Slavery and tobacco

Nicotiana Tabacum

Tobacco belongs to a large family of plants, which include the potato, tomato, petunia and deadly nightshade. The genus seems to have originated in South America. Although tobacco plants prefer heat (80º average) and humidity during their three-month growing season, they tolerate higher and lower temperatures, and they can be cultivated almost anywhere. Botanists suspect that tobacco has survived and spread through human intervention over the past 8,000 years. The plant, which can grow over six feet tall, is large in comparison to its roots, flowers, and seeds--a single plant may produce up to a million tiny black seeds. One plant can sprout 18-20 large leaves, nearly 1 ½-square-foot each. With between 6,000 and 10,000 plants growing on a single acre, the leaf yield may approach a quarter-million square feet.

Nicotiana rustica seems to have been the first subtype cultivated, and it was grown as widely as corn across the Americas by the time of contact with Europe. *N. rustica*'s insecticidal qualities were known by farmers, whose shamans fumigated seed corn with tobacco smoke. *Nicotiana tabacum*, which accounts for over 90 percent of the tobacco grown today, was also cultivated and used by pre-contact Americans. There are widespread archaeological findings and historical accounts indicating that tobacco was consumed in many forms for religious rituals, friendship ceremonies, and medicinal purposes. A pottery vessel from Uaxactun, Guatemala, painted over 1,000 years ago, depicts a Maya Indian smoking a roll of tied tobacco leaves. The Mayan verb *sik'ar* (to smoke) has become the English noun, "cigar."

Columbus encountered tobacco on his first voyage to the Americas in 1492. It is believed he was offered dried tobacco by the Arawaks of San Salvador on the day he landed, October 12. That November, Bartolome de las Casas reports that two of Columbus' men saw a group of Tainos who "were going to their villages, with a firebrand in their hand, and herbs to drink the smoke thereof, as they are accustomed." The Taino word for tobacco leaves sounded something like *cohiba*, and was transformed by the Spanish into a name for their island: Cuba. One of the two men, Rodrigo de Jerez, tried a "firebrand" and accepted gifts of tobacco. Upon his return to Spain, he was imprisoned for several years by the Holy Inquisition on suspicion of "consorting with the devil" for emitting smoke from his nose and mouth, having adopted the pagan custom. (This was not the toughest anti-smoking punishment recorded; Pope Urban VIII would excommunicate any Catholic who smoked or used snuff in a holy place, while Russian Czar Alexis Romanov, Ottoman Sultan Murad IV, Persian Shah Abbas I, and Ming Emperor Chong Zhen put smokers to death.)

European cultivation of tobacco began in 1531 in Santo Domingo; however, it was not introduced to Europe itself until around 1556 (to France). French diplomat Jean Nicot de Villemain championed tobacco as a medicine and introduced it in the form of snuff to the French royal court to treat Queen Catherine de Medici's migraine headaches (for which he was honored by the word "nicotine"). King Philip III regulated Spanish colonial tobacco production in the New World by restricting locations where it could be cultivated (1606) and decreeing that all tobacco leaf must be sent to Seville, Spain, for processing and distribution (1614).

The Brazil-Africa Transatlantic Trade

The entanglement of tobacco and slavery began, not in North America, but in the Portuguese colony of Brazil. Following the settlement of the eastern state of Bahia in 1549, Portuguese settlers brought sugar cane to the region and imported African slaves to raise it. The Portuguese also enslaved native tribes and integrated their tobacco crops into the colonial economy. The quality of early Brazilian tobacco was only third-grade, and its sale was prohibited in Europe. Portuguese traders began to include rolls of molasses-soaked tobacco as a trade item with West African slave dealers. As the habit of tobacco use became established among African rulers, it became associated with social rank: men of importance had ornamental pipes and attendants to carry the pipes. In some regions of Africa (such as the interior of Cameroon), tobacco became legal currency. Tobacco theft became a felony punishable by enslavement. By the beginning of the 1600s, tobacco had become more profitable to Brazilians than sugar because of its role in the slave trade.

