

1705 Virginia Slave Codes

Slavery in North America began slowly in the early 1600s, with the arrival in Virginia of a few captured Africans. They joined white indentured servants and captured Indians as laborers on the farms of struggling landowners.

In the British colonies, poor people could buy passages to America by signing contracts called *indentures*. After seven years of work, they became free men and women.

Even African slaves were allowed to gain their freedom after a period of time.

But by the end of the 17th century, black servants had lost the hope of eventual freedom and were trapped in a cycle of slavery. The Virginia Slave Codes of 1705 exemplified the terrible change in their legal status.

Jamestown, Virginia, August 1619. A Dutch ship, the *White Lion*, pulled into the dock bearing 20 African slaves.

WE WILL SELL THESE MEN FOR FOOD AND SUPPLIES.

In 1621, one newly arrived prisoner was sold to the owner of a small tobacco plantation.

NAME?
YOUR NAME?

ANTONIO.

ANTONIO,
YOU ARE MY
BOND SERVANT.

Antonio worked in the tobacco fields alongside the white indentured servants. It was backbreaking labor.

JEMMY, HOW
LONG ARE YOU BOUND TO
MASTER BENNETT?

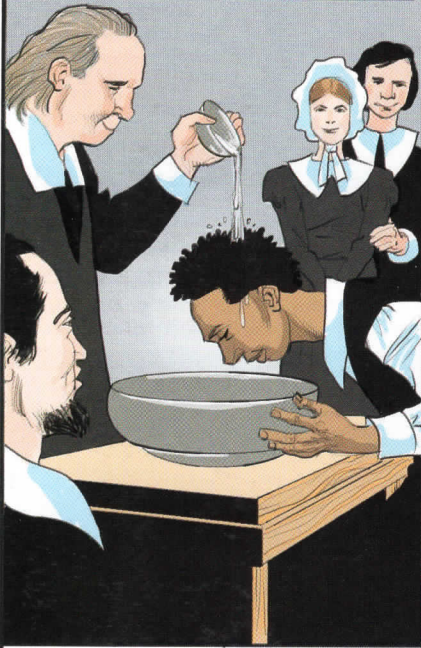
SEVEN YEARS.
THEN, MY FREEDOM
DUES--MY OWN LAND,
AND A GUN.

I WANT MY
FREEDOM
DUES, TOO.

In early Virginia, Antonio was called not a slave but a *servant*. Yet unlike Jemmy, he had not signed a contract that stated when he would be freed from service--if ever.

But Antonio's hard work was eventually rewarded. He became a Christian.

I BAPTIZE YOU ANTHONY JOHNSON.



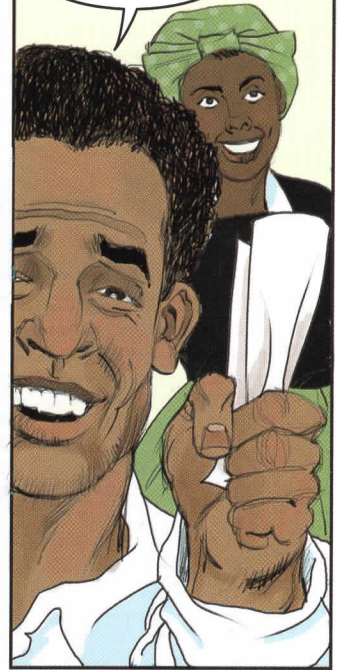
He was allowed to marry the woman he loved . . .

ANTHONY AND MARY ARE NOW MAN AND WIFE.



. . . and he became a free man.

MR. BENNETT LET ME BUY MY FREEDOM!



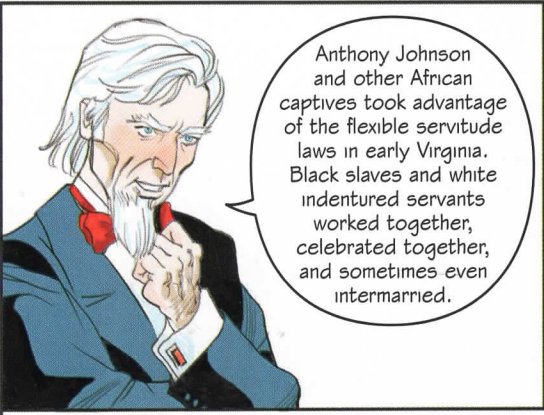
By 1651, freeman Anthony Johnson had a 250-acre plantation of his own. Like other farmers, he had servants and slaves to help him grow and harvest tobacco.

