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Supporting Caste: The Origins of Racism in Colonial Virginia

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Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Dr. Dwayne Tunstall for introducing me to issues of race in philosophy and history and to Dr. Louis Moore for his assistance on early versions of this essay and for granting me the creative freedom that enabled me to complete this research. Thanks also to my colleagues at the Grand Valley State Writing Center for help with editing the final versions.

Many historians of early Virginia argue that racism is what made slavery possible. The idea is that treating a group of people as less than human requires an ideological justification that defines that group as non-human. While this analysis may be true for the colonial elites, it is false for the working class laborers. For the elites, racist ideology preceded the institution of slavery; for the lower class workers, racism was only an acceptable ideology after the implementation of slavery had separated working class whites and blacks materially. Understanding the conditions under which racism originally arose in 17th century Virginia reveals the elitist origins of racist ideology. While racism and classism existed side by side in the colony, but the relative indifference of the labor class to racial distinctions shows that economic disparity was initially the primary criterion of social stratification. This is particularly evident in the 17th century interracial rebellions against the landowning elite class, the *Grandeers*. In order to reduce such class conflict, the elites attempted to divide the lower class by imposing racial distinctions through legislation. However, it was not until indentured servitude became economically obsolete and slavery became economically viable that the racist ideology acquired its material foundation in slavery and gained efficacy with the lower class whites. As the institution of slavery grew, race replaced class as the primary criterion for social stratification.

This essay proceeds in three steps. In the first section, I explain how the elites developed and maintained socio-economic classes in Virginia. In the second, I show how, against the elites, the lower classes practiced a degree of solidarity that ignored racial distinctions. And last, I argue that the initial legal attempts of the elites to separate the lower class along racial lines and mitigate class antagonism did not work until juridical measures were supported by practical economic conditions. Ultimately, I argue that racist ideology started with the elites and was only accepted by working class whites once slavery separated black workers from white workers materially.

CREATING CLASS SOCIETY IN VIRGINIA

The Virginia Company of London would have failed if tobacco had not come to the colony. First settled in 1607 on land granted by King James I, Jamestown originally attracted male traders looking to make their fortune in the gold trade. But there was no gold, and many refused to farm. Reluctance to work the land coupled with previously unknown diseases created a deadly situation: of the 1,200 settlers that arrived in Jamestown by 1611, over half had died of disease or famine.¹ Even Governor Thomas Dale conceded that at times "everie man allmost laments himself of being here."² Death overwhelmed the people, and the colony

¹ James A. Henretta, David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil, *America's History: Volume One to 1877, Sixth Edition* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008), 47.

² Carl Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown 1544-1699* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 121.

struggled to find an identity; that is, until a wealthy English planter named John Rolfe saved the colony from failure by importing tobacco from the West Indies. Although James I initially despised the "vile Weed," he changed his mind when "taxes on imported tobacco bolstered the royal treasury," and production flourished under the protection of royal troops. For the next forty years, tobacco sales and production soared. By 1660, tobacco exports reached £10 million per year.³

Such financial success could have never been achieved without access to an expansive and cheap labor force. White indentured servants performed the field labor in early Virginia, and laborers "were acquired as rapidly as the means of the landowners permitted."⁴ In 1617, land reform granted any freeman who moved to Virginia 100 acres of land and any who brought indentured servants with them received an extra "fifty acres for every one."⁵ England also supplied the colony with indentured laborers by deporting orphans and convicts. Poor Laws allowed the government to deport many people, primarily children displaced from the fall of feudalism. In 1627 alone, fourteen to fifteen hundred children were swept from the streets of England and shipped off to Virginia.⁶ In 1618, the British government agreed to pay the Virginia Company £5 for every convict the company would take "off its hands." That year, 100 "apprentices" were shipped to the New World.⁷ The economic incentives that drove planters to demand this mass of laborers "continued during the remaining portion of the century."⁸

In addition to those who were forcibly exported, many adults attempted to escape poverty by consigning themselves into labor contracts of varying lengths. These so-called "freewillers" were too poor to pay their own way upfront, so they agreed to work for a determined amount of years as compensation for their passage to the New World. Many of these people came from the lowest classes of society, forced to leave England because the living conditions there were so insalubrious. Work was scarce despite the desire to labor, and when one did find work, the pay was minuscule at best. Rents were so high that many could not afford adequate housing. But poverty was not an obstacle to one's emigration because someone was always willing to secure a passage for the promise of labor. In fact, English governance saw no problem with this method of driving out the

³ Henretta, Brody, and Dumenil, *America's History*, 50.