Despite efforts by some leaders, such the West African, Muslim conqueror Seku Ahmadu, who prohibited

tobacco use in the region of Timbuktu, the African appetite for tobacco continued to grow. Archaeologists have found pipes and smoking gear in West African burials dating to this period. Increasing numbers of convicted felons and prisoners of war were traded in exchange for the expensive imported leaf. In Guinea, it was reported that a slave could be purchased for six or seven rolls of sweetened tobacco (each weighing around 75 pounds). At the height of the slave trade, Brazilian traders sailed up to a 100 "negreiros" (slave ships) yearly between the Bay of All Saints ("Todos los Santos") and the port of Ouidah on the Gulf of Benin. It is believed between two and five million slaves were brought from the Slave Coast to Brazil from 1640-1870 in this two-way shuttle (rather than triangular) trade.

As other countries entered the slave trade, they also exchanged tobacco for slaves. English trader Humphrey Morice's 1721 instructions to Captain William Clinch of the *Judith* included a list of goods to be exchanged for slaves, including "tobacco, guns, Sringe, corrall, Amber, Pipes, gunpowder, spirits and beans."

Tobacco also was provided to slaves during their transport from Africa to the New World. It was considered, along with rum and brandy, to be a way to sedate the slaves. According to Danish documents, the slave ship *Fredensborg*, which sank in 1768, carried barrels of cheap clay "slave or Negro pipes" and tobacco; underwater archaeologists confirmed the written accounts when they found a large number of these pipes in the ship's wreck. According to Danish regulations, each slave was to receive a clay pipe and tobacco every day except Saturday while traversing the Middle Passage. However, one slave is known to have used his own African-made pipe on the way from Ghana to Barbados, for it was found in his grave, a rare transatlantic artifact. When the U.S. Navy intercepted three slave-ships in 1860 and brought 1,500 slaves to Key West, among the articles it supplied to the rescued slaves were four and a half boxes of pipes and 236 lbs. of tobacco.

Tobacco has one other association with the slave trade: there are reports that, along with vinegar, tobacco smoke also was used to fumigate the decks of slave ships once the slaves had been removed.

England and Tobacco

English explorers, such as Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake, introduced tobacco to England in the mid-16th century. Ralph Lane, first governor of Virginia (at the Fort Raleigh settlement in modern North Carolina), introduced the long-stemmed clay pipes to England through Sir Walter Raleigh. Early pipe bowls were very small, holding only about 1/25th of an ounce of tobacco. Tobacco was not only quite strong, it also was rare and expensive, a monopoly of the Spanish and Portuguese. (It ranged from $15-$125 per pound, worth its weight in silver to wealthy Londoners.) Tobacco use became popular among the social elite, who formed gentlemen's smoking clubs where they could "drink smoke" from their pipes. In an effort to curb tobacco use, King James I of England increased the import tax on tobacco by 4,000 percent in 1604. His efforts failed as tobacco shops proliferated. In 1614, there were 7,000 tobacco shops reported in London alone, and tobacco was also sold by apothecaries as a medicine. According to the theories of mercantilism, it was bad for a country to have to import products from other nations, and England was almost wholly dependent on tobacco from its enemy, Spain.

In 1607, the English established Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the New World. The Virginia colony was intended to supply England with necessities that it would otherwise have to import. Instead, the colony struggled for survival for the next four years, its population dipping to only 38 inhabitants in 1608. After stabilizing itself, Jamestown struggled next for profitability. Failing to discover gold or gemstones, the settlers also failed in one venture after the next, including the production of glass, wine, and silk. Even attempts to export native *N. rustica* tobacco failed because English smokers preferred the milder *N. tabacum* sold by the Spanish.

