

**LORENA WALSH AND THE ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION  
OF THE TRANSITION TO SLAVERY  
IN THE EARLY CHESAPEAKE**

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The question I have in mind is quite simple: why did the early settlers of what became the United States buy slaves, particularly African slaves? The answer used to be equally simple: because they were cheaper in the long run and more immediately plentiful than any alternative source of labor such as fellow colonists, Indians, indentured servants or the settlers' own children. Like most things that look simple at first, however, this answer has proven problematic. Just defining the terms, "cheaper" and the "long run," turns out to require lessons in economics and business accounting. If nothing else, however, the historical scholarship of the last fifty years has clearly imprinted on our minds the centrality of African slavery to our nation's early economic success as well as to the long and bloody conflict which nearly derailed our federal union. Given that centrality in American history, the origins of African slavery in this country continues to challenge and intrigue us.

This is where Lorena Walsh's new book comes in. For over thirty years, she has worked in the colonial archives of both Maryland and Virginia, publishing a steady stream of innovative articles in response to well-posed but demanding questions. In Motives of Honor, Pleasure, and Profit, she has marshaled massive amounts of research, her own and others', situating it precisely in the published literature. Her goals are not only to tell the early story of tobacco growing in the Chesapeake but, as her sub-title suggests, to discover how effectively the wealthiest planters coped with the risky business of overseas marketing in a world frequently roiled by war and how well they managed their resources at home, including, and especially, their slaves. To use her words, did slave-based commercial agriculture in this region and during these years produce lesser or greater returns than other potential investments? (Motives, p. 12) Walsh's conclusion is

that most large Chesapeake planters followed economically rational plans. They maximized one of the two scarcest resources in the colonies, labor, and accumulated the other, capital, by engaging in systematic farm building. Land, the most abundant resource, they exploited extensively, and with far less destructive long-term impact than that by later would-be improving farmers. When it became cost effective to use more advanced technologies such as plowing or more complex methods such as manuring or crop rotations, planters adopted them. And when new markets developed for alternative staples such as grain, livestock, and naval stores, planters diversified their crop mix. (Motives, p. 24)

These are important conclusions but they pertain to the period after slavery had become fully entrenched in the tobacco economy and derive from materials unavailable for earlier years. Let's begin, then, our own investigation of the rise of early American slavery by directing our questions at Walsh's coverage of the previous century. For instance, why in the world did settlers need more labor than their own hands could supply? As matters turned out, pioneering new continents in the age of sail was far harder, far more time- and life-consuming than the English could ever have imagined. It took years before newcomers learned how to survive, to feed themselves, yet they knew they had to find marketable commodities to send back to England in order to get clothing and tools in return. If they wanted to make a farm of their own, and most of them did, they needed land, labor, and capital to develop a going concern, one which would not only feed and house them, but produce something to sell because self-sufficiency was neither possible nor desirable. In the cold northern reaches of our continent, for instance, colonists produced fish and ships, barrel staves and shingles, biscuit and butter, sending these mundane goods in ships of their own make to trade in the West Indies, where planters drove gangs of

Africans day and night to grow and process sugar cane for the English market. These planters were happy to buy cheap provisions and save their precious land and labor for their far more valuable staple. So, indirectly but no less fundamentally, slavery in the West Indies kept New Englanders in business.

In the Chesapeake, a far different environment, settlers early began supplying the English home market with air-cured smoking tobacco, an exotic New World product that had proved both pleasurable and addictive. Like sugar, tobacco required continuous inputs of heavy labor, hands-on labor, for preparing the ground, planting, weeding, de-bugging the growing plants, cutting them down at the perfect time, then processing them. In the case of tobacco, the leaves needed to dry and cure before packing in shipping containers. The tobacco farmers learned by experience that hanging the leaves individually under shelter with plenty of air flow would preserve the leaves and perfect their texture with less risk of mold or mildew developing during the months-long storage in ships' holds and merchants' warehouses. All this required constant, daily labor for nine-to-ten months out of the year plus the kind of expertise in handling the land and the crop that took years to acquire.

