

Tobacco and Colonial Population



Tobacco is a flowering plant brought from Ecuador/Peru to Virginia first by Native Americans, before John Rolfe obtained seeds from a different species (*Nicotiana tabacum*) that was sweeter when smoked

Farming patterns based on physical geography led to the development of different social patterns in New England vs. Virginia. The New England colonies had thin rocky soils, remnants of the ice sheet left after scraping across the land 20,000 years ago. In New England, intensive management was required to produce a profitable crop. Stones had to be moved and fertilizer (animal manure) had to be applied to grow wheat and other crops during the shorter summers in Massachusetts and New York. Farming was intensive, with a great deal of human effort invested in each small, hilly field to improve the productivity of the New England soil over the years.

In contrast, in the Coastal Plain and Piedmont of Virginia there was plenty of fertile and flat land. Virginia also had a longer growing season between the last frost in the Spring and the first frost of the Fall.

Virginia colonists quickly centered nearly all of their investment on growing one staple crop, tobacco. They literally "bet the farm" that the crop would be successful and the prices in England would be high enough to make a profit. By 1640, London was importing nearly a million and a half pounds of tobacco annually from Virginia.

Tobacco was a finicky crop which required a large work force, an experienced overseer with excellent judgment, a sizable acreage and a certain amount of plain good luck.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, many small farmers successfully raised an acre or two of tobacco every season to sell for goods they could not grow or manufacture themselves. Most of the tobacco sold in England, however, was produced by plantation owners who relied on the unskilled labor of indentured servants or slaves for the bulk of cultivation and production tasks.

One third of the year was consumed from the time the tobacco seed was planted until the cured leaves were prized (pressed) into hogshead barrels. However, since tobacco grew best in previously uncultivated soils, land-clearing often took up most of the rest of the year.

If the seedlings survived inclement weather and ravages of the tobacco flea beetle, the planter would be ready to transplant his tobacco to prepared fields in May. Knee-high hills were made every three or four feet. This task was considered the most arduous one in the tobacco cultivation process; an experienced adult could prepare no more than five hundred hills a day.

About two months after the tobacco was transplanted, a series of steps began to ensure large leaves of high quality. First, the two to four leaves growing closest to the ground were removed in a process referred to as "priming." At the same time, the plants were "topped." After topping, the plant stood between three and four feet tall.

Once the tobacco plants stood six to nine feet high, they were mature and ready to harvest by late August or early September. Even if the planter had good weather and had avoided destruction by pests and diseases, his crop was still in danger. If the plant were harvested before it was fully mature or when its peak season had passed, it would be worth far less. On the other hand, if the tobacco stayed too long in the field, there was the risk of a frost destroying the entire crop.

Plants were cut with a sharp knife between the bottom leaves and the ground. If the weather were favorable, the tobacco was left on the ground for three or four hours to wilt. This resulted in a heavier, moister leaf which brought a higher price.

During the curing period, which lasted between four and six weeks, the color of the tobacco changed from a greenish yellow to a light tan. Mold was a danger during this time. Once again, a planter relied on his experience to know when the tobacco was ready to be removed from the sticks on which it hung, a process known as "striking."

At last, when the tobacco was ready, and during a period of damp weather, workers struck the tobacco and laid the leaves on the floor of the tobacco barn to sweat for a week or two. Logs could be used to press the tobacco and increase its temperature, but the heat might become too intense and mold spoil the crop.

Despite its drawbacks as a cash crop, tobacco cultivation had a number of advantages for both the wealthy plantation owner and the ordinary farmer. Its cultivation rapidly depleted the soil of nutrients. Although this may seem to be a strike against it, early settlers quickly discovered that virgin Virginia soil was too rich for successful harvest of traditional European crops, especially cereals. Tobacco broke down the fields and made food crops more productive.

Another advantage of cultivating tobacco was, although the crop was labor intensive, the labor need not be skilled. Unlike glassblowing or flax and silk cultivation, the tasks associated with tobacco were simple and could be quickly mastered by children or adults.

Of course, tobacco had its disadvantages, too. Weather, disease and pests could all too easily spoil a crop. In addition, it was necessary to have an experienced planter on the scene to supervise the other workers and to make crucial decisions all through the growing and curing processes.

The need for fertile soil on which to grow the year's crop required that the planter own large tracts of land, which had to be arduously cleared and prepared as field. Although the tobacco's depleting effect on the soil was at first considered an asset, all too soon the planters were left with land which was virtually useless for anything but grazing and which would take many years to regain its lost fertility.

Another problem with tobacco was that profit from it was so dependent on a foreign market. Prices fluctuated dramatically throughout the seventeenth century. Planters tried to control the market by limiting production and export, but they were largely at the mercy of their factors, the middlemen on the other side of the Atlantic.

Labor Force

Tobacco production was limited because the few colonists could produce only so much tobacco. One person could work 1-5 acres of land in a year - so a 50-acre headright was a generous grant for importing each worker.

A massive decline in Native American population after exposure to European diseases reduced the potential for using Virginia's original inhabitants as a labor force for growing tobacco. The

Spanish had experienced the same on the Caribbean islands, stimulating the original imports of slaves from Africa. Virginians tried but failed to enslave enough Native Americans to provide cheap labor, so the plantation owners found two other sources of settlers to grow their staple crop of tobacco for export--indentured servants and slaves.