John Rolfe, who arrived in Jamestown in 1609 and most famously married Pocahontas in 1614, is credited by the secretary of Virginia, Ralph Hamor, with transforming the colony into a mercantile miracle. "I may not forget the gentleman worthie of much commendations, which first tooke the pains to make triall thereof, his name Mr. John Rolfe, Anno Domini 1612, partly for the love he hath a long time borne unto it, and partly to raise commodity to the adventurers." A confirmed smoker, Rolfe planted seed from a variety of *N. tabacum* called Oronoco (an improved variety developed in Varina, Spain, that Rolfe obtained either from Trinidad or Bermuda) and discovered that this "tall tobacco" grew well in Virginia's hot and humid lowlands. He harvested the dark leaves, piled them up like hay, allowed them to sweat and dry, and then

shared some of his crop with other settlers who were pleased that the leaf smoked "pleasante, sweet and strong." Rolfe shipped out the remaining 200 pounds of experimental tobacco leaf, most likely on the *Elizabeth, which* sailed from Virginia on June 28, 1613. In England, Rolfe's tobacco was compared favorably to Spanish tobacco.

The following year, Rolfe packed his tobacco into four 500-pound capacity barrels called hogsheads and shipped it to England where it sold for three shillings a pound (£300 total). Having finally found a profitable export, Jamestown's colonists, within two years, had planted "the market-place, and the streets and all other spare places," including the cemetery, with tobacco. Captain John Smith calculated a man's labor in growing tobacco earned him £50-60 per year, while grain earned him only £10; John Pory, secretary of Virginia in 1619, explained that a man "by the meanes of sixe servants hath cleared at one crop a thousand pound English." However, in their scramble for wealth, the Jamestown colonists not only stopped producing other export commodities, they neglected to plant adequate supplies of food, so, in 1616, the deputy governor required anyone growing tobacco to raise two acres of corn.

The tobacco boom was a boon, but it also fueled territorial expansion and angered Powhatan. In 1619 alone, Virginia settlers established a dozen plantations (for a total of 44), encroaching on Powhatan's Algonquian confederacy of tribes as far west as modern Richmond. Because tobacco depletes nutrients from the soil in as little as three years, tobacco planters continued to sprawl farther into the Chesapeake region, claiming all of the land along banks of the James River and parcels on the Eastern Shore.

The tobacco economy also created also serious labor problems. With an English population that had fluctuated between 150 and 1,000 for a decade, the labor shortage in Virginia was acute. In 1619, the Virginia Company instituted the headright system, offering land for each person (head) that they could entice to settle in Virginia. The company gave glowing reports of Virginia's riches that lured poor, landless boys (most in their teens) to indenture themselves for four-seven years as servants in exchange for free ship's passage. However, the servants found that the "labor is infynite," there was little comfort and no prospect of family on the remote plantations, and that early death stalked them. Planters had a well-documented reputation for mistreating these indentured servants, starving and abusing them, renting out their labor to others, and abridging their contracts. The labor-desperate colony willingly accepted transported criminals and political dissidents, and asked no questions of professional kidnappers (like those who snatched David Balfour in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped*).

Virginians also pressured Powhatan's successor, Opechanconough, to send whole families from tribal villages to work on English tobacco plantations, with little success. As the tobacco planters continued to expand into the Powhatan Algonquians' land, they also expected the tribes to supply them with increasing amounts of corn from their dwindling acreage. On March 22, 1622, the confederated tribes staged a coordinated revolt across Virginia, killing between 300 and 400 English settlers. Yet incredibly, in 1623, William Capps reported planters were so blinded by tobacco profit that they neglected the defense of the colony, with arguments such as, "take away one of my men, there 2,000 Plantes gone, that's 500 waight of Tobacco, yea and what shall this man doe, runne after the Indians?"

The tobacco-obsessed Virginians continued to improve their product to make it competitive with Spanish leaf. Around 1618, Thomas Lambert figured out a way to dry tobacco leaves evenly by tying the tobacco from wooden laths that would be hung up in a shed where sun and air could circulate and cure all the leaves. The improved curing allowed the first representative government in the New World, the House of Burgesses, to enact as its first piece of legislation a minimum price for tobacco (1619). That same year, tobacco wealth also enabled the men of Jamestown to import wives at a cost of 120 pounds of tobacco per woman. Given the shortage of coin in the colony, tobacco was used as the currency. The wages of clergymen, government officials, and soldiers were paid in tobacco.

