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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia

Historians—like lawyers, physicians, and movie critics—are often at loggerheads over interpretations of major matters. Sometimes the different viewpoints are almost predictable, stemming from the interpreters' disparate backgrounds or ideologies, especially on issues that bridge the usual boundaries between events of the past and the present. But sometimes the reasons for differences are harder to discern, being rooted in the unique definition a scholar gives to crucial terms, or the idiosyncratic significance placed on certain words, or in the very personal intellectual context into which the historian tries to fit new evidence. Whatever the explanation for scholarly disagreements, surely the debate over the origins of slavery, and especially of racism, in early Virginia has been a prime example for nearly half a century.

Part of the problem, of course, is the paucity of evidence. Little survives, and a disturbing portion of it is ambiguous. What, for example, did the author of a seventeenth-century document mean by slave? We have a clear definition of the word today, but early colonial usage was imprecise; several meanings were simultaneously possible. Servant was ambiguous, too, as were a host of other terms that are essential to the dialogue, including nation, country, race—even Christian. Yet, as the previous essay illustrates, some evidence on early black-white relations does survive which, if not crystal clear, is at least suggestive and occasionally persuasive.

The purpose of my essay on "The Origins Debate" is threefold: to review the scholarly argument of the past century, especially its evolution since 1950; to analyze the major strands of evidence that underlie the interpretive differences; and to present my own convictions about early American slavery and racism. When this essay was published in 1989, I hoped it might put the debate to rest for a few years or more, but the issue is too vital, too connected to the present, and too ambiguous in its sources to ever remain quiescent. Barely a year after "The Origins Debate" first appeared, Barbara Jeanne Fields (a friend and colleague at Columbia University) published a very different explanation of the origins of

American racism. I append to this reprinting of my essay a summary of her interpretation and a fairly long rebuttal that brings this ongoing interpretive discussion as up to date as possible.

I had pondered for many years the sources on which this chapter is based, and had often presented the essence of them to my students at Columbia University, before I put my thoughts on paper in the late 1980s. The resulting article was published in the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97 (1989): 311–54, and is here reprinted with that journal's permission and with numerous minor changes to the text and notes. The appended postscript was first drafted in 1990, as a personal letter to Barbara Fields, and rewritten a year later as an open letter; the current version is considerably condensed.



FEW HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATES have generated so much scholarly attention and emphatic disagreement as the origins of black bondage in Virginia and its relation to race prejudice. Although historians discovered the issue only in the twentieth century and have argued it vociferously only since 1950, the elusive connection between British America's most lamentable institution and its most deplorable ideology make the issue important to the nation's present and future as well as to Virginia's distant past.

Colonial Virginia held no monopoly on either slavery or racism, of course. Both were endemic in Europe's American colonies from the sixteenth century on, and neither depended on Virginia's example for its vitality or longevity, even within the British empire. Virginia's primacy among Britain's mainland possessions in the introduction of black laborers and the emergence (sooner or later, depending on one's interpretation) of racial prejudice against them, however, has made the Old Dominion central to the verbal wrangling. Scores of books and articles and at least three anthologies explore the ambiguous connection between the institution and the ideology in early Virginia, and the end is not in sight.¹ In 1962 Winthrop D. Jordan referred to "the long duration and vigor of the controversy." More than a quarter century later, the vigor has not abated.²

I

Prior to the twentieth century, historians assumed without closely investigating the matter that slavery began in Britain's mainland colonies with the arrival in 1619 of the first blacks in Virginia.³ William Goodell's mid-nineteenth-century history of slavery and abolition, for example, simply stated that "Soon after the settlement of the British North American Colonies, Africans were imported into them, and sold and held as slaves." A quarter century later, Richard Hildreth was more spe-

cific: "Twenty negroes, brought to Jamestown by a Dutch trading vessel, and purchased by the colonists, were held, not as indentured servants for a term of years, but as slaves for life." Historians assumed too (when they thought about it at all) that racial prejudice appeared simultaneously. As George Bancroft, late in the nineteenth century, summed it up, "The negro race, from its introduction, was regarded with disgust."⁴ The consensus, in brief, was that there was no issue to debate. Arguments over the nature and mortality of antebellum slavery abounded; the colonial period, by contrast, generated little interest and less controversy.

In 1902 James C. Ballagh cracked the consensus by arguing that Virginia's early Africans were not slaves but indentured servants until the slave laws of the 1660s and 1670s decreed otherwise. Ballagh's evidence was legalistic and largely inferential. "Domestic slavery," he contended, "could find no sanction until the absolute ownership in the bodies of the negroes was vested by lawful authority in some individual." Ballagh showed convincingly that some blacks in the early decades were free and concluded that the other Africans in Virginia, about whom little was known, must have been free too because no colonial laws authorized enslavement: "Though the practice and incidents of negro and Indian slavery in the Spanish colonies were perfectly familiar to the people of Virginia, for some reason the notion of enslavement gained ground but slowly, and . . . the colonists seem to have preferred to retain him [a Negro or Indian] only as a servant."⁵

Ballagh's argument soon attracted adherents, though many of them stopped short of his wholesale revisionism. John H. Russell's study of Virginia's free blacks accepted Ballagh's reassessment only for the two decades after 1619. Russell was less convinced than Ballagh by the absence of slave laws in the early period—custom, if not legislation, could have kept blacks in bondage—yet he too was impressed by the many instances of free blacks in the decades before statutory slavery appeared.⁶

A similar partial acceptance of Ballagh's interpretation appeared in Ulrich B. Phillips's classic account of *American Negro Slavery* (1918). Phillips's brief discussion of the seventeenth century opened with a nod toward Ballagh's position:

The first comers were slaves in the hands of their maritime sellers; but they were not fully slaves in the hands of their Virginia buyers, for there was neither law nor custom then establishing the institution of slavery in the colony. The documents of the times point clearly to a vague tenure. In the county court records prior to 1661 the negroes are called negro servants or merely negroes—never, it appears, definitely slaves.

Phillips pointed to freed blacks (by owner's action or court order) as evidence that Africans in early Virginia were servants rather than slaves, but later in the same paragraph he shifted to a stance closer to Russell's:

As early as the sixteen-forties the holders of negroes were falling into the custom of considering them . . . as servants for life and perpetuity. The fact

that negroes not bound for a term were coming to be appraised as high as £30, while the most valuable white redemptioners were worth not above £15 shows also the tendency toward the crystallization of slavery before any statutory enactments declared its existence.⁷

During the 1620s and 1630s, Phillips seemed to be saying, all blacks were servants or free; during the 1640s and 1650s they were increasingly de facto slaves. The laws of the 1660s affirmed the custom, expanded it, and made it de jure. In *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929), Phillips presented his analysis more generally: "No preceding statute was requisite for the buying and holding of a Negro in bondage. . . . [C]ustom preceded law and fixed its course." Elsewhere in the book, however, Phillips again exempted the earliest blacks from slavery. "A few Negroes attained freedom in early Virginia," he assured his readers (with a footnote crediting Russell), "because the first comers, imported before definitive slavery was established, were dealt with as if they had been indentured servants."⁸

The Ballagh-Russell-Phillips doctrine made mixed headway among scholars of American slavery. James M. Wright's study of Maryland's free blacks (1921) did not apply it to Virginia's neighboring colony; instead he cited favorably two earlier studies of Maryland that said slavery existed from the colony's beginnings in 1634 and hinted at a concomitant racism. Yet Wright also referred the reader to Ballagh's book for developments in Virginia, thus implying that the two colonies may have had different customs and attitudes. Helen Catterall, on the other hand, wholly accepted Ballagh's thesis in her introduction to judicial cases concerning blacks.⁹ But by and large, historians ignored the debate. David Saville Muzzey epitomized the early twentieth-century diffidence toward black bondage in early America. In 1927 his *American Adventure* did not mention slavery until the narrative reached the eve of the Missouri Compromise; there Muzzey reminded his readers that "Negro slavery had been introduced into the colony of Jamestown in 1619."¹⁰

If Muzzey was typical of the generalists, Susie M. Ames reflected the continuing interest of colonialists in the historical origins of slavery. In 1940 her book on Virginia's Eastern Shore denied that Ballagh's argument fit the evidence and rejected his contention that indentured servitude was the earliest status for blacks. Freedom for some blacks in early Virginia, she protested, resulted not from termination of servitude but usually from manumission; other free blacks may have been the offspring of emancipated slaves or mulatto children of white fathers before the law of 1662 decreed that status depended on the mother's condition. Ames contended that by the time slavery became fixed in law, it was "a custom well established," much like the system already flourishing in England's island colonies.¹¹

Ames's stance was soon endorsed and expanded in a study of wider geographic scope. Wesley Frank Craven's judicious *Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (1949) quietly pulled Virginia's early Afro-American history back to nineteenth-century conclusions by warning

against "generalizing too much from the relatively few cases recorded" of freed blacks. "[T]he trend from the first was toward a sharp distinction between [the Negro] and the white servant," Craven insisted, and in a footnote he applauded Ames's "pertinent criticism" of the doctrine that servitude preceded slavery. Craven also questioned "the modern assumption that prejudice against the Negro is largely a product of slavery." Although he did not identify the proponents of that "modern assumption," Craven may well have had in mind Eric Williams's *Capitalism and Slavery*, a quasi-Marxist analysis of the New World slave system, which declared—as a necessary part of its theoretical argument—that "slavery was not born of racism; rather racism was the consequence of slavery." In any event, Craven's insistence that most blacks were probably slaves and subjected to racial prejudice from the outset foreshadowed an interpretation that would emerge emphatically a decade later.¹² Despite these occasional discussions of slavery's origin and the rare mentions of early racial prejudice, both issues and their interconnectedness remained in limbo until 1950. College textbooks—those litmus tests of scholarly dissemination—gave almost no attention to either topic.

II

In 1950 Oscar and Mary Handlins' seminal article resuscitated Ballagh's interpretation and went far beyond it.¹³ The times were ripe for seeing slavery as an afterthought of colonial development rather than as a conscious design and for finding the roots of racism in economic and legal debasement rather than in the mind-set of American colonists. As Winthrop Jordan suggested in his own influential article a dozen years later, the Handlins' position reflected the optimistic liberalism of its time. "Embedded in this description of diverging status," Jordan noted, "were broad implications: Late and gradual enslavement undercut the possibility of natural, deep-seated antipathy toward Negroes. . . . [I]f whites and Negroes could share the same status of half freedom for forty years in the seventeenth century, why could they not share full freedom in the twentieth?"¹⁴ Why not indeed, at a time when Jackie Robinson and other black athletes were erasing color lines in professional sports and when integration of the armed forces was well under way?

