

World Together, Worlds Apart: The Slave Society of Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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Overview

By the middle third of the eighteenth century, plantation slavery had taken firm root in the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland. The principal labor source consisted of African slaves and their American-born descendants, who were legally bought and sold by white masters. Slaves filled many kinds of jobs, such as household servant, skilled craftsman, teamster, or boatman. They were most important as agricultural laborers, raising foodstuffs and the region's staple crop, tobacco. The profits arising from tobacco underwrote the emergence of a wealthy class of planters, who used their wealth to expand their landholdings, stake claims to social leadership, and build lavish houses. The plantation "great house" was both for the enjoyment of the planter's family and for the display of the family's social status.



Stratford Hall Plantation, Stratford Virginia

The relationship of master and slave was therefore fundamentally exploitative, as masters used violence to compel their slaves to work and then kept the profits to themselves. Masters and slaves interacted on a daily basis in the fields or inside the plantation house, and yet they also each occupied separate worlds defined by residential, social, and recreational segregation. Slaves often resisted their plight by means both subtle and overt. The slave quarter provided a geographically detached space that sheltered families, allowed communities to form, and thereby strengthened resistance.

The following exercise is designed to introduce you to the eighteenth-century Chesapeake world that masters and slaves occupied together, along with the social spaces--the plantation great house and the slave quarters--that each occupied separately. It uses visual images of work and home in order to give you a sense of those worlds, while it relies on newspaper advertisements in order to explore one form of slave resistance, running away.

Resources

The following websites are either used in this activity or provide useful background:

1. Stratford Hall Plantation (<http://www.stratfordhall.org/>) typifies the kind of great houses being erected by Virginia's richest planters during the middle of the eighteenth century. Here we can learn what life was like for the Lee family.
2. The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/index.php>) is a database of hundreds of pictures that document multiple aspects of slavery from Africa to the Caribbean and North and South America. This exercise uses just a handful of the available images.
3. The Geography of Slavery in Virginia (<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/index.html>) includes a searchable database of advertisements for runaway servants and slaves that appeared in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Virginia newspapers.
4. In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience (<http://www.inmotionaame.org/home.cfm;jsessionid=f830758991444126202712?bhcp=1>) is a massive collection of source material that covers the history of African American migrations, some coerced but most voluntary, from the 1500s to the present. This exercise employs just one of its images.

5. Seeing Slavery: How paintings make words look different (<http://www.common-place-archives.org/vol-01/no-04/slavery/bontemps.shtml>) is an informative essay by Alex Bontemps in the online journal Common-Place. Instructors may wish to read it for additional background.

Activity

Each of you will work with a partner to complete the following instructions. Questions 1, 2 or 3, and 4 are for today's class, while questions 5 and 6 are for homework.

- As a pair working side-by-side in the computer lab, examine and discuss among yourselves the following three images of work:
 - cultivating tobacco (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=cultivating%20tobacco&recordCount=1&theRecord=0>)
 - processing tobacco (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=prizing&recordCount=1&theRecord=0>)
 - and shipping tobacco (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=wharf&recordCount=2&theRecord=0>).

Do the same for the painting entitled *Virginian Luxuries* (<http://www.inmotionaame.org/gallery/detail.cfm;jsessionid=80302423501124635141802?id=340967&type=image&bhcp=1>). Note that each image can be expanded to full-screen size by clicking on it.) Together write a paragraph of 3-5 sentences that discusses the economic production and labor that you see depicted in the first three images. Note especially the different types of jobs that blacks and whites are performing, as well as the tasks being performed by men and women. In a second paragraph, give your interpretation of *Virginian Luxuries*. (This will require some speculation on your part.) What is being depicted here? Who do you think might have painted the picture and why? What is the meaning of its title? What message(s) about Virginia slavery was it meant to convey? Post those two paragraphs to Blackboard.