The better the quality of the tobacco, generally the higher the price received by the grower. However, there were two different species of tobacco: sweet-scented and Oronoco. These were of different character and attributes. They faced different markets and fetched different prices. Sweet-scented was an upscale tobacco that grew only in a limited area and was pricey. Its market in England was limited to the wealthier class of smokers. Oronoco, on the other hand, was cheaper and could be grown almost everywhere in the Chesapeake tidewater except for peripheral areas such as Virginia's Southside and the lower Eastern Shore. (Motives,

p. 148) The potential market for oronoco was almost infinite, given tobacco's addictive qualities, but when production expanded too quickly, its market price declined. From the individual grower's point of view, however, the more tobacco he produced, the greater his income that year. So, if a man had a good piece of land on which to raise tobacco, with ready access to waterside transport, he could double his income if he could get another man to work with him.

Who would work for him? Land was cheap in the seventeenth-century; a man could rent land to farm on his own, paying for it with a share of his crop. Equipment for raising tobacco didn't cost much: it included a hoe to work the light soil, a saw for cutting up dead trees, an axe and a knife. But a man had to eat, which in the Chesapeake meant raising corn, beans, and hogs as well as tobacco. The hogs could take care of themselves, but our pioneer farmer also had to pound the dried corn into meal every day before boiling it, requiring yet more labor. He also needed a cabin to live in, with a fireplace to cook his food and to warm the cabin in cold weather. If he survived his first few years in the country, and mortality from "seasoning" was shockingly high, he could begin building up credit with his neighbors, buy his own land, and perhaps buy an indentured servant's term. If the servant survived the seasoning and stayed healthy, our farmer prospered—but then he'd have to buy another servant to replace the one whose term ended in a few years. Even a non-quantitative historian can appreciate the simple truth that a healthy servant willing and able to work and to learn the business, was literally a gold mine, especially when crop prices were rising.

But the servant cost money to buy, and he might die years before his term was out. There were numerous diseases that could slow him down or kill him: malaria, dysentery, and all kinds

of infectious diseases like measles and small pox brought in by new arrivals in the country. Pneumonia was common in the cold, damp winters. Even immigrants who survived their seasoning did not live very long, averaging maybe ten years. The lucky ones married and had children, but usually died before their children reached adulthood. Widows, if they survived, quickly married again. (Motives, pp. 92-93,205-210.)

Despite these grim statistics, thousands upon thousands of indentured servants continued to arrive in the Chesapeake over the course of the seventeenth century. In fact, most English immigrants to the region arrived there as servants. (Galenson, 1981; Eltis, 2002) Despite bad publicity about the deadliness of the country and the brutal treatment of servants, many English continued to venture their lives there in the hopes of surviving their terms and acquiring land of their own. Economic and political conditions in England in the first three-quarters of the century were apparently bad enough to drive these poor, young souls to try their luck overseas. A boom in tobacco prices beginning in the mid-1640s encouraged immigration from England, with the result that “tobacco production increased more than tenfold between 1640 and the late 1660s.” (Motives, p. 131)

The sheer abundance of indentured immigrants during these years kept their purchase price down, and most planters bought them in order to expand their output and, hence, their income. But not everyone found servants a satisfactory solution to their labor needs. Some were seeking out enslaved Africans. Why? This is the nub of the matter: why? And who were these buyers? Anthony Parent, in his fine book, Foul Means: the Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660-1740 (2003), argues that African slavery in Virginia was the product of deliberate actions taken by a small emerging class of great planters with large landholdings and political

connections. Parent describes how this “elite” garnered a disproportionate share of available land by seizing it from Indians, by amassing headrights through importing servants and slaves, by using their offices to bend the rules regarding patenting, grants, requirements for development, and payment of quitrents, and by successfully obstructing efforts for reform. Unfortunately he mis-dates the transition from a servant to a slave labor force among the elite to the 1680s when servants were in short supply, thus lending support to the old argument that planters were forced to switch to slaves.

But the elite were buying slaves decades before the 1680s. In a letter to the Board of Trade, Gov. Berkeley estimated in 1671 that there were already 2,000 in Virginia alone, about 5% of the colony’s population. Walsh cites John Coombs’ dissertation, in which, she states, he conclusively demonstrates that, despite difficulties in obtaining a supply of African slaves, the Virginia provincial elite had made the transition to enslaved workforces **as early as the 1650s and that county elites became thoroughly committed to slavery by the 1670s**. (Emphases mine.) Indeed, by the 1680s, elite planters already held more slaves than servants, and by the 1690s their labor forces were almost exclusively enslaved. Let me emphasize Coombs’ and Walsh’s point: elite planters began acquiring numerous slaves in the 1640s and 1650s from Dutch traders *long before there was a servant shortage*. (Motives, p 131) Despite the relative abundance of servants available, all provincial officials in Virginia had acquired at least one slave by the 1660s, and, for some, enslaved Africans had already become their main source of plantation labor. Thus, the early purchases of slaves by Virginia’s political elite laid the base from which slavery grew and spread. (Motives, p. 140) It became entrenched in the Chesapeake economy soon after 1700, and, as the black population began growing through natural increase,

ownership of slaves among planters spread further down the income scale. (Motives, p. 21)

