

# 1619 Project Discussion Article Packet



**Topic:** Slavery and America Part 1: 1619-1699

**November 11, 2021**

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349

Password: 691353

## Upcoming 1619 programs

All programs hosted on Zoom from 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.

Topics subject to change.

### **December 9, 2021**

Slavery in America Part 2

Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019

### **January 13, 2022**

Slavery in America Part 3

Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019

### **February 10, 2022**

Slavery In America Part 4

Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619-2019

Please check our 1619 Discussion homepage at:

<https://heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project/>

The Library's 1619 topic interviews are on Youtube

<https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/1619projectdiscussion>

And our Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3125417084169554>

For more information

Contact: John Piche' at [jpiche@heightslibrary.org](mailto:jpiche@heightslibrary.org)

1624-1629

## AFRICA

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE



**N**O ONE KNOWS THE PRECISE DATE OF THE ARRIVAL OF Africans in North America. Africans could have arrived centuries before the historical record indicates. We know they arrived in what is now South Carolina with Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón in 1526. In 1565 a marriage was recorded between Luisa de Abrego, a free African woman, and Miguel Rodriguez, a Segovian conquistador, in Spanish Florida. This is the first known Christian marriage in what is now the continental United States. Those Africans in Spanish Florida eventually fought against the colonists and found refuge among Native Americans. The ones who did not escape into the forest eventually made their way to Haiti.

By the time the first British North American colony was established in 1607, Africans had already been in the Caribbean region for over one hundred years. Africans entered the Jamestown colony at Point Comfort in Virginia in 1619. By 1624, a tapestry of ethnic convergence in North America was already being woven. Yoruba, Wolof, and Mandinka people had already been taken from their coasts and brought to the Americas. It is this mixture of cultures that constitutes the quintessential African presence in the British North American colony.

Throughout these years, Africans back on the continent fought off the threat of political dismemberment as the European powers, including the English, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and French, attacked the continent's people and resources in a constant barrage of

murder, theft, and brutality. In 1626, on the eastern side of Africa, Emperor Susenyos I of Ethiopia agreed to allow Patriarch Afonso Mendes the primacy of the Roman See over the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The Roman See quickly renamed the Ethiopian Church the Catholic Church of Ethiopia; this arrangement would not be permanent because the Ethiopians would later advance their autonomy.

In other developments taking place in Africa, Muchino a Mubatu Nzingha of the kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba of the Mbundu people met with the Portuguese governor in 1622. By 1624, war was on the horizon. João Correia de Sousa, the Portuguese governor, offered Nzingha a floor mat, instead of a chair, to sit on during the negotiations—an act that in Mbundu custom was appropriate only for subordinates. Unwilling to accept this degradation, Nzingha ordered one of her servants to get down on the ground, and she sat on their back during negotiations. She agreed to become a Catholic in 1622, but by 1626 she knew she had made a mistake in her fight against Portuguese slave traders. Whatever negative traits the Portuguese saw in Africans, the English Puritans came to Massachusetts in the late 1620s with an attitude just as horrible. They believed that Africans were similar to the devil and practiced an evil and superstitious religion.

Back in West Africa, the remnants of the Ghana, Mali, and Songhay kingdoms were losing their people to the encroaching European merchants who kidnapped Africans in what became the largest movement of one population by another in world history. Mandinka, Peul, Wolof, Yoruba, Hausa, and other ethnic groups would be uprooted on one side of the ocean and planted on the other.

Since no *African slaves* were brought to the Americas, but only *Africans who were enslaved*, it is safe to assume that among the arrivals in the 1620s were the usual human variety of personalities with an equally impressive number of character traits. Out of the cauldron that was developing under the hegemony of Europeans emerged several recognized types: the recorder of events, the interpreter of events, the creator of events, the advancer of events, the maintainer of events, and the memorializer of events.

Each of these archetypes was rooted in African cultures and stretched back in time long before 1624. The *recorder* (whom the Wolof and Mandinka referred to as the *djeli* and whom the Serer, Asante, Yoruba, and Bakongo called by other names) functioned as the one who listened to everything, saw everything, and remembered the secrets of all, so that he or she could later recall patterns of the past. The *interpreter* was a seer, whose purpose was to make sense out of the familiar and the unfamiliar, so that the African population would be sustained by the integration of African motifs, icons, and values into the rifts of the new place. The *creator* of events emerged in the 1620s as the African person who farmed, cleared the forests, and confronted the difficulties of living in a world made by Europeans, whose assaults on African dignity and Native Americans' inheritance were constant. The *advancer* of events was the person who sought to adjust African cultures and values to the newly forming American society. To advance events is to expose the nature of American activities in the early frontiers of the colonies and to encourage a form of governance that would secure the rights of Africans. The *maintainer* of events exhibited a clear conception of the society in order to service the polity with integrity, harmony, and preparedness for any eventuality. The *memorializer* of events assumed a spiritual role in the community, suggesting to other Africans in the colonies the need for African people to take account of and remember the events that created community. Many times these individuals would bring out the spiritual characteristics inherited from their African origins.

All these roles were played by women and men in the early period of African socialization in the Americas; they would become the archetypes through which the African community would tell its own story, establishing its heroic nature and distinguishing its epochal struggle for liberation from that of other peoples over the generations.

1629-1634

## WHIPPED FOR LYING WITH A BLACK WOMAN

IJEOMA OLUO

**M**Y MOTHER IS WHITE, AND I AM BLACK. SHE IS MY BIOLOGICAL mother. Half of my genetic makeup came from her. My skin is not the rich deep brown of my father's, having been lightened to a deep tan by my mother. I have my mother's eyes, my mother's face—and yet she will always be white, and I will always be Black. When people want to know why my skin is the color it is, or why my features are racially vague, I will say, "I am half Nigerian," or "I am mixed-race Black," or "my mother is white." But I am not white—I'm not even half-white. My mother is white. I am Black.

My mother is white and I am Black because in 1630 a Virginia colonial court ordered the whipping of Hugh Davis, a white man, as a punishment for sleeping with a Black woman. He was whipped in front of an assembled audience of Black and white Virginians, to show everyone what the punishment would be for "abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a negro."

Prior to the whipping of Hugh Davis, anti-Black racism already existed in the colonies. At the time, when there were scarcely one hundred Africans in Virginia, anti-Black racist ideas operated mostly in religious terms—whites referred to themselves as Christians and Africans as heathens.

Anti-Black racism did not arrive on the shores of the New World fully formed. Step by step, anti-Blackness and slavery justified,

strengthened, and expanded each other, building a vast network of systemic inequity that dictates large amounts of Black and white American life to this day.

But in 1630 the whipping of Hugh Davis wrote one important concept of race in America into law: the exclusivity of whiteness.

Davis was not whipped because he had polluted a Black woman. There was no record of the Black woman in question being punished for polluting herself with whiteness. Davis was whipped for polluting whiteness—his own and that of his community. This was the first recorded case of its kind in the United States, establishing that whiteness was susceptible to pollution from sexual contact with Blackness, and that “pure” whiteness must be protected through law.

I remember my mother asking me a few years ago why I did not call myself half-white. I explained to her: “You cannot become part-white.”

Whiteness is a ledge you can only fall from.

The fact that whiteness was something that could exist only in purity, not in percentages, was something reinforced throughout my entire life. Some of my earliest childhood memories are of other children asking me if I was adopted. After answering that no, I was not adopted, the white lady they saw with me was my mother, they would still stare at me confused, unable to comprehend how I came to be. As I grew older, teachers, bosses, and police officers would see only my Blackness. When people met my mother, they would look at her with pity, imagining the story of a white woman lost—lured and abandoned by Blackness and left with two Black children to forever remind her of her fall.

To many, my mother represented the fears of those white colonial Virginians who had ordered Hugh Davis whipped brought to life. Purity forever tainted, bloodlines lost. Establishing whiteness as a race of purity meant it was not something that could be mixed, it could only be turned into something else—removing it from whiteness altogether. The idea that racial mixing would not spread whiteness or even alter it but would destroy it would become a primary motivation for many racist laws and attitudes.

With the whipping of Hugh Davis, we saw the first separation of Black from white in the North American colonies as an issue of white survival instead of racial preference. This fear would lead to violence far beyond the whipping of a white man for lying with a Black woman. Shortly after establishing the legal need to protect whiteness from contamination, the consequences for such contamination were shifted from the white participant to the Black person who dared pollute whiteness. By 1640, when another white man was brought before Virginia law for impregnating a Black woman, it was the Black woman who was whipped, while the white man was sentenced to church service.

By the 1800s, this fear and anger over the possible destruction of whiteness justified the segregation of cities and towns, workplaces and schools, that would consign Black Americans to substandard living, working, and educational conditions. It justified the arrests, beatings, and lynching of Black Americans. Even today the fear of racial destruction heard in warnings of “white genocide” made by white hate groups rationalizes violence against Black Americans.

The idea of white purity not only served to narrowly define whiteness for over four hundred years, it also ensured that Blackness could hardly benefit socially, politically, or financially from proximity to whiteness in any meaningful way. If a white parent’s offspring ceased to be white because the other parent was Black, then those offspring were cut off from all opportunities that whiteness afforded, and so were their offspring for generations to come. If we cannot always recognize Blackness in skin tone, we can recognize Blackness in unemployment rates, poverty rates, school suspension rates, arrest rates, and life expectancy.

And so today I am Black, and my mother is white. I am Black because I have no choice but to be, and I am Black because I choose to be. While I may always be Black to the cop who pulls me over, and to the manager evaluating my work performance, I also choose to be Black with my friends and family. I choose to look in the mirror and see Black.

I have been accused of allowing white supremacist notions of race

to dictate how I see myself. I have been told that in this day and age, over fifty years since antimiscegenation laws were deemed unconstitutional, I have the freedom to claim the whiteness of my mother.

