Blacks in Virginia: A Note on the First Decade

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AMID the historiographical wrangling that has in recent years focused on the origins of American slavery and race prejudice, at least one item of agreement has held firm: almost nothing is known about the status of blacks in America until 1630 or later.[1] Unhappily for our attempts to understand the emergence of Negro servitude, information on the early years remains frustratingly sparse. However, the evidence for the 1620s is not so lacking or as unrevealing as has long been supposed.

Two principal sources and a smattering of lesser items tell much about how white Virginians viewed blacks during the first decade of African importation. What the sources reveal is not a solution to the slavery v. servitude puzzle; they do not make clear how many of the Africans in Virginia were being held in permanent bondage nor what effect conversion to Christianity may have had on the Negro's status. The sources do, however, shed some light on these matters. They also show with disturbing clarity that the black men and women brought to Virginia from 1619 to 1629 held from the outset a singularly debased status in the eyes of white Virginians. If not subjected to permanent and

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[1] The principal disputants have been Oscar and Mary F. Handlin, "Origins of the Southern Labor System," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3d Ser., VII (1950), 199-222; Carl N. Degler, "Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice," *Comparative Studies in History and Society,* II (1959), 49-66; Winthrop D. Jordan, "Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery," *Journal of Southern History,* XXVIII (1962), 18-30; and Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968). Other contributions to the debate include Paul C. Palmer, "Servant into Slave: The Evolution of the Legal Status of the Negro Laborer in Colonial Virginia," *South Atlantic Quarterly,* LXV (1966), 355-370; Louis Ruchames, "The Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial America," *Journal of Negro History,* LII (1967), 251-272; and George M. Fredrickson, "Toward a Social Interpretation of the Development of American Racism," in Nathan I. Huggins *et al.,* eds., *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience,* I (New York, 1971), 240-254. For a discussion of earlier treatments of the subject, see Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959), 38-40.

inheritable bondage during that decade—a matter that needs further evidence—black Virginians were at least well on their way to such a condition. For the Elizabethan Englishmen's deep-rooted antipathy to Africans, so well documented by Winthrop D. Jordan in *White Over Black*, reveals itself in a variety of subtle ways in the records of early Virginia.

The very earliest references to black men in British America leave uncertain their status but suggest that most, but not all, were held as servile laborers. John Rolfe's two letters concerning the events of August 1619 are our only surviving accounts of the arrival of the first Negroes. In a letter of January 1620 to Sir Edwin Sandys, Treasurer of the Virginia Company, Rolfe described the arrival the previous year of a Dutch man-of-war which "brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Marchant bought for victualles. . . ."[2] Rolfe's other mention of the event is even less fulsome; in a letter reprinted in John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia* . . . Rolfe reported that "about the last of August came in a dutch man of warre that sold us twenty Negars. . . ."[3] Clearly the arrival of the first Africans meant little to Rolfe; clearly also they were considered items of merchandise. But so were white indentured servants whose labor could also be bought and sold, and they too were occasionally mentioned with a callousness that matches Rolfe's.

There is no further reference to blacks until 1624. On the last day of November of that year, "*John Phillip* A negro Christened in *England* 12 yeers since" testified in a suit against a white man. Phillips, it appears, was no slave and perhaps not even a servant; his conversion to Christianity had taken place before he reached the colony and from his testimony before the General Court it seems likely that he was a member of a ship's crew.[4] About a year later the Court ordered that the "negro caled by the name of *brase* shall belonge to *Sir Francis Wyatt,* Governor etc., As his servant"; this was probably the same black man that a month earlier had been assigned by the Court to Lady Yeardley, wife of the former governor, who was ordered to allow the Negro "monthly for

[2] Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London,* III (Washington, D. C., 1933), 243.

[3] Edward Arber and A. G. Bradley, eds., *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith* (Edinburgh, 1910), II, 541.

