

1619: Virginia's First Africans

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In late August, 1619, 20-30 enslaved Africans landed at Point Comfort, today's Fort Monroe in Hampton, Va., aboard the English privateer ship *White Lion*. In Virginia, these Africans were traded in exchange for supplies. Several days later, additional enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia aboard a second ship, *Treasurer*. The Africans brought on both ships were Kimbundu-speaking people from west central Africa and had been captured by English privateers from the Spanish slave ship *San Juan Bautista*. They are the first recorded Africans to arrive in England's mainland American colonies.

Landing of the First Africans in Virginia

- In late August^a, 1619, the English privateer ship *White Lion* arrived at Point Comfort. On board were “20 and odd”^b captives taken from the Kingdom of Ndongo in west central Africa. They were sold to Sir George Yeardley (Virginia's governor) and Abraham Peirse (the Cape Merchant, the colony's supply officer and trade agent) in return for food and supplies. Surviving documents do not describe the first Africans coming ashore, but they probably were taken off *White Lion* at Point Comfort, either temporarily before the *White Lion* sailed to Jamestown or to be transferred to smaller crafts to be re-sold elsewhere.^c
- Three or four days later, the *White Lion's* consort ship *Treasurer* arrived with additional enslaved Africans at nearby Kicotan, also in present-day Hampton. The *Treasurer* did not stay long at Kicotan, departing quickly to avoid an ensuing scandal and potential seizure. It is unclear how many of the Africans onboard the *Treasurer* were traded and remained in Virginia. *Treasurer* sailed to Bermuda, where a friendly governor allowed her commander, Captain Daniel Elfrith, to land and trade. When she arrived in Bermuda, 27-29 enslaved Africans were aboard.
- The captives aboard *White Lion* and *Treasurer* had been stolen from the Spanish slave ship *San Juan Bautista* (or *São João Bautista* in Portuguese records). The two English privateers had attacked the Spanish slave ship a few weeks before arriving in Virginia.
- A March 1620 census^d of inhabitants of Virginia lists 32 Africans, 15 male and 17 female (as “Others not Christians^e in the Service of the English”). All probably came from the *White Lion* and *Treasurer* groups taken from the *San Juan Bautista*.^f None are identified by name.

^a The landing date is sometimes traditionally observed on August 20th or August 25th, but there is no evidence supporting any specific landing date, which remains unknown.

^b I.e. twenty-some; any number between 20 and 30.

^c The extant primary sources do not mention Jamestown after describing the landing at Point Comfort, but it is unclear whether the two colonial officials traveled to Point Comfort or dealt with the *White Lion's* captain, John Jope, at Jamestown. John Pory, Secretary of the colony, entrusted a letter describing the *Treasurer's* exploits to Marmaduke Raynor, the *White Lion's* pilot. The letter is dated 30 September from James City, so the *White Lion* was in Virginia for at least a month and probably sailed up to Jamestown.

^d The date on this census is labeled as March 1619, and some historians have erroneously concluded that 32 Africans were already present in Virginia before the arrival of the *White Lion* and *Treasurer*. However, the census was actually taken in 1620; it bears the date of 1619 because it is dated by the old Julian calendar, in which the new year did not occur until spring.

^e The 32 “non-Christians” in the census does not include any Indians; Native servants were listed separately. See below for additional discussion of the status of Christianized enslaved Africans.

^f It is possible other Africans had arrived on other ships, but there is no evidence to indicate this. While the Portuguese/Spanish controlled trade from West Africa, enslaved captives on English or Dutch ships or in their colonies could only come from privateer attacks on Spanish/Portuguese slave ships or from irregular trade with Spanish/Portuguese colonies. Spanish records do not note any other privateer attacks between 1618 and 1622.

The Treasurer Scandal: Piracy and the First Africans

The fate of the Africans taken from the *San Juan Bautista* was bound up in a web of piracy, illicit trade, and scandal for the Virginia Company. Privateering/piracy against Spanish ships sailing from the Americas was commonplace for privately owned English vessels during Elizabeth I's reign, but King James I's 1604 Treaty of London made peace with Spain and outlawed piracy. After 1604, English ships wishing to continue privateering had to secure commissions or authorizations, called letters of marque, from other European heads of state; *White Lion's* letter of marque was issued from Flushing, Zeeland (now Vlissingen, Holland), and *Treasurer's* letter of marque came from the Duke of Savoy (now part of northeastern Italy) and was probably issued by the Duke's ambassador in London, who was known to issue marques to ship captains. However, by the time of the attack on the *San Juan Bautista*, the Duke of Savoy had made peace with Spain, rendering the Treasurer's letter of marque invalid. *White Lion* sailed from Flushing, a Dutch port well-known as a base for English privateers, and both crews probably included Dutch sailors. Several records refer to *White Lion* as "Dutch," "from Flushing," or "out of Flushing." These records do not imply the ship was Dutch, but rather that it was an English ship based from Flushing, a commonly understood practice. They also may have wished to emphasize the *White Lion's* Dutch letter of marque to distance themselves from the practice of privateering.

