

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

Conclusion

No one factor can explain the Virginians' decision to shift from indentured servants to slaves at the end of the seventeenth century. Each of the factors considered in this module most likely played a part in their decision process, and it most likely took an interplay of all the factors discussed here to trigger the change. Virginians must have considered slavery an acceptable form of labor; they must have believed that certain groups of people would make better, or more appropriate, slaves than others; and they must have found it socially and economically preferable to enslave such designated peoples than to continue using indentured servants. If any or all of the above suppositions held sway at the end of the seventeenth century, many Virginians may have found compelling reasons to shift from servants to slaves.

Throughout the English colonies, white settlers confronted the choice between servants and slaves during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the time of the American Revolution, Britain had established 26 colonies in the Americas, and slavery existed in each one. Part of the decision to adopt slavery may have arisen from "unthinking" attitudes toward Indians or Africans, although part of it involved a rational choice. Which form of labor promised the greatest economic or social reward for a particular individual in a particular colony at a particular time? From Barbados to Boston, English settlers and communities came face to face with the choice between servants and slaves in a variety of situations. At different times between 1607 and 1776, individuals throughout the colonies made the decision that slavery's time had come.