CHAPTER I
Serving Time in Virginia

As has become clear, the historian's simple act of selection irrevocably separates "history" from "the past." The reconstruction of an event is clearly different from the event itself. Yet selection is only one in a series of interpretive acts that historians perform as they proceed about their business. Even during the preliminary stages of research, when the historian is still gathering information, interpretation and analysis are necessary. That is because the significance of any piece of evidence is seldom apparent at first glance. The historian quickly learns that the words *evidence* and *evident* rarely amount to the same thing.

For historians attempting to reconstruct an accurate picture of the first English settlements in Virginia, the difficulty of taking any document at face value becomes quickly apparent. The early Virginians were, by and large, an enterprising lot. They gave America its first representative assembly, gave England a new and fashionable vice (tobacco), and helped establish slavery as a labor system in North America. These actions raise perplexing and important questions for historians, and yet the answers to them cannot be found in the surviving source materials without a good deal of work.

The difficulty does not arise entirely from lack of information. Indeed, some Virginians were enterprising enough to write history as well as make it, not the least of them being Captain John Smith. Smith wrote an account of the young colony entitled *A Generall Historie of Virginia*, published in 1624. Much of his history is based on eyewitness, firsthand knowledge. At the vigorous age of twenty-seven, he joined the expedition to Virginia in 1606 sent by the Virginia Company of London and played a crucial role in directing the affairs of the inexperienced Jamestown colony.

Yet Smith's evidence cannot be accepted without making some basic interpretive judgments. Simplest and most obvious—is he telling the truth? If we are to believe his own accounts, the young captain led a remarkably swashbuckling life. Before joining the Virginia expedition, he had plunged as a soldier of fortune into a string of complicated intrigues in central

Europe. There he waged desperate and brave warfare on behalf of the Hungarian nobility before being taken prisoner by the Turks. Once a prisoner, he was made a slave to a young but "noble Gentlewoman" with the romantic name of Charatza Tragabigzanda. The smitten princess "tooke (as it seemed) much compassion" on Smith. But alas, he came under the control of her sadistic brother, who reviled and taunted the captain so much that Smith lost his temper one day in the granary and "beat out [his] braines with his threshing bat" and made a daring escape, reaching England in time to sign on with the Virginia Company's expedition.

In Virginia the adventures came nearly as thick and fast. While the colony's governing council quarreled at Jamestown, Smith went off on an exploring and food-gathering mission. He established the first European contact with many of the Indian tribes around Chesapeake Bay, succeeded in buying needed corn from them, and was captured by a party of Indians loyal to Powhatan, the principal chief in the Chesapeake region. With Smith facing execution, once again he managed to win the affections of a beautiful princess—this one, Powhatan's young daughter Pocahontas.

How much of this romantic adventure story do we believe? The tone of Captain Smith's narrative makes it reasonably apparent that he was not the sort of man to hide his light under a bushel. (In writing of his adventures, he compared himself implicitly with Julius Caesar, "who wrote his owne Commentaries, holding it no less honour to write, than fight.") Indeed, several nineteenth-century scholars, including Henry Adams, challenged Smith's account of his Indian rescue as mere embellishment. Adams pointed out that the Pocahontas story did not appear in Smith's earliest published descriptions of the Virginia colony. Only in 1624, when the *Generall Historie* was issued, did the public first read of the Indian maiden's timely devotion. Smith probably invented the story out of whole cloth, Adams argued, in order to enhance his reputation.

We can, of course, look for independent evidence that would corroborate Smith's claims, but in the case of the Pocahontas story, no independent records survive. Yet other historians have defended Smith, Philip Barbour prime among them. Barbour has checked Smith's tales against available records in both Hungary and England and found them generally accurate as to names, places, and dates. Smith claimed, for example, that he used an ingenious system of torch signals to coordinate a nighttime attack by his Hungarian friends, "Lord Ebersbaught" and "Baron Kisell." No other records mention Smith's role, but we do know such an attack was launched—and that it was led by two Hungarians named Sigismund Eibiswald and Jakob Khissl. Similarly, although the records show no princess named Charatza Tragabigzanda, that may have been Smith's fractured pronunciation of the Greek *koritsi* (girl) *Trapedzoûndos* (from Trebizond). Possibly, when he tried to discover the identity of his new mistress, someone merely replied that she was *koritsi Trapedzoûndos*—a "girl from Trebizond."

Yet even if we grant Smith the virtue of honesty, significant problems remain when using his account, problems common to all historical evidence.

To say that Smith is truthful is only to say that he reported events *as he saw them.* The qualification is not small. Like every observer, Smith viewed events from his own perspective. When he set out to describe the customs of the Chesapeake Indians, for instance, he did so as a seventeenth-century Englishman. Behind each observation he made stood a whole constellation of presuppositions, attitudes, and opinions that he took for granted without ever mentioning them. His descriptions were necessarily limited by the experience and education—or lack of it—that he brought with him.

The seriousness of these limitations becomes clearer if we take a hypothetical example of what might happen if Captain Smith were to set down a history, not of Indian tribal customs, but of a baseball game between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees:

> Not long after, they tooke me to one of their greate Counsells, where many of the generalitie were gathered in greater number than ever I had seen before. And they being assembled about a great field of open grass, a score of their greatest men ran out upon the field, adorned each in brightly hued jackets and breeches, with letters cunningly woven upon their Chestes, and wearinge uppon their heades caps of a deep navy blue, with billes, of a sort I know not what. One of their chiefs stood in the midst and would at his pleasure hurl a white ball at another chief, whose attire was of a different colour, and whether by chance or artyfice I know not the ball flew exceeding close to the man yet never injured him, but sometimes he would strike att it with a wooden club and so giveing it a hard blow would throw down his club and run away. Such actions proceeded in like manner at length too tedious to mention, but the generalitie waxed wroth, with greate groaning and shoutinge, and seemed withall much pleased.

Before concluding any more than that Smith would make a terrible writer for the *New York Post* (we don't even know if the Yankees won!), compare the description of the baseball game with the account by the real Smith of what happened to him after his capture. (Smith writes in the third person, referring to himself as "he" and "Captain Smith.")