[4] H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia, 1622-1632, 1670-1676* (Richmond, 1924), 33.

his labor forty pownd waight of good marchantable tobacco for his labor and service so longe as he remayneth with her."[5] These court entries and the evidence that survives concerning Anthony Johnson, a Negro who eventually claimed headrights for Africans *he* imported into Virginia, make clear that not all of the blacks who entered Virginia in the decade after 1619 were thrust into permanent bondage. A few may have arrived as free men, while others undoubtedly served a period of service from which they were released into freedom much as were white indentured servants. From the legal standpoint the black and white servants differed only in the absence, so far as we know, of any written terms of indenture by which the servant had engaged in service. The distinction may have been important, though. Most English servants came voluntarily with contract in hand. The blacks came under duress and were sold, most likely, for as long a period of service as the purchaser desired or the law decreed. But since Virginia had no relevant laws, and since those of England were sufficiently vague as to permit almost any interpretation, the probability is that many purchasers of blacks held them for life or at least far longer than white servants.[6]

That such a construction of the evidence is likely receives strong support from two colony-wide censuses taken in the middle of the decade. On orders of the Virginia Company of London, the colonial authorities in February 1624, compiled a "List of the Livinge and Dead in Virginia" in each of the twenty-three clusters of settlement that then comprised the colony. The original of this document survives in the Public Record Office in London, and it was printed as early as 1874 in the *Colonial Records of Virginia*.[7] The list gives evidence of twenty-two blacks among

[5] *Ibid.*, 72-73.

[6] Jordan, *White Over Black*, Chap. 2.

[7] The original document, filed in the West Room of the Public Record Office, London, is more legible than the microfilm copies in the Virginia Colonial Records Project and more accurate than the printed versions contained in the *Colonial Records of Virginia* (Richmond, 1874). However, because discrepancies between the original and printed versions are slight and for the most part irrelevant to the purposes of this paper, citations will be to the *Colonial Records of Virginia* except where otherwise noted. The manuscript is in C.O. 1/3, Public Record Office (Virginia Colonial Records Project Microfilm). The census also appears in John Camden Hotten, ed., *The Original Lists of Persons . . . Who Went from Great Britain to the American Plantations, 1600-1700* (London, 1874). Biographical sketches of some of the residents listed in the census can be found in Edward D. Neill, "A Study of the Virginia Census of 1624," *New-England Historical and Genealogical Register*, XXXI (1877), 147-153, 265-272, 393-401.

the living and one as having died since the previous April. What is most striking about the appearance of these blacks in the census is that although most of them had been in America for five years, none is accorded a last name and almost half are recorded with no name at all. Typical entries read "one negar," "A Negors Woman," or in the case of Flowerdew Hundred, as:

_____		negors
_____		negors
_____		negors
_____	vj	negors
_____		negors
_____		negors[8]

By contrast, very few entries for non-Negroes have incomplete names. Occasionally a first name is absent and the omission indicated by a dash, and a few listings of presumably white servants appear as "A servant of Mr. Moorewood's," or "Mary, a maid." Two Italian glassmakers are designated by their surnames only.[9] There are also a few entries for whites in the 1624 census on a level of impersonality that approaches the listings of the Negroes: "two Frenchmen," "Symon, an Italien," and "Thomas, an Indian."[10] One can only speculate on what such listings reveal about the attitudes of ethnocentric Englishmen toward persons of other nationalities, but the point to be made here is that Negroes as a group received by far the scantiest and most impersonal entries in the census. Ten of the twenty-three are without first or last names, the rest have first names only. By contrast, the same page that records two Frenchmen anonymously also lists two others with full names and a third with a surname only. Similarly, an Italian, Bernardo of the glass works, is followed on the list by "Mrs. Bernardo" in marked contrast to the entries for black women, none of whom is designated as married, although it seems implausible that some were not. In short, the census of 1624 suggests the early appearance of an attitude deeply prejudicial toward blacks in Virginia.

More telling is the census taken a year later.[11] The "Muster of Inhab-

[8] *Colonial Records of Virginia,* 40. I have used here the arrangement and spacing of the original manuscript.

[9] *Ibid.,* 47, 49.

[10] *Ibid.,* 50, 58, 53.

[11] C.O. 1/3, P.R.O. (Va. Col. Rec. Proj.). The document has been printed, with

itants in Virginia," of January and February 1625, like its predecessor, is arranged by plantations, beginning in this case with the "Colledge-land," and running through more than a score of localities. Again a name, or at least an identifying label, is given to each inhabitant. But in addition, for most men and women the census shows age, date of arrival in Virginia, and ship of passage, plus for each free family its possessions in houses, armaments, munitions, food staples, and livestock. The resulting gold mine of military, economic, and demographic data has barely been tapped by historians and thus far has received its most extensive attention from genealogists.[12] But like the census of 1624, that of 1625 tells much about the status of black men and women in British America.