The Handlins made no such connections between their argument and their sociopolitical hopes. Rather, their essay was historical and evidential, a tightly knit challenge to the Ames-Craven belief that the first Africans in America were held as slaves and to the less frequently articulated assumption that blacks were subjected to racial prejudice from the outset. Seventeenth-century England, the Handlins pointed out, had no legal slavery but did have an abundance of "unfree" people—indentured servants, debtors working off obligations, criminals serving sentences, and the like—statuses that transferred automatically to British

America. According to the Handlins, the few Africans who arrived in the Chesapeake colonies were similarly unfree: "The status of Negroes was that of servants; and so they were identified and treated down to the 1660's." If Negroes were occasionally called slaves, it merely meant that they performed the most menial labor or occupied the lowest rung on society's ladder. Slavery came late in the century, racism still later.¹⁵

If, as the Handlins asserted, slavery—permanent, inheritable bondage—had no legal or traditional standing in England, why did it emerge in America? Not, according to the Handlins, because the settlers copied an institution already prevalent elsewhere: "American slavery was no direct imitation of Biblical or Roman or Spanish or Portuguese or West Indian models." Nor did it come from a preference for black labor. In the Chesapeake, as in the Caribbean islands, plantation owners used white labor as long as the supply sufficed. Rather, racial slavery emerged in the 1660s because in Virginia's multiethnic mix Africans were the most *different* from the ruling majority who "longed in the strangeness [of the New World] for the company of familiar men and singled out to be welcomed those who were most like themselves." To the ruling English colonists, Africans were strikingly unlike them in appearance, customs, and language. Moreover, and equally important, Africans were the most vulnerable laborers. In an attempt to attract English indentured servants to a colony short of labor, the Virginia legislature made terms of service as attractive as possible; perhaps the colony's poor reputation could be reversed. Black laborers, however, need not be placated: "Farthest removed from the English, least desired, [the African] communicated with no friends who might be deterred from following."¹⁶

The results were unplanned and unexpected. "By mid-century the servitude of Negroes seems generally lengthier than that of whites; and thereafter the consciousness dawns that blacks will toil for the whole of their lives, not through any particular concern with their status, but simply by contrast with those whose years of labor are limited by statute." Maryland, undergoing a parallel social evolution, in 1664 turned practice into law by decreeing that "all Negroes and other slaues to bee hereafter imported into the Province shall serue Durante Vita." Virginia in 1670 took virtually the same step. Other Virginia legislation in the 1660s and 1670s closed various loopholes, especially the possibility that mulatto children of free white fathers were entitled to freedom (1662) or that baptism precluded enslavement (1667).¹⁷

White Virginians' disparagement of blacks, the Handlins believed (in tacit agreement with Eric Williams), was a product of slavery. When the Africans' place became fixed by law at the basest level, they became objects of extreme degradation: "the trace of color became the trace of slavery." Thereafter, as the slave population grew in response to the South's economic needs, the position of the black slave grew more rigidly bound and more vociferously defended by white apologists. In the eigh-

teenth century slavery as a labor system and the degradation of Africans began to exhibit their distinctively American characteristics. By then, most blacks suffered legal and economic bondage and were set apart as " 'abominable,' another order of man."¹⁸

The Handlins' interpretation was almost immediately and universally embraced. It appeared compactly but emphatically in scholarly tomes, college textbooks, and graduate school lectures.¹⁹ Thomas Gossett's history of American racial attitudes, for example, incorporated the Handlinian view with only the slightest nod toward contrary evidence, and scholars in other disciplines borrowed it wholeheartedly.²⁰ Among college textbooks, the widely used Hofstadter, Miller, and Aaron edition of 1957 was typical: "Negro workers, who had been present in Virginia as early as 1619 as servants, were introduced in increasingly large numbers."²¹

After nine years of historiographical supremacy, the Handlins' thesis was finally challenged. Carl Degler's essay on "Slavery and the Genesis of American Race Prejudice" (1959) refuted vigorously their contention that blacks were merely servants until the 1660s and that discrimination aimed especially at blacks was unknown in the Chesapeake until slavery called it forth. Degler found the condition of early blacks singularly debased from the start: "the Negro was actually *never* treated as an equal of the white man, servant or free." An inferior status for blacks and frequent discrimination against them thus preceded rather than followed the formal institutionalization of racial slavery; law reflected attitudes. Degler had reversed the Handlins' historical sequence.²²

Degler offered as evidence a variety of documentary scraps from the 1620s to 1660s that distinguished pejoratively between white servants and black servants (or "slaves"; the labels, but not the statuses, Degler contended, were ambiguous) in various parts of British America. Blacks had considerably higher valuations from the outset, which indicated far longer—perhaps lifetime—service; black runaways were punished differently than whites, apparently because the former's terms were already too long to be extended; black servants were forbidden to bear arms; black women were tithable—that is, taxed as potential field workers, unlike white female servants, though some of the latter undoubtedly labored in the fields. Contemporary statements, moreover, often distinguished between servants for years and slaves for life; the latter were always black. In 1649 a deed in neighboring Maryland strongly implied that slavery there was inheritable when it bequeathed three Negroes "and all their issue." Several Virginia cases offered corroboration.²³

Such legal evidence reflected social perceptions, Degler argued. "Unquestionably it was a demand for labor which dragged the Negro to American shores, but the status which he acquired here cannot be explained by reference to that economic motive." New England, Degler demonstrated, had comparable prejudicial attitudes and policies despite its paucity of blacks; customary slavery for Africans may have been as

firmly entrenched in New England by midcentury as it appears to have been in the Chesapeake colonies and the British islands. Degler concluded that "instead of slavery being the root of the discrimination visited upon the Negro in America, slavery was itself molded by the early colonists' discrimination against the outlander."²⁴

The Handlins struck back. In a public letter they criticized much of Degler's discussion as "inept" and charged him with misunderstanding the evidence of discrimination against all non-Englishmen. The Handlins also disputed Degler's assertion that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishmen considered Negroes "inherently different from and inferior to the whites," for "we know of no such expressions of racial prejudice." Expressions of ethnocentrism, the Handlins insisted, were a different matter and wholly compatible with their argument. In their annoyance at Degler's "obtuseness," the Handlins succumbed to ad hominem arguments: "Handicapped as he is by the inability to use his terms properly, Professor Degler cannot comprehend the subtle process by which changes in attitude occur."²⁵

Degler rebutted the Handlins with several examples of early English and American bias against blacks, such as lines from Shakespeare (not to suggest that the bard was prejudiced but that he documented its prevalence) and the missionary Morgan Godwyn, whose *Negro's & Indians Advocate* (1680) contains testimony of virulent contempt for Africans. In the British West Indies "Negro's are conceived to be but Brutes," Godwyn reported, with "no more Souls than Beasts"; if similar statements did not emanate from Virginia, Degler implied, the treatment of blacks there surely reflected the same attitude. In short, Degler's rebuttal reiterated and expanded his original contention: in early Virginia, "the Negro was generally accorded a lower position in society than any white man, bound or free." Why that was so, he considered a prime but unanswered question.²⁶

While the Handlins and Degler exchanged brickbats, Winthrop D. Jordan—first as a graduate student at Brown University and then as a fellow at the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg—wrestled with that very conundrum: the underlying reasons for discrimination against blacks in early British America. Because the Handlins had denied that for several decades such discrimination was appreciably greater than that toward other non-English colonists, they were under no burden to explain its existence beyond their contention that Englishmen disliked people unlike themselves. Yet even the Handlins admitted that no other racial or ethnic group struck the English as quite so different, which came close to Degler's implication that Africans were subjected to more discrimination than other foreigners precisely *because* they were the most observably different and therefore least acceptable in England's New World settlements.²⁷ The fundamental question thus seemed to be: Was the white colonists' revulsion toward Africans qualitatively different from their revulsion toward other outsiders, and, if so,

did it lead at the outset to different treatment of blacks? A crucial corollary to both questions concerned the Africans' pigmentation: did it underlie—or at least signify—English prejudicial perceptions and contribute significantly to white Virginians' discrimination against Africans? The Handlins had almost wholly ignored skin color as an ingredient of English antipathy; Degler implied that it was important; Jordan revealed its sociological roots and its centrality in early Virginia.

Jordan's preliminary explanation of the slavery-prejudice puzzle appeared in an article on "Modern Tensions and the Origins of American Slavery" (1962), in which he sided with neither Degler nor the Handlins. Instead Jordan offered a neatly neutral explanation: the paucity of evidence on the first several decades of black presence in America precludes our knowing whether prejudice or slavery came first, but the evidence is clear of some slavery and some social debasement of blacks by the 1640s and 1650s. Ergo, both slavery and prejudice were causes, both were effects "constantly reacting upon each other, dynamically joining hands to hustle the Negro down the road to complete degradation."²⁸ Extracts from the articles by the Handlins, Degler, and Jordan were quickly and widely printed in anthologies, partly because they formed a perfect thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.²⁹ The historiographical dispute seemed at an end, happily decided in everyone's favor.

As Jordan's investigation of early American racial attitudes continued, he changed his mind. In his capstone study *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (1968), Jordan largely retracted his earlier solution. The essay on "Modern Tensions," he confessed in his bibliographic essay, "was written at a time when (as I now think) I was far from comprehending the origins of American slavery."³⁰ *White over Black's* opening chapter, based on a close examination of sixteenth-century English sources, especially travel accounts, emphasized the depth and breadth of English prejudice against Africans before 1619. The English propensity to identify Africans with apes, with unbridled sexuality, and with extremely un-Christian behavior engendered a profound, though still inchoate, prejudice against Africans that the Jamestown colonists unconsciously carried to America. Equally important, Jordan demonstrated that to Elizabethan and early Stuart Englishmen black was "an emotionally partisan color," laden with implications of filth, evil, and repugnance. Thus Africans in early Virginia were not merely one group of strangers on whom the English settlers cast general scorn, as the Handlins had argued; instead, the colonists considered them a visually, socially, and perhaps biologically distinct people, in almost every way inferior to everyone else.³¹

White Virginians, Jordan argued, assumed that "slaves" must be strangers, heathens, enemies (potentially at least), and beastly. Africans bore all of those liabilities in English eyes and the stigma of color besides. "On every count," Jordan concluded, "Negroes qualified" as po-

tential slaves. And, because the Latin American model of lifetime, inheritable servitude was apparent to everyone—Spanish and Portuguese colonists held a quarter of a million black slaves by 1619—Virginians had no need to invent a new status. Rather, Jordan suggested in his second chapter, Englishmen in America quickly made an "unthinking decision" to enslave the blacks among them, though in the absence of applicable English statutes it remained until the 1660s a customary rather than a legal institution. Evidence from the 1630s on, not only from Britain's West Indian islands where blacks were abundant but also from New England where they were few, reveal that blacks were usually kept in permanent bondage. Laws of the 1660s and 1670s in Virginia, and almost simultaneously in Maryland, thus established de jure what had generally existed from the beginning de facto and closed the remaining loopholes in a rapidly evolving system of racial slavery.³²

Although the early chapters of *White over Black* could be read as a strong endorsement and elaboration of Degler's position, Jordan at times equivocated. He repeated and expanded much of the evidence that Degler used to show subtle—and sometimes not-so-subtle—discrimination aimed especially at blacks before 1660: restrictions on carrying arms, severer punishments for interracial sex or for running away, and so forth. Yet Jordan reverted at times, almost verbatim, to his position in "Modern Tensions." In contradiction of the evidence of *White over Black's* opening chapter, its second chapter retreated to his earlier explanation that "Rather than slavery causing 'prejudice,' or vice versa, they seem rather to have generated each other. . . . Slavery and 'prejudice' may have been equally cause and effect." Thus Jordan vitiated substantially *White over Black's* initial message and the explicit retraction in the book's bibliographic essay of his argument in "Modern Tensions."³³

More surprising than Jordan's contradictory stances in *White over Black*—his book, after all, covered an immense subject, of which the origins of slavery was a small though important part—was his continuing ambiguity in a condensed version of *White over Black*, published in 1974 as *The White Man's Burden*. The latter book retained the passage quoted above, but it deleted two early English definitions of slaves and servants which suggest strongly that in the early seventeenth century Englishmen assumed blacks to be customarily enslaved. By its retentions and omissions, *White Man's Burden* thus reinforced Jordan's ambivalent message: English prejudice against Africans, based on biological as well as cultural characteristics, long predated colonization of the Chesapeake, yet slavery and prejudice were coeval.³⁴ The overall thrust of Jordan's books endorsed Degler, but the "equally cause and effect" passage mitigated its implicit criticism of the Handlins.

