

American slavery

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Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom* goes in the dynamics of pre-Revolutionary Virginia from the unsuccessful Roanoke colony to the beginnings of revolution. Edmund Morgan discloses the changing demographics, economics, social structures, and political developments of colonial Virginia that participated to the adoption of slavery. In the first half of the book, Edmund Morgan tries to illustrate the conditions in Virginia that led to its use of indentured servitude along with the development of concurrent political processes which allowed the wealthy part of the population to dominate.

Under the Virginia Company, Jamestown passed poorly the first years due to the type of immigrants that arrived rather than from a lack of organization or political leadership, according to Morgan. Too many of the new Virginians were gentlemen. For them, work remained a disturbing activity or only for those from the lower strata. In England, they had grown used to not working much at all. The absence of labor combined with an abundance of land placed a premium on real workers. Thereby, when tobacco emerged as the colony's saving grace the importation of indentured servants rose quickly.

The practices toward servants, from the legislature and individuals, were noted for their harshness. There was a brutality exceeding the treatment received in England. Edmund Morgan points out that the Virginians' attitudes toward the workers permitted the later shift toward slave labor. As tobacco profits shrunk, wealthier men of the colony began using government office as means of financial support. Moreover, even if the lands had been plentiful at the beginning, by the 1660s, its availability for small tobacco farmers had shrunk significantly.

The male immigrants, mostly men that had earned their freedom from servitude, found it more and more difficult to claim for a land of their own. The importation of even more workers, many of them were of the " lesser" more " base" sort, combined with the complaints of more elite planters who also suffered as tobacco prices dropped led to a very dangerous mix of discontent. Through its use of indentured servitude, Virginia had already established a plantation system. But with some different parameters than those that would be developed under plantation slavery.

Some factors delayed the adoption of slavery, like lower mortality rates, reduced immigration from England, a decline in competition with sugar plantations in the West Indies and the threat of former servant insurrections. However, once established, slavery used to be quickly adapted. The demand for tobacco and the desire to exploit the common farmer for greater profits combined to curtail freedoms at the lower end of the economic ladder, resulting in widespread discontent that led to Bacon's rebellion, among others.

The uprising was put down without any significant impact but may have suggested that racism could be used to supplant class resentment. The revolts also made clear that the gentry's problem had become how to keep freedmen working at the highest possible level short of creating unrest. In New England the protestant work ethic had succeeded but Virginians never exhibited an equal religious fervor. Therefore, slavery became the obvious answer, allowing owners to compel men to maximum output without the risk of rebellion.

The decision to adopt slavery was eased because it had a proven record of success in areas, like Virginia, in which land was abundant but labor was not and because it was not necessary to enslave anyone, just to buy those that were already slaves. Several factors predicted the introduction of African slavery into the colony. Young men who had served out their indentures roamed Virginia without property. Opportunity closed as Virginia's planter class acquired much of the prime acreage of the colony.

Land scarcity provided the main source of class antagonism. This discontent exploded into Bacon's Rebellion in which Virginia's poor took out its resentments by plundering the estates of the planter class. In addition, mortality rates dropped and the flow of English servants stopped. These conditions all contributed to the employment of a new labor system in Virginia. Colonial leaders did not want a roving class of the English poor in their colony. Officials had taken steps to ameliorate this problem with extended periods of servitude and taxes.

However, it was almost unthinkable to enslave an Englishman who had been born free under English law. In order to solve the labor problem and end class conflict Virginians began to turn to African slaves. These slaves born into savagery would never be considered as English citizens. The emergence of racism also made it easier to enslave Africans over freeborn white Englishmen. Only when class differences disappeared, in Morgan's opinion, could liberty flourish in colonial Virginia. Morgan produces a smart work about the links between American slavery and American freedom.