

# Settling the Southern Colonies

*by Sophia*



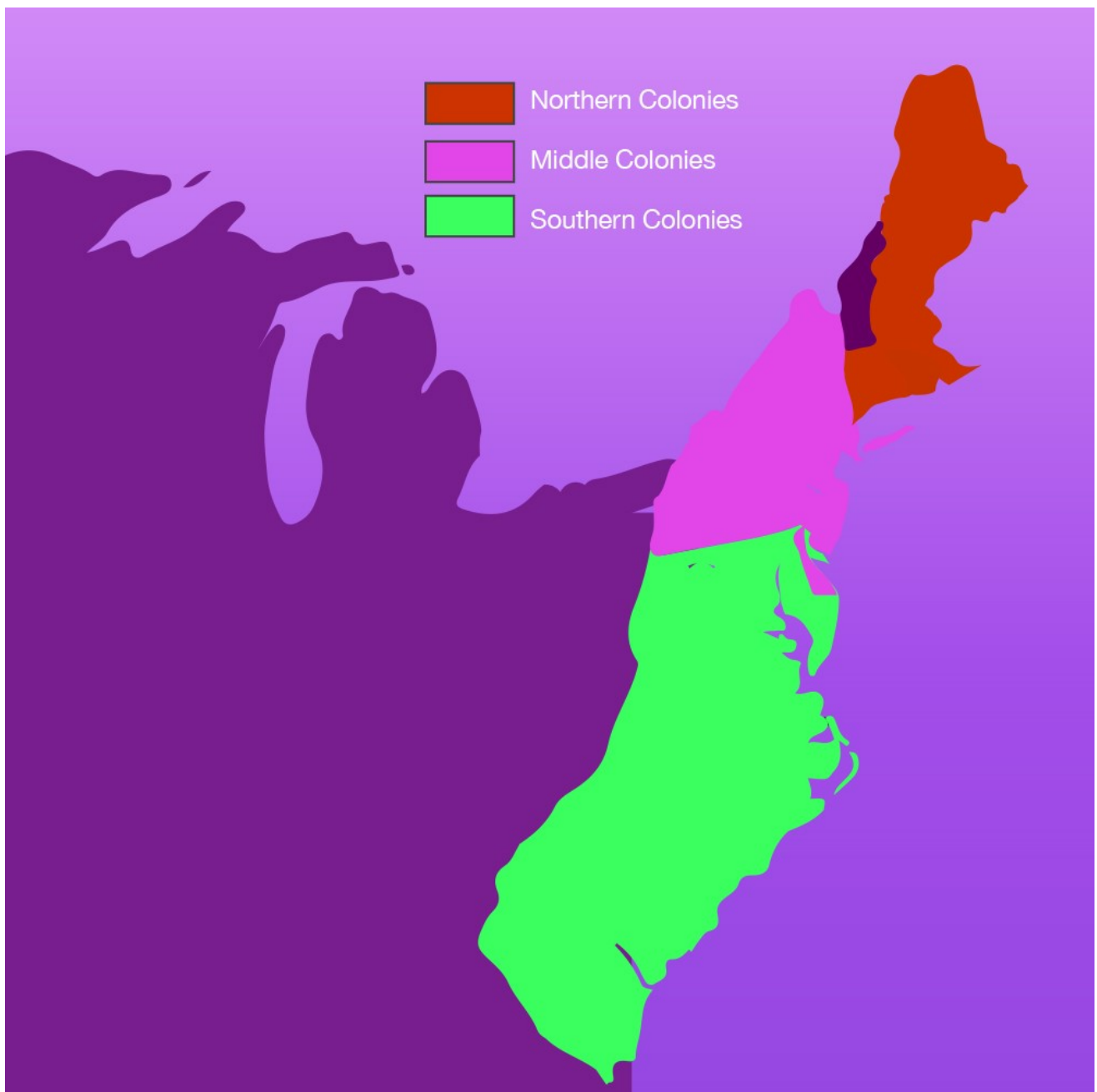
## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the founding and establishment of the Virginia, Maryland, and Carolina colonies. It includes a discussion of the rise of slavery in the Southern colonies and the ways in which it affected colonial life.