Jordan's contributions to early American history earned widespread acclaim. In 1969 *White over Black* garnered a National Book Award, the Francis Parkman prize, and the Ralph Waldo Emerson prize. Extracts

appeared in several anthologies of early American historiography, often as a replacement for "Modern Tensions" or for both the Degler and Handlin pieces. Despite Jordan's equivocal stance—or perhaps because of it—his "unthinking decision" seemed to be the definitive conclusion to nearly two decades of historical wrangling. In the judgment of one astute scholar, "if historians ever agree to accept an explanation of the emergence of prejudice and slavery in colonial America, it will probably be an explanation very similar to Jordan's."³⁵ After two decades, *White over Black* remains highly regarded and is now widely considered a classic in the early American field. It did not end the debate.

Barely three years after *White over Black's* publication, George M. Fredrickson inaugurated a neo-Handlinian movement—not intentionally, perhaps, but effectively.³⁶ In his 1971 essay on the early stages of American racism, Fredrickson distinguished between implicit or societal racism, which, he proposed, is revealed only through actions because it is not pronounced publicly, and explicit or ideological racism, which is argued openly and extensively. Implicit racism emerged in the late seventeenth century, Fredrickson believed, and explicit racism in the antebellum period. In Fredrickson's model, neither form of racism existed during most of Virginia's first century.³⁷

Fredrickson's essay seemed to cast new light on the old argument by showing that American racism was evolutionary and typological. In the seventeenth century, Fredrickson contended, societal racism developed slowly: "The story of white-black relations in seventeenth-century America is the story of an evolution *toward* societal racism." The early colonists, he acknowledged, were antipathetic to the color black and to the Africans' strangeness, but racism did not emerge until the late seventeenth century (the 1690s were critical in Fredrickson's view), when fear of the growing number of blacks combined with greed and the pursuit of privilege to create a permanent caste system. Thereafter, racism became increasingly evident; before then, Fredrickson implied, it was merely inchoate prejudice, not significantly different from the prejudice white Virginians leveled at all outsiders. He concluded that "societal racism—the treatment of blacks as if they were inherently inferior for reasons of race—dates from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century." Fredrickson's interpretation of the historiographical issue differed from the Handlins' principally in that the latter attributed racism to the aftermath of legal slavery, while Fredrickson found its roots in anxiety among whites over the sudden influx of unacculturated blacks in the late seventeenth century. "[T]he catalyst," Fredrickson declared, "was fear."³⁸

Almost simultaneously with Fredrickson's resurrection of the Handlins' interpretation, my essay on the 1620s endorsed Degler's position. All the disputants had lamented the paucity of evidence from the colony's early years. I proposed that the few documents surviving from the decade after 1619 suggest that whites considered blacks funda-

mentally inferior and that nearly all blacks were probably held in permanent bondage from the outset.³⁹ Governor George Yeardley's will of 1627 is suggestive: it refers to "negars" and "servants" separately, a strong implication that the two categories of labor were already distinct and racially defined. More extensive evidence of both a pejorative attitude toward blacks and the probability that they were slaves rather than indentured servants appears in the Virginia censuses of 1624 and 1625.⁴⁰ Those "musters" of the colony's inhabitants seldom list Africans by name; typical entries read "A Negars woman" or "vi negors."⁴¹ In the 1625 census only one black's age is given, and dates of arrival of only four are listed—critical information if imported Africans were, as the Handlins argued, to be released after terms of service, which were determined by age or length of servitude.⁴²

Another telling piece of evidence from the first decade of blacks' presence in the colony underlines the separateness of Africans in whites' eyes: in March 1629 Virginia's General Court ordered "a generall muster of all the inhabitants men woemen and Children as well *Englishe* as Negroes."⁴³ "*Englishe*" must have tacitly encompassed the colony's other non-English Europeans—many Irish, Scots, and some continentals—while Negroes, who may have numbered less than thirty in a total colonial population of about three thousand, were perceived as a separate group.⁴⁴ Surely this smacks of something more than ethnocentricity. In a brief biography of Captain John Smith (1975), I argued that white Virginians had from the outset a deep-seated antipathy to people from the place Smith scorned as "those fryed Regions of blacke brutish Negers."⁴⁵

Despite the mounting evidence of an early and pervasive antipathy toward blacks, the Handlin-Fredrickson distinction between pre-1660s ethnic prejudice and subsequent racism received prestigious support in the early 1970s from Edmund S. Morgan, a product of Harvard's history department, and Timothy H. Breen, a former student of Morgan. In a 1972 article Morgan acknowledged that on the eve of Virginia's colonization "Englishmen, along with other Europeans, were already imbued with prejudice against men of darker complexions than their own" and that "the Englishmen who colonized America and their revolutionary descendants were racists, that consciously or unconsciously they believed liberties and rights should be confined to persons of a light complexion." In an apparent contradiction, however, Morgan did not apply those generalizations to the decades before Virginia passed its slave laws. "It seems clear that most of the Africans, perhaps all of them, came as slaves. . . . It is equally clear that a substantial number of Virginia's Negroes were free or became free. And all of them, *whether servant, slave, or free*, enjoyed most of the same rights and duties as other Virginians." Morgan's subsequent generalizations about the blacks' rights homogenized the three categories. Free blacks and black servants may have had substantial equality with whites (though subtle prejudice

against them is evident in the records), but the question of how slaves—subjected to lifetime bondage—“enjoyed” those rights and duties Morgan left unanswered.⁴⁶

Although Morgan gave brief attention to the prejudice-slavery debate in his article, the book of which it was a prospectus, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), addressed the question more extensively if somewhat obliquely. Morgan implies throughout the book that racial prejudice did not appear significantly in Virginia until blacks became the colony's principal labor force: “[B]efore 1660, it might have been difficult to distinguish race prejudice from class prejudice . . . [but] fears [of servile insurrection] increased as the labor force grew larger and the proportion of blacks in it rose.” His chapter titles suggest as much: “Toward Slavery” precedes “Toward Racism,” and both come after a chapter on Bacon's Rebellion. Yet at times Morgan tempered the implications of this sequence. “[Whether] or not race was a necessary ingredient of slavery, it *was* an ingredient. If slavery might have come to Virginia without racism, it did not. The only slaves in Virginia belonged to alien races from the English.” Whatever racial harmony Virginia enjoyed in the early years eroded in the 1670s and 1680s, Morgan argued, when “the assembly deliberately did what it could to foster the contempt of whites for blacks and Indians.”⁴⁷

Morgan's interpretation of the chicken-and-egg debate, as it had come to be known, might have passed without fanfare had not J. H. Plumb highlighted it in *The New York Review of Books*. Plumb gathered from Morgan's book that “there was no social need for racism until there was a vast army of black slaves”: to wit, racism emerged in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, decades after slavery was legally established in Virginia. Plumb thought race prejudice was to be expected at that point: “As the slave population grew, racism naturally followed.” (Plumb did not speculate, in print at least, on why it was natural, nor on why Americans created a system of racial slavery a quarter century before, by his reckoning, they succumbed to racism.) Most significant to Plumb was Morgan's return of the issue to the socioeconomic realm and out of color classifications or ideology: “[T]he great merit of this profoundly important book is to put slavery back in the context of poverty and the exploitation of labor.”⁴⁸

Plumb's version of Morgan's book lured Carl Degler back into the fray. In a letter to *The New York Review of Books*, Degler complained that Plumb's analysis was illogical: its portrayal of racial prejudice as a response to vast numbers of blacks failed to explain similar attitudes in New England and other areas of sparse black population. Even more than Morgan, Degler complained, Plumb ignored the abundant signs of pervasive prejudice against blacks well before slavery entered the statute books and long before blacks were numerous in the Chesapeake. Degler's letter chided Morgan too. It was symbolic, if inadvertent,

Degler suggested, that in the index to *American Slavery, American Freedom* the entry under “Negro” tells the reader to see “Blacks,” which does not appear in the index at all.⁴⁹

III

One of the few undisputed facts about Africans in early Virginia is that some of them were fully free—neither slave nor bound to service, though most free blacks had probably initially not been free.⁵⁰ The best-known case, that of Anthony Johnson, has been widely cited, for he not only achieved freedom but also in turn acquired black servants, perhaps for life terms.⁵¹ Johnson and the other free blacks are the Handlin school's trump card: how could white Virginians have been racially prejudiced if they allowed some blacks to be free, to exercise property and perhaps political rights, and to mingle with substantial equality among white Virginians?

Critics of the Handlin interpretation accept the paradox as evidence that neither the slave system nor race prejudice reached their apogees of comprehensiveness and intensity in the seventeenth century and that occasional instances of prominent free blacks did not negate the pervasiveness of slavery or racism in the seventeenth century any more than it would in the eighteenth or the nineteenth.⁵² In no century was slavery universal for blacks. Until the 1660s they had various potential paths to freedom: by expiration of contracts, as the Handlins posited; by manumission, as Susie Ames emphasized; or perhaps through Christian baptism, as others argued.⁵³ All scholars of the subject agree that white Christians could serve terms of service voluntarily or by court decree; most scholars agree too that English law and custom, although not crystal clear on the point, imposed lifetime servitude only on non-Christians or, in a few instances, on criminals, though the latter were not so much slaves as convicts for life. But a widely held assumption among English people that no Christian could be held in permanent bondage implied that Africans who arrived as Christians, or who later converted to Christianity, could seek redress if their masters held them beyond the usual term of service for white (and therefore nominally Christian) servants.⁵⁴ The Virginia law of 1667, which stipulated that “baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or ffreedome,” was clearly aimed at the slave system's sacramental loophole.⁵⁵

In 1973 Warren M. Billings presented tantalizing evidence of the colony's early reluctance to enslave Christians regardless of color. He reconstructed as thoroughly as the surviving documents allow the cases of two Virginia slaves who sued for freedom in the colony's courts. In 1656 Elizabeth Key, the illegitimate child of a slave woman and a white planter, sued for freedom on the triple grounds of her father's status as a free Englishman, her own baptism, and a purported contractual agreement

to serve her present master a stipulated period, which had expired. The court granted Key freedom, though on which of the several grounds is not clear. In 1667 Fernando maintained that he was entitled to freedom because he was a Christian and had lived for a time in England. The disposition of his case is unknown. In any event, both suits illustrate the escape hatches available to slaves and forecast the legislation of the 1660s and 1670s that shut them tight. Five years before it passed the law making baptism irrelevant (1667), the House of Burgesses decreed that a mulatto child's status followed its mother's condition rather than its father's. With paternal status and baptism eliminated as paths to freedom, a contract for limited service (such as Elizabeth Key claimed) would be moot for most blacks, for by definition slaves had no contractual rights.⁵⁶

By whatever legal or circumstantial route, scores of Virginia's blacks became free during the middle decades of the seventeenth century. T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes have shed important light on many of those men and women in "*Myne Owne Ground*" (1980), a study of free blacks in Northampton County. In the early and middle decades of the century, the authors assert,

Englishmen and Africans could interact with one another on terms of relative equality for two generations. The possibility of a genuinely multiracial society became a reality during the years before Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. Not until the end of the seventeenth century was there an inexorable hardening of racial lines. We argue that it was not until the slave codes of 1705 that the tragic fate of Virginia's black population was finally sealed.⁵⁷

Here, once again, was the Handlin thesis in new clothes. If some of the garments seemed to be borrowed from Fredrickson and others from Morgan, the overall ensemble was nonetheless original—and highly controversial.