I ORDER THE RUNAWAY SLAVE JOHN CASAR RETURNED TO THE POSSESSION OF ANTHONY JOHNSON FORTHWITH.



Anthony Johnson died in 1670. His wife, Mary, passed on ten years later. Both lived to see their grandchildren grow up free and own farms.

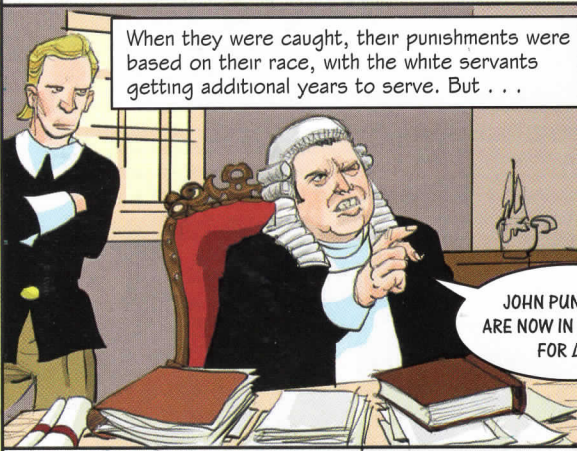




Anthony Johnson and other African captives took advantage of the flexible servitude laws in early Virginia. Black slaves and white indentured servants worked together, celebrated together, and sometimes even intermarried.



They also ran away together. In 1640, three servants conspired to escape from their master.

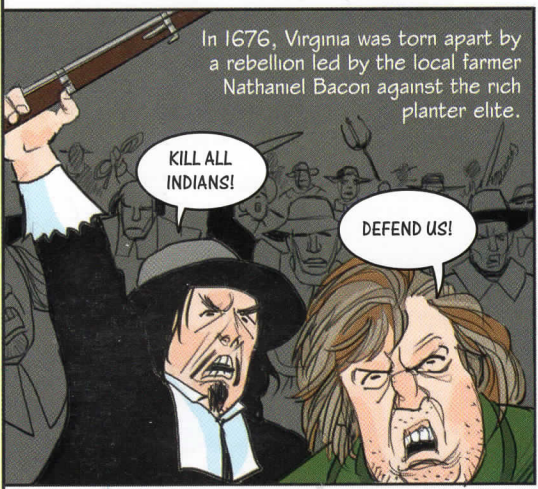


When they were caught, their punishments were based on their race, with the white servants getting additional years to serve. But . . .

JOHN PUNCH, YOU ARE NOW IN SERVITUDE FOR LIFE.



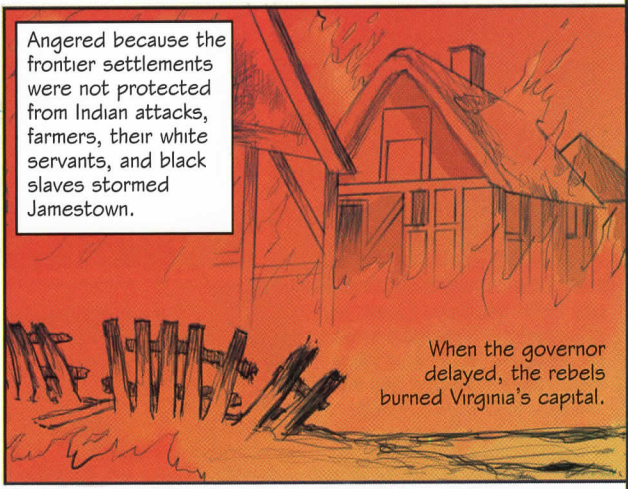
Whatever his original status, John Punch was now a slave.