We have broken this conversation down into the following categories:

## 1. Servants in Chesapeake

England's colonies in America slowly expanded throughout the 17th century. Despite being subjects of the same Crown, the colonial settlements along the Chesapeake Bay and further south began to develop along an economic, social, and political trajectory different from the Northern colonies. It was one that centered predominantly on the production of cash crops, such as tobacco.



**Map Depicting Regions Claimed by the Northern, Middle, and Southern Colonies in the 17th Century**

The Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland served a vital purpose in the developing 17th-century English empire by providing tobacco. However, growing tobacco was very labor-intensive, and the Chesapeake colonists needed a steady workforce to do the hard work of clearing the land and caring for the tender young plants. Mature tobacco leaves had to be cured (dried), which necessitated the construction of drying barns. Once cured, tobacco leaves had to be packaged in hogsheads (large wooden barrels) and loaded aboard ships.

To meet these labor demands, early Virginians first relied on indentured servants. An **indenture** is a labor contract that a worker signed in England, pledging to work for a number of years (usually between 5 and 7 years) growing tobacco in the Chesapeake colonies. In return, indentured servants received paid passage to America and food, clothing, and lodging. The image to the right is an example of an indenture contract. In this case, Henry Meyer signed with an X his indenture to Abraham Hestant of Pennsylvania in 1738.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Indenture

A labor contract that promised young men, and sometimes women, money and land after they worked for a set number of years.

At the end of their indenture, servants received “freedom dues,” usually food and other provisions, including, in some cases, land provided by the colony. The promise of a new life in America was a strong attraction for members of England’s underclass, who had few if any options at home. In the 1600s, some 100,000 indentured servants traveled to the Chesapeake Bay.

Life in the colonies proved harsh, however. Indentured servants could not marry, and they were subject to the will of the tobacco planters who bought their labor contracts. If they committed a crime or disobeyed their masters, they found their terms of service lengthened, often by several years.

Female indentured servants faced special dangers in what was essentially a bachelor colony. Many were exploited by unscrupulous tobacco planters who seduced them with promises of marriage. These planters would then sell their pregnant servants to other tobacco planters to avoid the costs of raising a child.

Nonetheless, those indentured servants who completed their term of service often began new lives as tobacco planters. To entice even more migrants to the New World, the Virginia Company also implemented the **headright system** in 1618. In this system, people who paid their own passage to Virginia received fifty acres plus an additional fifty for each servant or family member they brought with them. The headright system and the promise of a new life for servants acted as powerful incentives for English migrants to hazard the journey to the New World.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Headright System

A system in which parcels of land were granted to settlers who could pay their own way to Virginia.

## 2. From Servitude to Slavery

The transition from indentured servitude to racial slavery as the main labor source in Chesapeake was a product of external and internal factors.

The transition to racial slavery in English New World colonies occurred first in the West Indies. On the small island of Barbados, colonized in the 1620s, English planters first grew tobacco as their main export crop, but in the 1640s, they began growing sugar cane and increasingly relying on the forced labor of enslaved Africans.

In 1655, England wrestled control of Jamaica from the Spanish and quickly turned it into a lucrative sugar island, one run on the labor of enslaved people.

In contrast, when the first Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619, racial slavery—which did not exist in England—had not yet become an institution in colonial North America. Many Africans worked as indentured servants and, like their White counterparts, could acquire land of their own. Some Africans who converted to Christianity became free landowners with White servants. Colonial records from the 17th century indicate that a significant number of Africans traveled to Virginia as indentured servants. Many served their terms, married, and earned enough money to purchase servants and obtain land of their own.



#### DID YOU KNOW

By 1651, Anthony Johnson, who was originally listed in the Virginia census as “Antonio the Negro,” had earned enough money to purchase his and his wife’s freedom. He also earned enough to pay for several indentured servants of his own, and as a result, received 250 acres of land from the Virginia government through the headright system.

The change in the status of Africans in Chesapeake from servants and landowners to permanently unfree workers did not occur until the late 17th and early 18th centuries. This transition was the product of a number of factors. First, in 1662, Virginia passed a law making slavery hereditary. In contrast to English common law, in which a child inherited the status of their father (“pater familias”), a child in the colony born to an enslaved mother thereafter inherited her enslaved status.

