

Numbers Challenge:

From Servants to Slaves in Virginia

In the seventeenth century, Virginia underwent a dramatic transformation that shaped much of the rest of American history: planters shifted from a labor force primarily composed of indentured European servants to one made up largely of enslaved Africans. Why did this transformation occur? In this classroom activity, students try to answer this question by analyzing graphs presenting demographic and economic evidence from the period.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the early 1620s, Virginia planters discovered both that tobacco could save them financially and that growing it required the hard work of many hands. To meet the swelling demand for field labor, planters initially turned to Europe, where rapid population growth had left many people without employment or opportunities. Trading their misery in the Old World for the hope of a better life in a new one, many immigrants to America came as *indentured servants*.

In return for passage to the colonies, indentured servants agreed to work for between four and seven years. During this term, masters provided servants with food and shelter; at the end of the contract, masters agreed to give servants what were known as "freedom dues," usually a piece of land and a few basic supplies.

Harsh conditions, however, meant that close to one out of every two indentured servants died before they could win their freedom. Despite such bleak prospects, between one-half and two-thirds of the Europeans who came to Virginia by 1700 did so by selling themselves into servitude.

Like their white counterparts, most of the much smaller number of Africans who arrived in these years were also purchased as indentured servants, not as slaves. Color neither improved nor hurt a servant's status; black-skinned or white-skinned, all became free at the end of their indenture. A visitor to the colony in 1630, in other words, would have observed a society divided between servants and masters, not blacks and whites.

Although Virginia was the first British colony to legally define slavery in North America in 1661 — nearly a half century after the first Africans arrived — slavery did not immediately become the predominant form of labor. Indeed, in the decade after the formalizing of slavery, planters held nearly ten times as many indentured servants as enslaved Africans. It took more than thirty years before planters began to buy substantial numbers of enslaved Africans.

This classroom activity opens in the 1660s, when falling birthrates— combined with rising wages — in Europe had lessened both the desperation of the poor and their willingness to be sold into servitude in the New World.

THEMES: Slavery, Colonization, Indentured Labor.

OBJECTIVES

Students, in interpreting quantitative evidence, will:

1) understand how diverse immigrants affected the formation of European colonies; in particular, they will trace the arrival of Africans in the European colonies in the 17th century and the rapid increase of slave importation in the 18th century.

2) understand colonial economic life and labor systems in the Americas, including the shift from indentured servitude to chattel slavery in the southern colonies.

3) draw upon the visual and mathematical data presented in graphs to clarify, illustrate, or elaborate upon information presented in the historical context discussed in class.

MATERIALS

- Historical context (printed and copied for each student)
- Graph #1
- Graph #2
- Graph #3

ACTIVITY: TESTING A HISTORICAL HYPOTHESIS

Part 1: Introduction (5 min.):

Distribute the historical context sheet either before or at the beginning of class; give students the opportunity to read through it and then introduce the following definition of “hypothesis.”

Historians grappling with the transition from servants to slaves have often asked the question: "Did planters begin to purchase fewer indentured servants from Europe because more enslaved Africans became available?"

Such a question is an *historical hypothesis*; that is, a possible explanation used as the foundation for further investigation. Although a hypothesis might be plausible, to be persuasive, it needs to be tested. Testing an historical hypothesis usually means judging how well it explains the available evidence. We will test this hypothesis in a series of steps by comparing it to different kinds of evidence.

If the demand for indentured servants declined because the supply of enslaved Africans increased, historians would expect to see evidence of the following sequence of events:

- an increase in the supply of slaves followed by
- a decrease in the *price* of servants (as planters demanded slaves rather servants)
- a decline in the supply of servants.

Part 2: Analyzing the Graphs (15 min.)

Divide students into small groups of 3-5 people.

Have these groups examine each graph and answer the questions below; groups should complete work on one graph before going on to the next. After all groups have finished analyzing a particular graph, instructors may wish to encourage discussion by asking the small groups to report their conclusions to the entire class.

Graph #1: "Servants and enslaved Africans by probate inventory, York County, Virginia, 1657 - 1694."

Graph #2: "Price of servants 1674 - 1700 in Pounds Sterling."

Graph #3: "Price of enslaved Africans, 1674 - 1700 in Pounds Sterling."

GRAPH 1

The first task is to find out when the transition from indentured to enslaved labor took place. To date the transition, historians have turned to *probate records*. Probate records are often part of the process of settling an estate after the death of an individual. In many cases, a list of goods in the possession of the deceased at the time of death was made. In seventeenth-century Virginia, both enslaved Africans and indentured servants appear in those lists, which are known as a *probate inventories*. Accordingly, by compiling all of the available inventories from one place, historians can get an idea as to when planters came to rely on enslaved Africans rather than servants.

