America's Bitter Harvest

How Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America, inadvertently planted the seeds of slavery in the future United States

The village of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America, situated on the James River, Virginia, circa 1615. The painting is by National Park Service artist Sydney King (1906-2002). MPI/Getty Images

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Book Excerpt

The passage below is an excerpt from the author's upcoming book in the Why America Matters series: Puritans, Pilgrims, & Pioneers: How the First Generation of English Settlers Shaped the Future of a Nation.

The first permanent English settlement in the New World was founded in 1607 in Jamestown. Set in the Colony of Virginia, Jamestown was a commercial venture of the Virginia Company. The Company was chartered by England's King James I as a joint-stock company (in which individuals could invest, share in profits and losses, and thus diversify the risk away from the Crown).

The Company had two primary objectives: to establish profitable colonies through extracting natural resources (gold, silver, timber, etc.) and to develop agriculture for trade with England. Additionally, King James I had an overriding geopolitical goal, which was to confront Spain's dominance in the Americas and expand England's economic and political influence in the region.

The first few years did not go well for the Company or for the settlers in Jamestown. In the first year alone, nearly two-thirds (70 of 108) of the initial (all male) settlers died. The following winter (1609–1610), known as "starving time," 440 of 500 total settlers perished within six months. Undaunted, the Virginia Company convinced nearly 3,600 English (still mostly men) to try their luck between 1619 and 1622. Of this cohort, only 600 would survive.

Comprised mostly of noblemen, craftsmen, and servants, the Colony struggled to grow under extremely harsh conditions. Due to the absence of women, especially those hardy enough to overcome starvation and disease, more settlers, including women, would have to be imported to keep the settlement from failing. Beginning in 1620, "tobacco wives" began to arrive and marry settlers, but disease, malnutrition, and the risk of kidnap by neighboring native tribes would keep their numbers low and their surviving children few.

With a dearth of healthy men and laborers, it thus appeared fortuitous when in 1619 two English privateer (i.e., pirate) ships,

the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*, appeared on the horizon facing Jamestown's harbor. They carried in train the Portuguese merchant slave ship *São João Bautista*, destined for New Spain (likely Mexico or the Caribbean Islands). The privateers had captured the Bautista for profit, and sold what merchandise they could, including the 20 to 30 African slaves onboard, to the merchants in Jamestown in exchange for food and other supplies, before continuing their onward voyage in search of booty. Such is a pirate's life.

These captive Africans were soon put to work on tobacco and other farms around the Jamestown settlement, where the land was fertile and forgiving but the labor scarce. Given the small number of both English settlers and African servants, the two necessarily worked side-by-side in the fields. Nonetheless, embedded cultural and racial prejudices ensured that they were never treated equally.

The captives' legal status was initially unclear. There were no laws permitting slavery in the Colony of Virginia. The acquired Africans were at first treated as indentured servants, working off the debt that their acquirers had incurred to "liberate" them from the privateers. Laboring for a number of years, many of this first generation of African-Americans were able to acquire their freedom. Some, like one improbably christened "Anthony Johnson," was able to acquire land, grow, and successfully manage a tobacco farm, and hold some legal rights.

Recognizing the legal ambiguity, Virginia colonial leadership would eventually seek to clarify it. Moving away from the known English standard of indentured servitude, which benefited from some protections under English law, increasing onerous colonial laws were passed. These would make the obligation of servitude both lifelong and hereditary for the Africans' descendants. In 1662, the Colony enacted a law making a child's status (i.e., whether born free or enslaved) the same as the mother's. Beginning in the 1670s, laws were passed and amended explicitly classifying the Africans as chattel property, i.e., slaves. Those who had already earned their freedom were nonetheless increasingly discriminated against, while previous

legal rights (such as voting and property ownership) were eroded and eventually lost.

And thus, by a historical accident involving Angolan prisoners of war, Portuguese slavers, Spanish New World flesh-markets, and English pirates, the forefathers of the United States had inadvertently bitten into the poisoned apple of slavery, the future nation's Original Sin. Future generations would bear their guilt in spades. Much suffering, bloodshed, and destruction would be required to atone for it. The Civil War was still two centuries away, and in the interim the poisonous venom of slavery would spread its disease and decay throughout the bloodstream of the infant nation.

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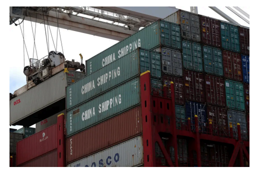

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