At the same time, as tobacco cultivation spread throughout Chesapeake, it became increasingly difficult for former indentured servants to obtain land upon receiving their freedom. Rather, established tobacco planters used political connections with the royal governor and the colonial assembly to acquire this land, which left former servants with few options besides working on these tobacco estates as tenant farmers. In addition, fluctuations within the tobacco economy—namely decreasing prices due to overproduction—damaged the economic prospects of small farmers and limited opportunities for newcomers to enter the tobacco economy. The result of all these trends was greater social stratification within the Chesapeake people and growing tensions between a tobacco-growing political elite and White and Black tenant farmers.

These tensions came to a head during **Bacon’s Rebellion**, in which colonists believed Virginia’s government was deliberately impeding their access to land and wealth by doing little to clear frontier lands of Native Americans.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Bacon’s Rebellion**

An uprising of both Black and White people against the Virginia colonial government in 1675–76, led by Nathaniel Bacon.

The rebellion takes its name from Nathaniel Bacon, a wealthy young Englishman who arrived in Virginia in 1674. Despite an early friendship with Virginia’s royal governor, William Berkeley, Bacon found himself excluded from the governor’s circle of influential friends and counselors. He wanted land on the Virginia frontier, but Berkeley, fearing war with neighboring Native American tribes, forbade further expansion.

In response to Berkeley’s decision, Bacon marshaled others to his cause, especially former indentured servants who believed the governor was limiting their economic opportunities and denying them the right to own tobacco farms. Governor Berkeley was trying to keep peace in Virginia by signing treaties with various native peoples, but Bacon and his followers, who saw all Native Americans as an obstacle to their access to land, advocated for a policy of extermination.

Tensions between Bacon's supporters and the native peoples in the Chesapeake colonies led to open conflict. In 1675, war broke out when Susquehannock warriors attacked settlements on Virginia's frontier, killing English planters and destroying English **plantations**, including one owned by Bacon. In 1676, Bacon and other Virginians attacked the Susquehannock people without the governor's approval. When Berkeley ordered Bacon's arrest, Bacon led his followers to Jamestown, forced the governor to flee to the safety of Virginia's eastern shore, and then burned the city.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Plantation**

Large agricultural estates in tropical or semitropical regions where crops such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco were grown, especially using enslaved labor.

With the burning of Jamestown, Bacon's Rebellion had clearly become a vicious struggle between Virginia's government, which represented the tobacco-growing elite, and Bacon's army of former indentured servants. Bacon became the de facto governor of Virginia for a short time, and his supporters plundered the estates of Berkeley and his political allies. Reports of the rebellion traveled back to England, leading Charles II to dispatch both royal troops and English commissioners to restore order in the region.

By the end of 1676, Virginians loyal to Berkeley gained the upper hand, executing several leaders of the rebellion. Bacon escaped the hangman's noose and died of dysentery instead. The rebellion fizzled, but Virginians remained divided as supporters of Bacon continued to harbor grievances over access to Native American land and frustrations toward elites within the colony.

Bacon's Rebellion had two important consequences. First, it catalyzed the creation of a system of racial slavery in the Chesapeake colonies. At the time of the rebellion, indentured servants made up the majority of laborers in the region. Yet, wealthy White people worried over the presence of this large class of laborers and the relative freedom they enjoyed, as well as the alliance that Black and White servants had forged in the course of the rebellion.

From the perspective of tobacco-growing elites in the region, replacing indentured servitude with a radicalized form of slavery diminished the potential risks associated with biracial coalitions against their control. Alleviating the reliance on White indentured servants, who were often dissatisfied and troublesome, and creating a caste of racially defined laborers whose movements were strictly controlled would make labor organization on the tobacco plantations more efficient.

New laws passed in the wake of the rebellion severely curtailed freedom for people of African descent and reinforced the foundations for racial slavery in Chesapeake. In 1680, Virginia passed a law prohibiting free and enslaved people of African descent from bearing arms and congregating in large numbers and establishing harsh punishments for enslaved persons who assaulted Christians or attempted escape. Two years later, another Virginia law stipulated that all Africans brought to the colony would be enslaved for life. Such reliance on enslaved Africans helped planters meet labor demands associated with tobacco cultivation.