- Now working separately, one of you is to do the following, while the other should proceed to #3. Read the background texts on Philip Ludwell (<http://www.stratfordhall.org/collections-research/staff-research/a-virginia-gentleman-on-the-eve-of-the-revolution-philip-ludwell-lee-of-stratford/>) and Thomas Lee of Stratford (<http://www.stratfordhall.org/collections-research/staff-research/thomas-lee-of-stratford-1690-1750/>). "Stratford and the Lees of Virginia: A Brief History." View the exterior photo (<http://www.stratfordhall.org/plan-your-visit/the-great-house/>) of Stratford Hall, then click on "Main Floor Plan" and click and read the descriptions of "The Great Hall," "Dining Room," and "Chamber." Finally, view this image (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=nursemaid&recordCount=5&theRecord=3>) of a black nursemaid and white children. Post to Blackboard a paragraph that addresses the following questions: How did the Lees rise to wealth and prominence in eighteenth-century Virginia? What materials were used in the construction of Stratford Hall? How was the house furnished? How were residents and guests entertained? How did they dine? What kind of public presentation would the house make to a visitor? What does the house tell you about its occupants' lifestyles?
- Read this brief description of slavery (<http://www.stratfordhall.org/educational-resources/teacher-resources/slavery/>) and the following images: exterior (<http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/virginia/williamsburg/carter'sgrove/carter'sgrove3.html>) and interior (http://nature.berkeley.edu/departments/espm/env-hist/espm160/assignments/carters/carter_photos2.htm) views of the reconstructed slave quarters at the Carter's Grove plantation, the slave quarters at Mulberry (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=mulberry%20plantation&recordCount=1&theRecord=0>) Plantation, a plantation dance (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=dance&recordCount=36&theRecord=22>), and this image (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/detailsKeyword.php?keyword=nursemaid&recordCount=5&theRecord=3>) of a black nursemaid and white children. Post to Blackboard a paragraph that addresses the following questions: How did some people end up as slaves in

eighteenth-century Virginia? What materials were used in the construction of the slave quarters? How were the houses furnished? How were residents and guests entertained? How did they dine? What kind of public presentation would the houses make to a visitor? What do such houses tell you about their occupants' lifestyles?

4. "The Geography of Slavery in Virginia" website contains a searchable database of runaway slave and indentured servant advertisements that appeared in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Virginia newspapers. Go to the search page (<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/search/search.php>), and in the box marked subscriber, enter "Henry Lee," who was a relative of the Lees of Stratford Hall. Click on "submit search," and read the 1769 and 1784 advertisements that this search yields. Do the same thing for subscriber "George Washington," and read the advertisement that this search yields. What skills did these runaway slaves possess? Where were they expected of going? In Blackboard, post a statement about what running away and taking out a newspaper advertisement meant for a slave or a planter. That is, if you answered #2 above, write about these advertisements from the master's point of view. If you answered #3, then discuss the meaning of running away from the slave's point of view.
5. For homework, read and view your partner's assigned material and post a reply to his or her posts. That is, if you were assigned to complete #2 above about Stratford Hall, you are now to read the directions under #3 and #4 and reply to your partner's post. Make any suggested additions of things that your partner may have failed to mention that you think are important. Also, comment upon how this material presents a different point of view and life experience from what you read under #2. Alternately, if you were assigned to complete #3 above regarding the slave quarters, now turn to #2 and #4 and comment on your partner's postings.
6. For next week, write an imaginary diary entry or letter of 2-3 double-spaced pages, that describes a visit to Stratford Hall and the slave quarters during the mid-eighteenth century from the point of view of a visitor. Your visitor may be male or female, black or white, slave or free, New Englander or Southerner, etc.; that is, feel free to develop your character. Include in your diary entry or letter such details that you have observed in the images and texts and that a visitor might have noted as well. Use your best creative imagination and synthesize what you've learned in this exercise. This paper is due in class next Monday.

Instructor's Annotations

I designed this assignment to bring to life some important material that gets glossed over in our textbook in just a couple of pages. From this assignment, I hope that students will come away with a much better picture of the "Rise of a Creole Elite" in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, which was certainly an important social grouping as we move forward in the course into the Revolution and early republic. I also hope that this assignment leads students to understand the lives of slaves better, including modes of resistance. In addition, this exercise serves as a prologue to a fieldtrip later in the semester to a nearby museum village, where my students tour historic structures as they do virtually in this online exercise.

I have used a less fully developed version of this assignment in my classes already and gotten good results. Some of my students did especially creative work on the final exercise, the imaginary letter or diary entry, which is designed to have them synthesize what they learned from the several images and advertisements. I have now expanded the assignment. In the past, I only had students take the virtual tour of Stratford Hall, view pictures of the Carter's Grove slave quarters, and do a little exploring of the runaway advertisement database. However, this time I wanted to emphasize more the overlapping world of work and to suggest the parallels as well as the stark differences between the master and slave dwellings. Students readily grasp the dichotomies of the master-slave relationship, but I also want them to realize some of the nuances and intimacies involved.

I have had success in the past with a strategy that I employ here. I have seen constructive results when students have to respond to another student's posting on Blackboard. I have divided up the assignment in such a way that each student will do a portion in class and then respond to his or her partner as homework. This gives students an exposure to all the material with a somewhat reduced load of work. The experience also tries to have students consider the primary sources from the distinct perspectives of masters and slaves.

I designed the exercise for my survey of U.S. history to 1865, which is held in a computer lab. Thus, the activity begins with pairs of students seated together around a PC. For classes without lab access, it would be easy to make #1 an individual activity that could be done online.