Every time I was told that my hair was too kinky, it was my Black hair that was disparaged. Every time I was told that my nose was too wide, it was my Black nose that was rejected. Every time I was called a monkey or a gorilla, it was my Blackness that was hated. Every time I was called loud or angry, it was my Blackness that was feared.

And it is my Blackness that has fought back. My Blackness that has survived. The vast majority of Black Americans, often through the rape of Black ancestors by white enslavers, have the ancestry of white Americans running through them. But when the privileges of whiteness were kept from us, it was our Blackness that persevered. I am so very proud of that.

I love my mother. I see her face when I look in the mirror. But whiteness, as a political and social construct, exists because of the fear of my very existence, and it functions to this day to aid in my oppression and exploitation.

Until the systemic functions of whiteness that began with the whipping of Hugh Davis are dismantled, I cannot claim whiteness. And as long as my survival is tied to my ability to resist the oppression of white supremacy, I'll be damned if I'll let whiteness claim me.

1634-1639

## TOBACCO

DAMARIS B. HILL

**B**EFORE HE BECAME A PLANTER, ROLFE TOLD GO-GO THAT stalagmite was a diamond. He had never seen any actual diamonds but couldn't admit it.

Diamonds in the colonies were travelers' lies, like the streets of gold and the mercy of missionaries. The only real thing in his life was an African girl he plucked from Bermuda, the one twin who wasn't traded for Spanish tobacco seeds on the high seas off the legal coast of what used to be called Virginia. That girl was carried into Jamestown and appeared as a speck of wonder to the eye of a young Indian princess called Pocahontas. This girl's skin with its brush of indigo was a lush wonder among the pale settlers the Indian princess witnessed.

And now Rolfe loved her. He showed her how to find the veins in each tobacco leaf, showed her how to crawl between the rows and look for parasites. Ever since the enslaved African and tobacco appeared in Jamestown, English colonists found ways to trade for food and plant tobacco after the last frost. Pocahontas was young and sure that this little girl was a Jogahoh, a trickster who knew the secrets of the earth. And that became the name they started calling her, Go-Go. What power did Rolfe have to make the magic people do his bidding?

No one was left to tell the record keepers about Go-Go's sister, the one Rolfe traded for the sweetest tobacco seeds a Spanish conquistador could smuggle. He quickly pacified his anxiety about leaving the

other twin with the conquistadors sailing back to Portugal, because they were on their way to their wives. Why worry about the girl? Where was the room for worry in the New World? The anxiety about a lost twin? Where was space to remember any of them?

It is August 1635. Rolfe is long dead, and the indigo girl Go-Go is an old woman who has made generations in the marshes of Virginia, while the English cycle in on sponsored passage to the Americas, dreaming about a better life than London had to offer. In the squator of London, they were nursed at poverty's breasts, especially the women. Even with the odds of three men to one woman, none of them found fortune on the passage. No man had a penny to pay. After a few weeks at sea and as the rations got low, few of the men honored English law or cared how some hoiry man lost his head for raping his rich wife, as was the punishment. The men were tired of taking turns on one another and began to reason about raping women. This was not the only abuse these English women would come to know. Their bodies would come to know how a snake is wicked only if it is under your foot and how a leech can become an anchor. They came to know that either could drown you in a few inches of water and that the lush leaves of tobacco did not provide shade. They came to know the work without boundaries.

Before and after 1636, ships come from Angola and the Caribbean carrying Africans who add life to the scourge of death in the colonies. When they arrive, the Indians and indentured whites who speak to them tell them about the ten colonists who became two in the first year. Then they tell them about the packs of English who creep up like wild crops in the forest and always with a woman running away. Then they say that everything was new when the Rolfe showed up with seeds and the indigo girl, the Jogahoh, who grew up without sickness and became the woman Go-Go. Then they count her children and grandchildren aloud. They explain how to know her. Her hands and skin stained blue with other-world Godliness. The Indians tell the Africans that Go-Go was the one who made this tobacco spring from the earth. The Indians tell the Africans that the English have proven to be liars since the first lot, and that the latest lie is: "Only the African can keep the Spanish tobacco alive." The lie is that

the Africans are the only ones who can cut tobacco at the base and survive the stalk.

The truth is that King Charles can't get enough of taxes. By 1639, he divides Virginia into shires, and everyone needs to count every body to calculate the assessment owed to the king for his armies. It is in this year that Go-Go calls out her sister's sacred name as she watches her pale-eyed granddaughter sold across the river to cover the tax on tobacco.

1639-1644

## BLACK WOMEN'S LABOR

BRENDA E. STEVENSON



**E**NSLAVEMENT IN THE AMERICAS BROUGHT MULTIPLE, complex horrors in the lives, families, communities, and cultures of the millions of Africans who fell captive to the inhumane system of the Atlantic slave trade. Those who arrived in British North America were hardly immune to these brutalities. Not the least of these abuses was the persistent assault on gendered identities as part of the effort to erase captives' humanity, self-worth, and traditional roles within their Indigenous cultures and communities.

One of the first attempts to codify these practices took place in March 1643, when Virginia's General Assembly passed the following measure:

Be it also enacted and confirmed that there be four pounds of tobacco . . . and a bushel of corn . . . paid to the Ministers within the several parishes of the colony for all tithable persons, that is to say as well for all youths of sixteen years of age as [upwards?] and also for all negro women at the age of sixteen year.

These few words designated a Black female of sixteen years or older as a "tithable"—meaning that taxes paid to the church would be assessed on these women. Neither white nor Indigenous women had that distinction. In that way, Virginia's earliest leaders legally equated

African women with men, erasing these women's public claim to feminine equality with other women. These elite white men did so through British colonial society's most important legal institution, their elected governance body. Their justification was that taxing Black women was a necessary part of the financial support structure for the colony's most important sociocultural establishment, the Church of England.

The impact on the lives of African women in the colony, whether they were indentured, enslaved, or free, was immediate. Enslavers passed the pressure of having to provide the taxes assessed for their Black bonded women directly onto these women. The legal designation of Black women as fundamentally different, in body and character, from other women in colonial society directly influenced African women's workloads and the punishments they endured if they could not meet these expectations. These enhanced labor assignments, in turn, damaged women's health, prenatal care, and the amount of attention that they could give their dependent kin. Single, free Black women struggled to make their own tax payments, a financial obligation that contributed to the likelihood of their impoverishment and dependency. They also suffered the consequences of being viewed as less desirable spouses in the eyes of other free Blacks who were reluctant to take on their additional financial responsibilities. This "othering" of Black women in colonial American society was foundational in the assault on Black femininity, masculinity, the Black family, and the sociocultural roles of Black adults.

From this initial effort, and from many more that were rapidly legalized or customarily practiced in the seventeenth century, an image of Black womanhood emerged that adhered to female gender prescriptions neither of Africans nor of Europeans. It was a womanhood synonymous with market productivity, not motherhood; with physical prowess instead of feminine vulnerability; and with promiscuity rather than modesty or a heightened moral sensibility. Such a distortion of Black women's physical, emotional, cultural, gendered, and spiritual selves led to the broad public's imagining of Black women as workhorses, whores, and emasculating matriarchs. Today



this historical misrepresentation remains a common "justification" for the theft of our children; our physical, medical, political, and sexual exploitation; and our broad criminalization.

The timing of the 1643 legislation was neither accidental nor incidental. It occurred once it was clear that the colony would survive and could turn a profit with sufficient labor resources. By the third decade of British residence, African female workers were a part of the formula for colonial settler success. The fledgling British mainland colony's 1620 census counted fifteen such female workers that year, all thought to have arrived on the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer* in 1619. While more than a few perished in the Anglo-Powhatan War of 1622 or other military hostilities, as well as from disease, exposure, malnutrition, random acts of violence, poor medical attention, and accidents, the cargoes of bound Black female workers continued to arrive. Although no population enumerations have been recovered for 1640, ten years later Virginia was home to three hundred Africans, many female laborers among them.

The skills that the first arrivals brought with them prepared them to be productive farmers and livestock keepers. Many who arrived from Angola, for example—like many of the earliest captives in British North America—were skilled farmers. In their home communities, they had cultivated a variety of crops, some for many generations. The crops included various types of corn and grains such as millet and sorghum, as well as bananas, plantains, beans, peanuts, pineapples, rice, pepper, yams, sweet potatoes, sugarcane, palm oil, and citrus fruits. They were accustomed to clearing land by using slash-and-burn methods, and they used hoes to prepare soil and to remove weeds. They practiced crop rotation. Many also had raised, butchered, traded, and prepared for the table cattle, goats, chickens, sheep, pigs, and other livestock.

Labor in their West-Central African homes was gender distinct, unlike their experiences in early-seventeenth-century Virginia and other British settler colonies. Among farming peoples, men cleared the brush and cultivated tree crops such as those that produced palm oil and wine and from which they made medicines and sculpred. Women planted, weeded, and harvested other crops. Men were re-

sponsible for building houses, making cloth, sculpting, working iron, and long-distance trading and hunting. Women cooked, cared for their children, and performed other domestic tasks. Women in seaside communities also dived for marketable seashells and boiled salt water in order to produce salt, another highly sought-after market item.

It did not take long before their skills as livestock keepers, domestics, and especially agriculturalists were recognized, prompting one mid-seventeenth-century Virginia governor to note that the planting of crops would occur "on the advice of our Negroes." Settlers, however, demanded that Black women perform the same tasks as Black men. These women, like Black and white indentured men, had to clear their owners' heavily wooded frontier lands, carry wood, and help construct dwellings, outhouses, and fences. Archaeological records from the seventeenth-century Chesapeake, for example, document the kinds of upper skeletal damage that young Black women sustained, probably by carrying heavy loads of wood on their heads or shoulders. They routinely planted, nurtured, weeded, and harvested corn and other plants, in addition to caring for tobacco—the most important cash crop of the era, and a very labor-intensive one. As early as five years after the first known captive arrivals, one planter could boast that his Black and white laborers produced a tobacco crop valued at ten thousand English pounds.