Within a dozen years of Rolfe's experiment, Virginia had a virtual monopoly on the English tobacco market: in 1619, tobacco cultivation in England was banned; in 1622, Virginia was awarded a seven-year exclusive contract to supply tobacco to England and Ireland; and in 1624, foreign ships were banned from Virginia trade. As tobacco production boomed, Virginia tobacco not only enabled England to stop importing Spanish tobacco, it produced a surplus, which could be exported to the European continent at a profit. Virginia's Act of 1730, establishing an inspection system to control the quantity and quality of tobacco, helped to make Virginia's tobacco the most desirable in the world for pipe and snuff consumption. Tobacco had allowed Virginia to achieve its mercantile founders' dreams. One of history's great ironies is that King

James' namesake, Jamestown, achieved economic prosperity only by growing the very tobacco that the king had denounced in ***A Counterblaste to Tobacco*** (1604).

Table 1: Virginia Colonial Tobacco Exports

1616	1617	1618	1622	1626	1639	1700	1775
2,300 lbs.	20,000 lbs.	50,000 lbs.	60,000 lbs.	300,000 lbs.	1,500,000 lbs.	20,000,000 lbs.	100,000,000 lbs.

African Servitude in Virginia

According to John Rolfe's account for the year 1619, "About the last of August came in a Dutch man of warre that sold us twenty negars." The privateer seems to have seized Africans from a captured slave ship and sold them to the colony, which subsequently sold them to settlers, evidently as indentured bondsmen rather than slaves for life. Court records show the term of service for some Africans, and a small number became free, held property, married, and raised families. Anthony Johnson, who arrived in 1621 on the *James*, survived the 1622 massacre and worked as a slave on Richard Bennett's tobacco plantation, eventually gained his freedom. By the 1650s, he had married Mary (a former slave who arrived in 1622 on the *Margrett and John*), owned 250 acres and at least one slave, and raised livestock. After 1635, African slaves were shipped directly to Jamestown from London, Neiuw Nederland (later New York), and the Caribbean islands. The total black population in Virginia grew only to a total of 300 by 1648, limited by a nearly 33 percent mortality rate brought on by illness, hunger, and warfare.

The decade of 1660s changed both the quantity of African laborers and the nature of their servitude. Virginia's demand for labor exceeded the supply of indentured servants. With the end of England's civil war, the supply of Scots, Irish, and Royalist prisoners-of-war dwindled, and renewed prosperity reduced the number of people willing to emigrate or indenture themselves. Although planters were beginning to suffer from a decline in tobacco prices caused by over-production, they had the capacity to compensate by increasing the size of their land-holdings and output of tobacco, provided they could find cheap labor. A crash in sugar prices prompted Caribbean planters to sell off many of their slaves to the labor-hungry Virginians. Perhaps most crucially, the Spanish and Portuguese monopoly of the slave trade had been broken by the Dutch in 1650, and the English decided to enter the transatlantic slave trade as well. King Charles II helped establish the Royal Adventures into Africa Company in 1660. Later chartered as the Royal African Company, the king authorized "as many ships, pinnaces, and barks as shall be thought fitting ... for the buying, selling, bartering and exchanging of, for or with any gold, silver, negroes, slaves, goods wares and manufactures." Removal of barriers to Dutch slave traders by Virginia's General Assembly in 1660 also increased the supply of slaves to the colony.

By 1689, British traders had carried 90,000 slaves from Africa to the New World, including several thousand to the Tobacco Coast (the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia, Maryland. and North Carolina). Following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, the British provided slaves to the Spanish Empire and emerged as the dominant slave-trading nation of the 18th century. By 1790, a slave ship departed British ports for Africa every other day. Despite the preference for Brazilian tobacco in most slave trading regions, Virginia tobacco became the preferred tobacco in the Senegambia area; the product of Chesapeake slaves' labor was used to enslave yet more Africans in the vicious circle that was the slave trade. Prior to the Emancipation Act, which ended the British slave trade on August 1, 1834, British vessels transported 2.6 million Africans into slavery throughout the New World.