Treasurer had a long history of piracy in the West Indies as well as dishonest dealings with other ships, and her connection to disgraced Virginia governor Sir Samuel Argall ballooned into a major scandal that eventually contributed to the dissolution of the Virginia Company. Efforts to minimize or cover up her piratical activity and the involvement of her owners and investors have obscured the historical record. *Treasurer* last left England in April 1618, and it is unclear whether her captain, Daniel Elfrith, knew his letter of marque was invalid when the two ships attacked the *San Juan Bautista*. If Elfrith knew, he likely assumed he would meet a ready welcome from friends in Virginia; *Treasurer* was formerly captained by acting Virginia governor Samuel Argall. Argall, in league with part owner Sir Robert Rich (Earl of Warwick), regularly supplied the ship at Jamestown, which acted as a base for *Treasurer* to privateer in the West Indies (depositions indicate the *Treasurer* was reported to authorities as fitted out as a fishing vessel but in reality was armed as a warship).

Between 1618 and 1620, a rival faction within the Virginia Company, led by Sir Edwin Sandys and Sir Thomas Wriothesley (Earl of Southampton), worked to expose Argall's and Warwick's illegal activities and oust them from power. In 1618, the Virginia Company dispatched Sir George Yeardley to replace Argall as governor of Virginia, investigate complaints of corruption and piracy, and "send home the said Captain Argall in quality of a malefactor and to sequester all his goods there for restitution to the Company." Argall escaped on a small ship sent speedily from England before Yeardley's arrival in Virginia in April, 1619. By June, 1619, the Virginia Company wrote instructions to Yeardley to "give diligent order that the ship [*Treasurer*] be seized immediately upon her return, and examination taken of her course and proceeding." It is unclear whether this letter reached Yeardley in Virginia before the *Treasurer's* return in late August or early September, but even if not, Yeardley instructed John Rolfe and two other officials to bring the ship to Jamestown after learning of its return.

When *Treasurer* arrived at Kicotan, Elfrith sent word to Jamestown, expecting the message to be received by Argall, but left Virginia hastily after learning of Argall's flight and the men on their way to bring the ship to Jamestown. The inhabitants of Kicotan refused to resupply *Treasurer*. However, at least one sailor from the *Treasurer* remained in Virginia after the ship departed, and an unknown number of enslaved Africans, including a woman named Angelo, were sold privately to individuals, possibly those more friendly to Argall's faction. After sailing from Kicotan, *Treasurer* received a better welcome in Bermuda, where governor Nathaniel Butler was friendly to privateers and was also a former captain and associate of Warwick. If *Treasurer* had been welcomed in Virginia and allowed to trade openly, it is likely all the Africans aboard would have been sold and remained in Virginia alongside the Africans from the *White Lion*.

Eyewitness testimony about the *Treasurer's* activities was recorded from sailors and officials in England, Bermuda, and Virginia. These depositions contain conflicting accounts of the ship's movements and activities. Some describe the ship as unseaworthy and imply she was destroyed or salvaged in Bermuda. Colonial Bermuda records indicate most or all of the remaining enslaved Africans from the *Treasurer* were temporarily seized by the colony because of the privateering scandal. Some of the enslaved Africans from the *Treasurer* labored for the colony and on the property of the Earl of Warwick, under the auspices of governors Miles Kendall and Nathaniel Butler. Miles Kendall wrote to Nathaniel Rich, "If it were not for the accidental negroes [those from the *Treasurer* and another privateer], I were not able to raise one pound of tobacco this year for the defrayment of any public work....These slaves are the most proper and cheap instruments for this plantation that can be." Between 1618 and 1620, Warwick set about replacing white tenant farmers on his land in Bermuda with enslaved Africans so he would not have to pay them their share of tobacco. However, word of the *Treasurer* scandal reached Bermuda, and Butler, aligned with Warwick's faction, was ousted from power.

The issue of the *Treasurer's* exploits in the West Indies was reported by Sir Edwin Sandys to the Privy Council, where the Spanish ambassador lodged a complaint against the attack on *San Juan Bautista*. The Company disavowed Argall's operations and the *Treasurer's* part in the attack. (Elfrith may have anticipated Spanish reprisal for the attack on the *Bautista*, for he warned the inhabitants of Kicotan that a Spanish attack was likely and Point Comfort should be further fortified. No attack materialized.) An investigation ensued. Some witnesses, friends of Argall, Elfrith, or Warwick, told the Privy Council the *White Lion* forced the *Treasurer* into consortship. Other witnesses remaining in Bermuda, not part of the privateers' faction, suggested Elfrith had stolen some of the captives that were supposed to go to Capt. Jope and the *White Lion*. If so, this would explain why *White Lion* apparently had fewer than 30 captives on board when she arrived at Point Comfort, and how *Treasurer* arrived in Bermuda with 27-29 enslaved Africans even after having sold others at Kicotan. The enslaved Africans brought by the *Treasurer* were caught up in the ongoing investigation, and some crew members and part owners of the ship filed claims to ownership of a share of the Africans.

