

## Module 02: Unthinking Decision? Why Did Slavery Emerge in Virginia?

### Introduction

Few images have become more closely associated with Colonial America than that of slavery, yet slavery was not immediately established in America, even in colonies like Virginia, where plantations dominated the economy. Virginians did not begin enslaving Africans until the second half of the seventeenth century, well after the establishment of tobacco farming. That Virginians began engaging slaves so late should hardly come as a surprise. Slavery was not part of the England that established Virginia. As an institution, slavery had vanished from English law and custom hundreds of years earlier. In addition, most English settlers of the seventeenth century found Africans revolting, frightening, or both.

So why create slavery in Virginia at all? Why travel thousands of miles away from the New World in search of African slaves? After years of employing indentured servants to grow tobacco, what convinced Virginians that slaves were necessary? And why enslave Africans when Native Americans were both closer and more familiar? The historian Winthrop Jordan called Virginia's move into slavery an "unthinking decision;" yet was it (1)? Did race-based slavery simply happen to Virginia, or did slavery emerge in Virginia when and how it did for very specific reasons?

(1) Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).