Between 1750 and 1860, black slaves accounted for 40 percent of Virginia's population on average. A census of eight Tidewater-Piedmont counties in 1782-1783 Virginia recorded 15 citizens who held over 100 slaves; 45 who held 50-99 slaves; 105 who held 30-49 slaves; 195 who held 20-29 slaves; 600 who held 10-19 slaves; 600 who held four-nine slaves; 1050 who held one-four slaves; and 900 who owned no slaves. In areas where the tobacco plantation system was less significant, the average slaveholder decreased below an average holding of eight slaves, while the numbers of non-slaveholders increased by double or more. Although the Byrd plantation of "Westover" consisted of 14,000 acres, Robert "King" Carter had 46 smaller plantations scattered throughout the colony, which he operated from "Corotoman" in Lancaster County. The

most efficient tobacco plantations ranged around 400 acres in size, manned by a crew of 20-30 field slaves. Slave prices hovered around £30 in the mid-1600s, dipped to around £22 in the 1680s, and rose again to around £35 by 1743. Planters with large numbers of slaves calculated their wealth not only in land and tobacco, but also in slaves.

To protect their increasingly costly investment in slaves, Virginia's colonial government passed a series of acts that created a system of hereditary, perpetual slavery based on race. In 1662, Virginia passed a law decreeing that "all children born in this colony shall be bond or free only according to the condition of the mother." Newly baptized slaves could no longer sue for freedom. Separate laws regulating slaves followed and were administered in separate courts. Slaves could not marry, own property, testify in court against a white person, receive a jury trial, carry weapons, travel from the plantation without a signed pass, or strike a white person. Court-ordered punishments for slaves ranged from whipping and mutilation to death. Slaves were considered property, not persons. Finally, in 1705, the Virginia Assembly authorized lifelong slavery saying, "All servants imported and brought into this country, by sea or land ... shall be ... slaves, and as such be here bought and sold notwithstanding a conversion to Christianity."

Table 2: Slave Population of Virginia 1619-1860

Year	Number of Slaves	Total Population	Percentage Enslaved
1619	20	1,000	2.0%
1625	23	1,232	1.8%
1648	300	15,000	2.0%
1670	2,000	40,000	5.0%
1700	8,000	58,000	13.7%
1750	120,000	231,000	51.9%
1790	287,959	691,737	41.6%
1800	339,796	807,557	42.1%
1810	383,521	887,683	43.2%
1820	411,886	938,261	43.9%
1830	453,698	1,044,054	43.4%
1840	431,873	1,025,227	42.1%
1850	452,028	1,119,348	40.4%

1860	472,494	1,219,630	38.7%

Life in the Tobacco Fields: Work from Can See to Can't

Tobacco cultivation and processing does not require the intense labor of rice cultivation, but it requires a great deal more care than cotton, with roughly 36 separate steps, and is extremely vulnerable to weather. As C.W. Gooch wrote in the *Lynchburg Virginian* in 1833, "The whole circle of the year is one scene of bustle and toil, in which tobacco claims a constant and chief share." In his diary, Landon Carter, one of the 12 richest men in 18th-century Virginia, described the level of supervision involved in tobacco cultivation recording, "My overseers tend their foreman close for one day in every Job ... by dividing every gang into good, Middling, and indifferent hands, one person out of each is to be watched for 1 day's work." Another tobacco grower complained to journalist Frederick L. Olmsted that he could grow only lower-grade tobacco, "because the finer sorts required more pains-taking and discretion than it was possible to make a large gang of negroes use."

Former slave Silas Jackson provided a different perspective on work in the tobacco field when interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project of the Work Projects Administration (WPA) in 1937. He said that slaves:

> were awakened by blowing of the horn before sunrise by the overseer, started work at sunrise and worked all day to sundown, with not time to go to the cabin for dinner, you carried your dinner with you. The slaves were driven at top speed and whipped at the snap of the finger, by the overseers, we had four overseers on the farm all hired white men. I have seen men beaten until they dropped in their tracks or knocked over by clubs, women stripped down to their waist and cowhided.