> At last they brought him to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. . . . Before a fire upon a seat like a bedsted, [Powhatan] sat covered with a great robe, made of Rarowcun skinnes, and all the tayles hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of 16 or 18 yeares, and along on each side the house, two rowes of men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red; many of their heads bedecked with the white down of Birds; but every one with something: and a great chayne of white beads about their necks. At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queene of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, in stead of a Towell to dry them. Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan. Then as many as could layd hands on

"And being ready with their clubs, to beat out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter . . . got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death." The tale has been passed down as a romantic rescue, but from Powhatan's point of view, was this event an adoption ceremony designed to cement a political alliance?

> him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beat out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper.

If we had not first read the account of the baseball game, it would not be nearly as obvious just how little Smith has told us about what is going on here. Indeed, anyone who reads the *Generall Historie* or any of the captain's writings will be impressed by their freshness and the wealth of detail. But that is because we, like Smith, are unfamiliar with the rituals of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake Indians. Quite naturally—almost instinctively—we adopt Smith's point of view as our own. And that point of view diverts us from ask-

ing questions to which Smith does not have the answer. What, after all, is the reason the Indians painted their heads and shoulders red and wore white down on their heads? We know no more than we did about baseball players who were described as wearing bright outfits with letters woven upon their chests.

Even more to the point, consider the *form* of Smith's narrative as it has been passed down to us over the years. The good captain is about to die until he is suddenly rescued at the last moment by "the Kings dearest daughter." Does the story have a familiar ring? Indeed—there is at least half an echo of Smith's being pitied by Princess Tragabigzanda. Equally important, the story has become prominent in our folklore because the romantic traditions of the nineteenth century delighted in such tales: a pure and noble-born woman saves the life of a brave commoner. Smith tells a story that fits a narrative pattern we love to hear.

But what if we lay aside the narrative perspective of Smith's story and consider the same facts from the point of view of Powhatan? Powhatan was the leader of a confederacy of Algonquian Indians living around Chesapeake Bay. He was, in short, the most powerful person in the region. But his control over the lesser chiefs in the area varied. Some tribal groups resisted paying tribute to him; others at a greater distance showed no allegiance and were indeed rivals.

Into this situation stepped Smith, along with the strange new tribe of white people who had just arrived from across the salt water. In hindsight, we see the arrival of Europeans as a momentous event that changed North America radically. But from Powhatan's point of view, here was simply another new group of people—strange indeed, but human beings nonetheless—whom he would have to set into the balance of his own political equation. Should he treat the newcomers as allies or enemies? Some historians and anthropologists have suggested that Powhatan's behavior toward Smith was in fact a kind of ritualized adoption ceremony and that Smith's supposed execution was a kind of initiation rite in which the captain was being ritually humiliated and subordinated. Once Smith passed the test of bravery in the face of apparent death, Powhatan was willing to adopt him as a vassal. As Smith himself puts it, Powhatan decides his prisoner can make hatchets for him and bells and beads for Pocahontas.

Powhatan's later actions also suggest that he now considered Smith a chief, or *werowance*, over this new tribe of English allies. At the end of a ceremony two days later, the chief told Smith "now they were friends" and that Smith should go to Jamestown and send back "two great gunnes, and a gryndstone"—just as other Indian allies supplied Powhatan with tribute. In return, Powhatan would give Smith land and treat him "as his sonne."

This interpretation of Smith's capture and adoption must remain speculative, but it is responsible speculation, informed by historical and anthropological study of the ways of Algonquian Indians. And we would have been blind to the interpretation without having separated Smith's *useful* information from the narrative perspective in which it came to us.

It is easy enough to see how a point of view is embedded in the facts of an eloquent narration. But consider for a moment evidence recorded by one of the pedestrian clerks whose jottings constitute the great bulk of history's raw material. The following excerpts are taken from the records of Virginia's general assembly and the proclamations of the governor:

> We will and require you, Mr. Abraham Persey, Cape Marchant, from this daye forwarde to take notice, that . . . you are bounde to accepte of the Tobacco of the Colony, either for commodities or upon billes, at three shillings the beste and the second sorte at 18d the punde, and this shalbe your sufficient dischardge.

> Every man to sett two acres corn (Except Tradesmen following their trades) penalty forfeiture of corn & Tobacco & be a Slave a year to the Colony. No man to take hay to sweat Tobacco because it robs the poor beasts of their fodder and sweating Tobacco does it little good as found by Experience.

In contrast to Smith's descriptions, these excerpts present small bits of information dependent on a great deal of assumed knowledge. Whereas Smith attempted to describe the Indian ceremony in some detail because it was new to him, Virginia's general assembly knows all too much about tobacco prices and the planting of corn. Policy is stated without any explanation, just as the box score in the paper lists the single line, "Yankees 10, Red Sox 3." In each case the notations are so terse, the "narratives" so brief, that the novice historian is likely to assume they contain no point of view at all, only the bare facts. But the truth is, each statement has a definite point of view that can be summed up as simple questions: (1) Did the Yankees win and if so by how much? (2) Should the price of tobacco be three shillings or eighteen pence or how much? (3) What should colonists use hay for? And so on. These viewpoints are so obvious, they would not bear mentioning—except that, unconsciously, we are led to accept them as the only way to think about the facts. Because the obvious perspective often appears irrelevant, we tend to reject the information as not worth our attention.

But suppose a fact is stripped of its point of view—suppose we ask, in effect, a completely different question of it? Historians looking back on twentieth-century America would undoubtedly learn little from baseball box scores, but at least by comparing the standings of the 1950s with those of the 1970s, they would soon discover that the Giants of New York had become the Giants of San Francisco and that the Brooklyn Dodgers had moved to Los Angeles. If they knew a bit more about the economic implications of major league baseball franchises, they could infer a relative improvement in the economic and cultural status of the West Coast. Similarly, by refusing to accept the evidence of tobacco prices or corn planting at its face value, historians might make inferences about economic and cultural conditions in seventeenth-century Virginia.