In this 1670 painting by an unknown artist, enslaved Africans work in tobacco-drying sheds. Half a century earlier, such a scene might have depicted English indentured servants.

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## 3. Racial Slavery and the Rise of the Southern Gentry

The second important consequence of Bacon's Rebellion was political. Reliance on racial slavery to meet the demands of producing tobacco and other cash crops also contributed to the rise of the **gentry** in Chesapeake and in other Southern colonies in English North America. The gentry built elaborate mansions to advertise their status and power. Perhaps most importantly, the gentry formed the political elite of the Southern colonies and held positions of power in colonial governments.

### TERM TO KNOW

#### Gentry

The wealthy colonial class in the Southern colonies that modeled itself after the English aristocracy. In the case of Virginia, the gentry displayed its influence through the **House of Burgesses**. Although celebrated as the first elected assembly in colonial North America (established in 1619), the House of Burgesses was not a model democracy. Only established landowners could vote and participate in the assembly, and royal governors such as Berkeley retained the authority to veto any measure that it adopted.

### TERM TO KNOW

#### House of Burgesses

The colonial assembly for Virginia that represented the political interests of tobacco-growing elites. By representing the interests of tobacco-growing landowners, the House of Burgesses was the primary legislative body that enacted the laws necessary to initiate the transition to racial slavery. Such laws, which defined Africans as property and not people, guaranteed a permanent labor force for the gentry. Such

measures also reduced the possibility of political alliances forming between Black and White workers in the future, which further strengthened the gentry's political influence among other White colonists. Members of the gentry recognized that racial slavery could heal some of the class divisions between wealthy and poor White people, who could now unite as members of a "superior" racial group.

Robert Beverley, a wealthy Jamestown planter and enslaver, was among those who considered himself a part of the gentry. This excerpt from his *History and Present State of Virginia* published in 1705, illustrates the contrast that Southern colonists established between White servants and enslaved people of African descent. Apply the lenses of race and gender when analyzing the excerpt below.

### *History and Present State of Virginia*

"Their Servants, they distinguish by the Names of Slaves for Life, and Servants for a time. Slaves are the Negroes, and their Posterity, following the condition of the Mother, according to the Maxim, *partus sequitur ventrem* [status follows the womb]. They are call'd Slaves, in respect of the time of their Servitude, because it is for Life.

Servants, are those which serve only for a few years, according to the time of their Indenture, or the Custom of the Country. The Custom of the Country takes place upon such as have no Indentures. The Law in this case is, that if such Servants be under Nineteen years of Age, they must be brought into Court, to have their Age adjudged; and from the Age they are judg'd to be of, they must serve until they reach four and twenty: But if they be adjudged upwards of Nineteen, they are then only to be Servants for the term of five Years.

The Male-Servants, and Slaves of both Sexes, are employed together in Tilling and Manuring the Ground, in Sowing and Planting Tobacco, Corn, &c. Some Distinction indeed is made between them in their Cloaths, and Food; but the Work of both, is no other than what the Overseers, the Freemen, and the Planters themselves do.

Sufficient Distinction is also made between the Female-Servants, and Slaves; for a White Woman is rarely or never put to work in the Ground, if she be good for any thing else: And to Discourage all Planters from using any Women so, their Law imposes the heaviest Taxes upon Female Servants working in the Ground, while it suffers all other white Women to be absolutely exempted: Whereas on the other hand, it is a common thing to work a Woman Slave out of Doors; nor does the Law make any Distinction in her Taxes, whether her Work be Abroad, or at Home."

The primary source points out that there was a clear difference between servants and enslaved workers. We can see that race and gender defined those roles and how the individual was treated and determined the type of labor assigned to an individual.

