

Virginia Slave Laws
Henry J. Sage (2007)

Throughout the seventeenth century, indentured servants, who agreed to work for a stated number of years in return for their passage to the New World, were a convenient source of labor for the American colonies. Both Negroes and whites served under the system. White servants, after working out their period of indenture, often rose to respected positions in the community. However, Negroes, who numbered about 2,000 in Virginia in 1670, were seldom accorded the same treatment. By the middle of the century they were generally considered servants for life. In the late 1650s, laws referring to slaves began to appear in the Virginia statutes; the following sampling of Virginia Laws, passed between 1660 and 1669, clearly marks the distinction between white servants and Negro slaves.

ON RUNNING AWAY WITH NEGROES (MARCH 1660)

Be it enacted that in case any English servant shall run away in company with any Negroes who are incapable of making satisfaction by addition of time ... the English so running away in company with them shall serve for the time of the said Negroes absence as they are to do for their own by a former act.

ON THE NATIVITY CONDITIONS OF SLAVERY (DECEMBER 1662)

Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a Negro woman should be slave or free, be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand Assembly, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother; and that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a Negro man or woman, he or she so offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.

ON BAPTISM AND BONDAGE (SEPTEMBER 1667)

Whereas some doubts have risen whether children that are slaves by birth, and by the charity and piety of their owners made partakers of the blessed sacrament of baptism, should by virtue of their baptism be made free, it is enacted and declared by this Grand Assembly, and the authority thereof, that the conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom; that diverse masters, freed from this doubt may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity by permitting children, though slaves, or those of greater growth if capable, to be admitted to that sacrament.

ON CORPORAL PUNISHMENT (SEPTEMBER 1668)

Whereas it has been questioned whether servants running away may be punished with corporal punishment by their master or magistrate, since the act already made gives the master satisfaction by prolonging their time by service, it is declared and enacted by this Assembly that moderate corporal punishment inflicted by master or magistrate upon a runaway servant shall not deprive the master of the satisfaction allowed by the law, the one being as necessary to reclaim them from persisting in that idle course as the other is just to repair the damages sustained by the master.

ON THE KILLING OF SLAVES (OCTOBER 1669)

Whereas the only law in force for the punishment of refractory servants resisting their master, mistress, or overseer cannot be inflicted upon Negroes, nor the obstinacy of many of them be suppressed by other than violent means, he it enacted and declared this Grand Assembly if any slave resists his master (or other by his master's order correcting him) and by the extremity of the correction should chance to die, that his death shall not be accounted a felony, but the master (or that other person appointed by the master to punish him) be acquitted from molestation, since it cannot be presumed that premeditated malice (which alone makes murder a felony) should induce any man to destroy his own estate.

Pray! what thing in the world can be worse toward us than if men should rob or steal us away and sell us for slaves to strange countries, separating husband from wife and children? — Resolutions of Germantown Mennonites, 1688