Look at Graph 1 from the collection of graphs. The graph details the numbers of servants and enslaved Africans in the probate records of a single county in Virginia from 1657 to 1694.

- Question 1: When does the supply of servants begin to decline?
- Question 2: When does the supply of enslaved Africans begin to increase *steadily*?

GRAPH 2

Although the probate records tell us *when* planters began to rely on enslaved Africans rather than indentured servants, they cannot tell us *which* of those two forms of labor planters preferred. To answer that question we must turn to the price of servants versus the price of enslaved Africans.

If, for example, planters preferred enslaved Africans to indentured servants, then historians would expect to see evidence that once the supply of enslaved Africans increased, the price of servants should have *decreased* (as fewer planters would be demanding those servants).

We can test this new hypothesis by looking at the price of servants over time.

Look back to your answers to Questions 1 and 2 from Graph 1. Use your response to Question 2, regarding the date of the increase in the supply of slaves, to help you interpret the chart above and answer Question 3 and 4 below.

- Question 3: Once the supply of enslaved Africans began to increase steadily, did the price of servants decline?

It is also possible that the supply of indentured servants fell because planter demand for servants fell. If that had been the case, historians would expect to see a decline in the price of servants (indicating a decline in demand), followed by a decline in their supply.

- Question 4: Did the supply of servants (seen on Graph 1) fall because planter demand for servants fell (as indicated by prices for servants on Graph 2)?

Hint: Because prices tend to fluctuate dramatically in the short run, it is sometimes helpful to look at price trends over a span of years to get a sense of long term changes. Accordingly, you might want to examine the price of servants from 1674 to 1680, and then again from 1680 until 1690, and finally from 1690 to 1700.

GRAPH 3

Potentially, planters switched to enslaved African labor because there was a decrease in their price. Look to Graph 3 to answer the following question

- Question 5: Did the increase in the supply of enslaved Africans (seen on Graph 1) occur because there was a significant decrease in their price?

Remember the hint from question 3 as you interpret the prices. Further, when assessing price shifts it is important to keep in mind that the significance of any particular price increase or decrease depends on the original price. Fifty additional cents on a \$50 book is not much of change (1%); but a fifty cent increase on a newspaper that originally cost a dollar is a significant increase (50%).

Part 3: Interpreting the Evidence (10 min.)

Students work individually to answer the following question:

Is the evidence presented in the graphs best explained by the hypothesis that “planters began to purchase fewer indentured servants from Europe because more enslaved Africans became available”? Why or why not?

To answer that question, instructors might want to encourage students to draw a timeline (1657 - 1700) locating the following events as presented in the evidence:

- 1) The increase in the supply of slaves.
- 2) A significant shift in the price of servants. (which direction did their price shift?)
- 3) The decrease in the supply of servants.

If the model presented in the hypothesis does not explain the order of events as suggested by the evidence, what new hypothesis might?

Part 4: Alternate Hypotheses

We sometimes imagine that oppressive laws like enslavement were put quickly into full force by greedy landowners. But that's not the way slavery was established in colonial America. It happened gradually—one person at a time, one law at a time, even one colony at a time.

One of the places we have the clearest views of that “terrible transformation” is the colony of Virginia. In the early years of the colony, many Africans and poor whites—mostly laborers came from the English working class—stood on the same ground. Black and white women worked side-by-side in the fields. Black and white men who broke their servant contract were equally punished.

During their time as servants, these men and women were fed and housed. Afterwards, they would be given what were known as “freedom dues,” which usually included a piece of land and supplies, including a gun. Black-skinned or white-skinned, they became free.

The first Virginia colonists did not even think of themselves as “white” or use that word to describe themselves. They saw themselves as Christians or Englishmen, or in terms of their social class. They were nobility, gentry, artisans, or servants.

Traditionally, Englishmen believed they had a right to enslave a non-Christian or a captive taken in a just war. Africans and Indians might fit one or both of these definitions. But what if they learned English and converted to the Protestant church? Should they be released from bondage and given “freedom dues?” What if, on the other hand, status were determined not by (changeable) religious faith but by (unchangeable) skin color?