When not working outside under the supervision of men, African women worked for their mistresses. Their assigned domestic tasks included barnyard labor, tending to livestock, cooking, butchering, salting and preserving meat, making soap and candles, housecleaning, laundry, sewing, carding, spinning, weaving, bathing, dressing and dressing the hair of their mistresses, and caring for children—their owners' and their own. Many also had to perform sexual labor.

Between 1639 and 1644, work defined Black women's lives, and the law of 1643 codified their differentiation from other women. This law led to a host of inhumane, defeminizing consequences for African and African-descended women. The endorsement by British North America's first permanent colony's two essential bodies of influence, the General Assembly and the Church of England, proved unshakable.

1644-1649

## ANTHONY JOHNSON, COLONY OF VIRGINIA

MAURICE CARLOS RUFFIN

COME DOWN TO MY WATER ON MORNINGS SUCH AS THESE.

Sunrise breaks through fog and tree limb like skin beneath skin, the smell of another's fire. This is what the memory of my own death and rebirth has done. Killed my sleep and woke my spirit so that rest is not possible. So many mornings, I wander as a sick bear cub does. It's fog, a dream to my mind. But clear as this gnarled branch under my boot.

In the hold of the small ship that stole me from my home. Tall but not yet strong I crouched in the dark with others like me, six men and two women between barrels of red palm oil and what bolts of Europe wool and silk went unsold. We shared skin, but not tongue. One woman's eye never blinked during her hand motions that showed when she was taken three children of her flesh became orphans.

Lashed to the underdeck in chains, we gaped like mud fish when water pooled in the hull not well sealed by pitch. I never left the green hills of my homeland, which the Portuguese men had taken to hunting as their own. But we were on the vast water, and I knew our pomegranate husk would sink if sea came. After starving on rope-tough meat and sitting in my own leavings for endless days, I liked to dive deep and never rise. But not so. We landed ashore. My rebirth and years of forced work followed.

But that was before. How my life has bloomed like a strange flower. Since I met my Mary. Skin of my skin. Soul of my soul. I was

told of steel horses. But that is less pleasing to me than this: once my freedom earned, my term of service done, my freedom fee collected—no more lashes to drive me to the field before the cockerel's crow—I bought Mary's freedom and the contracts of five men to work my will. And in the way of the good laws of this land—King Charles's laws—gathered a fifty-acre plot for each manservant. I claim this stretch of God's land as my own. And I work as I please.

Rising the path from the riverbank, I find a small bush. Not a bush but a deer melting back to earth. Feasted on. Nature's way. But I gather a few leafy branches, cover the critter, and cross myself. My hand comes to the right side of the cross, where Jesus's palm hung bleeding, when I freeze for leaves crunching behind. I don't have my musket or my scythe. But I have hands. I clinch my fist.

"Pap!" the voice says. My youngest, Walter, runs in the bramble, his knees bouncing in the dew. "Quick! Come see."

"Such a call!" I say, rubbing Walter's head. "Respect your old father." His mouth moves. His eyes dart. But he does not bend his head. I squeeze his shoulder in pride of him. His nerves ride him. That is his spirit. But his body is coming on strong, less bedeviled by bad humors in his lungs. The ones that took his older brothers when they were cubs.

"That white man, one of the brothers Parker. He walking in the patch." Walter leads along the creek trail, the beery nose scent of saffras everywhere. Turtle climbs a log. Reeds and rushes brush my legs. Many acres. God's land. My land. To be Walter's land.

My tobacco field with a ghost mist on it. The man stoops here and again. He touches my leaves as if they are born of his labor. Robert Parker. Some of these fields were his father's. But today the Parkers have only one man under contract and a few hay acres upriver.

John Casor, my third man, holds the rein of the Parker horse and holds a roped calf. John fears his old master, Robert. John stands on the path by the field, his look goes everywhere except to Robert.

"You let a fox in my patch," I say. I send Walter to the cornfield to give word.

John dips his head. "He wouldn't listen to the likes of Poor John." We have the same outside color, but his insides are smoke to me. He

shows dumb, but I know he is cunning. He shows weak, but he has a lion inside. He works less well than he can, so I task him to my fields longer.

My hands on my sides, I say, "You come out from there."

"Look ye here," Robert says, his swarty hair dripping onto his shoulders, a long dagger in his belt. He has a false manner of speaking, a squire's manner. They call Robert a freeboot who betrayed the crown during his journeys. Other men would be in stocks if not in servitude. But here he stands. Free as clover. "It's my old mate, Antonio."

I step into my patch. When he came before, he did not smile as I picked at his body for flea beetles that eat tobacco. But that plague is gone, or I would pick again. "You know my chosen name is Anthony, after the saint."

"So it is," he says.

Colin, my best field man, gallops to the field's edge and dismounts. White-skinned. A big man, a head above us.

"I came as soon as I heard, Mr. Johnson. Now, this one wouldn't be bothering you today, would he? I'll toss him in the shuck if that's the matter."

"If you would have your head cleaved from your shoulders, papist." Robert spits in the dirt. Touches his dagger.

"No," I say. "I have need of an animal." My oldest daughter, Eliza, is to be married to a freeman like myself called Wiltwyck of New Sweden. I chose a fatted calf as her gift. A fat calf would mean a strong union and hardy children. But disease spread among the many beasts of the colony last spring. Robert has the last ones.

"I assure you this is finest of my stock, valiant Moor."

A fine calf announces itself the same as people, by temper. I run my hand across the babe's glossy coat. I place my finger at its teeth, and the creature suckles, its ears moving. A fine calf. I give Robert a leather pouch of forty shillings. He counts each one.

Colin passes to me a legal paper that I unroll. The village justice made this. I am not learned in the work of scribes, but my Mary, who has eyes of stars, is and smiled at it. My daughter Eliza, who is as

learned of work of scribes, will also smile when she has her calf. I show the paper to Robert, who does not look at it.

"I need not sign a deed for the likes of you!" Robert pushes the paper away. "Take the animal as he stands. That is your proof of possession."

"The Lord covers me and mine in eternity, and the king's law covers me and mine here. I keep my papers."

Robert spits again. Part of it hits his own boot. He mounts his horse and pulls the calf behind. Down the path, he dismounts. His dagger flashes in the sun and disappears by the animal's neck. The calf falls to dirt. Robert rides off. Colin shakes his head. John Casor shows his teeth. Colin says Robert has my shillings, and he is right. The calf's tail twitches in the dirt.

"What now, sir?" Colin says.

I am back on the ship in the hold. But my sons and daughters and their sons and daughters are with me in the dark. Chains clink on their legs. We are on the shore. We are in the woods. A girl in the mist of tomorrows watches me from a coach tied to one of the steel horses I was told of. She laughs like she is happy to meet me. And behind her in the coach are her sons and daughters and their sons and daughters.

"The calf dies," I say, "but the law will always hold me. And my Eliza will have her calf."

1649-1654

## THE BLACK FAMILY

HEATHER ANDREA WILLIAMS

---

**I**N 1649 THREE HUNDRED BLACK PEOPLE LIVED IN THE ENGLISH colony of Virginia. Even fewer Black people lived in the more northern Dutch town of New Amsterdam that later, under British rule, would become New York City.

Slavery had not yet evolved into the pervasive institution that would devour the labor and lives of millions of people of African descent. Still, during these early years, among the small numbers of Black people who were free, enslaved, or lingering in some degree of unfreedom, it is possible to glimpse evidence of family formations and priorities that would become far more visible as slavery expanded. By the time they reached an American colony, most captives had already experienced forced separation from their families and communities, some of them more than once. They had been taken from families and communities in West and Central Africa and may have lost contact with a close shipmate after the Middle Passage journey. Some lost the family and community they created while they sojourned in the Caribbean or South America before being taken to North America.

Once in America, some of these people created families through marriage, childbirth, and informal adoptions. They remained vulnerable to being sold or given away. Many of them struggled to keep their families intact, to provide protection for their loved ones, and to take advantage of loopholes that might extricate them and their family members from enslavement.

Some Black people also responded to the era's high mortality rates by taking responsibility for children who were not their own. In New Amsterdam, Emmanuel Pietersen and his wife, Dorothe Angola, raised a child of their deceased friends, and when the child reached the age of eighteen, Pietersen sought to gain legal protection for him. In his petition to officials of the colony, Pietersen asserted that his wife had stood as "godmother or witness at the Christian baptism" of Anthony, whose parents had died shortly thereafter. The petition asserted that Dorothe, "out of Christian affection, immediately on the death of his parents, hath adored and reared him as her own child, without asking assistance from anyone in the world, but maintained him at her own expense from that time unto this day." Pietersen said that he too wanted to promote the well-being of the boy and asked the authorities to officially recognize that Anthony was born the child of free parents, had been raised by free persons, and should therefore be declared free and capable of inheriting from Pietersen. Emmanuel Pietersen realized the tenuous status of Black people in the colony and sought to ensure that the child he and his wife had raised would always be recognized as a free person, despite also being Black. The council granted Pietersen's petition.

Pietersen used very deliberate language in his petition. He was careful to assert that Anthony had received a Christian baptism and that Dorothe Angola had cared for the child out of her "Christian affection." These were consequential claims in those early years for Black people desiring to be acknowledged as free. After all, the Dutch, English, and other Europeans operated at the time under the belief that Christians should not be enslaved, and part of their stated justification for enslaving Africans was that they considered them heathens. If Black people could then prove their Christianity through baptism or marriage in the Christian church, as occurred in New Amsterdam, they might logically be exempted from slavery.

It seems that the baptism loophole was effective for some time. Between 1639 and 1655, Black parents presented forty-nine children for baptism in the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherland. But in a society become ever more dependent on the labor of enslaved people, laypeople as well as clergy grew concerned about the corre-

spondence between baptism and freedom, and Christianity and freedom.