⁴ Philip Alexander Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century: An Inquiry into the Material Condition of the People, Based Upon Original and Contemporaneous Records, Volume I* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), 575.

⁵ Henretta, Brody, and Dumenil, *America's History*, 46-48.

⁶ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume I*, 612-613.

⁷ Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, *White Cargo: The Forgotten of Britain's White Slaves in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 78.

⁸ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume I*, 612-613.

poor because they were regarded "with impatience and aversion as a useless weight upon the welfare of the community."⁹

Those who left for the New World voluntarily unexpectedly found themselves in a situation where they were owned, abused, and legally oppressed. Instead of being protected from harsh treatment and receiving the land promised to them upon the completion of their service, contracted servants "came to be viewed as – and treated by colonial law as – chattels." Few, if any, retained their fundamental rights and freedoms. Their "employer" made their decisions for them, and the laws supported this system. As early as 1623, servants appeared in planters' wills as real estate.¹⁰ Additionally, the master was required, by terms of the contracts, "to feed, clothe, and house the servant and provide for him" or her. However, "the incidence of mortality...fell heaviest upon the white laboring population,"¹¹ and many servants failed to survive long enough to obtain freedom or land.¹²

Because servants were viewed as private property, plantation owners felt justified in using brute force to maximize the output of their laborers. Between the time Virginia became a royal colony and the end of the 17th century, tobacco output increased from 400 pounds per hand to 1,900 pounds per hand. Often the vicious treatment of laborers that drove this growth resulted in death. One successful planter by the name of Thomas Brandox killed one of his servants, Thomas Jones. Brandox was acquitted and even continued to abuse his other indentures, especially Sarah Taylor who testified against him in the Jones case. Another planter, Henry Smith, killed several male servants, raped two women servants, and had one of his illegitimate children killed. The mother of the illegitimate child was whipped; he was spared the lash because he was a "gentleman." The rape victims were accused of lying and sentenced to extra years of servitude, although under a different master. For the murders, Smith paid a fine.¹³

The handling of these cases of gross mistreatment of indentures by masters is evidence that the entire legal system was biased in favor of the planter class. The servants had little or no legal rights. Only superficial improvements in governance were made in 1623 when the "martial law" that existed under Virginia Company rule "was replaced by English Common Law."¹⁴ Under the new system,

⁹ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume I*, 576-583.

¹⁰ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 108.

¹¹ Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown*, 53-55. Interestingly, Friedrich Engels stated that to make use of a servant or slave "presupposes the possession of a certain amount of property, in excess of the average." The master must have the means to feed, clothe, and shelter the laborer, as well as provide the tools, land, and seeds needed for production. Carter A. Wilson, *Racism: From Slavery to Advanced Capitalism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), 17-18.

¹² Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 111.

¹³ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 194-203.

¹⁴ Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown*, 77.

planters were "to suppress all inhuman severity toward servants." If they did mistreat a laborer with excess punishment, malnourishment, misappropriation of their property, or provided inadequate quarters, the laborer could file grievance with the colonial House of Burgess.¹⁵ However, contracts were the basis of servitude and because contracts were always made "between unequal powers [that appear] on paper as equals, enforcement was far easier for the master than for the servant." Thus, servants' complaints fell on deaf ears, even under the reformed government. After all, servants did not vote or "participate in juries. Masters did."¹⁶

The law reflected only the interests of the planter class – a group more "interested in controlling servants" than regulating the methods in which "they were procured" and the manner in which they were treated – allowing masters to exercise complete control over their servants.¹⁷ Laborers' sex lives were regulated and punishments were issued for transgressions, while masters made marriage decisions on behalf of their workers.¹⁸ Monetary rewards were issued to anyone who caught an indenture off the plantation without a note of permission from his or her master. The trait of servitude most indicative of its slave-like nature was that indentures were bought, sold, and gambled away at the discretion of the masters.¹⁹ Like the slaves that would follow, servants had no control over their own destinies.