Adding to these growing debates was the problem that after the 1670, indentured servants, especially once freed, began to pose a threat to the property-owning elite. The colonial establishment had placed restrictions on available lands, creating unrest among newly freed indentured servants. In 1676, working class men burned down Jamestown, making indentured servitude look even less attractive to Virginia leaders. Finally, colonists in need of labor realized that servants moved on, forcing a need for costly replacements; slaves, especially ones you could identify by skin color, could not move on and become free competitors.

In 1641, Massachusetts became the first colony to legally recognize slavery. Other states, such as Virginia, followed. In 1662, Virginia decided all children born in the colony to a slave mother

would be enslaved. Slavery was now not only a life-long condition but could also be passed, like skin color, from generation to generation.

English suppliers responded to the increasing demand for slaves. In 1672, England officially entered the slave trade as the King of England chartered the Royal African Company, encouraging it to expand the British slave trade. In 1698, the English Parliament ruled that any British subject could trade in slaves. Over the first 50 years of the 18th century, the number of Africans brought to British colonies on British ships rose from 5,000 to 45,000 a year as England passed Portugal and Spain as the number one trafficker of slaves in the world.

Credits and Resources:

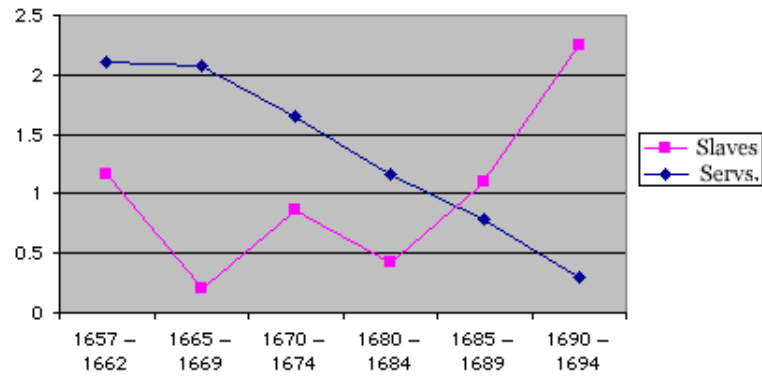
This lesson plan was originally developed by the American Social History Project (ASHP)/Center for Media and Learning, supported by the City University of New York Graduate Center. More information about the ASHP is available at <http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/>.

Graphs for this activity were adapted from Russell R. Menard, "From Servants to Slaves: The Transformation of the Chesapeake Labor System" *Southern Studies*, XVI (1977): 355 -390.

For more information about the impact of tobacco on Virginia, see Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680 - 1800* (University of North Carolina Press, 1986), chapter 1; For further resources on the development of slavery in Virginia, see material associated with the PBS series [*Africans in America: America's Journey through Slavery*](#), including a book of the same title by Charles Johnson, et. al., (Harcourt, 1999) and an extensive website (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/title.html>). The portions of that site devoted to [The Terrible Transformation](#) (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/title.html>) are particularly relevant to this exercise.

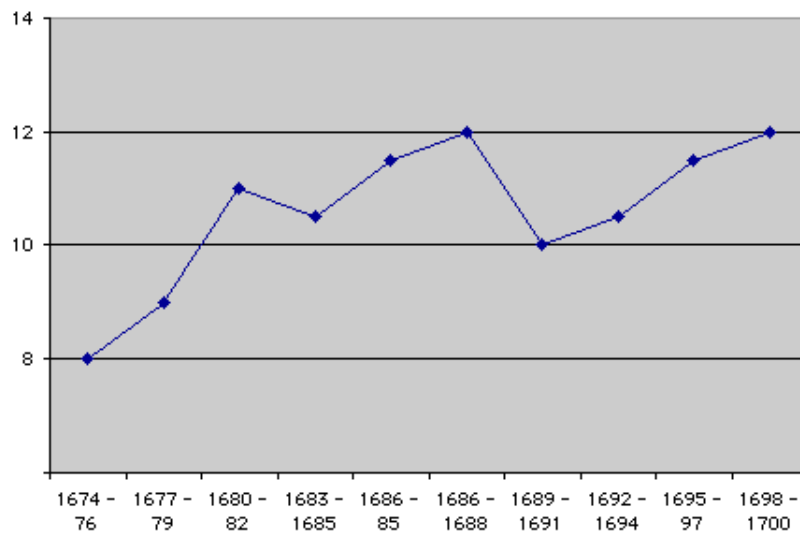
GRAPH #1

Servants and enslaved Africans per Probate inventory
York County Virginia, 1657 - 1694



GRAPH #2

Price of Servants, 1674 - 1700 in Pounds Sterling



GRAPH #3

Price of enslaved Africans, 1674 - 1700 in Pounds Sterling