What would later become New York closed this loophole for manuevering out of slavery. By 1656, the Dutch Reformed Church, caring more about saving slavery than saving souls, had stopped baptizing Black people. "The Negroes occasionally request that we should baptize their children," wrote a clergyman who ministered to the forty people Governor Peter Stuyvesant owned in Manhattan. "But we have refused to do so, partly on account of their lack of knowledge and of faith, and partly because of the worldly and perverse aims on the part of the said Negroes. They wanted nothing else than to deliver their children bodily from slavery, without striving for piety and Christian virtues."

Ironically, the minister deemed Black parents' desires to free their children "worldly and perverse" because of their emphasis on *physical* freedom, presumably in contrast to the *spiritual* freedom of the Christian people who claimed ownership over them. Although the minister went on to say that when he deemed it appropriate, he did baptize a few enslaved youth, he also noted, "Not to administer baptism among them for the reasons given, is also the custom among our colleagues."

Over time, New Netherland and other colonies imposed more and more restrictions against Black freedom. When Virginia codified the fact that baptism would not free Black people from enslavement, the language of the statute focused on "children that are slaves by birth." In that colony, too, policy makers blocked parents from using Christian baptism as a means of gaining freedom for their children.

In Virginia, Emmanuel and Frances Driggus took care of two adopted children, one-year-old Jane and eight-year-old Elizabeth, in addition to Ann, Thomas, and Frances, the three children who were born to the couple. They all belonged to Captain Francis Port, although Jane and Elizabeth were not enslaved but indentured for terms of several years. To cover his debts, Port mortgaged Emmanuel and Frances and eventually was forced to turn them over to his creditor, who lived twenty miles away from Port's farm, where all the children remained. Emmanuel, who had been given a cow and a calf by

Port, was eventually able to save enough money to purchase Jane's freedom in 1652, thereby releasing her from her indenture at age eight, twenty-three years earlier than scheduled.

By the end of that same year, Port prevailed in a lawsuit against his creditor, and Emmanuel and Frances Driggus returned to live on his property in Northampton. Seven years had elapsed since they had lived with their children. Upon their return to Northampton, Emmanuel Driggus faced a new threat to his ability to free himself and his family from slavery through the sale of his cattle—the county moved to prohibit enslaved people from engaging in trade. But Driggus was able to get Port to put in writing the fact that Driggus legally owned the cattle and was allowed to sell them. Port later restricted this prerogative, however, when he declared in court a few years later that no one should engage in trade with his slaves without his approval.

Just as Emmanuel Pietersen in New Amsterdam petitioned to protect the free status of his adopted child, Driggus sought to protect his ability to sustain some limited degree of economic autonomy in order to free his family.

More stunning for the Driggus family, though, was when Port sold their eldest daughter, ten-year-old Ann, for five thousand pounds of tobacco. He also sold a younger son, Edward, four years old. These children were sold into lifetime enslavement.

Frances Driggus died a few years after her children were sold. Emmanuel remarried, and several years later, as a free man, he gave to his daughters Frances and Jane a bay mare "out of the Natural love and affection." Jane was free and married; Frances's status is not clear.

Emmanuel Driggus was aware of the perilous lives of his daughters in the Virginia colony. His gift of a female horse who might produce other horses, he likely hoped, would provide his daughters, now in their twenties, with income that might render them a bit less vulnerable. After all, in the 1650s Virginia and other English colonies were racing toward full dependence on the forced labor of Black people.

1654-1659

## UNFREE LABOR

NAKIA D. PARKER

IN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND IN POPULAR MEMORY, THE enslavement of people of African descent is often depicted as an unfortunate yet unavoidable occurrence in the otherwise glorious history of the American republic. Echoing this common sentiment, Republican senator Tom Cotton called slavery “the necessary evil upon which the union was built” in his objection to adding *The 1619 Project* to school curriculums. The United States was indeed built on chattel slavery, which deemed people of African descent inferior to white people and defined Black people as commodities to be bought, sold, insured, and willed. That was certainly evil. It was not, however, “necessary” or inevitable. The system of racialized slavery that is now seared into the American public consciousness took centuries to metastasize and mature.

The March 1653 court case of *Johnson v. Parker* in Northampton County, Virginia, exemplifies the insidious transformations in forced labor practices in the early American colonies. Anthony Johnson, the plaintiff in the case, was an African man who likely arrived in Virginia sometime around 1621 as a captive from Angola, transported across the Atlantic in the slave trade. In the course of thirty years, however, Johnson enjoyed a remarkable fate different from that of millions of African captives. Against insurmountable odds, Johnson survived the harrowing trek to the Americas known as the Middle Passage and eventually married, had children, secured his freedom, and acquired more than two hundred acres of land, livestock, and even indentured servants.

John Casor, another African man, was one of these servants. At the time of the lawsuit, he was working for Johnson under a contract. Unlike Johnson, Casor claimed he’d first come to Virginia not in captivity but as an indentured servant, and he therefore demanded his freedom after he believed he had fulfilled his indenture contract with Johnson. According to Casor, “Johnson had kept him his servant seven yeares longer than hee ought [sic].” Casor likely knew that as an African man, he would face challenges in winning his freedom. In fact, fifteen years before Casor brought his case, in 1640, a Black indentured servant named John Punch ran away from his Virginia owners along with two white servants. After they were recaptured, the court sentenced the two white servants to thirty lashes and one extra year of servitude. Punch’s punishment, however, was to “serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere,” thereby becoming the first person of African descent considered a “slave for life.” Although the institution of chattel slavery had not yet been completely codified into law and racist ideologies connecting Blackness with enslavement were not yet fully formed, it was nonetheless clear at this time that servants of African descent were viewed as different from their white counterparts, subject to being held in servitude for an undefined period of time, unlike white servants, who had clear terms of indenture and were never considered slaves for life.

With the precedent that only people of African descent were held as slaves for life set before Casor, and with his claims of freedom apparently unheeded by Johnson, Casor eventually appealed to one of Johnson’s white neighbors, Robert Parker, for help in his quest for freedom. Parker took Casor’s side and, over Johnson’s objections, took Casor out of Johnson’s possession and to his own farm, “under pretense that the said Negro [Casor] is a free man.” Johnson, after consulting with his wife, two sons, and son-in-law, reluctantly acceded to Casor’s demands, even providing him “corne and leather,” as “freedom dues.” A few months later, however, Johnson reconsidered his choice and sued Parker in court for stealing Casor. Johnson asserted that Casor never had an indenture; on the contrary, “hee had him [Casor] for his life.” The court ruled in Johnson’s favor and ordered Casor to

"returne unto the service of his said master Anthony Johnson," decreeing that Robert Parker cover the costs of the court case.

With the decision of the Northampton County Court, Casor became the first person of African descent in a civil case to be deemed a "slave for life." Although Johnson initially agreed to free Casor from his contract, the loss of his labor apparently proved too much to accept. Perhaps thinking about ensuring his financial standing and the future of his family, Johnson decided that he needed to possess as much property, both human and inanimate, as possible. And though the court sided with him in this instance, Anthony Johnson and his family faced increasing harassment and threats to his property from his white neighbors. Around 1665, Johnson and his extended family moved to Maryland. Other people of African descent who were able to gain their freedom also bought land in the surrounding area and formed a tight-knit community that provided much-needed support in the face of rising discrimination and mistreatment of Black people. Two years later, in 1667, Johnson's son, John, acquired forty-four acres of land in Maryland and named the estate Angola, after the African homeland his father had been torn away from over forty years before.

Like Johnson, other masters of indentured servants in Virginia also made calculated choices about which unfree laborers to manumit or retain. In October 1657, Anne Barnehouse, the sister of Christopher Stafford, a white planter from England, followed the wishes stated in his will to free his servant Mihill Gowen, a man of African descent, and his son William, promising "never to trouble or molest the said Mihill Gowen or his sonne William or demand any service of the said Mahill or his said sonne William." Barnehouse, however, did not free her servant Prosta, who was William's mother and perhaps the partner of Gowen. Evidently, Barnehouse had no qualms about obeying the manumission wishes of her brother but could not part with her own servant, who was likely acutely aware of the differences in status between herself, her son, and the father of her child. Five years before the 1662 Virginia law of *partus sequitur ventrem* declared that children followed the legal status of the mother, Barnehouse likely realized that the productive and reproductive labor she could

extract from Prosta outweighed the morality of allowing her to enjoy freedom with her kin.

The English colonizers in the Chesapeake region were not the only Europeans to depend on Black people for labor. By the mid-seventeenth century, enslaved Africans comprised 20 percent of the population of New Netherland, the original homeland of the Lenape Indians—now occupied by Manhattan—making it the colony with the highest percentage of enslaved people at that time. Enslaved people of African descent performed all kinds of labor in the region for Dutch merchants of the West India Company. They cultivated small farms, built forts and churches, and protected the fledgling Dutch colony against Indian attacks.

Just like John Casor in Virginia, however, enslaved laborers of African descent in New Netherland used the labor they performed and the law as freedom strategies. Since enslaved Africans enjoyed the right to use the Dutch legal system, some individuals who participated on the side of the Dutch in conflicts with Indigenous nations petitioned—and often received—the status known as "half-freedom." The Dutch understood early on that fostering divisions between African-descended peoples and Native people could serve their interests by forcibly removing Indigenous people from their lands to free it for slave-based cultivation. Half-freedom was an appropriate term: those who had this status could not pass it on to their children, unlike the enslaved people in the English colonies, and had to pay the West India Company an annual tribute in exchange for working for themselves. Despite the limitations of this standing, Africans made the most of their circumstances and never stopped pursuing complete freedom.