These structural conditions of colonial Virginia were founded on the classist ideology of the colonial elites, which was exported by the English elites when they exported the poor themselves. English society looked upon such dregs with contempt and "anticipated that the Colony would diminish crime in the kingdom by drawing away" those tempted "to drift into vagabondage, beggary, and lawlessness."²⁰ The Virginia planters held the same lowly views of the lower classes, believing them to be "dirty and lazy, rough, ignorant, lewd, and often criminal." Underclass servants were seen as thieving, wandering bastards who "corrupted society with loathsome diseases," and the elites doubted the ability of the poor to make it in the New World as a landowner or artisan because they were "shiftless, hopeless, ruined individuals."²¹

¹⁵ Philip Alexander Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century: An Inquiry into the Material Condition of the People, Based Upon Original and Contemporaneous Records, Volume II* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), 10, 46.

¹⁶ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 43-44.

¹⁷ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 122.

¹⁸ Zinn, *A People's History*, 44. Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 38.

¹⁹ Ronald Schultz, "A Class Society? The Nature of Inequality in Early America," in *Inequality in Early America*, ed. Carla Gardina Pestana and Sharon V. Salinger (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1999), 211-212.

²⁰ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume I*, 583.

²¹ Zinn, *A People's History*, 46-47.

Governor William Berkeley epitomized the attitude of the planter elites toward their subordinates. He acknowledged "the great mass of people as living in severe economic straits" as he lamented his own position as a man "that Governs a People where six parts of seven at least are Poore Endebted [and] Discontented."²² (This statement supposes a privileged seventh.) Berkeley, "an archetypal Cavalier," was thankful that Virginia was free of public education and "printing" because these types of liberties had "brought disobedience and heresy and sects into the world." He very much wanted to keep the "scum" in its place.²³ Simply put, "Virginians [lived] across the Atlantic, but their minds and imaginations were conditioned by English culture."²⁴

AFRICAN LABORERS AND WORKER SOLIDARITY

Scholars disagree whether the first "twenty and odd Negroes" were slaves or indentured servants. Howard Zinn argued that slavery already had a firm socio-historical foundation and that Africans would have been treated no different than the other one million slaves brought to various places in the New World before 1619.²⁵ Others, such as Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, believe that, in practice, Virginians treated Africans as indentured servants, even if they were formally considered slaves by their transporters. Philip Alexander Bruce concurs, stating, "It appears from the county records that the largest proportion of them [Africans] were employed under the provisions of indentures similar to those by which the white servants were bound."²⁶ The concept of race certainly existed in Virginia and the elites noted the difference between whites and blacks by referring to Africans as "Negroes" in censuses.²⁷ However, the need for labor was the most important factor in colonial decision-making. In the words of Jordan and Walsh, "Racism may have well existed, but in the rush for profit, the colour of a field labourer was a secondary consideration."²⁸ Black labor "was equally as valuable" as white labor.²⁹

Social mobility is the best evidence in favor of the thesis that blacks were not limited by their race, as several black men survived servitude and became successful planters. The most famous example of a successful black planter is Anthony Johnson. Johnson arrived in Virginia in 1619, and after approximately

²² Zinn, *A People's History*, 40.

²³ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 194-195.

²⁴ Susan Westbury, "Theatre and Power in Bacon's Rebellion: Virginia, 1676-77," *Seventeenth Century* 19, no. 1 (2004), 81.

²⁵ Zinn, *A People's History*, 26.

²⁶ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 128.

²⁷ Anthony S. Parent, Jr., *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 107.

²⁸ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 170.