There are several reasons why *White Lion's* privateering activities were allowed whereas the *Treasurer's* parallel actions mushroomed into a years-long scandal: *White Lion* had a valid letter of marque while *Treasurer's* was expired; *White Lion* dealt transparently with Virginia's Governor and Cape Merchant; *Treasurer* was tied to Argall, who was being investigated for corruption and illicit activities; and *Treasurer's* connections to Argall and Warwick gave the appearance of the attack on the *San Juan Bautista* being perpetrated by the Company and linked it to the Crown, putting Virginia in danger of attack from the Spanish or James I in danger of losing England's peace with Spain. Sandys, as an officer of the Virginia Company, moved to expose and denounce the *Treasurer's* exploits to shield the Company from blame. However, the scandal's permeation of the Company and continuing fallout contributed to the Crown's revocation of the Virginia Company charter in 1624.

From West Central Africa to Virginia

- Virginia's first Africans were probably from the Kingdom of Ndongo, located between the Lukala and Kwanza Rivers in west central Africa and part of present-day Angola. Ndongo's population was made up of Kimbundu-speaking people living in densely populated, urbanized cities and towns, and nearby farming settlements where people grew sorghum and millet and raised cattle and poultry. The kingdom's capital city, Kabasa, was its royal seat of power and had a population of up to 50,000.
- In 1618, the Portuguese allied with Imbangala mercenaries and invaded Ndongo. During the ensuing 1618-1620 campaign, thousands were enslaved; the *San Juan Bautista* was one of at least 36 ships transporting captives to Spanish/Portuguese colonies in 1619 alone. Most of the captives were probably from urban areas in and near the capital city of Kabasa, and unlike the vast majority of enslaved Africans carried to America, the *San Juan Bautista* captives probably came from a single or a few related ethnic groups and shared common or similar languages and cultures. They were also captured more directly under Europeans' authority than most enslaved Africans.^g
- European trade of enslaved Africans began in the 1400s.^h In 1575, the Portuguese established the colony of Angola on the Kwanza River. Its purposes were to export enslaved captives and serve as a

^g Though the Portuguese government discouraged use of African mercenaries by colonial governors, the practice was commonplace. In the 1618-1620 campaign to conquer Ndongo, governor Mendes de Vasconcelos allied with three bands of Imbangala warriors. The combined Portuguese-Imbangala forces swiftly conquered Ndongo and its capital city, Kabasa. Manuel Bautista Soares, Bishop of Kongo, reported in 1619 that "in place of leaving off with the Jagas [Imbangala], he [Vasconcelos] embraced them, and he has gone to war with them for two years, killing with them and capturing innumerable innocent people." Those who were not able to flee were enslaved; the number of enslaved Africans captured during these campaigns was so great that they far outstripped the capacity of the port of Luanda to hold and export them.

^h Slavery existed in Africa before European colonization, but it was quite different and does not compare to the scale or extent of enslavement and trade in slaves driven by Europeans. Slaves in pre-colonial Africa still had legal rights, status did not pass from parents to children, slaves were not a major labor force, slavery was not necessarily for life, slaves were only enslaved in specific circumstances [i.e. as prisoners of war or as punishment], and slavery was not race-based. In the colonial period, very few Africans participated in the slave trade with Europeans, and Europeans vastly broadened the scale of the slave trade and locations and

base for Jesuit Catholic missionaries and trade in goods. From 1576 to 1605, the Portuguese fortified the city of Luanda, a large port through which thousands of captives were exported each year.

- In early 1619, the *San Juan Bautista* left Luanda carrying 350 enslaved Africans and bound for Vera Cruz, Mexico. 200 were earmarked to fulfill an *asiento* (or contract) for delivering enslaved Africans to Spanish colonies. The voyage was apparently beset by disease; between 120 and 150 of the Africans died, a death rate of 35-43%. The captain, Manuel Méndez de Acuña, ordered a stop in Jamaica to “refresh.” There, he traded 24 enslaved boys in return for supplies. In late July or early August, the *San Juan Bautista* was attacked in the Bay of Campeche (southern Gulf of Mexico) by two English privateers, the *White Lion* and *Treasurer*, which stole approximately 60 of the captives (probably the healthiest of the Africans remaining).ⁱ After the attack, the *Bautista*’s remaining captives were transferred by local authorities to the frigate *Santa Ana*, which arrived in Vera Cruz on August 30, 1619. On its arrival, 147 captives were declared as her cargo; this probably includes the 24 boys sold in Jamaica, but it possibly does not.

The Early Africans in Virginia

- Virginia’s first census was conducted in early 1620 (see above). 32 Africans, 15 male and 17 female, were living in Virginia. Most likely, all were from the *San Juan Bautista* and arrived via the *White Lion* or *Treasurer*. None are identified by name.
- The next census, taken in February 1624, records only 21 Africans. Several probably succumbed to disease or died in the 1622 Powhatan Indian uprising, although some may have been traded or moved by enslavers to Bermuda or England. Only 13 are identified by name, and only one has a surname (the rest either have none, or are labeled as “negro”), suggesting most of the Africans were enslaved (see below). At least two Africans in this group were not from the *White Lion* or *Treasurer*: Anthony (later known as Anthony Johnson^j) arrived on the *James* in 1621, and John Phillip, the only African with a surname, was known to have been baptized in England.^k
- A 1625 muster lists 23 Africans; again, several are unnamed. If there were no deaths, it is possible no new Africans were brought to Virginia between the 1624 census and 1625 muster, since two children are listed in 1625.

circumstances of their capture and labor. Interestingly, the enslaved Africans on the *San Juan Bautista* were likely captured directly by Portuguese and allied Imbangala troops as part of a military campaign against Ndongo, though this was not typical.

