3.3: Tightening the Bonds of Slavery

Tightening the Bonds of Slavery

In the early years of slavery, especially in Virginia and Maryland, the distinction between indentured servants and slaves was initially unclear. In 1643, however, a law was passed in Virginia that made African women “tithable.” This, in effect, associated African women’s work with difficult agricultural labor. There was no similar tax levied on white women; the law was an attempt to distinguish white from African women. The English ideal was to have enough hired hands and servants working on a farm so that wives and daughters did not have to partake in manual labor. Instead, white women were expected to labor in dairy sheds, small gardens, and kitchens. Of course, due to the labor shortage in early America, white women did participate in field labor. But this idealized gendered division of labor contributed to the English conceiving of themselves as better than other groups who did not divide labor in this fashion, including the West Africans arriving in slave ships to the colonies. For many white colonists, the association of a gendered division of labor with Englishness provided a further justification for the enslavement and subordination of Africans. (2)

Because of legislation in both Maryland and Virginia, life for those enslaved changed drastically in the 1660’s. As European servants became scarce and expensive, African labor came to dominate the labor force. Legislation slowly sealed the fate of African immigrants and their descendants removing opportunities for freedom and advancement. Laws that made slavery hereditable came to pass in Virginia in 1662 and in Maryland in 1663. (3)

Virginia law’s, for example, stated that an enslaved woman’s children inherited the “condition” of their mother. This economic strategy on the part of planters created a legal system in which all children born to slave women would be slaves for life, whether the father was white or black, enslaved or free. These new laws also gave legal sanction to the enslavement of people of African descent for life. The permanent deprivation of freedom and the separate legal status of enslaved Africans facilitated the maintenance of strict racial barriers. Skin color became more than superficial difference;
it became the marker of a transcendent, all-encompassing division between two distinct peoples, two races, white and black. (2)

The transformation of the “Negro” servant into the “Negro” slave was completed with the Virginia General Assembly passage of the Slave Codes of 1705. Thus, as the eighteenth century opened, most Africans and their American-born descendants lived and worked as slaves growing tobacco on “quarters” or “plantations” in rural, lower Chesapeake. They eventually improved their lives and by the 1720’s, there were enough American-born Africans in Maryland to create their own African-American culture.

Inventories taken in Calvert, Charles, Prince George’s and St. Mary’s counties Maryland between 1658 and 1710 found the slave population grew at an extraordinary rate increasing from about 100 enslaved people or 3% of the total counties’ population in 1658 to over 3,500 people, composing 24% of the region’s population in 1710. Almost all of these enslaved adults were African immigrants (Menard 1975:30–31). Within sixty-five years, almost all enslaved adults would be American-born, or as referred to here, African-Americans. (3)

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**Slave Life in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake**

Throughout the eighteenth century, most Africans came to the upper Chesapeake from two West African coast regions near what is today the nations of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, and Ghana. (Walsh 1997:6). The continued importation of Africans from the same areas throughout the eighteenth century probably accounts for the fact that along with people born in African, many Maryland-born people of African descent continued to use African naming patterns. For example, a Maryland plantation’s property inventory from 1734 lists a six-month-old child named Cusey, an African name. Cubit, Nom, Mingo or Tydoe are other African names found in the inventory. In other cases, Africans had English names that sounded like African names, for example: Jenny for Heminah, Patty for Pattoe or Sam for Samba. The Dulaney family’s plantation inventories from 1720 to 1740 also included enslaved people with the African names: Toader, Abuer, Jam, Ockery, Hann, Southey, Cuffey, and Sango. (Yentsch 1994).

Most eighteenth-century Chesapeake Africans, and their native-born descendants, lived and worked as slaves growing tobacco on “quarters” or “plantations” in the eastern part of Virginia, although some were “industrial slaves” working at iron forges and others were hired out to work in gristmills and other industries. As plantation sizes increased, 40% or more of enslaved people lived in quarters away from the home plantation and the slave owner’s direct supervision. On the largest plantations people lived in small villages on “quarters” of the plantation holdings (See Figure 3-4). An enslaved man was often responsible for the work in the quarter that was designated by his name, such as “Mingo’s Quarter.” Relatively few enslaved people lived in urban areas with the slave owner’s family.

By the last decades of the eighteenth century, 44% of the 46,547 enslaved people in the Chesapeake region lived in groups of more than 20 people in ten Tidewater counties: Anne Arundel, Prince George’s, St. Mary’s in Maryland and Essex, Gloucester, Lancaster, Middlesex, James City, Warwick, Charles City and York in Virginia. Another 34,000 enslaved people lived in similar sized groups on quarters or plantations in the Piedmont area of Virginia. (Kulikoff 1986:338).

Even though those in Maryland were more isolated and with limited social contact as compared to Virginian Africans, in both locales they formed families that slave owners recognized and recorded as family units in inventories (Menard
1975:33–37). Family and community formation was compromised from 1710 to 1730, the period of heaviest African immigration to the Chesapeake. During this time, African or “country-born” men, as they were called, competed with “native born” men for wives. Disproportionate sex ratios, resulting from the importation of greater numbers of African men than women, fostered internal conflicts and competition between African and African American men. In 1712, one African American complained “his country-men had poysened [sic] him for his wife.” Another killed himself because he could not have more than one wife (Kulikoff 1986:334). At Carter’s Grove plantation in 1733, “country-born” men lived in sex-segregated barracks. “Seasoned immigrants,” as one historian refers to them, lived in conjugal units but without children, while native-born African Americans lived as families. These were optimal conditions. Native-born women at Carter’s Grove preferred native-born men as husbands, limiting their opportunities for marriage.

A photograph from the 1930s showing an old slave quarter. Figure 3-4 — Old Quarters, Wisconsin Avenue & State Route 193, Bethesda, Montgomery County, MD by Thomas Waterman has no known copyright restriction.

Newly enslaved African-born women often waited two or three years before taking a husband (Kulikoff 1986). These personal preferences impeded formation of families.

Some families were polygamous, a sanctioned form of marriage in West Africa. Fictive kin families were formed of children sold onto a plantation community or left behind when their parents were sold or sent off to work in a far quarter of the plantation. Many enslaved people also participated in “abroad marriages,” that is they were married to someone on another plantation or in another city. (Chambers 1996:121).
From 1736 to the end of the colonial period, kinship ties increasingly figured into enslaved people’s decisions to run away, where they would run and with whom they would flee slavery. People ran away to their kin in other parts of the Chesapeake. The texts of some newspaper advertisements for runaways support the contention that knowledge Africans gained through travel must have been communicated throughout the African community and used to facilitate running away to distant places. In September 1776, James Scott, Jr. who lived in Fauquier County, Virginia, advertised in the Virginia Gazette for a woman named Winney who in the past, as a runaway, traveled as far as “Maryland, near Port Tobacco, where she passed for a free woman, and hired herself in that neighbourhood [sic] several months.”

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Chesapeake landscape was a network of large and small plantations. Although many planters on Maryland’s western shore still held fewer than a dozen enslaved people, as the colonial period came to a close, African American family and kin-based social networks spread across several counties. (3)

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