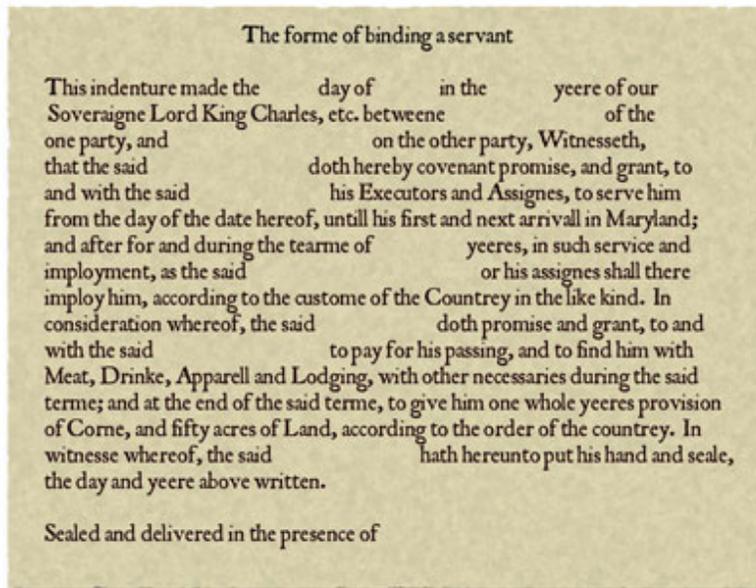


## Servants and Slaves

by Dr. Martin Sullivan, Executive Director, HSMC

St. Mary's City has had a part in African-American history ever since 1634, and for several centuries the institution of slavery formed a tragic central theme in Southern Maryland's way of life. But in the early years of settlement not all Africans were enslaved, nor were all enslaved people Africans. The work force was dominated throughout the 1600s by indentured servants, who sold their services for a period of four or more years in exchange for eventual full freedom and the opportunity to claim land. Some indentured servants were of African ancestry, like Mathias de Sousa. The great majority, however, came from the British Isles.



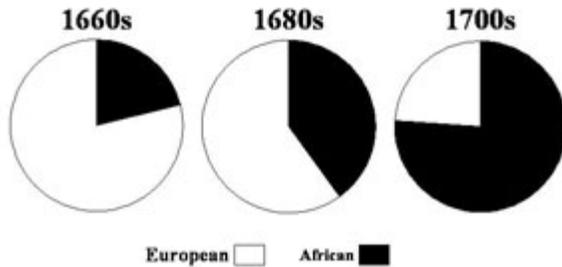
Visitors to the Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation at Historic St. Mary's City, an exhibit that recreates everyday life in the 1660s, are sometimes puzzled to learn that there were no enslaved Africans at the actual plantation on which this exhibit is based. Their confusion may have something to do with what springs to mind today when we hear the word "plantation," a word associated by many people with images of the antebellum South that we recall from films like "Gone with the Wind." But in the 1660s, a full two hundred years before the Civil War era, plantations in St. Mary's County were not at all like Margaret Mitchell's fictional Tara.

True, 17th-century tobacco growers in the Chesapeake called themselves planters, and even the humblest of homesteads was considered a plantation. But the hard work of tobacco planting and harvesting in early colonial times relied more on indentured servants than on enslaved Africans. The Godiah Spray exhibit at St. Mary's City, for example, depicts life on an actual 1660s-era plantation in St. Mary's County that has been studied in detail by historians Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh. Robert Cole, the real-life planter, worked the land with his own wife and children and an average of three adult male servants and one female servant, all of English descent. He held no slaves.

This is not to suggest that enslavement was absent from early Maryland, only that it did not become the dominant form of bound labor until around the turn of the 18th century.

Indeed, archival evidence documents the fact that workers of African ancestry such as Mathias de Sousa, John Babbiste, and Thomas Hagleton entered into indentures on the same basis as English workers in the early years. At the same time, some English masters had enslaved American Indians during this same period.

### Bound Labor in Southern Maryland Indentured Servants versus Enslaved Africans



The pie chart shows a steady tilt toward slavery as time went on. In the 1660s, which is the era portrayed at the Godiah Spray living history exhibit, fewer than one out of four bound laborers in Southern Maryland were enslaved Africans. Two decades later, such individuals comprised about a third of the total, while two-thirds were under indenture. By the 1700s, though, at least three of every four bound laborers were Africans who faced lifelong enslavement.

What caused the shift to an economy and a way of life defined by slavery? Several factors can be identified. By the late 1600s, tobacco planters found it increasingly difficult to attract English or

Irish laborers willing to travel to Virginia or Maryland in exchange for an indenture. Economic conditions were improving in England, fueled by manufacturing and the growth of cities. Other newly established colonies such as Pennsylvania and South Carolina drew upon the limited supply of servants willing to risk their lives in America. European wars disrupted Atlantic crossings and incidents of piracy increased, making the passage more dangerous. Former indentured servants, as they tried to establish their own plantations in the region, competed for a declining pool of laborers.

Moreover, Chesapeake planters who had accumulated some capital began to calculate that the profit on ownership of an enslaved African could be considerably more than on an indenture. Historian Robert Brugger has noted that the price of an indentured servant hovered around ten to twelve English pounds, while a healthy adult male African could be purchased from slavers for twenty-three pounds in 1674. Four years of labor from an indentured worker did cost less initially, but lifetime forced labor proved to be a cheaper proposition for the owner in the long run. Many of the colony's prominent leaders became slaveholders.

In support of this growing trend, Maryland enacted laws in 1663 and 1664 that sanctioned lifelong slavery and punished miscegenation, hardening legal distinctions based on race that treated Africans and their descendants as property rather than as persons.



The proportion of Africans and African-Americans in the population of Southern Maryland steadily increased. In 1658 only about 100 were counted in Charles, Calvert, and St. Mary's Counties; fifty years later the number had grown to 3,500, representing almost a fourth of the total population. Whereas those held in slavery in the early period were typically single individuals living with people they did not know, the eighteenth century plantations had many enslaved families in their work force.

Two plantation sites in St. Mary's County offer contrasting glimpses into these earlier and later colonial labor practices. St. John's, a freehold established by John Lewger in 1638 on land now surrounded by the campus of St. Mary's College, flourished for about eighty years. Most of its workers over that time

were individuals serving their indentures. A sad exception was the African Antonio, purchased by merchant Simon Overzee and tortured to death for resisting his status. It is accurate to say, though, that St. John's represented a society with some slaves rather than a slave-based society. An interpretive exhibit scheduled to open at the St. John's site in 2008 will enable Historic St. Mary's City to acquaint today's visitors with the stories of those who lived and worked there.

A dozen miles north of St. John's, along the Patuxent River, is Sotterley Plantation, also now open to the public as a museum. Unlike St. John's, Sotterley, which was built in 1717, represents the emergence and continuation of a slave-based way of life. Its owner in the 1720s, James Bowles, owned forty enslaved workers. Most of them lived in family groups. Enslaved labor remained the basis of Sotterley's prosperity under a succession of later plantation owners. More than fifty African-Americans were emancipated there in 1864. Sotterley in modern times is committed to interpreting the full story of its past, including the legacy of slavery.

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