Africans in early America lived in a society that blurred the lines between freedom and unfreedom, a world of constrained possibilities, a world that could provide only "half-freedom." And almost four hundred years later, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others serve as a stark and painful reminder that for people of African descent, the United States is still a place of "half-freedom."

1659-1664

## ELIZABETH KEYE

JENNIFER L. MORGAN

---

1662 Act XII [of the Virginia House of Burgesses]. Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman shall be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother—partus sequitur ventrem. And that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.

**E**LIZABETH KEYE WAS AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN WHO lived in colonial Virginia in the seventeenth century. She was the daughter of an enslaved African woman and the Englishman who owned her. As is so often the case, we can know nothing of the nature of their relationship except that it produced a daughter. Elizabeth Keye would instigate the single most important legislative act concerning the history of enslavement, race, and reproduction in the colonial Atlantic world.

As a child, Keye found herself misidentified on the estate where she was indentured. At some point in the late 1620s, Thomas Keye, a free white Englishman and member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, had impregnated her mother, an enslaved African-born woman (whose name we do not know). What this woman (who appears in the archives as “woman slave”) hoped or believed about her



daughter's future is utterly lost in the documentary record. What is clear is that her father's death threw that future into some confusion. Although Elizabeth had been placed in indenture as a child, after his death she (or her indenture) was sold to another Virginia landowner.

Selling the remaining term of an indenture was not uncommon, but because Elizabeth Keye was the daughter of an African woman, her race made her vulnerable to abuses that an Englishwoman would not have had to endure. Although the English embraced the system of African slavery elsewhere in the Atlantic, in Virginia they relied on indentured servants, the vast majority of whom were also themselves English. In the 1650s there were fewer than three hundred Africans in the colony, or about 1 percent of the population of English settlers. And yet Elizabeth understood that she was in danger, that her color could dictate her status.

Her status as Keye's daughter was never a secret; it was widely known that this young woman's father was a free Englishman. We learn from one witness that, out of ignorance or spite, Thomas Keye's other child, John, called Elizabeth "Black Besse." Mrs. Speke, the overseer's wife, "checked him and said[,] Sirra you must call her Sister for shee is your Sister." Whether or not Mrs. Speke's intervention was meant to take John Keye down a peg, it was recognition of Elizabeth's lineage. But her relative freedom, pinned as it was to a transgressive paternity that increasingly muddled the waters of property rights, was insufficient.

In 1655 Elizabeth Keye petitioned the courts for her freedom—and that of her new child—and thus became the first woman of African descent to do so in the English North American colonies. While we know very little about her, we can be confident that she had a precise understanding of the dangers that surrounded her as a result of the interrelated consequences of race and sex in colonial Virginia. She had been transferred, by then, to a third Englishman, whose ex-ecutors listed her and her son among his "negroes" rather than his "servants." She had, by that time, been held for at least ten years longer than the terms of her 1636 indenture had specified. Her original freedom suit was granted, then overturned, and finally won when the father of her child and common-law husband, William Grinstead, an

indentured Englishman who was knowledgeable in the law, brought her case to the General Assembly. On the day that her case was finally decided, July 31, 1656, she and Grinstead posted their bans (publicly announcing their intention to marry), and she and her descendants remained legally free well into the eighteenth century.

Less than six years later, the Virginia Assembly revisited this case. Perhaps the lawmakers understood that granting freedom to the children of women raped by free property-owning Englishmen would fundamentally undermine the labor system they relied upon. In 1662 they decreed that a child born to an African woman slave, no matter who the father was, would follow that woman into slavery. This piece of legislation encapsulated the early modern understanding of racial slavery—that it was a category of labor that African people and their descendants inherited.

How much did Elizabeth Keye know about the tide of racial slavery that was engulfing the Atlantic world? Enough to act decisively in an effort to protect herself and her children from the claims that she should be enslaved. She recognized, on some level, that she was embedded in racialized structures of meaning and labor. Her freedom was not assured, despite her father's prominence. When faced with the instability of her son's future, she came to understand that her ties to her child were exposed to destruction by the economic logic of racial slavery.

In this regard, she was prescient. The child of an African woman whose freedom and that of her children were dependent upon English men, Elizabeth may not have understood the role that her case would have in propelling the 1662 legislative act, but she did understand that the atmosphere in which she lived put her and her kin in jeopardy. The forces that moved Keye and the father of her children in and out of court were precisely those that anticipated both Keye's vulnerability and that of all Black women in a nascent slave society. The link between the Keye case and the 1662 act is evidence that legally sanctioned claims to lineage for Black Virginians were short-lived.

When racial slavery depended upon the transformation of children into property, Black women could not be legally allowed to pro-

duce kinship. The fact that they did, and that they would continue to do so despite the violations of slavery, is at the heart of the afterlife of reproductive slavery. Black women have struggled mightily to protect their children and, for that matter, their ability to give birth free of economic and racial violence. In the twenty-first century, African American women's ability to safely navigate the intrusion of the state into their reproductive autonomy continues to be at risk.

1664-1669

## THE VIRGINIA LAW ON BAPTISM

JEMAR TISBY

---

**H**OW EXACTLY DID CHRISTIANITY IN THE UNITED STATES become white? Of course we know that's not the reality. To this day, Black people remain the most Christian demographic in the country. But the statement, repeated in various ways throughout the centuries, that "Christianity is the white man's religion" has a basis in historical fact. After all, white Christians deliberately retrofitted religion to accommodate the rising racial caste system.

In 1667 the Virginia Assembly, a group of white Anglican men, passed a law that Christian baptism would not free an enslaved person in the colonies. "It is enacted and declared by this grand assembly," they wrote, "and the authority thereof, that the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of their person as to his bondage or freedom."

In England it had been the custom that Christians could not enslave other Christians. Spiritual equality, if it meant anything, meant that Christians should promote and ensure the liberty of their religious sisters and brothers. In North America, however, the Anglican lawmakers had a dilemma. What would become of white supremacy and slavery if Christians insisted that they could not enslave other adherents to the faith?

The context for the new law was given in its preamble: "Whereas some doubts have risen whether children that are slaves by birth, and by the charity and piety of their owners made pertakers of the blessed

sacrament of baptism, should by virtue of their baptism be made free.”

Apparently, some slaveholders had concerns that their “charity and piety” in sharing the Christian message with enslaved children would result in the loss of unfree labor and income. Such a practice would also disrupt the ideology of white supremacy. It would be harder to maintain the social, economic, and religious superiority of white people if spiritual liberty translated into physical and material liberty for enslaved people as well.

The new law would, in the judgment of the legislators, assuage the fears of plantation owners so they could “more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity by permitting the children, though slaves, or those of greater growth if capable to be admitted to that sacrament.” Under this law, white Christian missionaries could proselytize and the plantation owners could still have their profitable enslaved labor. The legislation helped harden the emerging racial hierarchy in the colonies.

These white Christian lawmakers chose to racialize religion and reinforce enslavement and white supremacy through religious laws and policies. While Christianity could have been a force for liberation and equality, under laws like the one passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1667, it became a cornerstone of white supremacy. According to many white Christians, their religion gave divine approbation to an emerging system of racial oppression and economic exploitation.

White Christian leaders made the double move of enshrining their bigotry in laws while simultaneously labeling the question of slavery as a “civil” or “political” issue outside the purview of the church. Not only did the religious, political, and economic establishment create policies to codify slavery and white supremacy, they also pushed those actions outside the realm of Christian ethics. To challenge slavery on moral grounds was to distract from the (selectively) spiritual mission of the church and impinge on the Christian liberty of white slaveholders.

White missionaries should not have been surprised, then, that they did not initially have much effectiveness in converting enslaved people to Christianity. Why would the enslaved adopt the religion of

slave owners? What good to Black people was a foreign God preaching their perpetual bondage?

In spite of the hypocrisy of white Christian slave owners and missionaries, Black people still heard some of the dignifying and liberatory strains within the Christian message. The book of Exodus told of a God who delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Enslaved Africans nurtured the hope of emancipation, too. They heard about the Promised Land awaiting the faithful followers of God and envisioned their freedom in a land of equity and justice. Enslaved people expressed their liberatory theology in “hush arbors” beyond the sight of slave owners. Their churchless church became the invisible institution. They composed and sang spirituals, finding within Christianity not only a source of daily endurance but also the motivation for protest and resistance.

But the faith of enslaved people often came in spite of and not because of the theology of white enslavers. The oppressed clearly saw the gap between Jesus Christ, who announced his ministry to “proclaim liberty to the captives,” and the religion of racism and abuse preached by many white Christians.

Oppressed people must either reform or reject a religion that preaches spiritual salvation but has little to say about their physical and material conditions. The hypocrisy of white Christians who said their religion condemned darker-skinned people to perpetual slavery even as they worshiped a brown-skinned Jewish man who was put to death by an imperial power could hardly be starker, both then and now.

ANTIRACIST PROGRESS CAN ONLY be realized if people treat race, religion, and politics as distinct but inseparable and interrelated factors. America will not see peace between different racial and ethnic groups without working for change in faith communities, as well as in politics and law. Racial inequities are the result of racist policies, which have been justified by religion, especially Christianity.

Looking back on the past four hundred years, this nation’s story of racism can seem almost inevitable. But it didn’t have to be this way. A critical turning point throughout history, people made deliberate

choices to construct and reinforce a racist America. Our generation has the opportunity to make different choices, ones that lead to greater human dignity and justice, but only if we pay heed to our history and respond with the truth and courage that confronting racism requires.

IN 1667 THOSE VIRGINIA lawmakers who insisted that baptism did not free an enslaved person also put themselves in bondage to a racialized corruption of Christianity. A recovery of the earthly and spiritual equality of all people, both in theory and in practice, is the only way to redeem religion from racism.