ⁱ The summer months were when Spanish treasure galleons transported extracted gold and silver from local ports to Havana to prepare for shipping via an annual convoy to Europe. The English pirates probably hoped *Bautista* was laden with gold and silver.

The wording of the primary sources seems to imply that *Bautista* stopped in Jamaica after the privateer attack. However, currents in the southern Caribbean flow east to west, and the attack took place on the other side of the Yucatan Peninsula in the Bay of Campeche. It is unlikely the *Bautista* sailed against the current back to Jamaica when she was so close to Vera Cruz. Moreover, the narrative also indicates that a frigate transported the *Bautista*’s human cargo into Vera Cruz, presumably following the attack.

^j Anthony Johnson’s story is well documented. He began an enslaved man but was able to purchase his freedom and eventually acquired a plantation on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. He is perhaps most well-known for taking black and white bound laborers to court to enforce the terms of their contracts or labor. Some online sites have incorrectly claimed that Johnson was the “first slave owner in America.” Oddly, Johnson is often the only individual discussed in descriptions of the landing of the first Africans. Such a narrative is puzzling, since Johnson did not arrive with the first group in 1619. Moreover, Johnson’s story was exceptional and belies the very different experiences of the vast majority of early Africans. Anthony Johnson is sometimes confused with Anthony Tucker in some narratives.

^k John Phillip’s surname appears in court records in late 1624, but he is not named in the census earlier that year; he may have arrived after the census was taken. John Phillip testified against a white man and is the only African given a surname in early records; he almost certainly was a servant rather than enslaved but was an exception. He had spent 12 years in England, and his command of English language and culture probably set him apart from other Africans in the eyes of English colonizers. He may also have had the opportunity to negotiate an indenture contract before sailing to Virginia.

- In 1624 and 1625, the largest groups of Africans in Virginia were at Flowerdew Hundred (present-day Hopewell), at or near Jamestown, and at Edward Bennett’s plantation (near present-day Smithfield).
- In Elizabeth City (formerly Kicotan, now Hampton), Anthony and Isabella are first described by name in 1624. Sometime in 1624 or early 1625, they had a son, William, who was baptized; in the 1625 muster they are identified as “Antoney Negro: Isabell Negro: and William their Child Baptised.” The locations and dates of William’s birth and baptism are not known, though the baptism probably took place at Elizabeth City’s parish church. They labored in the household or on the land of Capt. William Tucker; consequently, they are often described as Anthony, Isabella, and William Tucker, though they never appear with this name in the historical record. The child William is often described as the first African child born in America; however, there is a second child listed in the 1625 muster at Flowerdew Hundred, and no records indicate which child was born first. Like all Africans at Flowerdew Hundred, the second child’s name is unknown. No other written records of Anthony, Isabella, and William exist, though unwritten local traditions have found their way into many narratives.
- By 1625, John Pedro^l was also living at Elizabeth City in the household of Francis West.
- Angelo (or Angela),^m an African woman, was described in both lists at the residence of William Peirce at Jamestown. The 1625 muster notes that Angelo arrived on the *Treasurer*, meaning she is the earliest African whose arrival can be individually dated by name. (Though the vast majority of the Africans in Virginia arrived on the *White Lion* in 1619 or *Treasurer* in 1619, no records place any other Africans by name firmly on either ship.)

Were the First Africans Indentured Servants or Enslaved?

Because of the absence of clear records, it is impossible to know for sure. However, the existing evidence points to most Africans being treated as enslaved beginning in 1619.ⁿ Certainly, they arrived in Virginia enslaved. They were clearly not indentured servants. However, some early Africans may have had more opportunity to become free than was possible under hardening racial attitudes later in the 17th century.

Historian Alden T. Vaughan summarized it best: “The evidence from Virginia and elsewhere refutes the popular myth that slavery was rare or nonexistent before the legislation of the 1660s and 1670s, that free blacks were numerous, and that most blacks were indentured servants. The surviving records support a very different distribution: slavery from the outset for the vast majority, freedom for some (by a variety of means), and temporary servitude (rarely with a legal indenture) for the smallest number” (Vaughan, “The Origins Debate,” p. 341).

There is no “smoking gun” for slavery in early Virginia records. However, there is overwhelming evidence from Virginia and other English colonies.

- The Africans aboard *San Juan Bautista* were transported from the port of Luanda in Angola and bound for America as property. As pirate loot, they were stolen goods, and they were traded for goods and resold when reaching Virginia. At every step of their journey after their capture, they were considered commodities or property.

^l Pedro is probably not a surname; John Pedro follows double naming practices found in Portuguese and Kimbundu cultures.

^m In both Portuguese and Kimbundu languages, the final “o” included both masculine and feminine uses.