Beginning around the age of three or four, children would work on "trash gangs." In his autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, Booker T. Washington recalled that, from the time he could walk, he "was occupied in cleaning the yards, carrying water to the men in the fields, or going to the mills...." As they grew older, between 7-12 years of age, slave children would begin to work in the fields, assuming greater burdens each year.

On the average, a slave could tend 10,000-20,000 plants on up to four acres. What did that mean? A slave would have bent over hundreds of thousands of times each year planting, weeding, and harvesting that quantity of plants. After clearing a site in the forest where there was deep mold, slaves would burn the wood to create a layer of ashes into which the tiny tobacco seeds were sown. They would then cut down a woodland tract, clear the field, and plow it into shallow furrows spaced three-four feet apart. In early June, when the tobacco seedlings were about four inches tall, field hands would carefully remove the tender plants from their forest seedbed and transplant them into little hills in the prepared tobacco field. Because the work could be done only following rain before the ground dried out, precipitation and speed were critical during the transplanting. Expert workers could set thousands of plants a day, and Carter recorded in 1770 that his slave crews had transplanted 200,000 plants in a single day by 4 o'clock.

New slaves typically arrived in Virginia following the transplant of the tobacco seedlings and were put to work weeding between the rows. If a hard rain or hailstorm twisted or killed plants, the slaves would replant the hills. Roughly a month after the transplanting, when the flower-bud formed, each plant was "topped" to prevent it from growing too tall and producing spindly leaves. The job required skill to prevent damage to the plant; the slave would hold the plant between thumb and forefinger, severing the top with the thumbnail. During the remainder of the growing season, slaves "suckered" the plant, removing small shoots at the base of the leaf stem, and "primed" it by removing the low-quality bottom leaves called "lugs." They had to worm the plants of "gluts" of hornworms, which arrived twice each summer, once when the plants were half-grown and again shortly before harvest, to keep them from damaging the leaves.

About six weeks after being topped, when the tobacco leaves began to turn yellow and thicken, it was time for the harvest. If picked too early, the leaf would not cure; if picked too late, the leaf would be bitter. Experienced workers showed the new slaves how to handle the plants. In his WPA interview, former slave Gabe Hunt recalled that he had "to break ‘em off clean at de stem an' not twist ‘em cause if dey bruised dey spile. Hands git so stuck up in dat old tobaccy gum it git so yo' fingers stick together." The tobacco stalks were cut off close to the ground with a knife and the plants were allowed to wilt. After being carried to the well-ventilated curing barn, six to eight plants would be draped over five-foot long

oak sticks called laths and suspended from the roof joists so that air could circulate among the leaves and dry them thoroughly; in some regions, this was women's work. Although most tobacco was air-cured, some varieties were fire-cured in damp seasons or to improve color. In his interview, Gabe Hunt again recalled getting the smoke house in order explaining, "Barns was built on hills so's you kin lay de sticks way from top to bottom ... let it smoke two days an' two nights. Got to keep dat fire burnin' rain or shine, ‘cause if it go out, it spile de tobaccy." If tobacco was packed before it had finished curing, it would rot; and if it was bruised or torn, it would hurt the price a planter could get.

The final step was "striking" the leaf during wet weather. Part of the work gang would take down the brittle, cured tobacco. Teams of three would strip the leaf from the stalk, one culling poor quality leaves, the second removing the bright leaves, and the third removing the remaining dull leaves. The sorted leaves were tied into small ¼-pound bundles called "hands" and stacked in their respective piles. Depending on the variety, the slaves might have to "stem" the tobacco, removing the stem out of the leaf. At last, the tobacco would be "prized" or packed into wooden barrels called hogsheads. A barefoot slave stood inside the barrel and layered the "hands," packing the tobacco tight with the aid of blocks and levers before "heading" (putting the lid onto) the hogshead. When the shipment was ready, slaves rolled, carted, or transported the 500-1,300 pound hogsheads by boat to the planter's wharf (or inspection warehouse in Virginia after 1730).

