

Bound Labor: How Servitude Became Slavery

US History - Unit 2: Colonial America

Learning Targets

- ★ Explain why English colonies first filled their labor needs from Europe.
- ★ Trace how new laws made slavery last for life and pass to children.
- ★ Explain how historians link Bacon's Rebellion to the laws that followed.
- ★ Read a 1705 Virginia law and identify what it made legal.
- ★ Describe how enslaved people resisted a system people chose to build.

Land Without Workers

- Tobacco needed constant hand labor to plant, weed, and cure it.
- England could not simply order colonists to cross an ocean and work for free.
- Planters needed workers who would labor for years, not months.
- Most poor English families could not pay their own way across the Atlantic.
- Investors needed a system to move workers overseas and profit.

Key Concept: Tobacco was profitable only if someone else did the exhausting labor of growing it.

Paying for the Voyage

Indentured Servitude

A labor system in which a person works a fixed number of years to repay the cost of passage.

Indenture

The signed contract that bound a worker to a master for an agreed number of years.

Tip: 'Indenture' comes from the jagged cut once used to match the two halves of a contract.

The Reward Was Land

The headright system

- A headright: a grant of fifty colonial acres for a worker's ocean passage.
- Paying for one worker earned fifty acres; for ten, five hundred.
- The land went to whoever paid, not the worker who crossed.

Who actually profited

- Planters who paid many passages built large holdings.
- A worker who finished the term still needed land of their own.
- The system rewarded whoever had capital, not whoever did the labor.

Key Concept: The headright system paid land to whoever financed the voyage, not to the worker who made it.

Life Under a Labor Contract



Freedom Dues

The corn, money, and goods a master owed a servant at the end of the contract.



Room, food, and clothing

A master had to provide these for the length of the term, though enforcement varied widely.



Access to court

A servant could sue a master in county court for abuse or for withheld freedom dues.



A fixed end date

Most terms ran four to seven years, after which the servant was legally free.

Remember: A servant's contract had an end date. That single fact matters on the slides ahead.

Africans in Virginia Before the Codes

- In 1619 an English ship sold about twenty captive Africans in Virginia.
- Virginia law had not yet tied lifelong bondage to a person's race.
- Some gained freedom, later owning land and even servants of their own.
- A master could free an enslaved person through manumission.
- Manumission: the formal legal act where an owner released a person from slavery.
- Individual cases could turn out very differently from one another.

Did You Know: Anthony Johnson, a free Black Virginian, owned land and held servants of his own by the 1650s.

The Law Turns a Corner: 1662 and 1667

1662: Status follows the mother

- A child's status now followed the mother, not the father.
- Hereditary meant passed from parent to child, not earned, chosen, or agreed to.
- A child born to an enslaved mother was enslaved too.

1667: Baptism no longer freed you

- A baptized Christian could still be held in bondage.
- An act said baptism did not change enslaved status.
- The law closed a path some had used toward freedom.

Note: Two laws, five years apart, each closed a path out of bondage that had existed before.

1676: A Rising of the Landless

- Bacon's Rebellion: in 1676 colonists and servants attacked the government.
- Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy planter, led the rebels against Governor Berkeley.
- The rebels burned Jamestown and briefly forced the governor to flee.
- Enslaved and free Black Virginians fought alongside poor white colonists.
- The rebellion collapsed after Bacon died of dysentery later that same year.

Warning: The rebellion's causes were tangled - frontier conflict with Native nations, land hunger, and anger at the governor all played a part.

After the Rising: A New Labor Bargain

Many historians argue that Virginia's planters answered 1676 by widening the legal gap between poor white colonists and enslaved Africans.

— *A widely held historians' interpretation, not a settled fact*

Poor white colonists gained new legal privileges over enslaved people; the two groups that had once fought side by side were pulled apart by law.

Key Concept: This is an argument historians make about cause - not a fact this lesson proves outright.

Written Into Law: 1705

Slave Code

A body of colonial laws that fixed the status of enslaved people and controlled their lives.

Chattel

Property that can be bought, sold, and passed down to heirs, like livestock or tools.

Note: The 1705 act pulled decades of earlier rules into one consolidated slave code.

Two Systems, Side by Side

Feature	Indentured Servitude	Slavery Under the 1705 Code
Length of service	A fixed term, usually four to seven years	For life
Passed to children	No - status ended with the servant	Yes - passed from parent to child at birth
Access to court	Could sue for abuse or unpaid freedom dues	Very limited under the 1705 code
Legal status	A person under contract	Treated as property that could be bought, sold, and inherited

Remember: One system had an end date built in. After 1705, the other did not.

How to Read a Law That Denies People



Name who wrote it

This is the language of enslavers and lawmakers, not of the people it describes.



Watch for the people erased

A law that treats people as property still describes real people with real lives.



Note the year and the place

A 1705 Virginia statute reflects one colony's choices at one moment, not a universal rule.



Cross-check with other evidence

Court records, letters, and the archaeological record can confirm or complicate what a law claims.

Tip: Ask who benefited from this law being written the way it was.

Refusing the System

Everyday resistance	Open resistance	What the word covers
• Slowing down work on purpose. • Breaking tools or feigning illness. • Preserving language and family ties.	• Running away, alone or in groups. • Sabotaging crops or equipment. • Planning uprisings, at real risk.	• Resistance: many ways enslaved people opposed bondage, daily and in the open. • No single act ended the system. • They never simply accepted it.

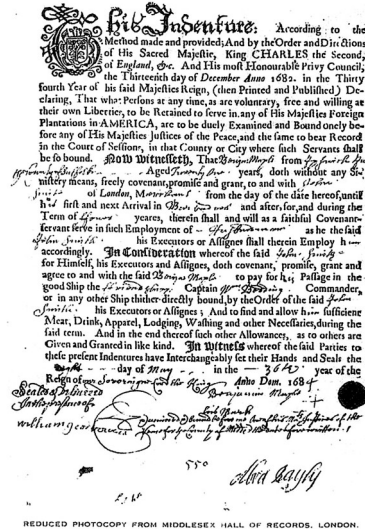
Did You Know: Colonial slave codes existed largely because lawmakers feared organized resistance.

The Paper That Bound a Servant

- Most contracts were pre-printed forms with blanks for names and dates.
- A merchant filled in the servant's name, county, and age by hand.
- The form named the term of years, the destination, and the ship.
- Both sides signed, or made their mark, at the foot of the page.
- A surviving 1684 contract preserves what this paperwork looked like.

Note: The next slide is a real servant contract from 1684.

A Contract from 1684



A 1684 servant contract: the terms were printed, the names written in.

Key Takeaways

- ★ In 1619, Virginia law had not yet fixed a person's status by race.
- ★ A labor contract gave planters workers and paid land to financiers.
- ★ 1662 and 1667 made bondage hereditary and ended the baptism escape.
- ★ Historians argue planters widened the legal gap after 1676.
- ★ The 1705 slave code classified enslaved people as legal property.
- ★ Enslaved people resisted this system from its earliest years.