Again, twenty-three Negroes appear. Nine of them lived in James City, seven at Percy's Hundred, three at Elizabeth City, two at Warrasquoke, one in the "Neck of land near James City," and one at "Elizabeth Citty beyond Hampton River"—a fairly wide geographical distribution of black laborers. Of particular interest is the nearly even balance in sex: twelve men and eleven women, an indication that the sexual disparity of the West Indies, where a severe shortage of females had grave implications for population increases and for social adjustment, found from the outset no parallel on the mainland.[13]

Compared to the 1624 census, the 1625 report is more complete as

omission of the data on armaments and other possessions, in Hotten, ed., *Original Lists,* 201-265; and in its entirety in Annie Lash Jester and Martha Woodruff Hiden, eds., *Adventurers of Purse and Person: Virginia 1607-1625* (Princeton, 1956), 5-69. A convenient tabular summation of the data can be found in A. C. Quisenberry, "The Virginia Census, 1624-25," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography,* VII (1899-1900), 264-267.

[12] Two early historians who made extensive use of the census are Alexander Brown, *The First Republic in America* . . . (Boston, 1898), 610-628; and Philip Alexander Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century,* II (New York, 1896), 70-72. Recently Edmund S. Morgan has drawn perceptively on the census in "The First American Boom: Virginia, 1618 to 1630," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XXVIII (1971), 169-198. But significantly the only published versions of the muster appear in essentially genealogical works: Hotten, ed., *Original Lists;* Jester and Hiden, eds., *Adventurers of Purse and Person.*

[13] Philip D. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," *Political Science Quarterly,* LXXXIII (1968), 211-215; and Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969), esp. 28. Much work remains to be done on the impact of sex ratio on the adjustment of blacks to new environments, its impact on the frequency and severity of slave revolts, and the correlation between sex ratio—with its important bearing on population growth—and white attitudes toward the slave trade.

well as more ambitious. Very few names are incomplete; age is indicated for the vast majority of inhabitants, and the remaining information—date and ship of arrival, provisions, cattle, etc.—shows few gaps. But again most of the Negroes are relegated to anonymity or partial identification. For example, the muster of Abraham Peirsey's "servants" lists thirty-six individuals, including seven blacks. Four of them are Negro men and are so designated, with no names, first or family, no date or ship of arrival, no age; the others are entered as "Negro woman," and "Negro woman and a young Child of hers." All of Peirsey's twenty-nine white servants, however, are recorded with full names and ship and date of arrival; ages are given for twenty-seven of the twenty-nine.[14] Similarly, of the twenty-four servants at James City, full information is given on all except the wife of one (who presumably arrived in the same ship as her husband and is therefore deficient only in age), and the eight blacks who are shown as: "Negro Men 3 Negro Woemen 5."[15]

Continuing the practice of the 1624 census, given names do appear for some blacks, and in a few instances additional information is recorded. Hence the muster of Capt. William Peirce includes "Angelo a Negro Woman in the *Treasuror*."[16] That entry may be significant: other entries show that *Treasurer* brought colonists to Virginia in 1613, 1614, 1615, 1617, and 1618, and from other sources it is known that the ship returned to Virginia in the fall of 1619 with a load of Negroes but was not permitted to land her human cargo for fear of arousing Spanish animosity. Perhaps the ship identification on Angelo is in error, or perhaps she alone came ashore from *Treasurer* in 1619, but barring such possibilities, Angelo's arrival in Virginia would precede by from one to six years the date usually assigned for the advent of blacks in Virginia.[17] Neither John Rolfe, it will be remembered, nor any other

[14] Jester and Hiden, eds., *Adventurers of Purse and Person*, 21-22.
[15] *Ibid.*, 27.
[16] *Ibid.*, 29.
[17] *Treasurer* was a controversial vessel in the 17th century and has remained one ever since. After making several trips to America for the Company, beginning in 1613 or earlier, in 1618 she arrived in Virginia under Capt. Daniel Elfrith with a commission from the Duke of Savoy to prey on Spanish shipping. Lt. Gov. Samuel Argall, a part owner of the vessel, dispatched her to the West Indies where she fell in with a Dutch man-of-war (more likely a privateer also under license from the Duke of Savoy), which soon captured a cargo of Negroes which she sold

contemporary claimed that the Dutch ship brought the *first* Negroes to Virginia.