1669-1674

## THE ROYAL AFRICAN COMPANY

DAVID A. LOVE

IN NOVEMBER 1998, I FIRST VISITED LIVERPOOL WHILE WORKING as a human rights campaigner and a spokesperson for Amnesty International UK. During my journeys to this English port city, I experienced the impact of the transatlantic slave trade in unexpected ways.

I encountered Black Brits whose ancestors had arrived in England hundreds of years earlier. They reminded me of the British role in the triangular trade of Black people and goods across West Africa, Europe, and the Americas, and of the Middle Passage, which served as an underwater resting place for millions of souls who succumbed to the hellish journey warehoused in slave ship dungeons.

What struck me most about Liverpool was the extent to which the city visibly and tangibly benefited from the slave trade. Evidence of the wealth amassed from human trafficking is found in much of the city's architecture. African heads and figures are carved into buildings and adorn such structures as the town hall and the Cunard Building. The entrance to the Martins Bank (Barclays) Building—designed by architect Herbert Rowse—features a relief by sculptor George Herbert Tyson Smith of two African boys shackled at the neck and ankles and carrying bags of money. It is “a reminder that Liverpool was built by slavers’ money and that its bankers grew fat off the whipped backs of Africans when they were bankrolling cargoes of strange fruit bound for the Americas.”

The enslavement of human beings amounts to a grave violation of human rights. The institution of slavery is a sin, a form of genocide, and a system of racial oppression, exploitation, and intergenerational theft that robs people of their freedom of movement, expression, and self-determination. It endeavors to deny people their dignity and humanity, among other things. From the vantage point of the monarch, the oligarch, the slave trader, or the banker, however, human trafficking is first and foremost a for-profit endeavor, a business enterprise designed to enrich its partners and shareholders. Moreover, the profit motive justifies the abuses, and the attendant systems of racial oppression and white supremacy that certainly must follow.

Responsible for transporting more African people to the Americas than any other entity, the Royal African Company (RAC) of England was the most important institution involved in the transatlantic slave trade. Through this company, England developed its infrastructure of human trafficking and supplied Africans to meet the labor demands of the lucrative Caribbean sugar plantations. Between 1673 and 1683, England's share of the slave trade increased from 33 percent to three-quarters of the market—rendering the nation the global leader of the slave trade at the expense of the Dutch and the French. A precursor to British imperialism and colonialism, the trading company expanded England's role in the African continent, exploiting the gold and later the human resources on the West Coast in Gambia and Ghana.

The RAC was a business deal and a corporate monopoly designed to financially enrich the royal Stuart family—specifically King Charles II and his brother the Duke of York, who later became King James II—and to allow them independence from Parliament. Originally known as the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading to Africa, the company was granted a monopoly on the shipment of slaves to the Caribbean under the Navigation Act of 1660, which allowed only English-owned ships to enter colonial ports. Reorganized under a royal charter in 1672, the renamed Royal African Company was granted a legal monopoly on the British slave trade between the African continent and the West Indies and “had the whole, entire and only trade for buying and selling bartering and exchanging of for or

with any Negroes, slaves, goods, wares, merchandise whatsoever.” It was a joint stock company; its investors purchased shares and received returns on those shares. These stockholders elected a governor who was a member of the royal family, a subgovernor, deputy governor, and twenty-four assistants.

In addition to exporting slaves, the company also monopolized the trade in gold, ivory, *malgweta* pepper, and redwood dye. The company was authorized to declare martial law and amass troops, to establish plantations, forts, and factories, and to wage war or make peace with any non-Christian nation. RAC military forts existed across five thousand miles of coastline from Cape Salé in Morocco to the Cape of Good Hope in present-day South Africa. West Africans transported to the Caribbean and Virginia were branded on their chest with the company's initials.

A court on the West African coast was authorized to hear mercantile cases and matters involving the seizure of English interlopers who attempted to operate in violation of the company monopoly. In addition, the crown was entitled to claim two-thirds of the gold the company obtained, upon paying two-thirds of the mining expenses.

A royal proclamation addressed to John Leverett, governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1674, granted the RAC exclusive rights to travel from America to Africa for the purposes of trade, and it forbade others from carrying “Negro Servants, Gold, Elephants teeth, or any other goods and merchandise.”

Under the RAC, the slave trade brought considerable wealth to Britain and its cities, particularly the commercial center of London and the major trading ports of Liverpool and Bristol, where the slave ships originated. Ships from Liverpool carried 1.5 million enslaved Africans, or half of the human cargo kidnapped and transported by Britain.

While the RAC and the transatlantic slave trade are things of centuries past, the spirit they embody—of unbridled capitalism and monopolistic business schemes designed to monetize human suffering and reap corporate profits from a free and captive labor force—did not die with the slave trade. After all, section 1 of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution—“Neither slavery nor involuntary

servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”—provides a loophole allowing for enslavement to continue.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery ended in name only, as the convict lease system allowed states to lease inmates to planters and industrialists to work on plantations, railroads, and coal mines in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Like slavery, convict leasing was highly profitable and cheap, requiring little capital investment and no expenditures for the healthcare of convicts, who died off and were buried in secret graveyards. Like the slave trade and the Royal African Company, the Jim Crow system of economic exploitation was perfectly legal. The convict lease system was made possible by the Black Codes, which were like vagrancy laws that criminalized minor offenses such as loitering; allowing Black people to be swept up and thrown into chain gangs.

And today, three and a half centuries after the Royal African Company received its charter, capitalism has continued to find a way to profit from—and exploit—Black bodies. Mass incarceration and prison labor are big business, and corporate America continues to extract every penny possible from the trauma and suffering of African Americans, creating new profit centers and intergenerational wealth streams. Unjust laws—enacted through lobbying and legalized bribery on the part of corporate America, corrections officers, the Fraternal Order of Police, and other groups—promote these predatory practices. The immigration industrial complex has criminalized undocumented immigration, and much as in the slave trade, private corporations profit from the detention of migrants and refugees as well as from the trafficking of babies and the separation of families. The Royal African Company may be long gone, but its spirit is very much alive.

1674-1679

## BACON'S REBELLION

HEATHER C. MCGHEE

**I** FOUND THEIR NAMES ON A LIST THAT VIRGINIA GOVERNOR William Berkeley kept of the men executed for their part in a rebellion against his rule. My finger paused on “One Page,” and I underlined what came next: “a carpenter, formerly my servant.”

The description went on: “But for his violence used against the Royal Party, made a Colonel.” Five names later I found what I was looking for again: “One Darby, from a servant made a Captain.”

One Darby, one Page. Both were servants who became officers in Nathaniel Bacon’s rebel army in 1676, an army that included hundreds of white “bondsmen” and enslaved Africans. They nearly succeeded in overthrowing the colonial government, burning the capital of Jamestown to the ground before Bacon’s death. Governor Berkeley’s list was the first time I’d seen names and descriptions of the men who followed Bacon and changed history.

I let my imagination wander. Was Page a white indentured servant and Darby an enslaved African? Had these two men experienced, in the brief months of rebellion in 1676, something that has eluded Americans ever since: working-class solidarity across race?

I first discovered Bacon’s Rebellion while I was teaching myself American labor history. It’s a history that otherwise is full of stories of white workers fighting workers of color to maintain their place in the hierarchy of capitalism: from Irish dockworkers chasing Black longshoremen out of their jobs in the nineteenth century to white factory workers leading “hate strikes” to oppose Black promotions in

the twentieth. I heard the same story when I traveled to Canton, Mississippi, in the wake of a failed union drive in 2017 and talked to autoworkers. “The whites [were] against it because the Blacks [were] for it,” one said. In the labor conflicts, the true victor was the boss, who used racial divisions as a wedge against organizing and kept employees competing for low wages.

In early colonial Virginia, work was brutal, often deadly, and for the large working class of Black, white, and Indigenous servants, it went unpaid and life was unfree. Even after servitude’s end (still a possibility under the law for some Africans at this time), common people had few opportunities to acquire land or gainful work. The colonial elite disdained and feared the mass of “idle” freedmen and fretted over the possibility of insurrection among the enslaved. The tempestuous young newcomer Nathaniel Bacon tapped into the widespread discontent in the colony and rallied more than a thousand men, waging what some historians have called America’s first revolution.

But as I read more about Bacon’s Rebellion, a fuller picture came into focus. Searching through the writings of Bacon himself (a wealthy Englishman from the same social class as his enemy, Governor Berkeley), I found few if any references to class, land, or bondage. What Bacon sought was all-out war with neighboring Indigenous tribes. He rebelled because Berkeley had made alliances with some tribes and preferred negotiation to war. Bacon’s anti-Native fervor was indiscriminate; his followers betrayed and massacred the group of Occaneechi people who helped them fight a group of Susquehannocks and relentlessly pursued a group of Pamunkey men, women, and children.

Knowing this, can we still think of Bacon’s Rebellion as a class-based, multiracial uprising against slavery, landlessness, and servitude, as some have described it? Or was it just an early example of the powerful making the powerless fight one another, this time with white and Black united, initially against Indigenous Americans?

And again we confront the problem of history: it’s usually the powerful who get to write it. Of the half-dozen or so remaining original documents about Bacon’s Rebellion, all were written by land-

owning white men. With only Page’s and Darby’s names and absent their stories, we may never know what drove them to war.

What we do know, however, is that the rebellion turned these captives into officers and set them free. The last men to surrender after Bacon’s death—not in battle but from dysentery—were a group of eighty Africans and twenty white men, who were tricked into surrendering with the promise of remaining free. Bacon had started his rebellion as an anti-Native crusade, but the multiracial alliance of landless freedmen, servants, and slaves who carried it on had their minds set on freedom.

But the governing white elite had their minds set on reinforcing slavery after putting down the rebellion. In 1680, four years after the rebellion, Virginia passed the Law for Preventing Negro Insurrections. It restricted the movement of enslaved people outside plantations; anyone found without a pass would be tortured with twenty lashes “well laid on” before being returned. At a time when white servants and African slaves often worked side by side, the hand of the law reached in to divide them. Prison time awaited “English, and other white men and women intermarrying with negroes or mulattos.” Already any indentured white servant caught running away with an enslaved African person was liable for their entire lost term of service, meaning that the servant risked becoming permanently unfree.