²⁹ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 53.

twelve to fifteen years as a servant, he was released and acquired property of his own. His estate reached at least 1,000 acres, which he secured with the head rights of many servants, white and black.³⁰ The story of Anthony Johnson shows that early in the century, black men could overcome racism if they could prove their ability in landowning and business management. This was only possible because class, not race, was the primary criterion of social stratification at the time, and social mobility was possible for those who were successful.

Because class was the most important social distinction, the working class remained relatively indifferent to racial distinctions, sharing the same working and living conditions. They performed the same duties and tasks: "planting, weeding, suckering, or cutting tobacco [and] preparing it for market." They cleared the same forests, received the same holidays, ate similar food, wore similar clothing, and lived in like conditions, although amenities given to the blacks were usually "simpler."³¹ Because "whites and blacks [often] found themselves with common problems, common work, common enemy with their master, they [...] were remarkably unconcerned about the visible physical differences."³²

Under the same oppressive conditions, black and white workers often rebelled the same, and often together. "Of all offences of which the servants were guilty, running away was the most common" for both white and black laborers. There are several famous documented cases of interracial flight in 1640 alone.³³ In addition to running, cooperative uprisings occurred as well. As early as 1663, whites and blacks were joining forces to end their mutual oppression.³⁴ The discontent among all servant groups – English, Irish, and African alike – culminated in the largest, most organized interracial revolt of the times: Bacon's Rebellion.

Nathaniel Bacon led the people in a class war against the elites but he did not invent their grievances. Rather, he merely articulated what the poor saw all along: "the sudden Rise of their [the elites] Estates compared with the Quality in which they first entered this Country" and the lack of "any Public work for our [the lower classes] safety and defense or for the Advancement and propagation of Trade, liberal Arts or sciences."³⁵ The people felt their oppression even though they lacked the means to articulate such sentiments.

A revealing truth of Bacon's Rebellion is that race was not a factor in the fight against the elites. Some historians argue that the people "fought with only the vaguest idea of a cause" because many fighters shifted allegiance several

³⁰ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 43. See also Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 169-171.

³¹ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 104-107.

³² Zinn, *A People's History*, 31.

³³ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 11, 19, 23-24, 113.

³⁴ Zinn, *A People's History*, 36.

³⁵ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 208.

times during the uprising.³⁶ Maybe, but at no time did any semblance of a cause contain racial tension between blacks and whites. This was especially true of the final days of the insurrection. After Bacon's death by illness in October 1676, the remaining rebel force consisted of "four hundred English and Negroes in arms." The British Captain Thomas Grantham engaged these rebels, of whom "some were for shooting [him] and others were for cutting [him] in pieces," and persuaded three-quarters of the men to return to their homes in exchange for their pardon and freedom. The remaining insurgents, "about eighty Negroes and twenty English," refused to surrender, so Grantham led them into a trap. "They yielded with a great deal of discontent," he reported, adding, "had they known my purpose they would have destroyed me."³⁷ These last 100 men, the core of the rebel movement, ignored race in their struggle against oppression.

RACISM AND THE ELITE RESPONSE

Colonial elites responded to the growing solidarity by treating whites and blacks differently in order to inhibit class-consciousness and promote racial separation. For decades, the only difference between white and black servants was that the latter were occasionally servants for life, but in the face of growing class-based resistance, the elites used racist justifications to create legal racial distinctions. The elites' ideas about the "nature" of blacks came to the fore as they remorselessly degraded people of African descent. As Bruce has put it:

The belief was held by many, even in England, that the negro was not a man but a wild beast, marked by an intelligence hardly superior to that of a monkey, and with instincts and habits far more debased. He was considered to be stupid in mind, savage in manners, and brutal in his impulses.³⁸

As discussed above, the elites believed those in the poor laboring class to be disgusting and lazy. Here, their racist views place Africans below poor whites. Given the cooperation of the lower class in terms of work, resistance, and, as we will see, sexual relations, it seems unlikely that laboring whites shared the strong racial views of the elites. Moreover, just as the Grandees had acquired their classist ideology from English elites, they likely acquired their racist views in the same manner. Thus, such racist ideology belonged to Governor Berkeley's privileged seventh.