By establishing the early timing of the switch to slaves among the power elite, we have thus substantially altered the argument that tobacco planters were forced to buy slaves because of a shortage of servants. That shortage did emerge in the 1680s, and slaves became more plentiful and significantly cheaper in the 1680s and later. For these reasons, slaves became the predominant form of bound labor in the Chesapeake early in the eighteenth century.

But we still don't know why elite planters, who could choose between the two forms of bound labor, preferred slaves long before they were easy to obtain. The price ratios between the two types of bound labor did not really move in favor of Africans until the mid-1680s when a depression in the West Indian sugar islands led to a drastic reduction in the price of new Africans there. This was followed in 1698 by the termination of the Royal African Company's monopoly, opening up the slave trade to competition.

If relatively high prices of Africans in the middle decades of the century did not deter well-heeled buyers, what attributes made an enslaved African preferable to an English indentured servant? Walsh does not address this question directly. Using account books, correspondence, and diaries from the 1720s on, she charts changes in labor management policies among the great plantation owners whereby slaves gradually lost the privileges enjoyed by both servants and slaves in the seventeenth century: their working days gradually extended into the evenings and came to include all day on Saturdays. Additionally, new forms of work were imposed on them during the winter months. So, if one were looking backward from 1760, the long-term trend in the rate of exploitation of slaves becomes clear, but we are trying to compare servants versus slaves a hundred years earlier. Back in 1660, could planters have reasonably expected to get

more productive work out of enslaved Africans than from English servants and knowing that, preferred slaves? One advantage is perfectly clear, because Africans were servants-for-life, owners did not have to buy new ones every few years to replace those completing their contracted terms. But were Africans living long enough to justify their high initial cost? Price trends were actually favoring the continued use of indentured servants. The price of servants changed little between the 1630s and the 1660s; *it actually dropped in the 1670s as the stream of English emigrants swerved away from the West Indies to the mainland.* With upward pressures on the price of enslaved Africans from West Indian demand and downward pressures on the price of servants, one would expect tobacco planters to take even more servants than in the previous decade, yet some 2000 more Africans arrived in Virginia during the 1670s. (Motives, p. 201.)

As for differentials in life expectancy, all newcomers generally arrived in a weakened condition. If they survived the winter, they fell sick with the “seasoning” the following summer: malaria and gastro-intestinal diseases. Mortality levels for immigrants of both races remained high. Cas Edmund S. Morgan once famously quipped, “Virginia never became a health resort.” (E. S. Morgan, 1975, p. 183) We don’t yet know enough about differential mortality rates to know whether Africans had a sufficiently decisive advantage in life expectancy over Europeans to explain buyers’ preferences. We do know, of course, that some carried genetic protection against the more serious form of malaria which they carried in their blood and which local anopheles mosquitoes then picked up to infect non-African neighbors. (Rutman and Rutman, 1976.) On the other hand, they may have been more susceptible to pneumonia in winter.

Still, though, the chances for a new English laborer’s surviving seasoning increased

substantially across the middle decades, helped no doubt by a much-improved diet that included fresh fruit and cider, *hence the annual cost of indentured servants was actually falling because more servants were living to complete their terms.* (Motives, p. 181.) Planters had also learned how to mesh tobacco growing with corn growing with minimum interference between the two crops. Learning-by-doing not only improved the output of both crops but also greatly enlarged the year-round food supply. (Motives, p. 182.)

For other clues about the motives behind buying slaves in preference to servants, consider some of the economic consequences of the region's peculiar geography. The humid climate sends multiple rivers and streams flowing through the low-lying land of the tidewater. As a result, ships could gain entry deep into the interior at multiple points along the Bay's heavily indented coastline. Given such dispersed access, planters could fan out in search of good land and never be far from water-borne transport. Two related consequences flowed from this bit of geography: first, there was no economic need for a port or any central place because ocean-going vessels could anchor at the planter's own landing. It also meant, however, that ships might take months assembling their cargoes of tobacco. "It could take as long as 210 days for a ship to load a full cargo of tobacco," says Walsh. (Motives, p. 130.) Thus, there was no "metropolis" in Virginia to serve the role that Charleston did in South Carolina or that the port cities performed in the West Indies. Hence, crafts carrying perishable human cargoes needed to limit their deliveries to those few destinations where they could make safe and speedy disposal of their wares.