ⁿ The only known exception was John Phillip, described above. A small number of Africans and African Americans appear as free in later records, but it is unclear whether they were released by their masters, purchased their freedom, or were treated similarly to white servants. See below; a small number of free blacks arrived in Virginia by way of England, where they may have entered into regular indentures, unlike Africans arriving via Atlantic or inter-colonial trade.

- By 1619, slavery was a familiar institution in England, English colonies, and throughout the English Atlantic. Enslaved Africans were present in England, and Africans' status as commodities was understood when they arrived in Bermuda and Virginia. English mariners had long been involved in the slave trade as pirates preying on Spanish or Portuguese ships and colonies. In 1562, pirate John Hawkins was the first Englishman to complete the "triangle trade" and transport captives from Africa to the Americas for sale. Along with Hawkins, Sir Francis Drake often stole and traded enslaved Africans. In the 1610s, English ships regularly traded captives raided or bought from Africa or Spanish settlements in America. Enslaved captives were one of the most common forms of loot for the Earl of Warwick's fleet of privateers, including *Treasurer*. Warwick was also a founding investor of the slave-trading Guinea Company (1618).
- In the 1624 census and 1625 muster, many Africans are not identified by any name. Of those with first names, none has a surname. Rather, they are identified as "negro." By the late 16th century, as English participation in the Atlantic slave trade grew, the words "negro" and "slave" were used interchangeably. 17th century English missionary Morgan Godwyn observed, "These two words, Negro and Slave, being by custom grown homogenous and convertible; even as Negro and Christian, Englishman and Heathen, are by the like corrupt custom and partiality made opposites; thereby as it were implying, that the one could not be Christians, nor the other Infidels."
- The Africans from the *Treasurer* were very clearly described as "slaves" in Bermuda records. Bermuda's political and legal structures resembled Virginia's in this period, and there were intimate trade and political links between the two colonies; for a time, Bermuda was operated by the Virginia Company.
- As in Bermuda, Africans' introduction to England's other Atlantic colonies (Barbados, New England, etc.) in the early 17th century seems to have instantly coincided with the assumption that Africans were enslaved. There is no reason to believe Virginia was an exception to this pattern.
- Africans' baptism or conversion to Christianity did not seem to alter their status in English colonies. For the English, "Christian" was an ethnic/racial distinction rather than religious identity. (See below for detailed discussion of slavery and Christianity.)
- In wills and other legal records in Virginia and throughout other English colonies, African laborers are consistently listed with valuations much higher than white servants, indicating a likely expectation of lifetime service.
- No evidence supports the myth that Africans were ever regarded or treated as indentured servants. They were captured in wars or raids and did not negotiate an indenture contract, unlike white servants whose practice of indenture is well documented. The only blacks that seem to have been indentured (for example, John Phillip) appear to have arrived via England, where they may have had the opportunity to negotiate contract terms or enter into an indenture voluntarily.
- Some Africans were able to become free; some likely took advantage of comparatively loose (though significant) racial restrictions and purchased their freedom, while others may have been treated more similarly to white servants and released after a certain number of years. However, there is no evidence that this practice was commonplace, and there was no legal reason for masters to release them. The experiences of free blacks were exceptional.

Slavery and Christianity

Until later in the 17th century, “Christian” had an ethnic, cultural, and racial definition rather than referring to someone’s religious identity or beliefs. “Christian” meant someone from somewhere within Christendom, i.e. Europe. For example, the 1620 Virginia census identified Africans as “Others not Christians in the Service of the English.” In 1630, a white settler was whipped for “mixing his Christian body with a heathen one” by fornicating with a “Negro.” In 1662, a Virginia law prohibiting interracial sexual relationships imposed a fine if “any Christian commit fornication with a negro man or woman.”

This assumption was a strong feature of English Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture but less so of the Iberian Catholic worldview. (This is why the English were able culturally to adapt so easily to the practice of enslaving Christian Africans, whereas it was outlawed in Catholic countries. Even so, Portuguese enslavers were required to nominally baptize Africans before they were exported from Angola.) Non-European culture, along with skin color, set Africans apart. From the 16th century until the early 20th century, English/British colonizers tended to consider non-whites not following Euro-centric cultural norms as “heathen,” regardless of whether they had converted to Christianity as a religion.

The process of transforming Christian identity from an ethnic/racial one to a religious one began in earnest with the evangelical impulses of the First and Second Great Awakenings of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Unlike Catholic France, Spain, and Portugal, English Protestants made very little effort overall to convert non-white, non-Christian peoples until the two Awakenings engendered widespread evangelical efforts. Far more often, converting non-whites to Christianity was used as justification for colonization, but actual missionary operations were paltry or non-existent. Early English missionaries also distinguished between Indians and Africans. While there were some organized efforts to Christianize natives, especially in Puritan New England, there were no major efforts for Africans until the 18th century; from Virginia, narratives like Richard Hakluyt’s and John Smith’s emphasized the possibility of natives’ cultural and religious conversion as a way to whiteness, like Pocahontas’ baptism and transformation into Rebecca Rolfe, but dismissed the ability of Africans to become “civilized.”