³⁶ Two of Bacon's top supporters and members of the Burgesses, Richard Lawrence and William Drummond, were the first to set fire in Jamestown, starting with their own houses. Bacon followed their lead by burning the church.

³⁷ Jordan and Walsh, *White Cargo*, 210.

³⁸ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 64.

Racial discrimination was initially unsystematic, but it was eventually codified into laws that issued harsher punishments to blacks and inhibited their property rights. For example, both black and white servants ran, but black servants were more severely punished. In 1640, a Scotsman, a Dutchman, and an African fled their master together. The Virginia court ordered that each servant receive thirty lashes. More importantly, the two white servants were sentenced to additional years of servitude, but the African was sentenced to lifetime servitude.³⁹ By the 1660s, the law prohibited blacks from owning white servants. Unlike Anthony Johnson, black plantation owners now found it increasingly difficult to compete because the amount of labor available for their use was limited.

The juridical distinctions that separated whites and blacks in terms of punishment and property were also applied to sexual activity, a fact that exposes the planter elites' fear of interracial sex. What should have been "a condition to be expected from the intimate association of members of the two races in the performance of their daily tasks" was a crime.⁴⁰ Miscegenation laws were implemented to put an end to the polluting of the pure white race. In 1630, Hugh Davis, a white man, was convicted of "criminal intimacy" and sentenced to be "soundly whipt before an assembly of negroes and others" for "abusing himself" and "defiling" his body by copulating with a black woman. Not only was his public punishment meant to serve as an example to others who might be tempted to commit a similar act, "the court targeted [blacks] as witnesses [...] to the exercise of their authority."⁴¹ Eventually, the House of Burgess passed a law in 1662 formally outlawing miscegenation between blacks and "Christians."⁴²

Men and women were treated differently when it came to work and sex, and eventually there was a distinction between white and black women. The 1643 tax code exempted white women servants who would be used as domestics, but continued to tax white female field laborers and all black female servants, as all black women worked in the fields. This merely reinforced the cultural practice of sheltering white women while attempting to eliminate temptations among planters to have relations with black women.⁴³ There is no clear record of the punishment of black women for having a bi-racial child, although most bi-racial children were made wardens of the state and most black women were servants at the time the child was born.

The attempted use of legal means to create a distinction between blacks and whites, and the apparent failure of this approach, reveal two important facts. First, as discussed earlier, the working classes had virtually no legal rights; they did not have input regarding the development of the laws. The legalist effort to

³⁹ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 12.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 109.

⁴¹ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 108.

⁴² Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 116.

⁴³ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 61.

racially divide the colony could have only come from the elites. Second, given the crescendo in interracial resistance during the period, these laws had little to no effect on the consciousness of the laboring class. In 1671, an English clergyman believed "These two words, Negro and Slave, had by custom grown Homogeneous and convertible."⁴⁴ This may have been true for the elites but Bacon's Rebellion is evidence that the workers had not yet accepted the ideology of the ruling class by 1676.⁴⁵ If racism were to gain efficacy as a mechanism to divide the lower class, it would require a material base in slavery.

As the 17th century wore on, economic growth in England and improvements in colonial living conditions undermined the system of indentured servitude. The British economy began growing at unprecedented rates in the 1660s and "authorities began to see the poor, not as a national problem, but as a national resource." The masses were put to work in England, building the largest economy the world had ever seen. By the 1680s, traders were prosecuted for inducing laborers to leave for the colonies.⁴⁶ In Virginia, servants increasingly lived longer than they did when the colony was established and the growing population of free laborers had claimed most of the available land. By the early 1670s, underclass rebellions were increasingly common and planters began to desire laborers that would not expect land upon the expiration of a contract.