In 1676, Virginia was torn apart by a rebellion led by the local farmer Nathaniel Bacon against the rich planter elite.

KILL ALL INDIANS!

DEFEND US!



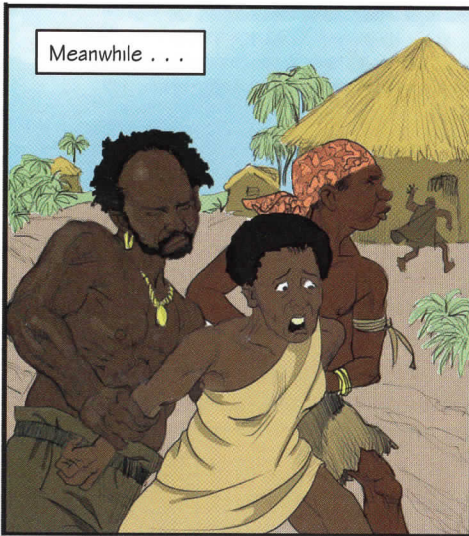
Angered because the frontier settlements were not protected from Indian attacks, farmers, their white servants, and black slaves stormed Jamestown.

When the governor delayed, the rebels burned Virginia's capital.

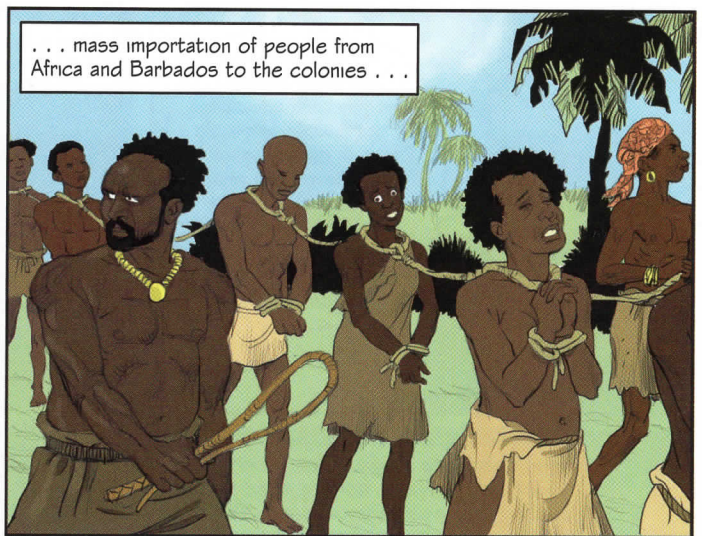
But Nathaniel Bacon died within a year, and the rebels were scattered or rounded up.



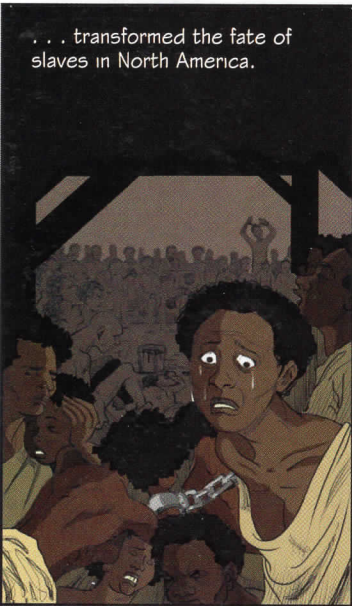
LET SLAVES AND RUFFIANS TOGETHER PAY THE PRICE OF REBELLION!