Breen and Innes conceded that all of Northampton County's blacks probably arrived as slaves. Within the next decade or two, a few were manumitted; many others raised tobacco on their house lots and purchased their freedom with the profits. Most of the new freedmen remained where they were as independent farmers, and by and large they flourished for two generations. Many acquired property, sued in court (often successfully), and engaged in daily give-and-take with their white neighbors on the farm and in the marketplace.⁵⁸ They could own guns (the 1640 and 1680 prohibitions did not apply to free blacks, Breen and Innes contend), their testimony was accepted in court, and they seem to have received fair treatment when accused of illegal actions.⁵⁹ In Northampton County, at least, free blacks and nongentry whites dealt "essentially as equals"; until Bacon's Rebellion, "economic status rather than racial identity seems to have been the chief factor in determining how blacks and whites dealt with each other." Racism was in the future. "At mid-century ethnocentrism was probably a more powerful force

shaping human relations than racism," according to Breen and Innes, for although Negroes were often so designated in the documents of the time, Italians and other non-English residents were often comparably identified.⁶⁰

The benign situation of free blacks ended soon after Bacon's Rebellion. Breen and Innes assert that the sharp increase in slave imports, especially of nonacculturated Africans, "exacerbated racial tensions"—tensions whose existence the authors had heretofore largely denied. Whites began for the first time to discuss black inferiority because the importations "generated racist ideas or brought to the surface latent racist assumptions." Free blacks suffered as much as the newly imported slaves. Some black farmers moved to Maryland in search of better land. Those who stayed in Virginia faced declining prosperity, and "increasingly, their white neighbors treated them with distrust and disdain." In 1699 the legislature ordered free blacks to depart the colony within six months.⁶¹

Breen and Innes argue forcefully against the early significance of racial prejudice in Northampton County. They propose that "[Anthony] Johnson and [Francis] Payne did not think of themselves as living in a racist society. Nor . . . did it occur to them that their white neighbors were making an 'unthinking decision' that would reduce all black people to the lowest levels of society simply because they were black." Perhaps not, but the thoughts of Virginia's free blacks, wholly unrecorded, are pure speculation. Is it not more plausible to suppose that Johnson and Payne wondered why, if race relations were "not affected by the color of a man's skin," nearly three-quarters of the county's blacks but none of its whites were held in permanent slavery during the period of relative racial harmony? Did Johnson and Payne not wonder why, if ethnicity rather than race was critical, African-Americans were designated by a color term—even if born and bred in Virginia—never by such national labels as "Angolan" or "Yoruban" or "Ashanti"—not even "African"?⁶² Did Johnson and Payne not wonder why, if skin color was unimportant, laws were passed in 1662 against a child inheriting its father's status, as English common law prescribed, if its mother happened to be "a negro woman"; why a law in 1667 denied that baptism could bring freedom to "slaves by birth," that is, blacks alone; why a law in 1668 decreed that free black women (but not white women) were tithable; why a law in 1670 prohibited free blacks, even if Christians themselves, from buying Christian servants?⁶³ Surely these laws reveal prejudice exclusively against blacks several decades before Africans became either numerous or outstandingly "foreign" in language and customs.⁶⁴ In sum, although Breen and Innes contribute much useful insight into the lives of free blacks in one seventeenth-century Virginia county, they seriously distort, I believe, the overall picture of early black-white relations and especially its connection to incipient American racism.

Reactions to "*Myne Owne Ground*" ran the gamut from skepticism to indiscriminate praise. Gary B. Nash, while applauding Breen and Innes's methodology, rejected their reading of the evidence on Anthony Johnson in particular and racial attitudes in general; Lorena Walsh pointed out the unrepresentativeness of Northampton County's thirteen black heads of family among Virginia's black population. On the other hand, Lawrence Stone hailed the book as "an extraordinary and convincing story" that "proves that for a couple of generations in seventeenth century Virginia the two races lived fairly comfortably side by side with little or no legal and not much psychological prejudice." Even Breen and Innes had not gone that far. Stone, matching his fellow Englishman Plumb's delight in economic rather than racial explanations of slavery, turned "*Myne Owne Ground*" into an anachronistic scenario for the genesis of American racism: after Bacon's Rebellion, "the number of blacks became relatively so great that they created fear; fear led to repression; repression led to legal discrimination and personal degradation; degradation led to racial prejudice." Like Plumb, Stone overlooked the early emergence of pejorative notions about blacks in New England, where their presence was always small. More serious, he distorted the chronology of slavery: the essentials of Virginia's legal discrimination emerged in the decade before Bacon's Rebellion and thus a quarter century before the great influx of Africans.⁶⁵

IV

A second issue in the historiography of early American slavery is intertwined with—and sometimes confused with—the debate over the origins of racism and slavery: Why did the Chesapeake's sparse black population suddenly increase in the late seventeenth century, and what effect did the new black presence have on the evolution of racism? To scholars who view racism as largely (though not wholly) in place by the mid-seventeenth century and slavery the overwhelming (but not sole) condition for British America's blacks by the late 1670s, the reason for the sudden and dramatic growth of the black population is a separate matter. To advocates of the argument that racism followed slavery, however, the dramatic influx and racism are causally connected.

The traditional explanation for the dramatic rise in the importation of Africans has been that, first, the expansion of Virginia's tobacco production increased the demand for field hands, but white labor was inadequate because it was short-term (usually four years for adult males); in fact, some of the demand for indentured labor came from former servants who had become entrepreneurs themselves; second, black labor, though perhaps less socially desirable, was in the long run cheaper than white labor because the former was permanent, the latter transient; and third, the availability of African slaves increased with the emergence of the Royal African Company in 1672 as the principal shipper of

Africans to British America and expanded further when the company lost its monopoly in 1698.⁶⁶ Thus the standard interpretation was almost exclusively economic, though obviously the economic solution (importation of vast numbers of unacculturated African slaves) had major social ramifications—the hardening of racial lines, the rigidification of the slave system, the further debasement of field labor, and much more.⁶⁷

Since the early 1970s two predominantly social explanations have challenged the economic interpretation. In 1972 Edmund Morgan's presidential address to the Organization of American Historians (subsequently published as "Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox" and expanded in *American Slavery, American Freedom*) gave far more attention to the reasons for the growth of Virginia's black population than it did to the chicken-and-egg issue—though at bottom Morgan was blending the two questions. Bacon's Rebellion, Morgan argued, was the key event. When armed, angry, landless, former servants—a "giddy multitude," according to the Virginia legislature—temporarily overturned the colony's political and social order, the elite read the writing on the wall. More white servants meant, potentially, more trouble; black labor might be less desirable socially, but it had abundant offsetting advantages. It was permanent (by law and custom), unarmed (by law and owner's caution), relatively docile (by coercive restraint), and self-perpetuating (by biological probability). Indentured labor was not abandoned immediately nor, in the colonial period, completely, but the proportion of black imports rose sharply soon after Bacon's Rebellion and remained high for half a century.⁶⁸

Concomitant with a rise in black population was the emergence of racial prejudice, Morgan asserted: poor whites increasingly made their own complexion a mark of freedom and superiority. The elite simultaneously fostered white cohesion as a protection against black insurrection. As slavery became the hallmark of black Virginians, freedom gained added meaning for Virginia's whites. The paradox reached fruition in 1776, when American independence heralded still greater freedom for the latter and more rigid slavery for the former.⁶⁹

Morgan's interpretation coincided with Breen's; the latter's 1972 article in the *Journal of Social History* also stressed the "giddy multitude" and its unintended stimulus to the importation of black labor. After Bacon's Rebellion, Breen noted, the quality of white servants rose—more had skills, fewer were "desperate villans"—white planters increasingly turned to African slaves for gang labor. At the same time, rising tobacco prices improved the prospects of lower-class whites and made "their servitude endurable and their freemanship secure." As the gap grew between contented white laborers and the swelling numbers of blacks imported directly from their homelands, "[n]o white servant in this period, no matter how poor, how bitter or badly treated, could identify with these frightened Africans."⁷⁰ The cumulative effect of the Morgan and Breen

articles and the Morgan book was perhaps predictable: by the late 1970s Bacon's Rebellion appeared in colonial and survey textbooks as the causal turning point in Virginia's slave system.⁷¹

In 1975 Theodore Allen reinforced the class-conflict implications of the Morgan-Breen interpretation. Writing from a Marxist perspective, Allen attributed the dramatic shift in Virginia's racial composition and the emergence of racism to the elite's fear of the "solidarity of black and white" proletariats in the 1660s, 1670s, and 1680s, especially during Bacon's Rebellion. Allen saw Bacon's army as an "armed working class, black and white, [that] fought side by side for the abolition of slavery." After the large planters crushed the rebellion, they tightened restrictions on blacks and conscripted lower-class whites to control the growing slave population. Thus separated into white and black elements, the proletariat lost its clout. Lower-class whites found some solace in being legally and (in the eyes of white society) socially superior to the blacks. Allen said almost nothing about racism as an ideology; implicitly he saw racism taking hold late in the seventeenth century among lower-class whites who had earlier been sufficiently unbiased against blacks to join them in matrimony, resistance, and rebellion. Racism was an elitist strategy.⁷²

No sooner had Morgan, Breen, and Allen's "giddy multitude" won the historiographical skirmish than it succumbed to a withering cross-fire. In 1977 Russell R. Menard pointed out that the supply of indentured servants had declined for a decade before slave imports began to rise appreciably. Beginning in the 1660s two alternatives to the Chesapeake colonies beckoned English workmen: at home, especially in London, where the Great Fire of 1666 created thousands of new jobs, and in America, where Carolina and the middle colonies attracted a mounting portion of American immigrants. Virginia continued to import indentured servants in substantial numbers; especially in the second decade of the eighteenth century, Chesapeake planters invested heavily in Irish, convict, and poor servants. The labor demands kept rising, however, and as early as the 1680s the only plausible solution seemed to lie in the African slave trade. "The rise of black slavery was more a consequence than a cause of the decline of white servitude," Menard concluded, although "it perhaps hastened the process." In short, "Chesapeake planters did not abandon indentured servitude; it abandoned them."⁷³

Economist David Galenson corroborated Menard's findings and added an important codicil. Galenson found that in the staple colonies (the Chesapeake, Carolina, and the West Indies) the rising cost of white labor caused planters to shift initially from unskilled white labor to unskilled black labor; skilled tasks were reserved for whites. This "racial division of labor" lasted until the mounting cost of skilled white labor encouraged planters to train blacks, especially highly acculturated

African-Americans, in the desired crafts. At that point the shift from white to black labor in the staple colonies was more or less complete, though of course it was never total, especially in the Chesapeake.⁷⁴

Although the two recent explanations of the shift from white to black labor in the Chesapeake are diametrical opposites—Morgan and Breen see the planters forsaking white servants, Menard and Galenson see white servants forsaking the planters—the interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Menard and Galenson do not deny that Bacon's Rebellion aroused fear of poor whites among the planters; that fear may have exacerbated the decline in importation of white servants, especially the unskilled, and accordingly increased the urgency for an alternate supply of labor.⁷⁵ The delay in filling the shortage through direct importation of Africans may have reflected a combination of the slow response of the slave trade—for reasons of organization and technology—and the reluctance of Virginia planters to embrace black labor on a large scale.⁷⁶ The planters knew the social implications of such a move—the dilemmas of Barbados and Jamaica, and later of South Carolina, were common knowledge—and resisted extensive use of black labor until economic realities convinced them, acting in their individual self-interests, that slave labor was the shortest and perhaps the only route to prosperity.⁷⁷

If viewed from the perspective of the entire Western Hemisphere and of the transatlantic slave trade (a century-and-a-half old when the boom reached Virginia), the decisions of the Chesapeake planters seem foregone. The gentry could either have slave labor from Africa and economic expansion, or they could limp along with a dwindling supply of indentured European labor. That virtually all African laborers would be slaves rather than servants had already been determined by hemisphere-wide economic circumstances and examples, including the British Caribbean's, and by Virginia's legislation of the 1660s and 1670s. Economic trends and social legislation thus shaped the Virginians' decisions about the growth and status of the black population.⁷⁸ In any event, the debate over the growth in the number of slaves continues to be inextricably connected to the chicken-and-egg argument by scholars who see racism as a response to the rapid expansion of Virginia's black population.