Ironically, the increase in life expectancy that caused trouble for the system of indentured servitude also made slavery a viable form of labor. As life expectancy increased, it became practical to own lifetime servants. When servants died younger, planters chose limited service contracts to secure labor. When they began living longer, planters opted to own. The new labor system was established along racial lines, as only black servants could be owned or be assigned to lifetime servitude. Additionally, slavery contributed to a profitable colony. As the argument went, "Blacks can make [tobacco] cheaper than Whites."⁴⁷ According to Bruce, if every servant imported between 1676 and 1700 had been replaced with a slave, "the accumulation of wealth by the planters would [...] have been more rapid than it [actually] was."⁴⁸

The viability of slavery inspired a rapid increase in the import of African workers. The Royal African Company, created in the 1660s to facilitate English lines in the African slave trade, had not yet begun selling blacks in the colonies at the time of Bacon's Rebellion. Immediately following the uprising, the company was readied with haste and was operational by 1678.⁴⁹ The African population

⁴⁴ Henretta, Brody, and Dumenil, *America's History*, 52.

⁴⁵ Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony points out that the ruling class need not rule by force if they can get the lower classes to passively accept their ideology. Wilson, *Racism*, 23.

⁴⁶ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 40, 58-59.

⁴⁷ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 60.

⁴⁸ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 63.

⁴⁹ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 66-67.

tripled during the last three decades of the century, reaching six thousand.⁵⁰ Blacks counted for "9 percent of the population but over one-half the bound labor force." Land was still distributed by head rights; as the only group that could afford slaves, the elites dominated agricultural production and economic power.⁵¹ Slaves continued to arrive in exponential numbers, counting for 40 percent of the population in 1740.⁵²

As the demographics of the colony transformed, black and white workers – now called slaves and freeholders or laborers – were split into two classes. The new class of slaves were defined racially and excluded from the community in various ways. Blacks were given different clothing, food, work, and housing to emphasize the difference between slave and white. Unlike the days of Anthony Johnson, when "free negroes who had obtained an ownership in real estate were allowed to exercise the suffrage in the times when it was based upon a property qualification,"⁵³ blacks were now excluded from the political order. The slave code of 1705 "[denied] blacks the civil rights [and] due process." People of African descent were also barred from holding "any ecclesiastical, civil, or military office, regardless of their status" as slave or free.⁵⁴ Ultimately, black lives were seen as less valuable and therefore less protected by law.⁵⁵

Compared to their African counterparts, white workers perceived themselves as a distinct group above slavery, even though they remained subject to the power of the ruling elite. Most working class whites acquired small plots of land by 1776, and were therefore considered "free," in contrast to dependent slaves.⁵⁶ Despite landowning, the lower class whites remained debtors to the elites. They lived in modest housing compared to the wealthy. The elites also continued to control the tobacco trade at the expense of the freeholders.⁵⁷ Underclass whites were denied many of the offices that blacks were denied due to class discrimination and had little say in colonial administration.⁵⁸ Even though they thought of themselves as better than slaves, working class whites of the mid-18th century occupied the same place in society relative to the Grandees as those in the 17th century.

During the century between Bacon's Rebellion and the American War of Independence, lower class whites support for the new caste system grew and

⁵⁰ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 108.

⁵¹ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 44, 74.

⁵² Rhys Issac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 12.

⁵³ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume II*, 127.

⁵⁴ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 120-121.

⁵⁵ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 129.

⁵⁶ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 11.

⁵⁷ Issac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 29-42, 137.

⁵⁸ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 121.

white society found a common scapegoat. While there were still class conflicts,⁵⁹ "slavery was never a major source of internal conflict between whites in Virginia before the [American] Revolution. Despite a few protests against the institution...even those who opposed slavery in principle" did not attempt to abolish it.⁶⁰ Workers grew to accept and even embrace the equivocation of "Negro and Slave," the one principle they shared with the elites.⁶¹