On five of the Negroes recorded in the 1625 census we have fuller entries, although only one received a complete listing: "John Pedro, a Neger aged 30 in the *Swan* 1623." This was probably the "John, a negro" of the 1624 report, who along with several other servants of Capt. Francis West appears "At the Plantation over against James Cittie" in 1624, and in 1625 at "Elizabeth Cittie Beyond Hampton River, Beinge the Companyes land."[18] In the case of John Pedro we have not only a full listing but a full name, the only black other than the aforementioned John Phillips of the 1624 General Court records to so appear in the decade from 1619 to 1629. We do, however, know the surname of three Negroes at Elizabeth City, listed in 1624 only as Anthony and Isabella, Negroes. In the 1625 report their entry reads "Antoney Negro: Isabell Negro: and William Theire Child Baptised." This undoubtedly was the Anthony Johnson who subsequently became free and later owned black servants himself.[19]

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in Virginia. *Treasurer* acquired some Negroes too, but finding a hostile reception at Jamestown, where the new governor George Yeardley feared repercussions from the Spanish if he allowed the landing of goods seized by an English ship during peacetime, she sailed to Bermuda and there unloaded her human cargo on the Earl of Warwick's estate. "Stark rotten" when she reached Bermuda late in 1619, *Treasurer* apparently did not sail again. Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia,* II, 66-70; Kingsbury, ed., *Virginia Company Records,* III, 219-222; and Edward D. Neill, *Virginia Vetusta* . . . (Albany, N. Y., 1885), 112-116, 201-202. Cf. Brown, *First Republic,* 324-327; and Brown, *The Genesis of the United States* . . . , II (Boston, 1890), 885-886, 987, where he argues that *Treasurer,* not the Dutch ship, brought the first group of 20 or more Negroes to Virginia. The surviving evidence does not seem to support Brown's contention. See also James Curtis Ballagh, *A History of Slavery in Virginia* (Baltimore, 1902), 7-9, who contends that *Treasurer* landed one Negro, Angelo. Ballagh bases his conclusion on Brown, whose findings are dubious, and on the 1625 census, which as noted above lists Angelo as having arrived on *Treasurer* but does not specify the year. Her date of arrival may have been 1618 or earlier. The most thorough account of the *Treasurer* episode is Wesley Frank Craven, *The Dissolution of the Virginia Company* (New York, 1932), 127-133. Two recent works by Craven, both stressing the possibility of blacks arriving before 1619 and in a number exceeding 20, appeared too late to be considered in this article. See "Twenty Negroes to Jamestown in 1619?" *Virginia Quarterly Review,* XLVII (1971), 416-421; and *White, Red, and Black: The Seventeenth-Century Virginian* (Charlottesville, Va., 1971), 77-82.

[18] Jester and Hiden, eds., *Adventurers of Purse and Person,* 62; *Colonial Records of Virginia,* 46.

[19] *Colonial Records of Virginia,* 51; Jester and Hiden, eds., *Adventurers of Purse*

The remaining two blacks whose entries show more than a given name are "Antonio a Negro in the *James* 1621" and "Mary a Negro Woman in the *Margarett and John* 1622," both at Warrasquoke.[20] Significant in these listings is evidence that blacks continued to enter Virginia, perhaps at the rate of two or three per year, and on English ships that also carried free and indentured whites, thus presumably coming from England and either bringing a black or two from there, or stopping in the West Indies where a few blacks may have been purchased for importation to Virginia.

Once in Virginia the black servants may or may not have fared much like their white servant counterparts. However, there are strong hints from the census of 1625 that they were a different category of labor: witness the absence for most of the blacks of age and date of arrival—crucial data for white servants since terms of indenture usually stipulated service for a specified number of years or until a specified age. Furthermore, although most of the blacks of the 1625 census had been in Virginia for six years, none of them is shown as free; all are either specifically listed under the heading of "servants" or are included in the holdings of free white men who held white as well as black "servants." In most cases the blacks are at the end of such lists of "servants," sometimes accompanied by an Indian, and, as already noted, usually accorded no name or other data. The overall impression conveyed by the census of 1625, then, is of a significantly inferior position for the Negro in the social structure of white Virginia.