Some historians believe some of the Africans on the *San Juan Bautista* may have been Christianized in whole or in part, since many had Christian/European names (and therefore may have been baptized), Portuguese Catholic missionaries had been active in West Africa for over a century by this time, and some Christian Africans from Kongo and Ndongo were being enslaved by the Portuguese; the Bishop of Angola lodged a complaint against this practice in 1619, claiming that over 4,000 of the captives exported from Ndongo were Christians and had been enslaved illegally. But, there is no clear evidence indicating what the religious beliefs of the *Bautista* Africans were.

Africans’ baptism or conversion to Christianity did not seem to alter their status in English colonies. Two Virginia legal suits illuminate this problem further. In 1656, Elizabeth Key sued for her freedom, arguing that she had been baptized, she had been bound for a finite term rather than for life, and her father was a free white man (under English common law, children took the status of their father; a 1662 Virginia law confirmed children would take the status of their mother). A local jury decided in Key’s favor, but an appeal to the General Court ruled Key was enslaved. A further appeal to the General Assembly went unresolved, and the case was slated for retrial but ended when the overseers of Key’s enslaver apparently dropped their argument. In 1667, an enslaved man named Fernando sued for his freedom on the grounds that “he was a Christian and had been several years in England” and even had written documentation in Portuguese of his baptism. However, his suit was dismissed. Fernando clearly believed his Christian status entitled him to freedom, but this idea probably came from his experience with the Portuguese or in England, not in Virginia. (Later in 1667, the General Assembly clarified that “conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom.” The act explained that “some doubts have risen whether children that are slaves by birth...should by virtue of their baptism be made free,” indicating that some others in Virginia possibly wrestled with the same question, but there is no evidence of freedom for any baptized captives anytime between 1619 and 1667.) In neither Key’s nor Fernando’s case did evidence of baptism or Christian status provide enough support for a successful claim to freedom. Most significant is that both enslaved individuals were held in bondage by their enslavers despite strong, public evidence of their baptism, revealing that the overwhelming attitude among English colonizers in Virginia was that Christianity did not alter the status of enslaved people.

Slavery and Indentured Servitude

Indentures were a form of legal contract, evolved from the feudal system of the Middle Ages, in which an apprentice or servant was bound to a master for a set number of years. While under indenture, servants lacked some personal freedoms but still had legal protections. Indenture contracts could be bought and sold. In Virginia, indentures were a key component of migration; laborers bound themselves to landowners in return for their passage. Most laborers entered into indentures with merchants, ship captains, or planters’ agents before boarding ships in England, then their indentures were sold to planters when they arrived in Virginia.

A small number of early white servants arrived from England without contracts and negotiated indentures with planters once in Virginia. In 1619, before the African landing, the first General Assembly passed legislation requiring the registration of all indentures, to prevent uncontracted servants taking advantage of the widely circulated English Common Law dictum of a one year period of service for servants without a formal indenture contract. All records from Virginia indicate that Africans served far longer than their white indentured counterparts, so it is clear they were not treated as uncontracted indentured servants when they arrived. Moreover, there is no evidence Africans were included in the mandated registration of indentures.

In 1643, the Assembly passed legislation setting standard terms of service for as-yet-unindentured servants based on age; this law suggests it never was applied to Africans beforehand and clearly did not apply to Africans at the time, since no documents recorded Africans' ages as they did for white servants. A very small number of Africans, like John Phillip, were known to come from England; some of this group may have been able to negotiate regular indentures, and this small group probably accounts for a disproportionate number of free blacks in early Virginia.

Some Africans attempted to sue for freedom by claiming they were indentured servants. However, they usually could not prove their claim. For example, in 1655 John Casor, a black servant of Anthony Johnson, testified that he was due his freedom after completing an indenture of seven or eight years. However, the court ruled in favor of Johnson, probably because Casor could not produce a valid indenture contract or evidence an indenture was recorded by the colonial government when he arrived in Virginia.

Some proponents of the "indentured servant" theory of Africans' status emphasize the use of "negro" as a signifier of nationality, akin to "Irishman" or other labels found in some very early Virginia records. However, these white nationality labels all but disappear from the record in the 1620s, whereas they persisted for Africans. Additionally, and more strikingly, there are no examples of ethnic labels also applying to children of whites, whereas Africans and their African American descendants were consistently labeled for generations as "negro."

Some scholarly works and popular websites still describe Africans as indentured servants, but invariably, they cite Breen & Innes' groundbreaking work on Anthony Johnson, *Myne Owne Ground*, as their source. This is a misreading of *Myne Owne Ground*, which claims that some Africans may have had experiences similar to white indentured servants but does not argue that they *were* indentured servants. While the book is an important narrative, many of its broader claims, especially those applying Johnson's Eastern Shore experiences to other Africans' in Virginia, have been criticized by prominent historians of slavery as exaggerated and unrepresentative of conditions in the rest of the colony. Even Breen & Innes concluded that all of the Eastern Shore Africans probably arrived enslaved. *Myne Owne Ground* correctly points out that, while equality was not the experience of Africans in early Virginia, race was marginally more fluid than in the hardened racial lines that developed after 1660. However, Johnson's experiences were exceptional, and generalizations about the status or experience of blacks in early Virginia cannot be derived from Johnson's biography.