In adopting a perspective different from any held by the historical participants, we are employing one of the most basic tactics of sociology. Sociologists

have long recognized that every society functions, in part, through structures and devices that remain unperceived by its members. "To live in society means to exist under the domination of society's logic," notes sociologist Peter Berger. "Very often men act by this logic without knowing it. To discover this inner dynamic of society, therefore, the sociologist must frequently disregard the answers that the social actors themselves would give to his questions and look for explanations that are hidden from their own awareness."

Using that approach, historians have taken documents from colonial Virginia, stripped them of their original perspectives, and reconstructed a striking picture of Virginia society. Their research reveals that life in the young colony was more volatile, acquisitive, rowdy, raw—and deadly—than most traditional accounts have assumed. Between the high ideals of the colony's London investors and the disembarkation points along the Chesapeake, something went wrong. The society that was designed to be a productive and diversified settlement in the wilderness soon developed into a world in which the single-minded pursuit of one crop—tobacco—made life nasty, brutish, and short. And the colony that had hoped to pattern itself on the free and enlightened customs of England instead found itself establishing something that the government of England had never thought to introduce at home: the institution of human slavery.

A Colony on the Edge of Ruin

None of the English colonial ventures found it easy to establish successful settlements along the Atlantic coast, but for the Virginia colony, the going was particularly rough. In the first ten years of the colony's existence, £75,000 had been invested to send around 2,000 settlers across the ocean to what Captain Smith described as a "fruitfull and delightsome land" where "heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for mans habitation." Yet at the end of that time, the attempt to colonize Virginia could be judged nothing less than an unqualified disaster.

Certainly, most members of the Virginia Company viewed it that way. In 1606 King James had granted a charter to a group of London merchants who became formally known as "The Treasurer and Company of Adventurers and Planters of the City of London for the First Colony in Virginia." The Virginia Company, as it was more commonly called, allowed merchants and gentlemen of quality to "adventure" money in a joint stock arrangement, pooling their resources to support an expedition to Virginia. The expedition would plant a colony and extract the riches of the new country, such as gold or iron, and also begin cultivating crops that would yield a high return, such as grapes for the production of wine or mulberry trees for the production of silk. King James, a silkworm buff, even donated some of his own specially bred worms. The proceeds would repay the company's expenses, the investors (or "adventurers") would reap handsome profits, the colonists themselves would prosper, and England would gain a strategic foothold in the Americas. So the theory went.

The reality ran rather differently. After four difficult months at sea, only 105 of the original 144 settlers reached Chesapeake Bay in April of 1607. The site chosen at Jamestown for a fort was swampy, its water unhealthy, and the Indians less than friendly. By the end of the first hot and humid summer, 46 more settlers had perished. When the first supply ship delivered 120 new recruits the following January, it found only 38 men still alive.

The company correctly blamed part of the failure on the colony's original system of government. A president led a council of 13 men, but in name only. Council members refused to take direction and continually bickered among themselves. In 1609 the company obtained a new charter providing for centralized control in a governor, but when it sent another 600 settlers across, the results were even worse. Because a hurricane scattered the fleet on its way over, only 400 settlers arrived, leaderless, in September of 1609. Captain Smith, the one old hand who had acted decisively to pull the colony together, was sent packing on the first ship home, and as winter approached, the bickering began anew.

Nobody, it seemed, had planted enough corn to last through the winter. Settlers preferred to barter, bully, or steal supplies from the Indians. And the Indians knew that the English depended on them—knew that they could starve out the newcomers simply by moving away. When several soldiers stole off to seek food from the natives, the other settlers discovered their comrades not long after, "slayne with their mowthes stopped full of Breade, being donn as it seemeth in Contempte and skorne thatt others might expect the Lyke when they shold come to seek for breade and reliefe amongst them."

As the winter wore on, the store of hogs, hens, goats, sheep, and horses were quickly consumed; the colonists then turned to "doggs Catts Ratts and myce." Those settlers who were healthy enough searched the woods for roots, nuts, and berries, while others resorted to boiling boot leather. Conditions became so desperate that one man "did kill his wife, powdered [i.e., salted] her, and had eaten part of her" before leaders discovered his villainy and had him executed. By May 1610, when Deputy Governor Thomas Gates and the rest of the original fleet limped in from Bermuda, only 60 settlers out of 500 had survived the winter, and these were "so Leane thatt they looked Lyke Anotamies Cryeing owtt we are starved We are starved."

Grim as such tales are, we have almost come to expect them in the first years of a new colony. The Virginia experiment broke new ground in a new land. Mistakes were inevitable. But as the years passed, the colonists seemed to have learned little. Ten years after the first landing, yet another governor, Samuel Argall, arrived to find Jamestown hardly more than a slum in the wildnerness: "but five or six houses [remaining standing], the Church downe, the Palizado's [stockade fence] broken, the Bridge in pieces, the Well of fresh water spoiled; the Storehouse they used for the Church; the marketplace and streets, and all other spare places planted with Tobacco." Of the 2,000 or so settlers sent since 1607, only 400 remained alive and only 200 of them, Argall complained, were either trained or fit enough to farm. Even

John Rolfe, a prominent settler who was usually willing to put as good a face on affairs as possible, could not help taking away with the left hand the praises he bestowed with the right. "Wee found the Colony (God be thanked) in good estate," he wrote home hopefully, "however in buildings, fortyfications, and of boats, much ruyned and greate want." All in all, it was not much of a progress report after ten years.

In England, Sir Edwin Sandys was one of the adventurers who watched with distress as the company's efforts came to naught. Sandys lacked the financial means of bigger investors such as Thomas Smith, who had often presided as the company's treasurer. But Sandys's limited resources were precisely the point. Smith and the other big investors considered the Virginia enterprise just one venture among many: the East India Company, trading in the Levant, and the Muscovy Company. If Virginia did not pay immediate dividends, they could afford to wait. Sandys and his followers, with less capital and less margin for error, pressed for immediate reform. By 1618 Smith had agreed to introduce significant changes into the colony's organization; the following year Sandys was elected treasurer of the company. With real power in his hands for the first time, he set out to reconstruct the failing colony from the bottom up.