In order to fully buttress the nascent racial antagonism, lower class whites were rewarded for doing their part in policing slave behavior. Scottish writer James Reid explains that the working class came to accept the legal system they formerly opposed: "you may find innumerable families in which there is no Bible, yet you will not find one without a Law-book."⁶² This new respect for the law was harnessed when "freed white male servants, by order of the Council of State in 1706, were issued a gun at the end of their tenure" to protect against slave revolts.⁶³ On plantations, white laborers "were fully empowered to patrol slave quarters and to break up assemblies."⁶⁴ The antagonism between black and white laborers grew as the former rebelled and the latter suppressed rebellion. Numerous slave rebellions broke out in Virginia during the 18th century.⁶⁵ After the 1800-1802 slave rebellions, the elites decided to "restore the old colonial instruments of control in order to better discipline a troublesome labor force and crush its rebellious spirit."⁶⁶ By 1831, Virginia maintained a military roughly equal to 10 percent of the total population and, with the absence of external threats, working class white soldiers were used primarily to guard against slave revolts.⁶⁷ Having been set up against each other by being split into racialized castes, long past were the days when working class whites and blacks would work together in the fight against their mutual oppressors.

CONCLUSION

⁵⁹ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 173-194.

⁶⁰ Robert E. Brown and B. Katherine Brown, *Virginia 1705-1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1964), 76-77.

⁶¹ For the connections between republican ideology and racism, see Issac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 320-321.

⁶² Issac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 133.

⁶³ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 121.

⁶⁴ Parent, Jr., *Foul Means*, 129.

⁶⁵ Brown and Brown, *Virginia 1705-1786*, 71.

⁶⁶ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xi.

⁶⁷ Zinn, *A People's History*, 174.

Virginia began as a business and profit remained the key motive of the colony throughout the 17th century and beyond.⁶⁸ Initially, the needed labor was taken from the nearest available source: the poor. The justification for the treatment of these laborers rested on the idea that they were listless and indolent by nature. The laborers were exploited by "an increasingly wealthy class of plantation owners"⁶⁹ who "would have become a community of peasant proprietors" without them.⁷⁰ As soon as the economic situation in the colony was conducive to slavery, Africans replaced the English poor; for when it came to blacks, the elites saw a difference so great they could justify perpetual servitude. Eventually, all the necessary requirements were met: an accumulation of wealth above the average, long lifespan, means of acquiring large numbers of cheap Africans, and social unrest to hurry the process along. The laboring class whites accepted racism, identifying with white solidarity, only after black workers were separated by distinct material conditions. Anti-black racism, then, was not "natural," it was the result of socio-historical relationships between real people,⁷¹ and it had acquired its material basis in slavery.⁷²

One may ask, however, why were whites not reduced to slavery? "Because it was not in their [the elites] power to do so in the historical context," says Theodore Allen; "The non-slavery of white labor was the indispensable condition for the slavery of black labor."⁷³ If all workers were made into slaves, then they would have continued to rebel in solidarity. Racism justified slavery, and slavery met the economic demands of the colony, but for this system to work, the majority of whites needed to accept racism. Bacon's Rebellion reinforced the fear of a lower class, interracial union and hastened the pace at which poor whites were given an imaginary investment in colonial society. While racism today cannot be reduced to economic factors, the history of Virginia reveals the close relation between the two. All oppressed groups from lower class laborers and women to slaves participate in "anti-deferential" behavior,⁷⁴ but any union of these groups threatens dominant class interests. The Virginia elites knew this well.

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⁶⁸ The elites complained that the laborers refused to cultivate anything but tobacco, but "most of all, they wanted free trade." Joan de Lourdes Leonard, "The Birth and Death of a Virginia Blue Print for Progress 1660-1676." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1967), 45, 50.

⁶⁹ Schultz, "A Class Society?" 212.

⁷⁰ Bruce, *Economic History of Virginia, Volume I*, 586.

⁷¹ Zinn, *A People's History*, 30.

⁷² Wilson, *Racism*, 54.

⁷³ Theodore Allen, "...They Would Have Destroyed Me: Slavery and the Origins of Racism," in *Radical America* (Somerville, MA: Alternative Education Projects, 1975), 47.

⁷⁴ Gregory Nobles, "A Class Act: Redefining Deference in Early American History," *Early American Studies* 3, no. 2 (2005), 289.

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