaves in Virginia was \$400. One planter sold four slaves (gender unspecified) in 1826–1827 for \$700, \$600, \$500, and \$450. By early 1850, male slaves were advertised at \$825 each, and females were priced at \$700 and \$600. By early 1861, with a civil war looming, prices for Virginia field hands had climbed to an average of \$1,200 each. Prices were correspondingly high during the early months of

1861, when field hands were advertised from \$1,600 to \$1,650.⁶ Slaves were expensive.

According to this same 1860 census, 261,988 southern Blacks were not slaves. One wealthy black sugar planter owned over 100 black slaves and had land holdings valued at over a quarter of a million dollars, making him one of the richest blacks in Louisiana, perhaps one of the richest Blacks in the United States. A widow and her son (black) owned a plantation and worked more than 150 slaves. This same census lists several Blacks owning 65 or more slaves. Blacks in one South Carolina city claimed over \$1.5 million in taxable property, including slaves valued in excess of \$300,000.

Since light-skinned Blacks owned dark-skinned Blacks, do lighter-skinned Blacks owe damages to darker-skinned Blacks? Can anyone say, "Rep-a-rations?" Brothers were doing brothers in back then just as brothers are doing brothers in now. I am certain that some of my brothers will attempt to do me in with vitriolic disdain for this feeble attempt to get the white man off the hook by blaming our slavery on ourselves with "Well, Blacks did it too!"

Lest I be misinterpreted; the above information is in no way to be misconstrued as justification of institutionalized slavery. I offer this merely as evidence that injustice is, just as justice should be, colorblind.