The law separated the members of the lowest class by color and lifted one higher than the other. The goal, as it has been ever since, was to offer just enough racial privileges for white workers to identify with their color instead of their class. The Virginia legislature ended the penalties imposed on rebels for the insurrection of 1676, but only the white ones, removing a source of lingering solidarity among them. Post-Bacon reforms forbade Black people to carry anything that could be considered a weapon, but they made sure that every manumitted indentured servant was given a musket. Even a free Indian or Black person was forbidden to “lift up his hand in opposition against any Christian,” no matter the provocation.

A decade after Bacon, the governing class made a final decision to ensure the loyalty of white servants: simply have fewer of them. A critical mass of white working people threatened their racial slavery

order, so Virginia plantation owners imported more Africans, whose rights they could drastically limit through legislation. By the end of the eighteenth century, the gentry were relying almost entirely on Africans for their labor. They stopped importing white servants from England, save to meet a Britain-imposed quota to ensure the presence of enough armed white people to defend against slave rebellions.

Why does Bacon—the myth and the reality—matter so much to those of us who care about justice today? I think we want to believe that there was once a time when people suffering from oppression together would stand up for one another, despite their color. We want to revel in the image of a Black person, perhaps like Darby, breaking his chains to become a captain in an army that brought a slaveholding colony to its knees. More desperately, now more than ever, we need to believe in the existence of a Page—a white man we'd call working-class today, refusing to settle for what W.E.B. Du Bois called the psychological wage of whiteness, and fighting instead for the freedom that can only be won in numbers.

Today, as in colonial Virginia, the wealthy and powerful maintain an unequal society with the complicity of white people who share color with them but class with almost everybody else. At the time of this writing, a man is in the White House who made promises to fight for white Americans by scapegoating immigrants and people of color, but his biggest policy accomplishment has been a massive tax handout for himself and other wealthy people.

Though my view of Bacon's Rebellion has changed over the years, I keep coming back to it. There's something vexingly American in the story, in the violence and in the hope—and in the lengths that the powerful will go to try to stop the most natural yearnings of all, for human connection and for freedom.

1679-1684

## THE VIRGINIA LAW THAT FORBADE BEARING ARMS; OR THE VIRGINIA LAW THAT FORBADE ARMED SELF-DEFENSE

KELLIE CARTER JACKSON

**B**Y NOW, VIRGINIA WAS THE RINGLEADER OF SLAVERY. LAWS created there tended to have a “Simon says” effect, as other slaveholding colonies followed suit politically, economically, and socially. Enslavement “happened one law at a time, one person at a time,” Frances Latimer explains.

Nearly 40 percent of North America's slave population lived in Virginia. And it was growing, along with the enslavers' fear of slave rebellions, especially after Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. Virginia's enslaved population grew from two thousand to three thousand in 1680 and to over sixteen thousand by 1700. The colony was becoming at risk of being an enslaved majority.

Virginia lawmakers responded by passing racist laws of control. They prohibited enslaved Africans from congregating in large numbers, even to bury their loved ones—and, notably, from bearing arms. They made it unlawful for an African American to own a gun, even for self-defense. The enslaved were not legally allowed to protect themselves from racist whites. If a white person struck an enslaved man or woman, striking back was a criminal offense.

If an enslaved person, in an effort to defend themselves, “[f]irted]



up his hand in opposition against any Christian," the punishment was thirty lashes on their bare back—that is, if the Christian saw fit not to kill them. The law offered no space for the enslaved to defend themselves, protect loved ones, or even procure food by hunting game.

The irony is that most slaveholders violated these laws in their own interests. In 1723 Virginia allowed enslaved people to bear arms when hunting in the frontier regions. The enslaved held or transported guns while their owners hunted. Some enslaved people were given guns to keep birds off rice fields. In Lowcountry plantations, slave watchmen usually carried guns, and one county in the Chesapeake fined several masters for selling arms to their slaves. By the American Revolution, "eighty Guns, some Bayonets, swords, etc." were collected from the enslaved by their masters.

While it may seem reckless and self-endangering for masters to have violated gun laws like this, it speaks to planters' beliefs in their own military power. White nonslaveholding men from the militia could be signaled and employed at any moment. The punishment for rumors of uprisings, let alone rebellions themselves, was death.

But those were exceptions for the self-interest of individual planters: in general white Americans then and later considered it to be in their self-interest for Black Americans to remain unarmed. One U.S. Supreme Court justice argued, in the infamous *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision in 1857, that one of the clear hazards of recognizing Black people as citizens was that it would allow them to "to keep and carry arms wherever they went."

Today the National Rifle Association (NRA) leads the charge in protecting the Second Amendment—a charge it has been leading since it began in 1871. But the NRA has never been a defender of African Americans who purchased weapons for self-defense against white terror. In the late 1960s, when Black Panthers carried weapons in public spaces, it was entirely legal in the state of California. When California passed some of the most restrictive gun laws in the country to disarm the Black Panthers, the NRA lent its support.

It is nearly impossible to disconnect gun ownership and race in America. Gun ownership has always been a tool to secure power—racist white power.

1684-1689

## THE CODE NOIR

LAURENCE RALPH

**T**HE PERIOD OF THE 1680s WAS A TIME OF GROWTH AND EXPANSION in the English colonies as Africans replaced European indentured servants, and slavery became commonplace. By 1685, when Blacks were becoming more central to the plantation economy, the conditions of slavery, especially the way whites treated Blacks, varied based on location. In South Carolina, whites passed a law that "prohibited the exchange of goods between slaves or slaves and freemen without their master's permission." In 1687 whites in Northern Neck, Virginia, caught wind that enslaved people were organizing a revolt under the guise of planning a funeral. They immediately crushed the insurrection and then made it illegal for enslaved Blacks to bury their dead.

Enslaved people began to flee harsh conditions in Virginia and South Carolina to Spanish Florida. If an enslaved person made it there and professed his belief that Roman Catholicism was "the True Faith," the Spanish colonists would set him free. As a result, the first Black town, St. Augustine, was founded by freedmen and -women in 1687. A year later Germantown Quakers wrote the first petition against slavery ever drafted by a religious group in the English colonies. Just four years after the Quakers had brought enslaved people to settle the frontier, they argued that it was immoral to treat human beings as if they were cargo. This period also marks the tail end of the Royal African Company's seventeen-year monopoly on transporting enslaved people to the English colonies. But just as Black people who

lived in those colonies were deeply impacted by the decisions of the London-based trading company, the 1685 Code Noir, "one of the most extensive official documents on race, slavery, and freedom ever drawn up in Europe," transformed the lives of generations of Black people living in the geographical expanse that would eventually become the United States.

The Code Noir (or Black Code) was written by French politician Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who served as minister of finance for twenty-two years under Louis XIV. The goal of the Code Noir was to ensure the success of the sugar plantation economy. What France needed to do to maintain economic security, Colbert believed, was establish protocols for regulating enslaved people in the colonies. Colbert died an accomplished statesman at the age of sixty-four, but he was buried before the code was complete. In 1683 Colbert's eldest son, the Marquis de Seignelay, submitted the document to the king, and two years later Louis XIV ratified it.

In an edict that the king announced in March 1685, which concerned how order was to be enforced in "the French American islands," Louis XIV asserted that the purpose of the Code was to provide comfort to French officers living in colonies who were said to "need our authority and our justice . . . [in order] to regulate the status and condition of the slaves." As the majority of those living in the colonies were enslaved, the king meant for his white subjects to feel at ease.

In the security regime of the mercantilist period, the colonists' sense of safety was related to the way their mother country regulated and surveilled enslaved people, who were central to their nation's ambitions to conquer the globe. Louis XIV's attempts to "assist" his French officers living in the Americas, in other words, were inextricably bound to the process by which Spanish and European nations enlarged their power at the expense of rival nations through wars, purchases, treaties, and the enforcement of codes.

A remote part of the French Empire, Louisiana, was settled in 1699, though its most famous city—New Orleans—did not come under French control until 1718. The Code Noir was applied to Loui-

siana six years later, in 1724. Though Louisiana would eventually come under Spanish rule and then French rule again before being purchased by the United States, the territory was still controlled by the French in 1729 when John Mingo, a Black man who was enslaved in South Carolina, escaped to New Orleans. When Mingo arrived, a colonist granted his freedom, and he worked the land that the colonist hired him to break. Before long Mingo had saved enough money to purchase an enslaved woman, Therese, who also lived and worked on the plantation. John Mingo and Therese then moved in together and made a living by farming another colonist's land, for which they were granted a "salary and a portion of the yield."

As free Black people, John and Therese Mingo were rare but not completely alone. They joined the small population of free Black servants, drivers, hunters, artisans, and domestics who had accompanied French colonists when they arrived from Europe. The public record does not mention any Mingo children, but if Therese gave birth, her offspring were subject to the 1685 Code Noir. If John and Therese Mingo had a boy, they might have warned him that marrying an enslaved woman would turn his offspring into slaves. If they had a girl, they might have warned her about the perils of marrying an enslaved man. Having children with a white man was also dangerous under the Code, as both mother and child could become property of the New Orleans hospital. Since sexual relations with a white man could endanger her freedom and since marrying someone white was outlawed, it would have been reasonable for John and Therese to encourage their daughter to marry another free Black person.