Indentured Servants

The initial Virginia labor force consisted of English immigrants, transported across the Atlantic Ocean to Virginia from London and other English cities. To pay for the trip, many Englishmen and Englishwomen agreed to work for a master in the colony. The immigrants signed an "indenture" to document that commitment in exchange for the trip. The master of the indentured servant was obliged to provide food, shelter, and clothing during the indenture, which was often a seven year contract.



shipping hogsheads of tobacco (from Frye-Jefferson map of Virginia, 1755)

Slavery in Virginia



slave trade from Africa to North America (omitting those shipped to Brazil/Caribbean)

Source: National Park service - [The Transatlantic Slave Trade](#))

Virginia was not settled initially to be a farming colony; slavery was not part of the Virginia Company's plan for making a profit. The first blacks from Africa were imported into Virginia in 1619. It took about 50 years after the first slaves arrived at what is now the City of Hampton to develop a series of laws defining perpetual slavery based on one's color, and thus to ensure a low-cost labor force in perpetuity. The percentage of imported indentured servants used to grow tobacco declined, and around 1700 Virginia landowners began to purchase large numbers of imported slaves. To the Virginians of the 1700's, slavery was desirable and a new social structure based on race was justified by the economic importance of having a low-cost labor force to grow tobacco.



before modern pesticides, laborers had to pick worms off tobacco plants

Source: Jonathan Carver, [Travels through the interior parts of North America, in the years 1766, 1767, and 1768](#) (p.20)

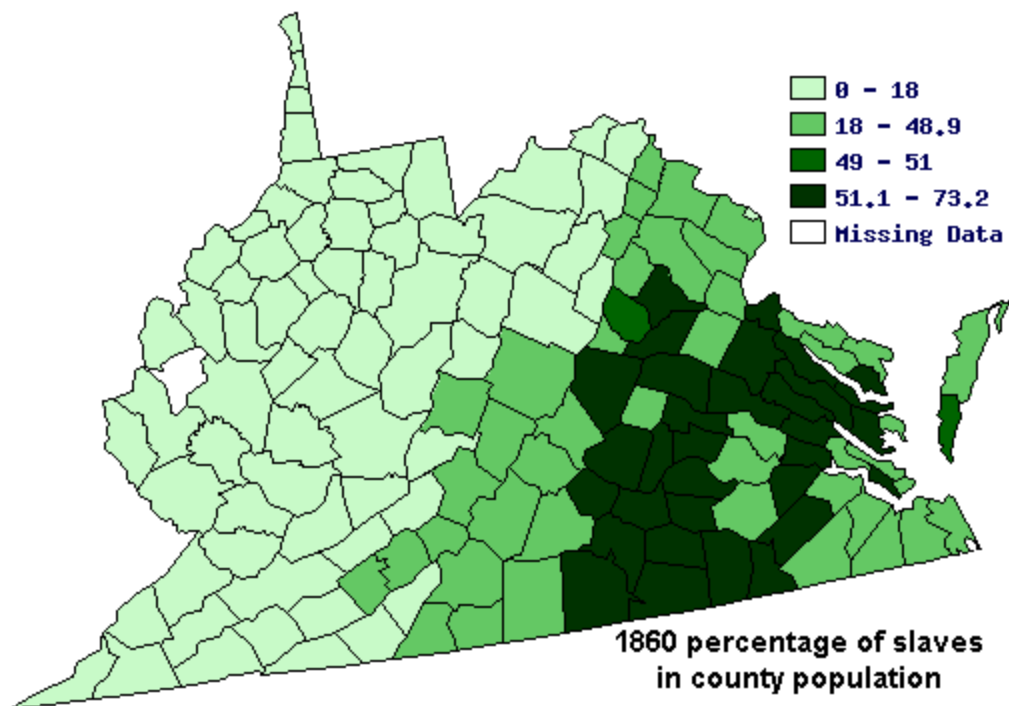
In New England, there was far less demand for a large pool of low-skill agricultural workers. The cultural attitudes towards slavery developed differently in New England as the economic systems developed differently. By the time of the American Revolution, 40% of the population of Virginia was composed of black slaves.

For almost 150 years from 1700 to the end of the American Civil War, the primary laborers raising tobacco in Virginia were black men and women. They were forced to work without ever having an opportunity to get a fresh start.

County	State	TOTAL POPULATION	TOTAL NO. OF SLAVES	total no. of slaves/total population
NOTTOWAY	VA	8836	6468	0.73
AMELIA	VA	10741	7655	0.71
CUMBERLAND	VA	9961	6705	0.67
GREENSVILLE	VA	6374	4167	0.65
KING WILLIAM	VA	8530	5525	0.65
POWHATAN	VA	8392	5403	0.64
ESSEX	VA	10469	6696	0.64
CHARLOTTE	VA	14471	9238	0.64
SUSSEX	VA	10175	6384	0.63
PRINCE EDWARD	VA	11844	7341	0.62

some of the 1860 population statistics

Source: [Historical Census Browser](#)



percentage of slaves in total population of counties in 1860

(note that Virginia in 1860 still included the counties of what is now West Virginia)

Source: [Historical Census Browser](#)

Questions for Tobacco Farming

1. How was farming different in New England vs the other colonies? Your answer should include the following elements: what type of agriculture was practiced; the type of crops grown; and the season and soil conditions.
2. What crop became the staple of Virginia farmers?
3. What were three challenges to successfully growing it?
4. What were two benefits of growing tobacco?
5. How did Virginians initially find labor to grow it? Why did they eventually turn to slavery?
6. How did Virginia's laws legalize the inferiority of slaves?
7. How did slavery develop differently in the North?