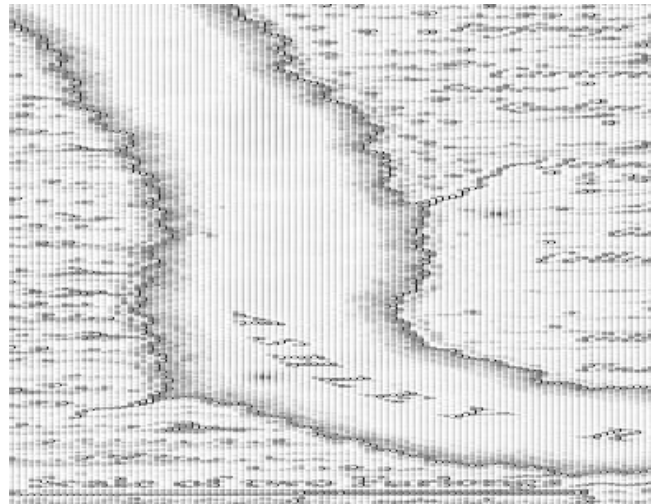


#### THINK ABOUT IT

- According to Robert Beverley, what are the differences between servants and enslaved people?
- What protections did servants have that enslaved workers did not?
- Why would Virginia law seek to regulate the labor performed by female servants and enslaved women? How might such a distinction have reinforced racial divisions between White colonists and enslaved people of African descent?

In 1670, English plantation owners from the tiny Caribbean island of Barbados, already a well-established English sugar colony fueled by enslaved labor, migrated to the southern part of Carolina. At the junction of the Ashley and Cooper rivers, they established Charles Town (later Charleston) in honor of King Charles II.

The southern part of Carolina produced two important cash crops: rice and indigo (a plant that yields a dark blue dye used by English royalty). Racial slavery developed relatively quickly because so many of the early migrants came from Barbados, where the institution was already well established. By the beginning of the 18th century, a wealthy class of rice planters who relied on enslaved workers had attained political dominance in the southern part of the Carolinas. By 1715, the region had a majority of people of African descent because of the number of enslaved people in the colony.



The port of colonial Charles Town, depicted here on a 1733 map of North America, was the largest in the South and played a significant role in the Atlantic slave trade.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Political disagreements between settlers in the northern and southern parts of Carolina escalated in the 1710s through the 1720s and led to the creation, in 1729, of two colonies, North and South Carolina.



#### SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we examined the founding and establishment of the Virginia, Maryland, and Carolina colonies. By the start of the 18th century, the Southern colonies in English North America had begun to form an identity unto themselves, one defined largely by race and plantation labor. We also discussed how the founding of Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas onwards had a reliance on enslaved labor and their plantation economies led to a cultural, political, and geographic identity that separated the Southern colonies from their Northern counterparts.

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- [Image of Indenture contract](#) | License: Public Domain





## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Bacon's Rebellion**

An uprising of both Black and White people against the Virginia colonial government in 1675–76, led by Nathaniel Bacon.

### **Gentry**

The wealthy colonial class that modeled itself after the English aristocracy.

### **Headright System**

A system in which parcels of land were granted to settlers who could pay their own way to Virginia.

### **House of Burgesses**

The colonial assembly for Virginia that represented the political interests of tobacco-growing elites.

### **Indenture**

A labor contract that promised young men, and sometimes women, money and land after they worked for a set number of years.

### **Plantation**

Large agricultural estates in tropical or semitropical regions where crops such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco were grown, especially using the labor of enslaved people.



## DATES TO KNOW

### **1618**

The Virginia Company introduces the headright system to entice migrants to Virginia.

### **1619**

The first Africans arrive in Virginia.

### **1627**

Britain colonizes the Caribbean island of Barbados to grow tobacco and sugar.

### **1655**

England takes control of Jamaica and uses it for sugar production.

### **1670**

English plantation owners from Barbados migrate to the Carolina colony and establish Charles Town (later Charleston).

### **1675–1676**

Frontier warfare breaks out and Bacon's Rebellion challenges Virginia's colonial government.

### **1680**

Virginia passes a number of laws limiting the rights of free Black and enslaved people.

### **1682**

A Virginia law stipulates that all Africans brought to the colony would be deemed enslaved people.

**1715**

The Carolina region has a Black majority because of the number of enslaved people in the colony.

**1729**

The Carolina colony is split into North Carolina and South Carolina.