V

Although there is no consensus on when and why slavery and racism began and the possible connections between them, there is now agreement on several subsidiary issues. No one doubts, for example, the basic demographic configurations of Virginia's black population: its sparse numbers in the early decades, its sharp rise in the 1680s and after, and its shift late in the century from Caribbean sources to, increasingly,

African sources. Nor does anyone doubt that the legal status of blacks was ambiguous until the 1660s and 1670s and to some extent beyond, or that many blacks—perhaps more than 25 percent in some counties—were free on the eve of Virginia's slave legislation. There is general agreement too that legal restrictions on free blacks and popular prejudice against all blacks hardened late in the century, probably in response to the rapid increase in the number of Africans and to their relatively greater (compared to earlier African-Americans') cultural "differentness" from the English colonists.⁷⁹

There is even agreement that before the 1660s white Virginians harbored some degree of prejudice—or, at the very least, a special unease—toward blacks. The Handlins acknowledged that the English were offended by "[t]he rudeness of the Negroes' manners, the strangeness of their languages, the difficulty of communicating to them English notions of morality and proper behavior."⁸⁰ Morgan conceded that the early colonists were "imbued with prejudice against men of darker complexions than their own"; Fredrickson agreed that Virginia's whites felt special antipathy from the outset toward black strangers; while Breen and Innes hinted at "latent racist assumptions."⁸¹ Degler, Jordan, and others stated the case more emphatically. In any event, the various interpretive positions differ more in degree than in kind, although the Handlins largely ignore pigmentation and its implications on the assumption that skin color only became an issue in the aftermath of large-scale enslavement: "Color then emerged as the token of the slave status."⁸²

Despite the several points of agreement about Virginia's early treatment of blacks and its prejudicial attitudes toward them, fundamental disagreements persist over several issues: first, the status of most blacks before the 1660s—whether they were, on the whole, temporary servants or lifetime slaves; second, the depth and significance of discrimination against blacks in the early decades; third, the reasons for Virginia's initial enslavement of blacks; and fourth, the point at which antipathy against blacks was sufficiently rooted in biological assumptions for historians to label it racism rather than ethnocentrism.

On the first point—the status of blacks before the passage of the slave laws—the issue is not whether some were free or some were slave. Almost everyone acknowledges the existence of both categories by the 1640s, if not from the beginning. At issue, rather, is the relative size of those groups and of a third that many maintain was the largest—indentured servants.⁸³ The calculations of Morgan and of Breen and Innes that in Northampton County in midcentury nearly 30 percent of the black inhabitants were free seem to set the maximum figure for that category, though the colonywide figure may have been appreciably lower. Breen and Innes acknowledge that the rest of Northampton County's blacks were slaves.⁸⁴ Some scholars (rarely colonial specialists) nonetheless still assert that most blacks in the early period were neither slave nor free but rather indentured servants.⁸⁵

For that contention to be valid, three evidentiary problems must be resolved: why the evidence of indentured blacks is extremely scarce;⁸⁶ how, in the absence of contracts, blacks could have been freed by "the custom of the country" when the laws concerning servants without indentures apparently applied only to Englishmen;⁸⁷ and how lengths of service were determined for blacks when the censuses and land patents rarely listed their ages, dates of arrival in the colony, or even their names. Indentured servitude, in short, appears from both positive evidence (much higher evaluations in wills and inventories and anonymous entries in censuses) and negative evidence (absence of contracts and unrecorded ages or dates of arrival) to have been an unlikely status for most of Virginia's blacks.⁸⁸

Testimony from other English colonies is relevant, for it suggests strongly that throughout British America blacks were very quickly—perhaps immediately—enslaved. In Barbados, for example, the governor and council announced in 1636 (before sugar production spurred the importation of Africans) that "*Negroes* and *Indians* that come here to be sold, should serve for Life, unless a Contract was before made to the contrary"; two years later the Providence Island Company referred to its "Negros being . . . kept as perpetuall servants"; in 1652 the Rhode Island legislature reported that "there is a common course practised amongst English men to buy negers, to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever."⁸⁹ Until each colony enacted its own statutory legitimation of perpetual bondage, the mother country's common law of property served the same effective purpose. There is no reason to posit a Virginia exceptionalism in the use of African labor. In short, the evidence from Virginia and elsewhere refutes the popular myth that slavery was rare or nonexistent before the legislation of the 1660s and 1670s, that free blacks were numerous, and that most blacks were indentured servants. The surviving records support a very different distribution: slavery from the outset for the vast majority, freedom for some (by a variety of means) after a period of slavery, and indentured servitude (seldom with a legal contract) for the smallest number.⁹⁰

On the second point of disagreement—the severity and significance of discrimination against blacks in those early years—the sharp division that characterized the Handlin-Degler exchange of thirty-five years ago has substantially subsided, but it has hardly been settled. Most historians now concede that blacks in early Virginia were often subjected to discriminatory treatment, though rarely in legal confrontations; there English jurisprudence, transferred substantially though imperfectly to the colonies, seems to have retained much of its traditional impartiality. There is no consensus, however, on the significance of the discrimination aimed specifically at blacks—whether it was a superficial reaction to strangers or indicative of a distinct racial antipathy. The Handlins, Morgan, and some others underestimate (in my opinion) the uniqueness and import of the overall plight of blacks in early Virginia.⁹¹ By

contrast, Degler, especially, and some others find discrimination against blacks distinctive and extensive.⁹²

The problem of assessing discrimination and its underlying attitudes is exemplified by the frequent identification of Africans as "Negroes" in seventeenth-century records. Most contributors to the debate acknowledge that Africans were often so designated, but they disagree sharply over what it means. Breen and Innes minimize the custom's significance; it was, they contend, merely an identifier that had parallels among Europeans in the use of "Italian," "Irish," and so forth—signs, in other words, of English ethnocentricity. Lerone Bennett Jr. even argues that "Negor was a national rather than a racial designation" and "the early records identify the *nationality* of all non-Englishmen."⁹³ Such conclusions are not supported by documentary evidence from early Virginia.⁹⁴ Non-English Europeans are, to be sure, occasionally identified by nationality, especially during their early years in the colony; I know of no instance in which their progeny are so identified.⁹⁵ Africans in America, by contrast, were usually identified by a color (not a national) label, regardless of their length of time in America or whether they were of African or American birth.

The prevalence of such color terminology is demonstrated, with unintended irony, in an illustration accompanying the essay in which Bennett argues that black and white outsiders were labeled by nationality. It shows sample pages from Virginia musters of the 1620s: of the six blacks identifiable in the illustration, four are listed only as "Negro"; the others are "Antonio a Negro" and "Mary a Negro woman." The remaining thirty-seven people, clearly English or European, listed in the illustration all have full names and none is identified by nationality.⁹⁶ Comparably ironic is Breen and Innes's use of the document from which they take their title "*Myne Owne Ground*." It quotes Anthony, a free black whose boundary dispute with a white neighbor had just been settled, as saying, "Now I know myne owne ground and I will worke when I please and play when I please." To Breen and Innes, Anthony is reflecting Northampton's equitable race relations. Is it not equally significant, however, that the only contemporary account of this episode always refers to the white neighbor as "Capt. Taylor" or "Mr. Taylor," while Anthony is always "Anthony the negro," or "the said Negro," or simply "the negro"? His last name is never used.⁹⁷ In the surviving records, in fact, blacks are usually anonymous—"negro," "a negro man," "17 negroes," and so forth—while the few African-Americans, free or slave, who have full names are often *additionally* designated by color, as a virtual suffix to their family names—"Francis Paine Negro," "phillip Mongom negro," "Thomas Driggins Negro," "John Casor Negro."⁹⁸ There is no comparable pattern for whites of any nationality.⁹⁹ The prevailing terminology shows emphatically that white Virginians saw blacks as a unique type of "others"—people so markedly different from themselves that they must be separately identified in most private and public documents. A

plethora of such evidence notwithstanding, historians are far from a consensus about the nature and meaning of early American discrimination.

On the third major unresolved issue—the causes of Virginia's slavery—debate is still lively, largely because slavery's relationship to white racism is problematic. A loose agreement on other "causes" has emerged, however. Many historians now acknowledge that the absence of legal prohibitions in England encouraged rather than inhibited de facto slavery; rarely does anyone contend that the absence of statutory slavery impeded its practice in either England or the colonies.¹⁰⁰ Thus the colonists were free to adopt the Latin American model or to contrive their own. Almost all historians, following the Handlins' lead, now emphasize the vulnerability of blacks to unscrupulous owners who could do pretty much as they pleased with African "servants"; sometimes that meant manumission, especially for Christian blacks, but more often it meant lifetime servitude. There is probably universal agreement too that the Chesapeake planters' insatiable demands for labor of any kind and for the longest possible periods of service gave human bondage its *raison d'être*. As Degler observed in 1976, "slavery developed from a need for labor in a social context of readily available land. In that sense the roots of slavery were economic."¹⁰¹ On several aspects of the genesis of American slavery, then, most historians of early American race relations seem to concur. Their explanation, in general, is that an intense demand for labor joined hands with Latin American precedents, the absence of English legal restraints, and the Africans' vulnerable status as captives to forge a slave system for Virginia's small but growing black population. An existing and perhaps essential additional ingredient, some historians contend, was racial prejudice.

VI

On that final point, profound disagreement persists. What role did racism play in the evolution of American slavery? None, according to the Handlins, Allen, Bennett, and others, who see racism as a result—"the child of slavery," in Fredrickson's words—rather than a contributing cause or concomitant phenomenon of emergent slavery.¹⁰² Other historians see racial antipathy as a crucial ingredient, though they vary on the exact terms to describe English beliefs about blacks and even differ in the meanings they ascribe to certain words.

