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

Context

The Virginia Company

The colony of Virginia was established for profit. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English investors searching for places in which to sink their capital and make money established investment companies such as the Muscovy Company, which traded with Russia, and the East India Company, which traded in Sumatra and Malaysia. At the same time, Englishmen also sought ways in which to advance their nation and its church, the Church of England, in their competition with Spain and the Catholic Church for supremacy in Europe and the New World. In 1606, a new company emerged promising investors a chance to earn profits while serving both king and God. The Virginia Company proposed to establish colonies in Virginia, the English name for America north of Florida. If successful, the Company would end Spain's monopoly on North American colonization and make a handsome profit for its investors.

The Settlement of Jamestown

In April 1607, the Virginia Company's first "adventurers" — roughly 100 men and boys — settled along a river they named the James in honor of their king, James I, and began building Jamestown on land the monarch had granted them. During the years that followed, Jamestown suffered a host of problems. The site itself proved unhealthy and the men sent to develop it were ill-prepared and poorly equipped. Leaders of the colony feuded among themselves and abused their subordinates. The Native Americans living near Jamestown, members of a powerful confederation led by the Powhatan people, came to resent the arrogant, incompetent, and demanding English settlers in their midst. Perhaps the greatest obstacle, however, was Jamestown's utter failure to earn a profit. Settlers could find nothing worth exporting to England. Virginia began to look like a dry hole, draining the company of capital while returning nothing to its investors. The dry spell ended, however, with the first shipment of tobacco from Virginia to London in 1614.

Tobacco

Spanish explorers had introduced tobacco to Europe around 1500, and by the early seventeenth century, it had become one of Europe's hottest commodities.

Gentlemen throughout Europe found it fashionable to smoke tobacco and took up pipe-smoking in earnest. Doctors recommended tobacco to their patients as a sort of wonder-drug. One Spanish physician had even declared tobacco a remedy against headaches, toothaches, chilblians, cankers, and variety of other diseases, as well as a salve for wounds and a means to ward off both fatigue and hunger. As a result, initial demand for tobacco exceeded supply and prices soared. When settlers in Virginia discovered that they could grow tobacco around Jamestown, the crop quickly became the colony's economic salvation.

The Virginia Plantation

Tobacco required workers, however, and the Virginia Company had little capital with which to pay them. In 1618, the company's directors devised a scheme that used land, the one thing it had in abundance, to attract workers at the expense of private investors who were invited to recruit workers and send them to Virginia on their own dime. Most of the workers arrived in Virginia as indentured servants, having signed contracts, or "indentures," to serve their employers for a set period of time in return for passage to Virginia and room and board while employed. For every such worker sent to Virginia, investors received a "headright" — fifty acres of land to use or sell for their own profit. Under the headright system, for example, a London merchant with capital to invest might send a son, nephew, or other agent to Virginia along with a dozen indentured servants. The merchant would immediately acquire title to 650 acres of land, which his colonial agent could then plant in tobacco for export to London. The merchant, in turn, could make a hefty profit off of sales of his own tobacco. Thus the Virginia plantation was born.

The Expansion of the Colony

The new arrangement could not save the Virginia Company, which the king stripped of its charter in 1624. The scheme did, however, save the colony of Virginia, since investors remained eager to profit from tobacco. Over the next half century, hundreds of planters lured thousands of servants to Virginia. More than 50,000 headrights totaling 2.5 million acres of land had been claimed by 1674. Many of the men and women the headrights represented died before completing the terms of their contracts. Well into the seventeenth century, Virginia remained an unhealthy climate for Englishmen and many newcomers died within a few years of their arrival. During the 1660s, for example, Virginia granted headrights for more than 18,000 immigrants, yet its population increased by fewer than 9,000. The colony's population did grow, however, and by 1670, more than 30,000

English had settled in Virginia along the James and adjacent rivers toward what would become the towns of Fredericksburg, Richmond, and Petersburg.

Relations With Virginia Indians

Success bred new problems. First, the expansion of tobacco farming led to widespread conflict between colonists and Native Americans. The two groups had not been on good terms during the early settlement of Virginia, and the tobacco boom worsened relations. The rapid expansion of tobacco plantations depended on the equally rapid acquisition of Indian land. As investors imported servants in larger and larger numbers, they acquired more headrights; Indian claims were simply pushed aside as Virginia's government converted headrights into real grants of land. Moreover, wherever Indians and Europeans lived beside one another, disputes between neighbors — over boundaries, trespassing, cattle straying, runaway servants — invariably escalated into fighting. Between 1620 and 1670, Anglo-Virginians fought two full-scale wars with Virginia Indians and took part in countless small skirmishes.

