History Paper: Slavery in Colonial Virginia

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In 1501, after America was discovered by Christopher Columbus, Portugal and Spain started to bring slaves from Africa to South America. They need these slaves to work in the plantation that was established in their colonies. The first Africans were probably treated as slaves when they arrived in Jamestown in 1619. They were also freed after they had worked for their masters for a pre-decided number of years. But that privilege was not to last for long. By the start of the eighteenth century, the Assembly in Virginia passed a set of slave laws that were known as Black Codes. These laws established the principle of life-long slavery, even saying that a child born to a slave will inherit the same status at his birth. At the start of the seventeenth century, English decided to do the same as they began to buy these slaves to grow tobacco in their colony of Virginia.

The development of Virginia was purely a business venture, as the colony was established under a joint-stock company. This makes sure that the Virginia Company of London that not existed to establish the presence of the Crown in the Americas. It existed to make money. There were no mines of gold and silver, as many colonists were led to believe to motivate them to settle in the American colonies. Instead, they use the natural resources of the land was to be made to establish an industrial presence to make goods like tar production, glass making and distillation of wine and beer. But this was not enough to justify the investment made by the people in the Virginia Company of London.

The white merchants and plantation owners developed and passed these laws for lifetime slavery due to several reasons. Chief of these reasons was that the planters of Virginia started to cultivate the commodity crop of tobacco as their main export. The problem was that growing tobacco was a labor-intensive task that required a significant number of slaves. This made sure that the demand for slaves in the American colonies was at the highest level. By the mid of the eighteenth century, there were around one and half hundred thousand slaves in the Chesapeake Bay region, comparing to about fifty thousand in the Spanish colony of Cuba.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Tobacco was Virginia's first cash crop, which was grown for the main aim of raising profit from the colonies, rather than using it for the development of the colonies. Even though cheap labor was supplied in the form of African slaves, the start-up costs were still expensive. The settlers had to use the methods they had observed from the native Americans to clear the land and make it fit for tobacco plantations. From the start of sowing the crops, tobacco needed a whole year to plant. Also, the crop could only be planted in a specific field for only three years. After that, the slaves had to wait for nutrients to return to the soil and make it fit again for planting another crop. This again made sure that more land and slaves were required to develop the colony of Jamestown and the settlements around it. By the end of the 1600s, the Virginia (Tobacco) Company of London was the most profitable venture in all the Americas. The profits of Tobacco further increased the dependence of the colony of Virginia on slavery. These profits began to be used for building local infrastructure, paying taxes and purchase of finished goods from Britain. With the combination of cheap labor, ever-increasing demand and a regulatory system born of trial and error, the colonial plantation network was born. Shirley plantation was one of the examples that are often cited to explain this network of Virginia tobacco plantation.

Even though the requirement of slaves was skyrocketing, the overproduction of tobacco was causing a drop in the demand and the price of the crop. This resulted in the decrease in growth in the number of people in Virginia, as its inhabitants needed to sustain their profits so that they would be able to afford more slaves and increase the capacity of their production. After some restrictions[[2]](#footnote-3) and a small slump in the prices, the demand for tobacco started to rise again, and so did the role of slavery in the progress of the colony of Virginia.

By 1709, the colonists of Virginia were producing around twenty-nine million pounds of tobacco annually. The ample number of slaves and land made sure that the prices and the production of the crop throughout the 1740s and 1750s were stable. This stability helped the patriots as the War of Independence broke out in 1775. The General Assembly stopped the production of tobacco and used its ample workforce and labor force to provide and soldiers and rations for the noble cause. Several historians are of the view that the stability of this colony was one of the deciding factors of the outcome of the War of Independence, as the profits earned by the sale of tobacco were used by the plantation owners and landlords that were supporting the patriots in the War of Independence.

# **Bibliography**

**There are no sources in the current document.**

1. Klein, Herbert S. (2010). "The Atlantic slave trade" (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. To stabilize prices, colonial authorities restricted the number of plants farmers could grow. Farmers were only allowed to plant 1,500 tobacco crops. Low tobacco prices caused a group of farmers to cut down tobacco seedlings in 1682. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)