Disparate definitions have long plagued the chicken-and-egg debate. Several key terms—ethnocentrism, prejudice, and especially racism itself—are frustratingly imprecise, and until recently most historians of early Virginia have been reluctant to use *racism* at all. The Handlins, Degler, and Jordan shunned it, partly, no doubt, because it was not yet widely used and partly, perhaps, on the assumption that the term was too emotionally charged in the social climate of the 1950s and 1960s to be useful. Moreover, Degler held that seventeenth-century racism, if

it existed, could not be demonstrated. "I make no claim," he wrote in his 1959 rebuttal to the Handlins, "for the widespread acceptance of a racist view of colored peoples in the seventeenth century, for the evidence is too skimpy"; in his retort to Plumb's review of Morgan's book, Degler further protested that "'racism' is an inappropriate word here since it means imputing *biological* inferiority to other people." Thus, although both Degler and Jordan believed that Virginia's early English settlers discriminated against blacks in general far more than against any group of whites, regardless of nationality, and believed too that whites held uniquely pejorative views of dark-skinned peoples, they adopted somewhat equivocal terminology: Degler alluded to "race prejudice" in his title, but his essay referred almost exclusively to "discrimination" and "status"; Jordan discerned a general "debasement" of blacks and a pervasive "racial prejudice" but never alluded to "racism."¹⁰³

In 1971 Fredrickson complained that popular American usage had blurred the meaning of *racism* to include almost any hint of prejudice against blacks, individually or collectively. He insisted that racism is an expressed conviction that innate behavioral and intellectual differences distinguish human "races" and permit hierarchical ranking—in short, an ideology.¹⁰⁴ (Race is a discredited biological-anthropological concept, of course, but essential to racist theories.)¹⁰⁵ Fredrickson postulated that seventeenth-century attitudes could only be inferred from the way whites treated blacks in laws, court cases, economic practices, and the like. By that rule, he found no racism, not even implicit, until unacculturated blacks became numerous; he considered early Virginians prejudiced, perhaps, but not racist.¹⁰⁶ Fredrickson apparently ignored, or was unimpressed by, the numerous discriminatory laws against blacks alone in the seventeenth century, by the imposition of customary slavery for most blacks early in the century and of legal slavery for the overwhelming majority of blacks in the 1660s, and by the evidence of strong color bias among English settlers from the outset.¹⁰⁷

A year after Fredrickson's plea for a more rigorous use of terminology, sociologist Donald Noel applied precise and scholarly meanings to the key concepts. He distinguished between ethnocentrism ("in-group glorification"), prejudice ("a hostile or negative attitude toward members of a *specific* group"), discrimination ("unequal treatment of the members of a specific group"), and racism ("an ideology based on the conception that racial groups form a biogenetic hierarchy"). Although Noel's application of those concepts to the chicken-and-egg debate suggested a rigorous methodology, he vitiated his case by admitting that "the present analysis does not start from neutral ground but is guided by the hypothesis that American racism was far more a product than a cause of slavery. . . . Racism arose, in response to slavery, as a means of justifying the extreme economic exploitation of blacks"—a blunt rephrasing of the Handlin thesis. Somewhat like the Handlins, Noel believed that cultural ethnocentricity was a contributing cause. Unlike the

Handlins, Noel acknowledged that racist ideas may have existed in Virginia before slavery and may even have "had some causal significance," though they were not, he contended, sufficiently "widespread or legitimate" to be "a significant cause."¹⁰⁸ He might have reached a different conclusion had he not assumed, following the Handlins, that slavery was rare until the laws of the 1660s and 1670s, for Noel held that a "society is racist . . . only if the idea of group superiority-inferiority is incorporated into the institutional structure."¹⁰⁹

Noel's emphasis on institutionalization hints that Virginia's sociopolitical rulers imposed racism on the colony at large through legislation. As noted earlier, Morgan, Breen, and especially Allen posit upper-class origins of lower-class racism; they imply that neither class arrived with much bias, but after midcentury the need of the planters to justify their increased subjugation of blacks and to drive a wedge between the potential alliance (in Bacon's Rebellion, some argue, the actual alliance) of poor whites and blacks engendered a racist rationalization.¹¹⁰

The strongest advocate of racism as a class strategy is Lerone Bennett Jr. "In the beginning," he announced in a series of essays in *Ebony*, "there was no race problem in America. *The problem of race . . . was a deliberate invention of men who systematically separated blacks and whites and reds in order to make money.*" Fear, snobbery, and especially greed were the inanimate villains in Bennett's scenario; the principal actors were "the white Founding Fathers. The Byrds, the Mathers, the Winthrops, the Jefferisons, the Washingtons." Bennett argued that in the early decades whites in general "had concepts of class and nationality but no concepts of race or slavery"; by the middle of the seventeenth century "the men who ran colonial America began to create racism." Poor whites were hoodwinked; blacks were degraded; the Founding Fathers were enriched.¹¹¹

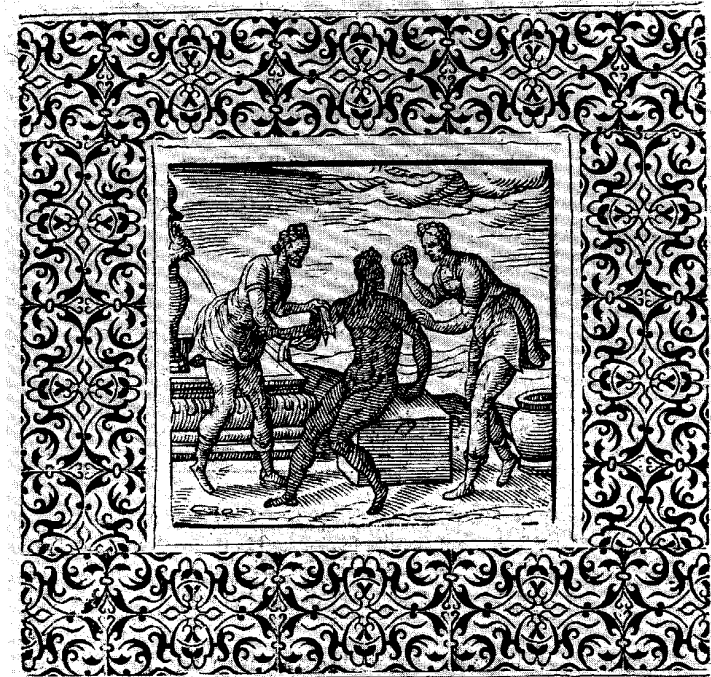
In the absence of more evidence on lower-class attitudes, we cannot be sure what inarticulate whites thought about blacks, though surely they had a concept of slavery and probably, however inchoate, of race as well. In any event, the surviving records scarcely make a case for a bias-free lower class. Poor whites sometimes had illicit sex with blacks, but that is no more a sign of unprejudiced minds than was the antebellum planter's penchant for sex with his female slaves. Although interracial marriages do suggest perceived equality, few such unions are documented. Equally inconclusive are the handful of attempts by white and black servants to escape or rebel together. Such efforts surely reflect temporary common interests, but they tell nothing about long-term relationships or basic attitudes. Similarly, Breen and Innes's case for the acceptance of free blacks as near equals by middle-class whites in Northampton County seems limited to court proceedings and commercial transactions, and even there the record is arguable.¹¹²

On the other hand, numerous clues point to a separate and inferior status for all blacks, slave or free, from the outset, without discernibly different class attitudes among whites. The evidence from British Amer-

ica and Tudor-Stuart England suggests that the bias against Africans was widespread.¹¹³ Although some lower-class whites surely overcame that bias by living and working closely with people who at first seemed strikingly different, the scattered clues suggest a broad English heritage of prejudicial attitudes from which few Anglo-Americans were liberated. The possibility remains (and is compatible with otherwise disparate interpretations) that the plantocracy grew alarmed at signs of eroding prejudice as lower-class whites became more familiar with black men and women; the upper class may then have reinvigorated a waning racist ideology among the poor whites to prevent a united working class. Convincing support for such a theory has yet to be presented, and class lines were so fluid in early Virginia that attempts to demonstrate ideological variants may be futile.¹¹⁴

The apparent prevalence of racial prejudice toward blacks in early Virginia raises a gnawing question: Why were Anglo-Americans contemptuous of people they barely knew? Surely racism was not inherent, nor was it inevitable. (A few scholars believe otherwise. Carl Degler, for example, concluded after analyzing race relations in Brazil and the United States that "color prejudice is a universal phenomenon" and that "blacks will be recognized as different and discriminated against whenever nonblacks have the power and an incentive to do so.")¹¹⁵ The evidence is now fairly clear that confluent circumstances in sixteenth-century England engendered a conviction, theretofore unarticulated and perhaps unknown in the British Isles, that dark-skinned Africans were in fundamental ways unlike Europeans and inferior to them (Fig. 7.1).¹¹⁶

The precise evolution of that notion is uncertain, but Jordan provided a good preliminary explanation in the opening chapter of *White over Black*. Its central components were, first, England's relative insularity before the middle of the sixteenth century from the world's cultural and ethnic variety; second, the sudden "discovery" by English voyagers, and eventually by the English public in general, of a people remarkably different from themselves in appearance and culture; third, the unfortunate coincidence of England's simultaneous encounter with people they perceived to be least like themselves and the animals (great apes) they deemed most like humans, with resulting false assumptions about the interrelationship between the two and the possibility that Africans were partly animal; and, fourth, the "emotionally partisan" quality of the color black in English symbolism.¹¹⁷ Subsequent studies support Jordan's conclusion that "from the first, Englishmen tended to set Negroes over against themselves, to stress what they conceived to be radically contrasting qualities of color, religion, and style of life, as well as animality and a peculiarly potent sexuality."¹¹⁸ Religion and lifestyle are cultural considerations and therefore targets of ethnocentricity, but notions of color, "animality," and perhaps sexuality are essentially biological, from which racist assumptions could be fashioned. Thus part of the English



LEAVE of with paine, the blackamore to skowre,
With washinge ofte, and wiping more then due:
For thou shalt finde, that Nature is of powre,
Doe what thou canste, to keepe his former hue:

Fig. 7.1.

Illustration and part of an accompanying poem that epitomize "Impossible" in Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems* (Leiden, 1586). By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

bias was ethnocentric—a perceived cultural difference in kind and quality—while much of it was racist, based on a widespread English conviction that Africans were innately inferior and unworthy of full equality.¹¹⁹

No literary outpouring comparable to antebellum America's denigration of blacks can be found in late Tudor or early Stuart England—an era of transition from oral to print culture—but an authentic racial ideology existed nonetheless. If the evidence for such an ideology, like everything else in the chicken-and-egg debate, is fragmentary, numerous clues nonetheless demonstrate that English assumptions about the nature of dark-skinned Africans were based on perceptions of biological as well as cultural difference. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

racial theory lacks the pseudoscientific language of the nineteenth century, of course; in keeping with the Elizabethan worldview, the rhetoric of human differences was almost always framed in religious terms. That terminology made it no less sincere and no less pernicious.

Take, for example, George Best, explorer and author, who wondered in 1578 why the inhabitants of Africa had such strikingly dark complexions. He dismissed the theory that the sun's heat determined pigmentation, because people at comparable latitudes in America and the East Indies were "not blacke, but white"; moreover, in England a black man could sire a black son, despite the climate and even the "good complexion" of the child's white mother. Rather, Best concluded, "the most probable cause . . . is, that this blacknesse proceedeth of some naturall infection of the first inhabitants of that Countrey [Africa], and so all the whole progenie of them descended, are still poluted with the same blot of infection." The Bible, Best believed, explained the initial infection: on the ark, Noah admonished his three sons to be sexually continent, but Cham (Ham), hoping for a son who would inherit the earth, disobeyed; for punishment, God made Cham's son Chus (Canaan) and all his posterity "so blacke & lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the World."¹²⁰ That Best's reading of Genesis 9:20-27 took great liberties with the text is beside the point. His conclusion about the Africans' pigmentation was widely shared.

The Reverend Thomas Cooper's tract of 1615, dedicated to (among others) "the worthe Commissioners, for the plantations in *Ireland* and *Virginia*," suggested a slightly different scene but with similar results. When Noah lay drunk and naked in his tent, Shem and Japeth were too modest to look at their father's nakedness; Cham not only saw but mocked it, "reioycing at, and deriding the corruption of the Ancient." God retaliated, Cooper theorized, by decreeing that "this cursed race of *Cham* [shall be] scattered towards the South, in *Affrica*, etc."; one of Shem's rewards was "that he shall be *Lord* over his *cursed brother*, and his posteritie."¹²¹ George Sandys, a prominent scholar and Virginia colonist, attested in 1615 that "all of that complexion" were descended from "*Chus*, the Sonne of cursed *CHAM*." Similarly, an English author in 1627 observed that "this curse to be a servant was laid, first upon a disobedient sonne *Cham*, and wee see to this day, that the *Moores*, *Chams* posteritie, are sold like slaves yet."¹²² A belief that blacks were eternally cursed by God thus had currency in England as early as the 1570s; that they were divinely consigned to slavery was expounded at least as early as 1615.