Facing the almost infinite number of potential landing sites along that heavily indented coastline, where would slave ships most likely entrust their valuable cargoes? In a stunning

article published in the William and Mary Quarterly more than ten years ago, Walsh first mapped the Chesapeake region into three distinctive areas: oronoco-growing, sweet-scented growing, and peripheral areas where tobacco did not thrive and alternative crops and industries took hold.

(Walsh, 1999) Those elite planters acquiring slaves in the middle decades of the seventeenth century were concentrated in the sweet-scented growing areas, most of which lay along the middle reaches of the York River in Virginia. They commanded access to the credit and commissions that enabled them not only to have first pick of the cargoes arriving in the York River basin but also to earn commissions on selling the rest to their wealthiest neighbors. (Coombs, forthcoming.)

We know, then, who bought slaves, how they obtained them, and where they deployed them: on plantation quarters growing sweet-scented tobacco. This was the luxury-market tobacco developed sometime before the 1650s. Its leaf had finer fibers, cured to a darker brown, and had a milder taste. It commanded a fat premium in the English market prior to 1675 and still-handsome margins above oronoco most years thereafter until c1710. (Motives, pp. 211, 213.) The leaves were also denser so that a container of sweet-scented tobacco weighed more than a similar-sized one of oronoco. This species had other advantages: with low topping, the plants absorbed fewer nutrients from the soil each season, leaving more for subsequent crops. “Sweet-scented could apparently be cultivated on the same plot for as long as six to eight years” in contrast to just three seasons for oronoco. So planters of sweet-scented saved by having to clear less often. (Motives, p. 149.) Once air-cured to the right “case,” this variety could also more readily be stripped of their stems before packing into hogsheads. Such stripping could lower the weight of the tobacco being shipped by as much as a quarter. The more leaves that

could be packed into the barrels, the more money the owner saved on impost and freight charges, which apparently were levied by the hogshead, not by their weight. (Motives, p 147, citing work by Hardin, 1995, 2006. See also Motives, pp. 182, 211, 353, 406)

Whether planters of sweet-scented tobacco were regularly stripping their leaves as early as the middle decades of the seventeenth century, we don't know, but we do know that doing so tacked additional days of hard manual labor onto the crop year. Did English servants resist this encroachment on their annual free time? To speculate further along these lines, were English servants able to use customary rights, such as half-days off on Saturdays and free time in winter, as a defense against owners' "unfair" demands on their time and thus hinder more efficient utilization of their labor? Perhaps they played hooky from work more often than court records suggest? By contrast, newly-arrived Africans would be at a particular disadvantage in negotiating privileges or resisting exploitation, unable as they were to understand a language and customs foreign to them.

Or perhaps owners had discovered some other advantage in using African workers that we haven't yet identified. Whatever the grounds for their preference, slave-buying planters must have felt secure enough in their property rights to risk investing so much money in them. How and when did the status of Africans arrive at that point in the Chesapeake? First of all, if any English settler living in the seventeenth century had any moral qualms about slavery, no evidence of them survives. As Walsh points out, English sailors and merchants entered the African slave trade *after* the Portuguese had already developed it. English participants, she says, "readily accepted enslaved Africans' status in the Atlantic world as trade goods and the degradation inflicted upon" them by their African and European enslavers and masters. Hence English

mariners viewed their cargoes and the laborers they saw working on plantations as “good merchandise,” or, as we would now say, as “commodities.” Settlers in the Chesapeake, furthermore, were not the first English to import Africans to work in their fields: their fellow colonists elsewhere had already done so: Bermudians began as early as 1616. Saint Christopher, the first successful English colony in the Caribbean, had a workforce of about 60 by 1626. “In the next few years, planters in new English colonies on Barbados, Nevis, and Providence Island almost immediately began buying African slaves taken by privateers.” (Motives, p. 112.)