Blueprint for a Virginia Utopia

Sandys knew that if his schemes for reform were to succeed, he would have to attract both new investors to the company and new settlers to the colony. Yet the Virginia Company was deeply in debt, and the colony was literally falling apart. In order to entice both settlers and investors, Sandys offered the only commodity the company possessed in abundance—land.

In the first years of the colony, Virginia land had remained company land. Settlers who worked it might own shares in the company, but even so, they did not profit directly from their labor, because all proceeds went into the treasury to be divided only if there were any profits. There never were. In 1617 the company formally changed its policy. Old Planters, those settlers who had arrived in Virginia before the spring of 1616, were each granted 100 acres of land. Freemen received their allotment immediately, while those settlers who were still company servants received their land when their terms of service expired.

Sandys lured new investors with the promise of property too. For every share they purchased, the company granted them 100 acres. More important, Sandys encouraged immigration to the colony by giving investors additional land if they would pay the ship passage of tenant laborers. For every new tenant imported to Virginia, the investor received 50 additional acres. Such land grants were known as "headrights" because the land was apportioned per each "head" imported. Of course, if Old Planters wished to invest in the company, they too would receive 100 acres plus additional 50-acre headrights for every tenant whose passage they paid. Such incentives, Sandys believed, would attract needed funds to the company while also promoting immigration.

And so private property came to Virginia. This tactic was the much-heralded event that every schoolchild is called upon to recite as the salvation of the colony. "When our people were fed out of the common store and labored jointly together, glad was he could slip away from his labour, or slumber over his taske," noted one settler. But "now for themselves they will doe in a day" what before they "would hardly take so much true paines in a weeke." It is important to understand, however, that the company still had its own common land and stock from which it hoped to profit. Thus a company shareholder had the prospect of making money in two ways: from any goods marketed by company servants working company lands, or directly from his newly granted private lands, also known as "particular plantations."

Sandys's administration provided still other openings for private investment. By 1616 the company had already granted certain merchants a four-year monopoly on providing supplies for the colony. The "magazine," as it was called, sent supply ships to Virginia, where its agent, a man known as the "cape merchant," sold the goods in return for produce. In 1620 the company removed the magazine's monopoly and allowed other investors to send over supply ships.

Sandys and his friends also worked to make the colony a more pleasant place to live. Instead of being governed by martial law, as the colony had since 1609, the company instructed the new governor, George Yeardly, to create an assembly with the power to make laws. The laws would be binding so long as the company later approved them. Inhabitants of the various company settlements and the particular plantations were to choose two members each as their burgesses, or representatives. When the assembly convened in 1619 it became the first representative body in the English colonies.

Historians have emphasized the significance of this first step in the evolution of American democracy, and significant it was. But the colony's settlers may have considered it equally important that the company had figured out a way to avoid saddling them with high taxes to pay for their government. Once again, the answer was land, which the company used to pay officials' salaries. Thus the governor received a parcel of 3,000 acres plus 100 tenants to work it, the treasurer of the colony received 1,500 acres and 50 tenants, and so on. Everybody won, or so it seemed. The officers got their salaries without having to "prey upon the people"; the settlers were relieved "of all taxes and public burthens as much as may be"; and the sharecropping tenants, after splitting the profits with company officials for seven years, got to keep the land they worked. If the company carried out its policy, John Rolfe observed enthusiastically, "then we may truly say in Virginia, we are the most happy people in the world."

In 1619, with the reforms in place and Sandys in the treasurer's seat, the company moved into high gear. New investors sent scores of tenants over to work the particular plantations; the company sent servants to tend officers' lands; and lotteries throughout England provided income to recruit iron-mongers, vine-tenders, and glassblowers for the New World. The records of the Virginia Company tell a story of immigration on a larger scale than ever

before: more than 1,000 settlers in 1619, Sandys's first year, and equal numbers in the following three years. Historians who do a little searching and counting in company records will find that some 3,570 settlers were sent to join a population that stood, at the beginning of Sandys's program, around 700.

It would have been an impressive record, except that in 1622, three years later, the colony's population still totaled only about 700 people.

The figures are in the records; you can check the math yourself. What it amounts to is that in 1622, there are about 3,500 Virginians missing. No significant number returned to England; most, after all, could hardly afford passage over, let alone back. No significant number migrated to other colonies. We can account for the deaths of 347 colonists, slain in an Indian attack of 1622. But that leaves more than 3,000 settlers. There seems to be only one way to do the accounting: those immigrants died.

Who—or what—was responsible for the deaths of 3,000 Virginians? Something had gone terribly wrong with Sandys's plans. The magnitude of the failure was so great that the leaders of the company did not care to announce it openly. When the king got word of it, only after the company had virtually bankrupted itself in 1624, he revoked its charter. The historian who confronts the statistical outlines of this horror is forced to ask a few questions. Just what conditions would produce a death rate in the neighborhood of 75 to 80 percent? A figure that high is simply staggering. For comparison, the death rate during the first (and worst) year at the Pilgrims' Plymouth colony stayed a little below 50 percent, and during the severe plague epidemics that swept Britain in the fourteenth century, the death rate probably ranged from 20 to 45 or 50 percent.

Obvious answers suggest themselves. The colony could not sustain such an influx of new settlers, especially since Sandys, in his eagerness to increase the population, sent so many people unprepared. Immigrants often arrived with little or no food to tide them over until they could begin raising their own crops. Housing was inadequate; indeed, the records are full of letters from the company in London begging the colony's governors to build temporary "guest houses" for the newcomers, while the governors' letters in return begged the company to send more adequate provisions with their recruits.

Disease took its toll. Colonists had discovered early on that Virginia was an unhealthy place to live. For newcomers, the first summer proved particularly deadly, so much so that it was called the "seasoning time." Those who survived the first summer significantly raised their chances of prospering. But dangers remained year-round, especially for those weakened by the voyage or living on a poor diet. Contaminated wells most likely contributed to outbreaks of typhoid fever, and malaria claimed additional victims.