The impression gains further credence from the will of George

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and Person, 49; Court Records of Northampton County, Land Patents of Virginia, 1643-1651, Bk. II, 326, 1651-1654, 161-162, Virginia State Library, Richmond. Because of his relative prosperity and his ownership of black servants, Johnson has received considerable attention from historians. See Susie M. Ames, *Studies of the Virginia Eastern Shore in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond, 1940), 102-104; John H. Russell, *The Free Negro in Virginia, 1619-1865* (Baltimore, 1913), 24-25; Russell, "Colored Freemen as Slave Owners in Virginia," *Jour. Negro Hist.,* I (1916), 234-237; and James H. Brewer, "Negro Property Owners in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," *WMQ,* 3d Ser., XII (1955), 576-578. While there is no doubt that Anthony Johnson and his family were free by 1652, the evidence does not support a claim that he had escaped bondage "within three years of the landing of the first Negroes at Jamestown." See "Anthony Johnson, Free Negro, 1622," *Jour. Negro Hist.,* LVI (1971), 71-76. In 1625 he and his family belonged to Capt. William Tucker.

[20] Jester and Hiden, eds., *Adventurers of Purse and Person,* 46.

Yeardley, governor from 1619 to 1621 and again from 1626 to 1627, who wrote his will in 1627, eight years after the date generally accepted for the arrival of the first Africans. To his heirs Sir George left "goode debts, chattels, servants, negars, cattle or any other thing."[21] The "negars" may of course have been "servants" too, but a separate category for them as distinct from his other servants suggests at the very least that Governor Yeardley considered blacks apart, and presumably inferior, and certainly a species of property. At the most, the sequence of Yeardley's listing in which Negroes come between servants and cattle implies a status lower than servants, perhaps relegated to servitude for life, a crucial step on the path toward a system of permanent and inheritable slavery based primarily on color.

For the remainder of the decade, evidence of Africans in Virginia is again shrouded in obscurity. From papers preserved in the Public Record Office we know that at least a few more blacks entered the colony, but the number and circumstances are not clear. In 1628 a Captain Guy or Gay in *Fortune* seized a ship near Angola with some Negroes on board; he sent them to Virginia to be sold for tobacco.[22] That same year an unspecified number of blacks were sent to the colony on board *Straker*.[23] Unfortunately the records in these cases tell us too little. But presumably the black population of Virginia had grown by 1629 to a figure somewhat greater than the "20 and odd" of ten years before. Some natural increase had taken place, some fresh imports had arrived, and because of the probability that most of the blacks were young and healthy on arrival and had in many cases undoubtedly been "seasoned" to English diseases in Britain or the Indies, the mortality rate would likely have been low.

What the evidence of the decade after 1619 tells us is inconclusive but not insignificant. It shows with alarming clarity that blacks from the outset suffered from a prejudice that relegated them to the lowest rank in the colony's society, and there are strong hints that bondage for blacks did not follow the same terms as for whites. There is a suggestion,

[21] MS 2y327a, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

[22] H.C.A. 13/47, P.R.O. (Va. Col. Rec. Proj.); John Ellzey to Edward Nicholas, May 13, 1628, in John Bruce *et al.*, eds., *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, Charles I, 1628-1629* (London, 1859), 110, Ellzey to Nicholas, May 27, 1628, *ibid.*, 131; Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia,* II, 73-74.

[23] H.C.A. 13/47, P.R.O. (Va. Col. Rec. Proj.).

too, that a small but growing traffic in slaves had begun in which Virginia served as the final destination. Finally, there is evidence that a few blacks, principally if not exclusively those who had been converted to Christianity before their arrival in Virginia, may have held a higher status than other blacks and eventually obtained their freedom. But on balance, the scattered evidence of the first decade strongly supports the contentions of Winthrop Jordan and Carl Degler that a deep and pervading racial prejudice served as an early and inevitable precursor to American Negro slavery.