In no English colony, including Virginia, did “negroes” ever have a status remotely equivalent to that of indentured servants. According to Walsh, the “great majority” were treated as “servants for life” despite the absence of explicit laws guaranteeing buyers’ property rights. Common custom, among English settlers on both the mainland and West Indian colonies, held that “negroes” brought for sale from Africa would serve for life, unless they arrived with a written contract specifying lesser terms of service. “The harshness and brutality that Virginia masters were able, more or less with impunity, to exercise over European servants afforded them more than sufficient license with which to control those” from Africa. In addition, however, “as councilors, burgesses, and magistrates, the slaveowning elite upheld and enforced” their own private acts of controlling and disciplining their slaves. They also decided that enslaved status was not just lifelong but also hereditary. They ruled that the status of children born to enslaved women would be determined by the condition of the mother. (Motives, p. 138.)

By the mid-1640s children born to a white father and an enslaved African mother were being sold as lifelong slaves. “The practice of putting African women to heavy field labor equal to that of men also began in the 1640s, if not earlier. Their status as permanent agricultural

workers was confirmed by a *law classifying all “negro women “age sixteen and above as tithables in 1643.”* “Thus, many of the conditions that came to define African slavery had already been established in practice, if not in law, within the first three decades after Africans arrived.” (*Motives*, p. 139.)

That’s when their numbers were still few. But, in the 1640s and 1650s before Parliament banned direct trade between the colonies and foreigners, the Dutch were delivering cargoes of Africans to the Chesapeake, so that their presence in the population increased substantially. But, as we have seen, it was the planter elite, the political officeholders, who owned more than two-thirds of enslaved Africans living in the Chesapeake between 1640 and 1670. Their heavy financial investment apparently prompted the Virginia and Maryland assemblies in the 1660s to enact the first laws actually defining the status of most blacks as slaves and closing all the legal loopholes. (*Motives*, pp. 141-142.)

With the arrival of another two thousand kidnaped Africans during the 1670s, many plantations owned by the officeholders had more slaves present than servants and “some were relying almost solely on black labor, even in poorer or more recently settled areas like the lower Eastern Shore and the Potomac River basin.” Thus, slavery was spreading beyond sweet-scented districts. The majority of Chesapeake tobacco growers were small to middling planters, however, and they simply lacked both the wealth and the mercantile connections necessary for acquiring slaves. The price of a prime slave, about L23 sterling in the 1670s, well beyond their means. Nor could small planters afford the risk involved in borrowing money to buy high-priced workers who might die within a year or two. (*Motives*, pp. 119, 140.)

Thus slavery did not replace servants in the Chesapeake as a whole, and especially in the

oronoco-growing regions, until later after the servants stopped coming. By that point, the English predominance in the African slave trade had driven down their average price. Moreover, as the African population in the Chesapeake grew, they were better able to form families and have children. Natural increase made it much easier for ordinary planters to acquire slaves from their neighbors on credit. At this point, as the saying goes, this society with slaves became a slave society.

Well, what have we learned from Lorena Walsh and Motives of Honor, Pleasure & Profit about the origins of African slavery in the continental British Colonies? First, if colonial farmers had a labor-intensive crop bringing in high returns over cost, and looked to continue to do so, then any rational farmer would invest in more labor beyond what they and their families and neighbors could supply. They could do so because, in the early colonies, suitable land was abundant and cheap. But in order to keep their laborers from running off to a higher-bidding neighbor or to go farm on their own, the colonists utilized existing systems for legally binding laborers to them: English indentured servitude for a term of years, and slavery for “heathens,” including kidnaped Indians as well as Africans. Seventeenth-century colonists did not shrink from imposing life-time servitude on Africans nor did they hesitate to use physical force and violence to squeeze additional work from either kind of laborer.

We are still unsure which advantages were decisive in favoring enslaved Africans over English servants in the years when the latter were still abundant in the Chesapeake and their average annual cost was declining. The difference in price between five years of white servitude and life terms for others, especially those from Africa, made the latter an uncommon luxury among common planters because they were without access to credit and could not afford the very

real risk that life for the costly new arrival might quickly be cut short. But for the rich and well-connected, their preference revealed itself early and appears to have been rooted in the greater productivity of Africans, whether because they suffered less from seasoning, lived longer after seasoning, or could be regimented more easily is unclear; perhaps it was all of the above. Lorena Walsh has no doubt, and I have no doubt, that slavery made sound business sense in the colonial Chesapeake.

The moral of this story seems to be that the market has no morals. It is up to those using the market to incorporate the well-being of others into their business equations. The expanding Atlantic economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries built America and made a lot of people rich but many, many more, miserable.

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