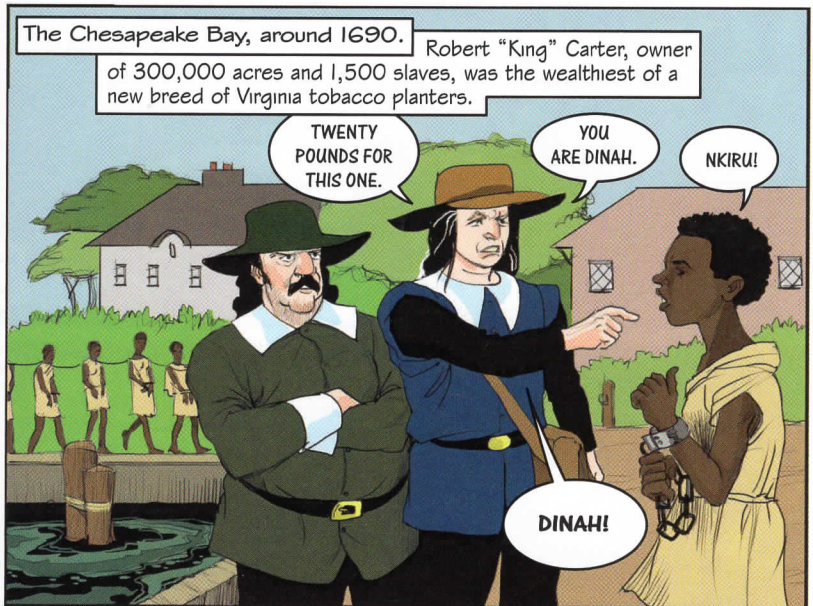
Meanwhile . . .



. . . mass importation of people from Africa and Barbados to the colonies . . .



. . . transformed the fate of slaves in North America.



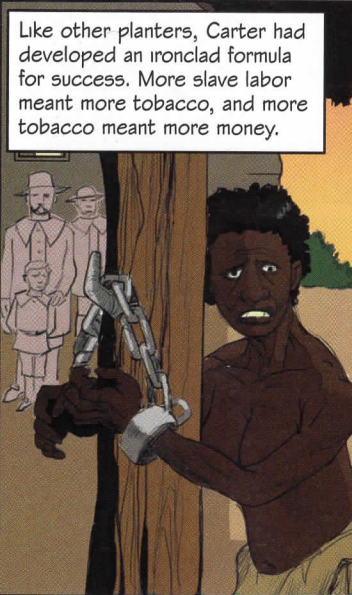
The Chesapeake Bay, around 1690. Robert "King" Carter, owner of 300,000 acres and 1,500 slaves, was the wealthiest of a new breed of Virginia tobacco planters.

TWENTY POUNDS FOR THIS ONE.

YOU ARE DINAH.

NKIRU!

DINAH!



Like other planters, Carter had developed an ironclad formula for success. More slave labor meant more tobacco, and more tobacco meant more money.



THIRTY LASHES WHEN YOU REFUSE TO WORK!

A decade later . . .

BUY ONLY AFRICAN SLAVES. THEY COST MORE . . . BUT YOU OWN THEM FOREVER. AND THEY FARE BETTER AGAINST THE MALARIA.

TOO MANY SLAVES MIGHT RISE UP IN REBELLION.

NO MORE INDENTURED SERVANTS FOR ME. YOU FEED THEM, CLOTHE THEM--THEN THEY'RE GONE. OR THEY CATCH MALARIA AND DIE.

NOT IF WE CONTROL THEM TOTALLY.

Carter's actions lived up to his words.

BAMBERRA HENRY AND DINAH, THIS IS YOUR THIRD ESCAPE ATTEMPT.

I KNOW HOW TO KEEP SLAVES FROM RUNNING AWAY. CUT OFF THEIR TOES!

During the 1700s, the slave population of Virginia skyrocketed.


293,000 - 1790

105,000 - 1750

40,000 - 1730

13,000 - 1700

In 1705, the Virginia legislature approved a slave code that reinforced the legal status of black slaves as property. Fearing for their freedom, Anthony Johnson's descendants fled the colony.



As members of the House of Burgesses, "King" Carter and other wealthy Virginians passed laws that progressively deprived slaves of any legal rights.

Other colonies passed similar laws, especially in the South, where the economy was based on the growing of rice, tobacco, and indigo on large plantations worked by slave labor. And so the Southern slave society was born.

In Anthony Johnson's day, African servants became Christian in hopes of proving that they were part of the larger society. But under the new slave codes, conversion would no longer save them from a life of bondage.

Owners could maim or even kill their slaves without fear of punishment. And by making children's slave status dependent on the status of the mother rather than the father, the law ensured that slavery would continue from generation to generation.