The obvious answers do much to explain the devastating death rate, but anomalies remain. Even granting the seriousness of typhoid and other diseases, why a death rate higher than the worst plague years? Virginia's population was made up of younger men primarily and lacked the older men and

women who would have been most weakened by these conditions. Even healthy settlers, of course, may be affected by malnutrition and semistarvation, but that brings the problem right back to the question of why, after more than ten years, the Jamestown colony was not yet self-sufficient.

Self-sufficiency required that colonists raise their own food. And the principal food raised in the area was corn. So the historian asks a simple question: how much work did it take to grow corn? A quick look at the records confirms what might be suspected—that no Virginian in those first years bothered to leave behind a treatise on agriculture. But a closer search of letters and company records provides bits of data here and there. The Indians, Virginians discovered, spent only a few days out of the year tending corn, and they often produced surpluses that they traded to the Virginians. A minister in the colony reported that "in the idle hours of one week," he and three other men had planted enough corn to last for four months. Other estimates suggested that forty-eight hours' work would suffice to plant enough corn to last a whole year. Even allowing for exaggeration, it seems clear that comparatively little effort was needed to grow corn.

Yet if corn could be grown easily, and if it was needed to keep the colonists alive, what possible sense is the historian to make of the document we encountered earlier, Governor Argall's proclamation of 1618 requiring "Every man to sett two acres corn (Except Tradesmen following their trades)." That year is not the last time the law appears on the books. It was reentered in the 1620s and periodically up through the 1650s.

The situation is a puzzle: a law *requiring* Virginians to plant corn? The colony was continually running out of corn, people were starving, and planting and reaping took only a few weeks out of the year. Under these circumstances, the government had to *order* settlers to plant corn?

Yet the conclusion is backed up by other company records. Virginians had to be forced to grow corn. The reason becomes clearer if we reexamine Governor Argall's gloomy description of Jamestown when he stepped off the boat in 1617. The church is down, the palisades pulled apart, the bridge in pieces, the fresh water spoiled. Everything in the description indicates the colony is decrepit, falling apart, except for one paradoxical feature—the "weeds" in the street. The stockades and buildings may have languished from neglect, but it was not neglect that caused "the market-place and streets, and all other spare places" to be "planted with Tobacco." Unlike corn, tobacco required a great deal of attention to cultivate. It did not spring up in the streets by accident. Thus Governor Argall's description indicates that at the same time that settlers were willing to let the colony fall apart, they were energetically planting tobacco in all the "spare places" they could find.

Settlers had discovered as early as 1613 that tobacco was marketable, and they sent small quantities to England the following year. Soon shipments increased dramatically, from 2,500 pounds in 1616 to 18,839 pounds in 1617 and 49,518 pounds in 1618. Some English buyers thought that tobacco could be used as a medicine, but most purchased it simply for the pleasure

Virginia's early planters marketed their tobacco to the Dutch as well as the English. This painting on an early-seventeenth-century ceramic tile shows a Dutch smoker attempting the novel accomplishment of blowing smoke through his nose. The new habit of smoking, at once popular and fairly disreputable, led to a demand for Virginia tobacco in Europe that drove up prices and sent enterprising colonists scrambling for laborers to help raise the profitable crop.

of smoking it. Sandys and many other gentlemen looked upon the "noxious weed" as a vice and did everything to discourage its planting. There had been "often letters from the Counsell" in London, he complained, "sent lately to the Governour for restraint of that immoderate following of Tobacco and to cause the people to apply themselves to other and better commodities." But his entreaties, as well as the corn laws, met with little success. Tobacco was in Virginia to stay.

Virginia Boom Country

The Virginia records are full of statistics like the preceding tobacco export figures: number of pounds shipped, price of the "better sort" of tobacco for the year 1619, number of settlers arriving on the *Bona Nova*. These statistics are the sort of box-score evidence, recorded by pedestrian clerks for pedestrian reasons, that we noted earlier. Yet once the historian strips the facts of their pedestrian perspective and uses them for his or her own purposes, they begin to flesh out an astonishing picture of Virginia. Historian Edmund Morgan, in his own reconstruction of the situation, aptly labeled Virginia "the first American boom country."

For Virginia was indeed booming. The commodity in demand—tobacco—was not as glamorous as gold or silver, but the social dynamics operated in similar fashion. The lure of making a fortune created a volatile society where wealth changed hands quickly, where an unbalanced economy centered on one get-rich-quick commodity, and where the values of stability and human dignity counted for little.

The implications of this boom-country society become clearer if we ask the same basic questions about tobacco that we asked about corn. Given the

fact that Virginians seemed to be growing tobacco, just how much could one person grow in a year? If tobacco was being grown for profit, could Virginians expect to get rich doing it?

Spanish tobacco grown in the West Indies fetched 18 shillings a pound on the English market. Even the highest-quality Virginia product was markedly inferior and sold for only 3 shillings. And that price fluctuated throughout the 1620s, dropping as low as 1 shilling. What that price range meant in terms of profits depended, naturally, on how much tobacco a planter could grow in a year. As with corn, the few available estimates are widely scattered. John Rolfe suggested 1,000 plants in one year. William Capps, another seasoned settler, estimated 2,000 and also noted that three of his boys, whose labor he equated with one and a half men, produced 3,000 plants. Fortunately, Capps also noted that 2,000 plants made up about 500 "weight" (or pounds) of tobacco, which allows us to convert numbers of plants into number of pounds.

By comparing these figures with other estimates, we can calculate roughly how much money a planter might have received for a crop. The chart below summarizes how many plants or pounds of tobacco one or more workers might have harvested in a year. The extrapolated numbers in parentheses show the number of pounds harvested per worker and the income such a harvest would yield if tobacco were selling at either 1 or 3 shillings a pound.

