**SLAVERY IN THE U.S.: WHAT MADE IT UNIQUE?**

In the 1600s, 3 out of every 4 migrants to the Chesapeake was a white indentured servant. As white indentured servants began to grow in number in the Chesapeake and earn their freedom, the rich planter class faced a problem: 6 out of 7 men were propertyless, impoverished and had little prospect of obtaining a wife or land. They were also armed and had begun to attack the rich planter class (Bacon’s Rebellion). As health improved in the colony, African slaves proved to be an attractive long-term investment. They had no rising expectation of freedom or land ownership and could be prevented from owning weapons.

The transition from indentured servitude in Virginia to African slavery was an evolutionary process that took place over the course of many years. As the colony made the transition, laws were created to distinguish African slavery from other forms of servitude. Prior to the 1660s, the status of Africans in Virginia society was murky. Slaves could earn their freedom by being baptized as a Christian, or by purchasing their freedom. Slaves were allowed to own their own property and sue their masters in court. Free blacks could become landowners and purchase their own property, even becoming owners of other black slaves and white indentured servants.

Throughout history, owners of slaves have always feared violent slave uprisings. In Virginia, owners faced the additional fear of black slaves teaming up with poor whites to overthrow the rich planter class. The wealthy planter class needed to create a system that could separate the two groups - they needed poor whites to feel more connected to rich planters than black slaves. As you will see, Virginia passed a series of laws that accomplished that objective. The primary purpose these laws served was to create a rigid ***racially-based*** slave society that would come to distinguish itself from all previous forms of slavery in world history. Ironically, these laws allowed Virginia to simultaneously expand liberty, freedom and equality for one group of people (lower class whites) while depriving it from another (black slaves). This is what historian Edmund Morgan refers to as the “central paradox of American history.”

Read the following list of laws from Virginia. As you read each law, consider the natural consequences of that law and the purpose it might serve.

Purpose of laws:

1. Transform slavery into a rigid racial system (rather than a system based on religion or national origin or class)
2. Gradually isolate slaves from the rest of society (distinguish slaves from lower-class whites, disassociate the two groups)
3. Strengthen social controls over enslaved Africans (limit their freedoms)
4. Regulate ambiguities of racial differences in the colonies (establish status of mixed-race individuals and prevent creation of an intermediate class)
5. Stigmatize and dehumanize blackness (limit freedoms of free blacks and distinguish them from lower class whites)
6. Uplift self-identity and social status of lower class white residents (freedom = whiteness)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Law | Consequence/What purpose does it serve? |
| 1662: Slave status of children determined by the condition of mother; children of slaves automatically became slaves |  |
| 1667: Converting to Christianity did not alter the status of slave (baptism used to earn a slave freedom)  |  |
| 1669: No longer a felony for killing slaves for “resisting”; owners could also maim and kill runaways |  |
| 1670: Free blacks forbidden from owning servants  |  |
| 1680: Extra punishment issued if a black slave injured a white man (allowed white servants to bully slaves) |  |
| 1682: Mixed race children defined as slaves  |  |
| 1691: Interracial marriages outlawed and extensive punishments added for interracial sex in or out of marriage |  |
| 1691: White women who gave birth to mulatto children; sentenced to 5 years, child sentenced to 30 years of servitude |  |
| 1691: Owners could only free slaves if they could transport them out of the colony  |  |
| 1705: Forbid whipping of white servants without permission of judge |  |
| 1705: Forcibly took away any and all property of slaves while white servants allowed to keep theirs; property turned over to poor whites  |  |
| 1705: Newly freed white servants given more resources by former owners: 50 acres of land; taxes cut in half for men already free |  |
| 1705: Slaves required to have written permission to leave plantation |  |
| 1705: Slaves whipped, branded or maimed for associating with whites; executed if they have committed murder or rape |  |
| 1705: Slaves can no longer sue in court, can’t file a dispute about their master  |  |
| 1723: Free Blacks couldn’t vote, hold office or testify |  |
| 1740: Illegal to teach slaves to read, slaves no longer allowed to earn money, or assemble in large groups (South Carolina Slave Codes) |  |