The pervasiveness of the biblical explanation is uncertain, for it competed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with a variety of other nonsensical explanations of African pigmentation. As Jordan observed, however, the Genesis theory was "probably sustained by a feeling that blackness could scarcely be anything *but* a curse and by the common need to confirm the facts of nature by specific reference to Scripture."¹²³

In sum, English opinion during early American colonization held that Africans were innately inferior in a variety of ways (just which ways depended, as with nineteenth-century racists, on the commentator's own concerns) and stigmatized by the color of evil because of God's displeasure. That was as profoundly a racist ideology as anything advocated two centuries later by Edmund Ruffin or George Fitzhugh or three centuries later by Ku Klux Klansmen.¹²⁴

Further evidence that notions of a biblical curse on black-skinned peoples were widespread in seventeenth-century Anglo-America, though infrequently articulated in print in an era of few presses and limited literacy, is found in Morgan Godwyn's missionary pamphlet *The Negro's & Indians Advocate* (1680). Godwyn was, to be sure, describing Barbados rather than Virginia and from the vantage point of the 1670s, but the racial biases he encountered echo Best's of a century earlier and comparable testimony from the intervening years. Godwyn's efforts to bring Christianity to the slaves encountered retorts of "*What, those black Dogs be made Christians?*" Many colonists, Godwyn lamented, adhered to the theory of the curse on Ham, others posited a separate creation for black-skinned peoples, while still others argued that "the *Negro's*, though in their Figure they carry some resemblances of Manhood, yet are indeed *no Men*." Godwyn had heard that idea expounded in England as well as America.¹²⁵

When the ideology of Negro inferiority first arrived in Virginia, it was unfocused—England had only a few hundred black residents, Virginia probably had none until 1619—and it surely lacked the depth and breadth of later times. Racism, like other ideologies, is erratic; it vacillates over time, has varying degrees of adherence, and may fluctuate within individuals.¹²⁶ The evidence from the early decades, however, suggests that although racism was incomplete, it was virulent in early Virginia, much as racism is incomplete, yet appallingly virulent, in America today. Such early racism helps to explain why Africans, and no others, were thrust into slavery almost simultaneously in Virginia, Maryland, Bermuda, the British West Indies, and New England. It also helps to explain why de facto enslavement usually emerged several decades before Anglo-American statute law acknowledged the practice and, in Virginia and several other colonies, long before blacks were numerous enough to engender racism as a response to fear over their abundance.

Racism alone did not, of course, bring slavery to British America. The world has witnessed many slave systems without racism and many racist societies without slavery.¹²⁷ Rather the conjunction of slavery (largely an economic matter) and racism (largely an ideological matter) generated a system of bondage exclusively for a perceived branch of humankind; that system was peculiar to Western Europe's American colonies in the sixteenth century and after, although there were traces of it in the mother countries as well.¹²⁸ Thus racism was one cause of a particular type of slavery, though it may be better to avoid the term *cause*

for causation is itself a shaky concept in complex situations. It may be more useful to see Anglo-American racism as a necessary precondition for a system of slavery based on ancestry and pigmentation. Without a profound bias against peoples of dark pigmentation—and all that it implied about God's curse on them (even if, in the case of many mulattoes, their ancestry was predominantly "white"), about their culture, and about their possible animality—Virginians could not have enslaved blacks alone, almost certainly from their first arrival in America. The Anglo-Americans' bias, shared by virtually all other Europeans, allowed the exploitation of Africans in ways that colonists seem not to have contemplated toward anyone else, not even, in the early stages of Anglo-American imperialism, toward Native Americans.¹²⁹

In sum, the explanation of Virginia's slavery that comports best with the evidence, I believe, is that white Virginians made permanent bondsmen of imported Africans and their descendants because it was economically advantageous to the slaveowners; because Africans were usually powerless to prevent enslavement or to discourage additional importations; and because the planters, and probably most of their white neighbors, believed that Africans were an inherently inferior branch of humankind, suited by their God-given characteristics and the circumstances of their arrival in America to be slaves forever. Such attitudes help to explain not only the existence of racial slavery but also the Virginia legislature's decision of 1668 that free "negro women, though permitted to enjoy their freedom, yet ought not in all respects to be admitted to a full fruition of the exemptions and impunities of the English." Free black women were, in short, second-class citizens, their legal freedom notwithstanding, simply because they were "negroes".¹³⁰

Given that pervasive ideology, the other racial patterns of early Virginia are not surprising. In the 1620s blacks were only about 1 percent of Virginia's total non-Indian population, yet they received strikingly different notice in the surviving records, and most were almost certainly enslaved; the few who were not had probably, in most cases, been baptized before arrival in the colony. In the 1650s blacks were only about 2 percent of Virginia's non-Indian population, yet again the records suggest that more than 70 percent were enslaved and all, slave or free, were subjected to discrimination unique to blacks. In the 1670s they were scarcely more than 5 percent of the non-Indian population, but most were enslaved by legal definition. A few blacks had by then been free all their lives and enjoyed many traditional English rights, yet in the closing decades of the century they too were gradually deprived of those rights, not because of anything they had done, but principally because people of similar skin color and similar cultural ancestry—though not necessarily from the original political or linguistic or theological groups of the free blacks—were brought into the colony in unprecedented numbers. Perhaps early Virginia society should not be called racist. Some readers may adhere to that interpretation; others may join me in be-

lieving that it sanitizes white Virginians' early attitudes and policies toward blacks and thereby distorts racism's baneful role in the seventeenth century and beyond.

Postscript to Chapter 7

Less than a year after the foregoing essay first appeared in print, its contention that American slavery began in 1619 and was accompanied from the outset by racist underpinnings was challenged in the *New Left Review*. Written by my Columbia University colleague Barbara Jeanne Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America" argued emphatically for a different interpretation of early Virginia's history and for a much later emergence of American racism. Although I do not find her reading of the evidence persuasive, she makes the most articulate case I have yet encountered for the arrival of American racism at the end of the colonial period rather than at the beginning. Her essay, moreover, raises some fundamental issues that had previously been slighted and brings to a new level of discourse the basic positions probed in my "Origins Debate." ("Slavery, Race and Ideology," it should be noted, was not a direct response to my essay; hers had been substantially written before mine appeared and was more a reflection of her own thoughts on the subject than a reaction to anyone else's, although she includes occasional criticism of other contributions to the debate, including a footnote reference to my own.)¹

Fields's basic argument is that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries white Virginians had not yet developed a "coherent ideology" of race and therefore did not perceive or treat Africans and their Afro-American descendants on such a basis. Rather, the ideology of race

came into existence at a discernible historical moment for rationally understandable historical reasons. . . . During the revolutionary era, people who favoured slavery and people who opposed it collaborated in identifying the racial incapacity of Afro-Americans as the explanation for enslavement. American racial ideology is as original an invention of the Founders as is the United States itself. Those holding liberty to be inalienable and holding Afro-Americans as slaves were bound to end by holding race to be a self-evident truth.

In support of this thesis, Fields advances three assumptions that presumably prove the absence of racism in early Virginia. She holds that (1) white servants generally fared almost as poorly as blacks, and some whites (Irish in America; vagabonds in England) were actually enslaved in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; thus "race" could not have determined (mal)treatment. (2) Africans and their descendants in Virginia before the 1660s, even those who were de facto slaves, had an unusual number of "rights" compared to their antebellum descendants;

thus racial bias must have been wholly or nearly absent at the time. (3) The terminology of seventeenth-century colonial laws concerning Africans and Afro-Africans "makes clear that the point was not yet race."²

Fields's analysis of seventeenth-century Virginia, I contend, misreads the evidence on all three of those assumptions and therefore fails to prove her point. On the first and second assumptions she homogenizes the plight of lower-class whites and blacks (slave and free); on the third she misunderstands the terminology of colonial laws. But her arguments are not to be dismissed lightly. Some readers, unaware of the article's factual shortcomings, find it persuasive; Fields has ardent adherents both in the United States and abroad. And even if she did not, the vigor and intellectual versatility of her argument deserve a respectful, point-by-point response.

I

The principal victims of early Virginia's labor system, Fields proposes, were not African slaves but white indentured servants, whose masters abused, cheated, and maimed them, "even killed [them] with impunity." Although they were not actually enslaved by their countrymen, Fields argues, it was not from any qualms about the sanctity of English nationality or respect for pale pigmentation. As to nationality: "the law in Tudor England provided for the enslavement of vagabonds"; as to pigmentation, "the English considered no brutality too extreme in bringing to heel the supposedly savage and undoubtedly fair-skinned Irish"—witness Oliver Cromwell's consignment of Irish prisoners to slavery in the British West Indies. English servants in the colonies fared almost as badly. "The only [*sic*] degradation they were spared was perpetual enslavement along with their issue in perpetuity."³

Up to a point, Fields is right: servants in early Virginia were often treated atrociously, and numerically they undoubtedly bore the brunt of the plantocracy's unfettered appetite for pliant labor. But she overstates both the severity of treatment and the existence of lifetime bondage for whites.

Unlike slaves, servants had some legal protections, they were rarely killed with impunity, and their four- or five-year terms (seldom seven) held promise of full freedom in a relatively short time, no matter how harsh the treatment until then.⁴ "Freedom dues," usually including a firearm, clothes, and sometimes land, awaited the former servant. For many of England's unemployed, those were attractive terms. Maltreatment of indentured servants was neither universal nor notorious enough to seriously curtail immigration until the third quarter of the century, when better alternatives emerged for England's "surplus" laborers. In Virginia's exploitive society, indentured servants, though sometimes treated slavishly, were never slaves.⁵

Nor were any other Europeans enslaved, in the usual sense of the word, in Tudor England or British America. The "Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds" of 1547 did, until its repeal in 1549, permit county courts to assign "vagabonds and sturdy beggars" (i.e., those physically able to work), if they appeared incorrigible to the authorities, to be "slave[s] . . . for the space of two years." Only if a temporary slave ran away for more than two weeks was he or she assigned permanently to a master. Two years later Parliament repealed the vagabond law because even its very limited form of judicial bondage was unacceptable to the English public and members of the judiciary. Few if any "slaves" were created by the short-lived act of 1547, and it had no counterparts in later, or earlier, Tudor-Stuart England.⁶ There were, of course, some slaves in England at the time: Africans or descendants of Africans, who were sufficiently numerous to evoke repeated royal efforts to banish them.⁷

Neither were many, if any, Irish prisoners of war consigned to true slavery in the West Indies. The records are frustratingly incomplete on the fate of the thirty or so survivors of the Drogheda Massacre (most of the city's inhabitants were slaughtered on the spot) and other prisoners who were shipped to Barbados; they may have served out their lives in servitude, or they may have been freed after many years of harsh labor. According to Michael Craton, arguably the foremost authority on early Caribbean colonization, "The unfortunate Irish captives and perhaps some Barbadoed criminals were servants for life without indentures. But even in their case servitude did not survive them, to be inherited by their children. . . . There is absolutely no evidence that whites were ever true slaves in this sense [of absolute, inheritable property] in the English colonies."⁸

While Fields's version of white labor exaggerates its similarity to slavery, her picture of Virginia's Africans errs in the other direction. Some blacks in the British colonies, Fields acknowledges, were "eventually" enslaved, because they *could* be: Africans and Afro-West Indians did not share the English lower classes' hard-earned legal and customary protections against enslavement, and the forced migration of Africans would not be affected by adverse publicity in Africa. But, she contends, American "slavery got along for a hundred years after its establishment [which she dates from the post-Bacon's Rebellion years] without race as its ideological rationale." Even the few in bondage before the enactment of slave laws, according to Fields, were relatively well off, because "African slaves during the years between 1619 and 1661 enjoyed rights that, in the nineteenth century, not even free black people could claim."⁹ By the middle of the eighteenth century, though, white Americans got used to seeing blacks at the bottom of the socioeconomic heap and began to assume that they were *naturally* inferior beings. As Fields reconstructs the evolutionary sequence, by the eve of the Revolution white Ameri-

cans had to justify to themselves and to a candid world the enslavement of one-fifth of the incipient nation's population. "Race" was the answer.¹⁰

This picture of Africans in seventeenth-century Virginia minimizes unjustifiably their plight. Fields is surely right that they came unwillingly and that no adverse publicity about their status could undermine the slave trade, but she underestimates the timing and prevalence of enslavement for most Africans and their descendants. The evidence, sparse and sometimes ambiguous though it is, leaves little doubt that slavery was prevalent and that slaves enjoyed no "rights." Some masters in the seventeenth century, as in the antebellum era, granted privileges to some slaves; some were granted outright freedom. Neither circumstance undermines the prevalence of slavery nor the absolute rights of the masters.¹¹

That racism accompanied slavery in seventeenth-century Virginia is harder to demonstrate, but the language of the laws is evidence for the existence of such an ideology rather than against it. Fields simply misreads the language of Chesapeake laws, especially Maryland's statute against "ffreeborne English women" marrying "Negro Slaves" "to the disgrace of our Nation" (1664) and Virginia's law against "any negroe or other slave" lifting a hand in opposition "against any christian" (1680). "Race" she contends, "does not explain" those statutes.¹² Of course race does not *wholly* explain the laws—a society's (at least a legislature's) immediate practical need is almost always the impetus for legislation—but the racial element in the laws she quotes is palpable, even though it is couched in the ambiguous language of the day.