The Landed and the Landless

Tobacco also widened the gap between rich and poor Virginians. The land conveyed by headright belonged to the investors responsible for bringing or sending servants to Virginia and not to the servants themselves. Year after year, wealthy Virginians imported new cohorts of indentured servants to cultivate the land, which accordingly increased their land holdings. At the same time, they released those servants whose terms had expired, providing each with a suit of clothes and three barrels of corn — but no land — as "freedom dues." Many former servants did, eventually, acquire land of their own, although many others, perhaps even the majority, never did. The percentage of former servants endowed with land declined over the years as their numbers in Virginia increased. Landless men could still earn their living as tenants, sharecroppers, or hired hands, but they lacked the status of freeholders. In 1670, the landless lost their right to vote.

The Tobacco Price Collapse

Perhaps the biggest problem with tobacco emerged as supply rose and the price began to fall. During the boom years of 1615-1630, one pound of tobacco sold for a shilling or more. By the late 1630s, the price had dropped sharply, and by the 1660s, tobacco sold for just over a penny (1/12 of a shilling) per pound. At such a low price, many, among them smaller, older farms in particular, found it difficult to

turn a profit on tobacco. Planters grew desperate. They attempted to force open new markets by selling tobacco illegally to foreigners. They extended the terms of indentured servitude by increasing the penalty for desertion. They even petitioned the king to either reduce taxes paid on tobacco or limit tobacco-growing. A few small planters launched "plant-cutting riots," during which fields of tobacco were destroyed in an effort to increase crop price by reducing supply.

Bacon's Rebellion

By 1676, the situation had become explosive. That year, Bacon's Rebellion began as fighting between whites and Indians, but evolved into a war between rich and poor Virginians. Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy newcomer to the colony, tapped white Virginians' resentment at their government's failure to protect them against Indian raids. Over the governor's objections, Bacon led a series of attacks against peaceful Indians. In response, the governor branded him a rebel, and after a series of encounters in which Bacon was arrested, pardoned, and again declared a rebel, he marched on Jamestown with "an incredible number of the Meanest [i.e. poorest] people. . .[a]rmed to assist him." For months, civil war raged in Virginia. Jamestown was burned, dozens of plantations looted, and scores of Virginians killed. Bacon's death and the arrival of 1,000 British soldiers ended the revolt.

Africans in Virginia

During the turmoil, Virginia tobacco planters began shifting from servants to slaves and from white labor to black. Africans had first arrived in Virginia in 1619, when a Dutch ship landed with "20 and odd negroes" that it had captured from Spaniards in the Caribbean. The first Afro-Virginians were not slaves, however. The right to several years of their labor may have been sold, just as an indentured servant's contract could be sold, but they were free by the mid-1620s. Seventeen Afro-Virginians appear on a Virginia census compiled in 1625. Over the next several decades, a very small number of Africans entered Virginia. Between 1625 and 1660, Virginia recorded just 562 headrights for black immigrants (compared to well over 30,000 white immigrants during that time). Who they were and where they came from remains a mystery, and what happened to them is equally unclear. Initially, they appear to have been treated as indentured servants, although they received harsher punishments and fewer privileges than white servants did. Most, however, were eventually freed, and a number became small tobacco planters on their own pieces of land.

The Emergence of "Slave," the Term

Some Africans, however, appear to have remained servants for life. In 1640, for example, three indentured servants — two white and one black — ran away. When recaptured, the two whites were each sentenced to four years of extra labor, while their black accomplice was ordered to serve "for the time of his natural life." Gradually such distinctions became more common, and the term "slave" began to appear in Virginia laws, though without a clear definition. Various statutes referred to "negroes, mulattoes, and other slaves," or to crimes committed "by a negro or slave." Such references suggest that some slaves were black, but not all, and that some blacks were slaves, but not all. Finally, in 1705, the House of Burgesses declared that all servants brought into the country by sea or land who were not Christians in their native countries (excepting Turks and Moors in amity with her Majesty and others who could prove their freedom in England, or any other Christian country, before they were shipped) should be accounted for as slaves.

The Legal Establishment of Slavery

By 1705, then, racial slavery had been legally established in Virginia. Servants still greatly outnumbered slaves in the colony's tobacco fields, yet the tide had turned. As the eighteenth century progressed, slaves became more common. Why this happened, however, remains unclear. Why had Virginians, between 1620 and 1720, come to prefer enslaved Africans to indentured whites?