Tobacco Production and Income Estimates

Number of Workers	*One-Year Production* Number of Plants	Number of Lbs.	One Man Lbs./Yr.	*Income* 1s	3s
1 (Rolfe)	1,000		(250)	£12	£37.5
1 (Capps)	2,000	500	(500)	25	75
3 boys (1½ men)	3,000		(500)	25	75
4 men		2,800	(700)	46.5	139.5
6–7 men		3,000–4,000	(540)	27	81

Source: Based on data presented in Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975).

These estimates indicate that the amount of tobacco one man could produce ranged from 250 to 700 pounds a year, an understandable variation given that some planters undoubtedly worked harder than others, that some years provided better growing weather, and that, as time passed, Virginians developed ways to turn out bigger crops. Even by John Rolfe's estimate, made fairly early and therefore somewhat low, a man selling 250 pounds at 1 shilling a pound would receive £12 sterling for the year. On the high side, the estimates show a gross of £140 sterling, given good prices. Indeed, one letter tells of a settler who made £200 sterling after the good harvest of 1619.

Such windfalls were rare, but considering that an average agricultural worker in England made from 30 to 50 shillings a year (less than £3), even the lower estimates look good.

The estimates look particularly good for another reason—namely, because they indicate what a planter might do working *alone*. In a society where servants, tenants, and apprentices were commonplace, Virginians quickly discovered that if they could get other people to work for them, handsome profits could be made.

Back to the basic questions. How did an Englishman get others to work for him? In effect, he simply hired them and made an agreement, a bond indicating what he would give in return for their service and for how long the agreement was to run. The terms varied from servant to servant but fell into several general classes. Most favorable, from the worker's point of view, was the position of tenant. A landowner had fields that needed working; the tenant agreed to work them for a certain period of time, usually from four to seven years. In return, the tenant kept half of what he produced. From the landowner's point of view, a servant served the purpose better, since he was paid only room and board, plus his passage from England. In return he gave his master everything he produced. Apprentices, usually called "Duty boys" in Virginia because the ship *Duty* brought many of them over, made up another class of workers. Apprentices served for seven years, then another seven as tenants. Again the master's cost was only transportation over and maintenance once in Virginia.

Little in the way of higher mathematics is required to discover that if it cost a master about £10 to £12 sterling to bring over a servant, and if that master obtained the labor of several such servants for seven years, or even for two or three, he stood to make a tidy fortune. In the good harvest of 1619 one master with six servants managed a profit of £1,000 sterling. That was unusual perhaps, but by no means impossible. And Sandys's headright policies unwittingly played into the hands of the fortune-makers: every servant imported meant another fifty acres of land that could be used for tobacco.

The opportunities were too much to resist. Virginians began bending every resource in the colony toward growing tobacco. The historian can now appreciate the significance of Governor Argall's proclamation (page 6) that no hay should be used to "sweat," or cure, tobacco: obviously, colonists were diverting hay from livestock that desperately needed it ("it robs the poor beasts of their fodder"), thus upsetting Virginia's economy. The scramble for profits extended even to the artisans whom Sandys sent over to diversify the colony's exports. The ironmongers deserted in short order, having "turned good honest Tobaccoemongers"; and of similar well-intentioned projects, the report came back to London that "nothinge is done in anie of them but all is vanished into smoke (that is to say into Tobaccoe)." The boom in Virginia was on.

Planters were not the only people trying to make a fortune. The settler who raised tobacco had to get it to market in Europe somehow, had to buy corn if he neglected to raise any himself, and looked to supply himself with

as many of the comforts of life as could be had. Other men stood ready to deal with such planters, and they had a sharp eye to their own profit.

The company, of course, sought to provide supplies through the magazine run by the cape merchant, Abraham Peirsey. And if we now return to the Virginia assembly's order, quoted earlier, requiring Peirsey to accept 3 shillings per pound for the "better sort" of tobacco, we can begin to understand why the assembly was upset enough to pass the regulation. Peirsey was charging exorbitant prices for his supplies. He collected his fees in tobacco because there was virtually no currency in Virginia. Tobacco had become the economic medium of exchange. If Peirsey counted a pound of the better sort of tobacco as worth only 2 shillings instead of 3, that was as good as raising his prices by 50 percent. As it happened, Peirsey charged two or three times the prices set by the investors in London. Further, he compounded injury with insult by failing to reimburse the company for their supplies that he sold. Sandys and the other investors never saw a cent of the magazine's profits.

Another hunt through the records indicates what Peirsey was doing with his ill-gotten gain: he plowed it back into the most attractive investment of all, servants. We learn this not because Peirsey comes out and says so, but because the census of 1625 lists him as keeping thirty-nine servants, more than anyone else in the colony. At his death in 1628 he left behind "the best Estate that was ever yett knowen in Virginia." When the company finally broke the magazine's monopoly in 1620, other investors moved in. They soon discovered that they could make more money selling alcohol than the necessities of life. So the Virginia boom enriched the merchants of "rotten Wynes" as well as the planters of tobacco, and settlers went hungry, in part, because liquor fetched a better return than food.

Given these conditions in Virginia—given the basic social and economic structures deduced from the historical record—put yourself in the place of most tenants or servants. What would life be like for them under these conditions? What were their chances for success?

For servants, the prospect was bad indeed. First, they faced the fierce mortality rate. Chances were that they would not survive the first seasoning summer. Even if they did, their master was out to make a fortune by their labor. Being poor to begin with, they were in no position to protect themselves from abuse. In England the situation was different. Agricultural workers usually offered their services once a year at hiring fairs. Since their contracts lasted only a year, servants could switch to other employers if they became dissatisfied. But going to Virginia required the expense of a long voyage; masters would hire people only if they signed on for four to seven years. Once in Virginia, what could servants do if they became disillusioned? Go home? They had little enough money for the voyage over, and likely even less to get back.