Slavery and the Law

Between the 1640s and 1705, Virginia's legal codes gradually constructed the rigid system of slavery in place in the 18th and 19th centuries. These series of laws did not anticipate the existence of slavery; rather, these laws eliminated potential "loop holes" and reinforced a system already deeply embedded in Virginia's culture and economy. As with most aspects of English Common Law, the absence of written codes does not indicate the absence of a practical or legal reality. Slavery was legal in custom and in fact long before Virginia's Slave Codes were formally codified. Individual court records indicate slavery was the norm from at least the late 1620s.

Despite the likelihood that nearly all of Virginia's early Africans were enslaved, no definitive documentary proof exists on an individual basis. The earliest documented enslaved African in Virginia records may be the unnamed mother of Elizabeth Key, a mulatta woman who sued for her freedom in 1655. The suit referred to Key's mother as enslaved. Based on the dates of Key's birth, this would date the enslavement of Key's mother to the late 1620s. Her experience appears to have been typical. Similarly, Governor George Yeardley's 1627 will listed Africans separately from servants, indicating Africans were not considered to have the same status as white indentured laborers.

Key's mother is the earliest person we can definitively prove was enslaved, but her story was not the first appearance of slavery in Virginia records. While historical records indicate Key's mother was enslaved in the 1620s, those records were not written until Key's 1655 suit. The earliest appearance of an enslaved African in historical records is probably John Punch (or Bunch), who is recorded in 1640 as bound for life. An earlier case (1625) also appears to imply an African named Brase was enslaved for life and considered the property of Sir Francis Wyatt.

Other “First” Africans

- Several theories have emerged which posit that America may have been “discovered” by Africans before the arrival of Europeans. Some Arab sources and oral accounts from Caribbean natives suggest that North Africans may have voyaged to America in the medieval period. Additionally, over the 20th century some anthropologists theorized that Africans may have crossed the Atlantic and influenced the ancient Olmec culture of central Mexico. Although there is no verifiable genetic or archaeological evidence to support this theory, the most compelling support comes from masks and sculptures of heads that seem to show African features. However, this theory is not widely accepted among scholars.
- Free (and possibly enslaved) Africans almost certainly made up part of the crews of Spanish Conquistador ships, including Columbus’ 1492 expedition. Archaeological excavations have unearthed Africans’ remains among those of Spanish conquistadors from the early 16th century.
- Spanish conquistadors first imported enslaved Africans to Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic) in 1502. Spanish conquest depended on enslavement of native peoples, but forced labor, cultural and environmental disruption, and waves of devastating epidemics caused native populations to collapse. Within two decades, the Spanish relied on Africans to replace native enslaved labor.
- The first documented enslaved Africans in the present-day United States were part of a Spanish expedition to present-day South Carolina in 1526. There, the Africans staged a rebellion, and the Spanish abandoned the settlement the next year. The Spanish brought enslaved Africans to St. Augustine (Florida) in 1565.
- Enslaved Africans may have been left at Roanoke Island (present-day North Carolina) by Sir Francis Drake. In 1586, Drake led an English fleet in pillaging Cartagena and other colonial Spanish settlements. According to Spanish accounts, Drake stole at least 200 enslaved Africans and Turks/Ottomans as part of his loot. Drake’s fleet then sailed to St. Augustine and onto the Roanoke colony. Three Africans left behind at St. Augustine reported that Drake intended to leave the remaining Africans at Roanoke to labor for the benefit of the colony there. However, surviving records do not confirm whether this plan was carried out.^o
- African sailors served on Dutch crews involved in founding New Netherland. Africans were known to be in the colony in 1612, and others were probably present earlier as crew members.
- Enslaved Africans were imported to Bermuda in 1616.
- The landing of the “20 and odd” Africans in Virginia in 1619 is the most significant beginning for African Americans who lived enslaved between 1619 and 1865, as well as today’s African American population.
- The first documented Africans in New France arrived in 1632.

^o If these reports are true, it would suggest that the presence, use, and commodification of enslaved Africans was a widespread assumption from very early on in England’s colonial Atlantic endeavors.