Informed by the Code, their advice might have sounded something like this:

Don't marry a slave; if you marry a slave, your life will be full of worry: if your slave husband were to carry a weapon, or even a large stick, you may find him flogged with his back bleeding at your doorstep; you would not be able to invite other slaves to your wedding; your husband could not sell sugar or fruits or vegetables or firewood or herbs at the market, and he could not

travel without a written note; if you or your husband were to be violated in any way he could never win a judgment; and if he were to strike his master, his mistress, or their children, his punishment would be death; know that if you were to save your money and purchase your husband's freedom, he would still have to maintain respect for his former master and his former master's family; rest assured, your children would be free despite the condition of their father; but for you, free girl, best not marry a slave at all.

In the system of chattel slavery from which Europe benefited, Black people were considered the property of colonists. However, they never stopped imagining ways to be free. Precisely because Black girls, in particular, were devalued, they were most likely to have their freedom purchased by family members. That is, "since girls and women had lower market values, they were more likely to be freed."

Despite the fact that free Blacks in New Orleans were a relatively large group compared to those living in other American cities, the legacy of the 1685 Code Noir should not be mistaken for a mythical story of progress in which the document traveled out of France and paved the way for freedom purchases, creating space for the emancipation of all Blacks. That mythology covers over the backlash to free Blacks in New Orleans under U.S. rule when the white planter class systematically excluded them from the halls of power. The legacy that I want to resurrect, rather, is the way that this piece of legislation helped colonial officers govern through enforcing and exploiting a society's racial divisions. What might be reduced to anti-Black sentiment or self-hate, in those imagined words of advice to a free Black girl, accurately reflect codified law that inscribed a racial caste system within New Orleans civil society.

In this way, our imagined advice given to the Mingo daughter also echoes the enduring dialogue about the law and the police that Black parents and their children have had for generations. (I am speaking of that coming-of-age conversation about racial awakening, commonly referred to as "the talk.") And thus, although one would never be able

to prove it definitively, it would likewise be impossible to deny that the control, regulation, vigilance, and surveillance indicative of the 1685 Code Noir are still embedded in the place where the Mingos gained their freedom: New Orleans, the U.S. city that recently possessed the highest rate of incarceration.

1689-1694

## THE GERMANTOWN PETITION AGAINST SLAVERY

CHRISTOPHER J. LEBRON

**T**HE IDEA OF “ALLIES” OFTEN COMES UP IN OUR CURRENT resistance struggles. The #MeToo movement would do better if men were good allies in fighting the sexual predation of women; Black Lives Matter would benefit if whites were good allies in resisting racism and racist institutions; the queer movement would be stronger if cis-normative people were good allies in promoting understanding of gender fluidity and combating both ignorance and damaging public policies that limit access to traditionally gender-normed spaces.

But what makes a good ally? As it is used these days, it means someone who is not being directly harmed by the injustice in question yet who stands with those being harmed, even if it's against the self-interest of their identity privilege. In many ways, it asks more of the privileged than they are often willing to give but less than what those of us on the other side of that privilege need.

This was not the case in 1683, when thirteen families founded Germantown, a neighborhood in what would become the city of Philadelphia. Quakers were prominent among the founding families and, from this base, established a long-term presence in the city. History celebrates those of the Quaker faith as being reliably antislavery. But there were differences between early Quaker groups, as the 1688 Germantown petition shows.

In addition to being at the historical forefront of abolitionist tracts, the German Quaker petition represented a position that was impor-

tantly different from that of English Quakers. Although the English Quakers resisted the presence of slavery, their concern tended to focus on the inconsistency that slavery presented to the ostensible principles of this still-forming new country—a free land for free people. Thus for them, slavery was wrong because it impeded those of African descent from partaking of the bounty of the land as a reward for hard work and from participating in the processes that were collectively shaping the nascent nation.

These are fine abolitionist principles, but the German Quakers had a more fundamental disagreement with slavery: they found it an affront to the human condition. Consider the demands in the petition, written by its four authors, Gerrit Hendericks, Derick up de Graeff, Francis Daniell Pastorius, and Abraham op den Graeff. They declared that Blacks

are brought hither against their will and consent, and that many of them are stolen. Now, tho they are black, we can not conceive there is more liberty to have them slaves, as it is to have other white ones. . . . This makes an ill report in all those countries of Europe, where they hear off, that ye Quakers doe here handel men as they handel their ye cattle. . . .

And in case you find it to be good to handel these blacks at that manner, we desire and require you hereby lovingly, that you may inform us herein, which at this time never was done, viz, that Christians have such a liberty to do so. To the end we shall be satisfied in this point, and satisfied likewise our good friends and acquaintances in our natif country, to whose it is a terror, or [fearful] thing, that men should be handeld so in Pennsylvania.

The most important part of the petition—the part that compelled historian Katharine Gerbner to describe it as “one of the first documents to make a humanitarian argument against slavery”—is the plain affirmation that Blacks are first and foremost human beings and not salable animals for toil and labor. A humanitarian argument is different from an argument based on inclusion and exclusion.

Inclusion—in this case, being included as beneficiaries of the bounty of America—is important, but it is not fundamental because if the people who want to be included are not considered worthy or even really people at all, then your commitment to inclusion will evaporate. But if you start from the idea that Blacks are indeed human, then every commitment to equality after that will be unshakable. And that is the thing to be learned from the 1688 petition. Blacks do not need allies who fight for our inclusion; rather, we need people who are possessed of the basic belief that we are human and that any arguments that depend on rejecting that proposition are tyrannical, unjust, and to be fought.

This may seem to be a semantic point. After all, can't allies do exactly that? Yes, but there's more to consider. By their very nature, alliances are agreements, explicitly or implicitly, and usually the most essential part of an alliance is that it is made for mutual benefit and advantage. But think about that. What does it mean to rely on a system of racial support founded on people entering into that kind of pragmatic agreement?

The 1688 Germantown petition is a model of, if nothing else, a quality that Black people need in white Americans—the uncompromising belief that what is wrong with racism is not that it inhibits full access to American goods and treasures but that it is an affront to the human standing of Black Americans. Black people don't need allies. We need decent people possessed of the moral conviction that our lives matter.

1694-1699

## THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

MARY E. HICKS

**F**ROM THE 1400S TO THE 1600S, PORTUGUESE MERCHANT interests on the vast coast of West Africa experienced the ebbs and flows of fortune characteristic of any form of early modern commerce. But the Portuguese were not exclusively involved in trading spices, textiles, specie, and other luxury goods; the fledgling empire increasingly specialized in the disputable commerce “in human flesh and blood.”

The tiny Iberian nation originated the Atlantic world's first trans-oceanic slave trade. It connected Europe with sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas through the brutal commerce of buying and selling human beings. The pioneering maritime technologies and trading strategies of the Portuguese made the once commercially insignificant territory into the preeminent importer of gold and enslaved men, women, and children on the continent in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The incursions of Dutch, English, and French traffickers slowly eroded the Portuguese monopoly. In the region surrounding Elmina—the most prolific gold-producing area in West Africa—the Portuguese were supplanted by the Dutch in 1637. The rush of European merchants to the Gold Coast following the Dutch victory prompted the once modest number of slaving ships trolling West African waters to metastasize. The number of enslaved people whom slavers violently embarked from the sandy strip of coast reached an average of 4,494 per year.

In the final decade of the seventeenth century, slave traders under Portugal's banner began to reassert their regional dominance by regaining the covered *asiento* or commercial monopoly to supply enslaved laborers to Spanish America. In 1698 the ruler of Ardra, a powerful African polity to the east of Elmina, invited the Portuguese monarch to build a fortified trading post there in recognition of the nation's lucrative dealings in the port. Meanwhile in Brazil, Portugal's largest and most opulent colony, gold deposits were discovered in a remote, mountainous region west of Rio de Janeiro, which further stimulated Portuguese efforts to exploit a steady stream of laboring hands to mine for precious metals. But the Portuguese also exploited the expertise of another group of unlikely laborers.

West African mariners provided the critical labor necessary to make slaving voyages profitably efficient. And their seafaring skills became the hidden element in the slave trade's surging growth. A string of coastal communities, "Axim, Ackum, Boutroe, Tacorary, Commendo, Cormentim and Wineba," furnished Portuguese and other Europeans with highly skilled contracted canoeemen to ferry goods and people from ship to shore, as well as carry provisions and trade goods along the coast.

Their expertise in fashioning lithe, maneuverable watercraft was unmatched. So too was their knowledge of the contours of coastal geographies and the rhythms of the powerful local surf, which often confounded European seamen. The canoes of the Fanti especially captivated European navigators for their size and complexity. These vessels, able to navigate on the open waters of the Atlantic, made a striking impression. Visitors noted "the bigger canoes . . . made from a single trunk, the largest in the Ethiopias of Guinea; some of them are large enough to hold eighty men, and they come from a hundred leagues or more up this river bringing yarns in large quantities. . . . They also bring many slaves, cows, goats, and sheep." On larger craft, crewmen remained stationed for long periods, just as they would on European sailing ships, eating and sleeping aboard.

European slavers such as Jean Barbot called Gold Coast canoe-men "the fittest and most experienced men to manage [to] paddle the canoes over the bars and breakings." Though at the behest of slaving

ship captains and merchants, these laborers were not without leverage. They bargained for higher wages and used their proximity to transatlantic commerce to deal on their own behalf. As one European trader noted, "It was customary for Mina fishermen [canoeemen] to go out in their canoes and contact ships from Portugal before they reached the [trading] castle. Out at sea they conducted private trade to the detriment of the [Portuguese] crown."

Maritime middlemen were vectors between avaricious European and American merchants and the West African brokers who sold them Black people. These middlemen occupied a paradoxical position within the transatlantic slave trade. They bore witness to and participated in heart-wrenching scenes of violence: enslaved peoples being shackled, branded, and forcibly moved aboard ships. Facing these disturbing scenes, as well as the inherent dangers of the Gold Coast's tumultuous waters, they carved out individual benefits for themselves on the margins of the infamous trade. Like many participants in the Middle Passage, the individual inducements for cooperation bound them to a ruthless process that enriched the few at the expense of many.