Duty boys, the children, were least in a position to improve their lot. The orphans Sandys hoped to favor by taking them off the London streets faced a hard life in Virginia. They were additionally threatened by a law the Virginia labor barons put through the assembly declaring that an apprentice who committed a crime during his service had to begin his term all over

again. What constituted a crime, of course, was left up to the governor's council. One Duty boy, Richard Hatch, appeared before the council because he had commented, in a private house, on the recent execution of a settler, one Richard Cornish, for sodomy. Hatch had remarked "that in his consyence he thought that the said Cornishe was put to death wrongfully." For this offense he was to be "whipt from the forte to the gallows and from thence be whipt back againe, and be sett uppon the Pillory and there to loose one of his eares." Although Hatch had nearly completed his term of service—to Governor George Yeardly, who also sat on the council—he was ordered to begin his term anew.

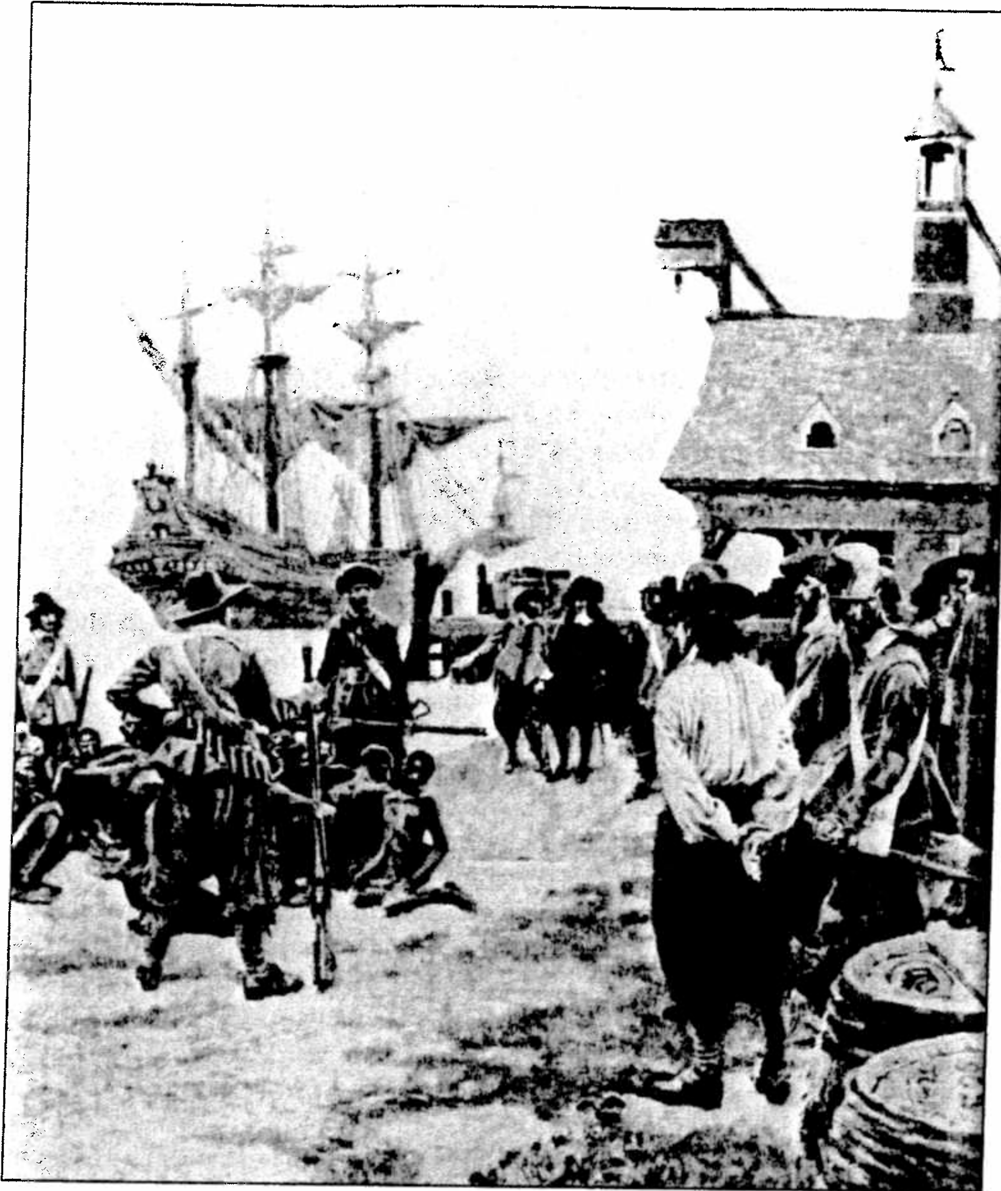
Tenants would seem to have been better off, but they too were subject to the demand for labor. If immigrants could pay their passage over but were unable to feed themselves upon arrival, they had little choice but to hire themselves out as servants. And if their masters died before their terms were up, there was virtually always another master ready to jump in and claim them, legally or not, either as personal servants or as company tenants due in payment of a salary. When George Sandys, Sir Edwin's brother, finished his term as colony treasurer, he dragged his tenants with him even though they had become freemen. "He maketh us serve him whether wee will or noe," complained one, "and how to helpe it we doe not knowe for hee beareth all the sway."

Even independent small planters faced the threat of servitude if their crops failed or if Indian attacks made owning a small, isolated plantation too dangerous. William Capps, the small planter who recorded one of the tobacco production estimates, described his own precarious situation vividly. His plantation threatened by Indians, Capps proposed that the governor's council outfit him with an expedition against the neighboring tribes. The council refused, and the indignant Capps angrily suggested what was going through the wealthy planters' minds. "Take away one of my men to join the expedition," he imagines them saying,

> there's 2000 Plantes gone, thates 500 waight of Tobacco, yea and what shall this man doe, runne after the Indians? soft, I have perhaps 10, perhaps 15, perhaps 20 men and am able to secure my owne Plantacion; how will they doe that are fewer? let them first be crusht alitle, and then perhaps they will themselves make up the Nomber for their owne safetie. Theis I doubt are the Cogitacions of some of our worthier men.

And Slavery?