This point is worth pursuing because Fields is not the only reader misled by seventeenth-century rhetoric. At first glance her claim that race is not at issue in the laws seems reasonable: the Maryland law specified "English women" rather than "white women" and "our Nation" rather than "our race," and the Virginia law read "Christian" instead of "white." But numerous examples from contemporaneous statutes and other documents demonstrate that "English nation," "Christians," and "whites" were virtually synonymous, as were, on the other hand, "negroes," "blacks," and "Africans." In the Maryland law quoted earlier, "English women" clearly included women of any European nationality living within the English colony, just as the Virginia legislature's call in 1629 for a muster of inhabitants "as well *Englishe* as Negroes" unquestionably sought information on everyone, regardless of nationality; in the language of the time, every person was either "English" or "Negro." Similarly, the Virginia decree of 1670 that "noe negroe or Indian though baptised and enjoyed their owne ffreedom shall be capable of any . . . purchase of christians, but yet [are] not debarred from buying any of their owne nation" had a clear racial basis: no African or Indian could buy a European, regardless of the latter's baptismal status, but Indians could buy Indians, regardless of tribal affiliation; Negroes similarly could buy Negroes from whatever African nation. Surely the legis-

lature did not intend that Yorubas could buy only Yorubas or Cherokees only Cherokees. "Nation" in this case effectively meant "race," and "Christian" meant "white" or Euro-American—as in William Berkeley's estimate of 1671 that Virginia had "two thousand *black slaves*, six thousand *christian servants*." The language of the time did not show "society in the act of inventing race," as Fields proposes; rather, I contend, it showed society inventing a vocabulary to express its racial ideology.¹³

In sum, Barbara Fields's keenly argued thesis that racism emerged in the Revolutionary era is invalid, I believe, because it depends on a mistaken view of seventeenth-century Virginia. Especially misrepresented are the distinct circumstances of white and black labor and the character of white Virginians' racial beliefs and policies. Of course I agree with her observation that "shared colour and nationality set no automatic limit to oppression"; most of the world's atrocities—including slavery—did not depend on those criteria. Slavery could exist without racism, racism without slavery.¹⁴ But the issue in the "origins" debate is the interaction of a particular form of slavery and a particular form of racism at one historic place and time. I believe that in early British America the institution and the ideology formed a fateful, unholy alliance.

II

The evidence of racism's baneful presence in early Virginia is, as I argued in "The Origins Debate," varied and abundant. To summarize briefly what I state more diffusely in several essays in this book (especially chapter 7, but also partly in chapters 3 and 6), I offer the following points. They are intended as both the final portion of my response to Barbara Fields's "Slavery, Race and Ideology" and as a summary statement on the entire "origins" issue. Documentation for the following paragraphs, unless cited here, appears in the other essays.

1. In every seventeenth-century English colony, most Africans were enslaved upon their first arrival and most remained slaves throughout their lives: in 1616 and thereafter in Bermuda (as ninety-nine-year indentures), 1619 in Virginia, 1627 in Barbados, 1630 in Providence Island, 1631 (perhaps 1641) in Massachusetts, 1634 in Maryland, and so forth. Although no Virginia law until 1661 mandated slavery for Africans, no law decreed otherwise; the buyer of human chattel had the protection of English common law of property. Moreover, contemporaneous statements by colonial residents and visitors describe Africans in general as permanent slaves in the English colonies. No Europeans, on the other hand, were enslaved by the English.

2. Some of the Africans who arrived as slaves became free through manumission by sympathetic owners, or perhaps by a selfish owner who granted freedom rather than support elderly or incapacitated slaves. Other Africans and early Afro-Americans escaped slavery by buying themselves, and perhaps their kin, through long-term purchase agree-

ments with owners. This was not a slave's *right*; it occurred only if the owner was willing, and it was probably to the owner's long-term profit and with money or credit he permitted the slave to accrue.¹⁵ Instances of self-purchase were apparently few, numbering scarcely a dozen men in seventeenth-century Northampton County, where the practice was probably at its most frequent.

3. A few Africans and Afro-West Indians apparently arrived in Virginia with servant indentures and subsequently gained their contractual freedom. A few others may have gained such contracts after their arrival, perhaps on the basis of conversion to Christianity. But the absence in the official records of most Africans' names or ages or dates of arrival would have thwarted an indenture system based on stipulated periods of service, either by contract or by "custom of the country" laws. Those statutes set terminal dates for servants arriving without written indentures; in any event they seem to have applied only to English servants. The few recorded black servants, moreover, served unusually long terms.

4. Only free blacks, and sometimes Native Americans, were denied full rights of citizenship despite their nominal freedom. For example, free black women after 1668 (and Indian women within the colony's jurisdiction after 1682) were taxed; other free women were not. And when, late in the century, Africans directly from Africa rather than the West Indies began to arrive in greatly increased numbers, free blacks, even those whose families had lived in the colony for three or four generations, were required to leave Virginia. They were ostracized as a separate, inferior branch of humankind—not yet designated by the word *race* but nonetheless perceived in just that sense—because many people of similar appearance and roughly similar geographic origin had arrived in the colony.

5. From the outset of British colonization, white Americans (at least those whose opinions survive) identified almost all Africans and Afro-Americans by one or more synonymous European color terms—"negro," "neger," or "black"; such terms appear in the laws, court records, inventories, diaries, and other literary evidence. Rarely was a geographic or ethnic term such as "African," "Yoruban," or "Ashanti" used. And color identifiers were applied regardless of the individual's longevity in America or status as slave or free. Very often the records included only the color labels for Africans, and where a name was used, it was usually a first name only (given by white owners or officials) and was often followed, even if a full name, by the color designation. Virginia's seventeenth-century censuses, moreover, commonly distinguished between only two categories of people: black (usually "negro") and white (usually "English" or "Christian"). There was, in sum, a palpable sense within the English community that Africans were distinctly separate and identifiable by pigmentation. In 1652, Rhode Island's legislature epitomized the prevailing English bifurcation of humanity when it referred to "blacke mankind or white."

6. Most references to Africans or Afro-Americans in English writings of the time were in some way pejorative. One of the most prevalent signs (as the previous paragraph implies) was anonymity: headright lists, for example, like censuses and wills and property inventories, show full names for almost all Euro-Americans and a partial name for most of those without full names but usually no names for Africans; instead, the lists acknowledge (for example) the issuance of headrights for "six negroes," or "three negro men and one woman." This pattern of depersonalization begins with the first mention of Africans in Virginia in 1619 and continues unabated through the century. In some censuses most of the cattle but only a few of the Africans are accorded names. And the various documents that list people, for whatever purpose, usually put Africans at the end, thus subtly implying an inferior status. Nothing comparable can be found for any other human group, including Native Americans, although they came increasingly closer to the Africans' anonymity and pejorative references than did any European nationality.

7. Not until the era of the American Revolution did a substantial body of literature emerge in defense of slavery and in derogation of the Negro "race"—i.e., a racist literature. But unless one assumes that without a substantial body of literature espousing a set of ideas there is no ideology (a trap into which many intellectual historians but few anthropologists fall), there is no need to see the literary outpouring as a sign of racism's arrival. Rather, I believe, it marked a new stage in the ideology's development, as did, in the antebellum era, the emergence of "scientific" explanations of "racial" differences. Racism, after all, need not be full-blown to be viable. As J. R. Pole observed, Edmund Morgan (and I would add Barbara Fields as well as many other historians) "seems to suppose that if the historical explanation of slavery lay in racism, it could only be because racism was as profound at the beginnings as it later became, but this is not so. It was only necessary that racism should be sufficient, and that visible identification—already a cause of racial repugnance—should make slavery so easily practicable."¹⁶

The *idea* of races—imprecisely defined and inconsistently explained—had arrived, I contend, with the first English settlers. That belief in turn determined to a large extent the set of shared perceptions, assumptions, and experiences that after 1619 shaped Euro-American behavior toward Africans and Afro-Americans in Virginia until the end of the century and beyond. The champions of that ideology had no need to proclaim in writing the beliefs that apparently had little opposition, except, of course, from its victims, and in any event the infant colony had neither presses nor sufficient readers. Still, from a variety of brief statements, especially from the writings of a few outspoken opponents of the ideology, the cluster of beliefs is clear, and it constitutes (to use Fields's definition of ideology) "the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the[ir] social reality."¹⁷

The cluster of beliefs that helped seventeenth-century white Virginians make sense of their perceived reality is readily apparent, I think, however irrational it may seem to us. In brief, they held that Africans were perhaps not fully human, and if human, surely inferior to whites in mental and spiritual capacity; that their general appearance and especially their pigmentation proclaimed that inferiority, probably because of the "curse" on Canaan's descendants, perhaps for other reasons, which in any event were God's doing; and that in light of their divinely ordained inferiority, Africans should be held in abject slavery or at least in a subservient status because they merited nothing else, not even the consolations of Christianity. To that last proposition a few clergymen (such as Morgan Godwyn and Richard Baxter) and laymen (such as Thomas Tryon) dissented. Their impassioned testimony documents the majority's virulent ideology.

III

I did not always advocate the interpretation I present in this book. As a graduate student in history in the 1950s, I was taught the Handlins' version of slavery's and racism's origins (as my yellowing class notes attest), and I taught those interpretations to my own students until Carl Degler's article and Winthrop Jordan's book shook my confidence. Some years later I dug deeply into the primary sources of early Virginia and was persuaded that white Virginians', and other Anglo-Americans', perception of Africans was even more thoroughly racial than I had suspected. Since then, I've spent hundreds of hours on those records, and the evidence only gets stronger.

I wish it didn't. The interpretation put forward by the Handlins and their many followers—each scholar adding his or her own twist but essentially insisting that racism was a post facto rationalization for slavery—is implicitly more optimistic about a speedy end to racial prejudice and eventually to race as a functioning concept in human relations. But I go where the evidence takes me. In this case it went in a depressing direction, one that suggests the future of race relations may be more drawn out and contentious than people of goodwill had hoped or expected. The solution, I submit, is not to rewrite history into a more hopeful story. Rather, we must all work harder to end a concept (race) and an ideology (racism) whose persistence has blighted American society since its beginnings and continues to cloud its present and future.

PART THREE

Puritans and Indians