Timeline

1618-1620	Portuguese and allied Imbangala warriors wage a campaign to conquer Ndongo; thousands are enslaved.
Early 1619	The <i>San Juan Bautista</i> leaves Luanda, Angola, carrying 350 enslaved Africans, and bound for Vera Cruz, Mexico. Between 120 and 150 Africans die during the voyage.
(June/July?) 1619	Captain Manuel Méndez de Acuña orders the <i>San Juan Bautista</i> to stop in Jamaica to “refresh.” There, he trades 24 enslaved boys in return for supplies.
Late July or early August, 1619	English privateers <i>White Lion</i> and <i>Treasurer</i> attack the <i>San Juan Bautista</i> in the Bay of Campeche. They steal approximately 60 of the remaining enslaved Africans.
Late August, 1619	<i>White Lion</i> arrives at Point Comfort and trades 20-30 Africans for supplies.
Late August? (a few days later), 1619	<i>Treasurer</i> arrives at Kicotan with additional enslaved Africans. The ship leaves quickly to escape seizure after illicitly trading some of the captives, including Angelo. <i>Treasurer</i> sails to Bermuda, where a friendly governor allows her to land.
30 August, 1619	The frigate <i>Santa Ana</i> arrives in Vera Cruz with the remaining 147 (or possibly 123) captives from the <i>San Juan Bautista</i> .
Late September or early October, 1619	<i>White Lion</i> leaves Virginia to return to England.
March, 1620	A census lists 32 Africans in Virginia, 15 male and 17 female.
1621	Anthony Johnson arrives on the <i>James</i> .
February, 1624	A census records 21 Africans in Virginia, including Anthony and Isabella at Elizabeth City, and Angelo at Jamestown.
1624 or January 1625	Anthony and Isabella’s son, William, is born and baptized. A second unnamed African child is also born.
January, 1625	A muster lists 23 Africans living Virginia. This muster is the first record of William’s birth and baptism, as well as Angelo’s arrival on the <i>Treasurer</i> in 1619.

Principal Primary Sources

(N.B. Spellings have been modernized, but no word changes have been made.)

Excerpt from letter of John Rolfe to Sir Edwin Sandys, January 1620 (old calendar 1619)

(From EncyclopediaVirginia.org. See also Ferrar Papers/Virginia Company Archives document 151.)

About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of war of the burden of 160 tons arrived at Point Comfort, the commander’s name Capt. Jope, his pilot for the West Indies one Mr. Marmaduke an Englishman. They met with the *Treasurer* in the West Indies, and determined to hold consort ship hitherward, but in their passage

lost one the other. He brought not anything but 20. and odd Negroes^p, which the Governor [Sir George Yeardley] and Cape Merchant [Abraham Peirse] bought for victuals (whereof he was in great need as he pretended) at the best and easiest rates they could. He had a large and ample Commission from his Excellency to range and to take purchase in the West Indies.

Three or 4. days after the *Treasurer* arrived. At his arrival he sent word presently to the Governor to know his pleasure, who wrote to him, and did request myself and Lieutenant Peace and Mr. Ewens to go down to him, to desire him to come up to James City. But before we got down he had set sail and was gone out of the Bay. The occasion thereof happened by the unfriendly dealing of the inhabitants of Kecoughtan, for he was in great want of victuals, wherewith they would not relieve him nor his Company upon any terms.

Excerpt from letter of John Pory to Sir Dudley Carleton, 30 September 1619, written at Jamestown
(From *EncyclopediaVirginia.org*.)

The occasion of this ship's [*White Lion's*] coming hither was an accidental consortship in the West Indies with the *Treasurer*, an English man of war also, licensed by a commission from the Duke of Savoy to take Spaniards as lawful prize. This ship, the *Treasurer*, went out of England in April was [last?] twelvemonth, about a month, I think, before any peace was concluded between the King of Spain and that prince. Hither she came to Captain Argall, then governor of this Colony, being part owner of her. He more for love of gain, the root of all evil, than for any true love he bore to this Plantation, victualled and manned her anew, and sent her with the same commission to range the Indies. The event thereof (we may misdoubt) will prove some attempt of the Spaniard upon us, either by way of revenge, or by way of prevention; lest we might in time make this place *sedem belli* against the West Indies....

...This packet I delivered to one Marmaduke Rayner, an Englishman, who goes entertained as Pilot in this Flemish man of war [*White Lion*]. If he come to your lordship, as he hath promised, he will be the fittest messenger....

Accounts of the privateer attack on the *San Juan Bautista* (Archivo General de Indias [or AGI; Seville], in Engel Sluiter, "New Light on the '20. and Odd.")

Enter on the credit side the receipt of 8,657.875 pesos paid by Manuel Mendes de Acunha, master of the ship *San Juan Bautista*, on 147 slave pieces brought by him to the said port on August 30, 1619, aboard the frigate *Santa Ana*, master Rodrigo Escobar. On the voyage inbound, Mendes de Acunha was robbed at sea off the coast of Campeche by English corsairs. Out of 350 slaves, large and small, he loaded in said Loanda (200 under license issued to him in Sevilla and the rest to be declared later) the English corsairs left him with only 147, including 24 slave boys he was forced to sell in Jamaica, where he had to refresh, for he had many sick aboard, and many had already died. (AGI, Contaduría 883)

[*San Juan Bautista* was] robbed by corsairs on the coast of Campeche, and from there the civil authorities transported them [the 147, to Vera Cruz] on the frigate, master Roderigo Descobar, who entered the said port on August 30, 1619. (AGI, Indiferente General 2795)

^p Some websites and other narratives incorrectly quote Rolfe as writing "Negars" rather than Negroes. The Museum staff has examined images of Rolfe's letter and confirms he wrote "Negroes." The incorrect quotations probably confuse Rolfe's account with what appears in John Smith's 1624 book, *A Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*: "About the last of August came in a Dutch man of war that sold us twenty Negars." Smith seems to have misquoted Rolfe, the source for his account.

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