This reconstruction of Virginia society, from the Duty boy at the bottom to the richer planters at the top, indicates that all along the line labor had become a valuable and desperately sought commodity. Settlers who were not in a position to protect themselves found that the economy put constant pressure on them. Their status as freemen was always in danger of debasement: planters bought, sold, and traded servants without their consent and, on occasion even used them as stakes in gambling games. There had been



"About the last of August came in a dutch man of warre that sold us twenty Negars." So wrote John Smith in 1619. The illustration is by Howard Pyle, a nineteenth-century artist who prided himself on his research into costume and setting. Yet even here, Pyle's depiction of the first African Americans probably reflects illustrations he saw of the very different slave traffic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These early arrivals may have been sold as servants, not slaves. Court records indicate that in the 1640s at least some black slaves had been freed and were purchasing their own land.

"many complaints," acknowledged John Rolfe, "against the Governors, Captaines, and Officers in Virginia: for buying and selling men and boies," something that "was held in England a thing most intolerable." One En-

glishman put the indignity quite succinctly: "My Master Atkins hath sold me for £150 sterling like a damnd slave."

Indeed, quite a few of the ingredients of slavery are found in Virginia: the feverish economic boom that sparked a fierce demand for human labor; the mortality rate that encouraged survivors to become callous about human life; the servants who were being bought and sold, treated as property—treated, almost, as slaves. If we were looking in the abstract to construct a society in which social and economic pressures combined to encourage the development of human slavery, boom-country Virginia would seem to fit the model neatly. Yet the actual records do not quite confirm the hypothesis.

The earliest known record of Africans in Virginia is a muster roll of March 1619 (discovered only in the 1990s), which shows thirty-two Africans (fifteen men and seventeen women) "in the service of sev[er]all planters." But are these Africans working as servants or as slaves? The muster roll doesn't say. Historians have combed the sparse records of early Virginia, looking at court records, inventories, letters, wills, church records—anything that might shed light on the way blacks were treated. Precious little information is available—but what little there is has been studied intensively. What we find is that very few Africans come to Virginia in the colony's first half century. People of African descent made up no more than 5 percent of the population at any time during those years.

Furthermore, the status of Africans who did come to Virginia varied widely. Before 1660 some were held as slaves for life, but others worked as servants. Still others either were given their freedom or were able to purchase it. Even the names in the record supply a clue to the mixed status of these early African newcomers. In the eighteenth century, once slavery was well established, planters tried to control the naming process, giving their slaves diminutive names such as Jack or Sukey, or perhaps a classical Caesar or Hercules, bestowed in jest. But during Virginia's early years Africans tended to keep their full names—names that often reflected the complex cultural landscape of the African coast, where Europeans and Africans of many backgrounds mixed: Bashaw Farnando, John Graweere, Emanuel Driggus. Other Africans tried to assimilate into English life. The man who first appeared in the colony's records as only "Antonio a Negro" changed his name to Anthony Johnson. "Francisco a Negroe" eventually became the freeman Frank Payne.

Only during the 1660s did the Virginia assembly begin to pass legislation that separated blacks from whites, defining slavery, legally, as an institution. Black Virginians, in other words, lived with white Virginians for more than forty years before their status became fully and legally debased. The facts in the records force us to turn the initial question around. If the 1620s with its boom economy was such an appropriate time for slavery to have developed, why *didn't* it?

Here, the talents of historians are stretched to their limits. They can expect no obvious explanations from contemporaries such as John Rolfe, Captain Smith, or William Capps. The development of slavery was something that snuck up on Virginians. It was part of the society's "inner dynamic," as sociologists would say—hidden from the awareness of the social actors in the

situation. Even the records left by the clerks are scant help. The best that can be done is intelligent conjecture, based on the kind of society that has been reconstructed.

Was it a matter of the simple availability of slaves? Perhaps. During the time that Virginia was experiencing its boom of the 1620s, West Indian islands like Barbados and St. Kitts were being settled. There, where the cultivation of sugar demanded even more intensive labor than tobacco did, the demand for slaves was extremely high, and slavery developed more rapidly. If traders sailing from Africa could carry only so many slaves, and if the market for them was better in Barbados than in Virginia, why sail all the way up to Chesapeake Bay? Slave traders may not have found the effort worth it. That is the conjecture of one historian, Richard Dunn. Other historians and economists have argued that Chesapeake planters preferred white servants but that during the 1670s the supply of servants from England began to decrease, sending prices higher. At the same time, an economic depression in the West Indies sent the price of slaves falling and sent slave dealers looking to sell more slaves along the Chesapeake.

Edmund Morgan has suggested another possibility, based on the continuing mortality rate in Virginia. Put yourself in the place of the planter searching for labor. You can buy either servants or slaves. Servants come cheaper than slaves, of course, but you get to work them for only seven years before they receive their freedom. Slaves are more expensive, but you get their labor for the rest of their lives, as well as the labor of any offspring. In the long run, the more expensive slave would have been the better buy. But in Virginia everyone is dying anyway. What are the chances that either servants or slaves are going to live for more than seven, five, even three years? The chances are not particularly good. Wouldn't it make more sense to pay less and buy servants on the assumption that whoever is bought may die shortly anyway?

It is an ingenious conjecture, but it must remain that. No plantation records or letters have been found indicating that planters actually thought that way. Available evidence does suggest that the high death rate in Virginia began to drop only in the 1650s. It makes sense that only then, when slaves became a profitable commodity, would laws come to be passed formally establishing their chattel status. Whatever the reasons may have been, Virginia remained until the 1680s and 1690s what historian Ira Berlin has termed a "society with slaves" rather than a full-fledged "slave society" whose economy and culture revolved around the institution of slavery based on race. During the boom of the 1620s slavery did not flourish markedly.

Sometime between 1629 and 1630 the economic bubble popped. The price of tobacco plummeted from 3 shillings to a penny a pound. Virginians tried desperately to prop it up again, either by limiting production or by simple edict, but they did not succeed. Planters still could make money, but the chance for a quick fortune had vanished—"into smoke," as Sandys or one of his disillusioned investors would no doubt have remarked. It is much to the credit of historians that the feverish world of the Chesapeake has not, like its cash crop, entirely vanished into smoke.