Because they were so closely involved with raising and processing tobacco, slaves were responsible for some leading innovations in the industry. Most famous is the 1839 discovery by Stephen, Abisha Slade's 18-year-old slave, of the "yallercure" process that used charcoal to fire-cure the "Bright leaf" variety of tobacco. This thinner leaf was so mild that it popularized chewing tobacco and, later, cigarettes. Slade received $7,000 for a single 20,000-pound shipment in 1857, the highest price received to that time for U.S. tobacco.

Not all slaves were field hands. Plantation coopers (who made the shipping hogsheads) and blacksmiths (who made nails and tools) were indispensable, as were the carpenters who built the tobacco barns. Elderly or infirm plantation slaves spun cotton or wool, wove cloth, sewed clothes, and cooked for the field workers. Port slaves loaded tobacco onto the sea-going merchant ships that sailed between the Tobacco Coast and England and unloaded imported goods for the planter's homes.

Virginians began to process tobacco into snuff in small factories during the 1730s. By 1860, there were at least 348 factories in Virginia and North Carolina, almost all of them producing chewing tobacco. Nearly 13,000 Virginia slaves worked in the tobacco factories of Richmond, Petersburg, and Lynchburg. About half of these slaves were seasonal workers hired out by the planters in the spring and fall to small, local factories. The mostly male factory workers would stem, cut, and shape the tobacco into plugs and twists. Virginia's processed tobacco products were worth over $12,000,000 in 1859, nearly twice the value of the state's bulk leaf for the same year.

Tobacco cultivation was not only the occupation of enslaved blacks, but it also was the main means of support of free blacks living in the Chesapeake region. At the time of the first Federal census in 1790, the free black population totaled 25,272.

Slave Life in Tobacco Country

On the large tobacco plantations, slaves lived in outbuildings apart from their owners. Although they might live in family groups, unrelated slaves were sometimes housed together. Clay-daubed huts of the early colonial period gave way to wood frame buildings in the 1850s. The one-room cabins measured around 12' x 16,' with a clay-lined wooden chimney and dirt floors. Windows were simple openings with wooden shutters (no glass), at best. Most slave dwellings had "cuddy holes," small pits lined with boards, where they could store sweet potatoes and root vegetables or bury ritual objects. Slaves spent little time in the huts except at night and during bad weather. Ex-slave Dennis Simms, born in Maryland in 1841, recalled in his WPA interview, "We lived in rudely constructed log houses, one story in height, with huge stone chimneys, and slept on beds of straw. Slaves were pretty tired after their long day's work in the field. Sometimes we would, unbeknown to our master, assemble in a cabin and sing songs and spirituals."

Plantation owners typically provided the slaves with little for their homes: a built-in bed or straw pallet, blankets, iron pots, hand mills for grinding corn, an iron or clay cook pot, some clothes, and tobacco pipes. Sometimes, a slave would be supplied with fishing hooks and lead weights or a flintlock gun to hunt or fish.

Archaeological evidence suggests that most 18th-century slaves ate "one-pot" meals, such as vegetable stews seasoned with pork fat that could simmer over a low fire during the day and be ready to eat after dusk when the days' work was done (not unlike slow-cooker meals today.) Rev. Silas Jackson, born near Ashbie's Gap, Virginia, around 1846, recalled in a WPA interview:

On Saturday, each slave was given 10 pounds of corn meal, a quart of black strap [molasses], 6 pounds of fat back, 3 pounds of flour and vegetables, all of which were raised on the farm. All of the slaves hunted or those who wanted, hunted rabbits, opossums or fished ... Our food was cooked by our mothers and sisters and for those who were not married by the old women and men assigned for that work. Each family was given 3 acres to raise their chickens or vegetables.

Slaves also raised tobacco for their own consumption when it was not provided. John Lindsay, a Jamaican minister writing in 1720 claimed, "This Plant ... is pretty much planted by the Negroes for the use of the Pipe; to which the Negroes are greatly inslaved. Indeed they alledge that this alone is what makes their other Slavery the more tolerable."

Ex-slave Dennis Simms recalled punishments at "Contee" tobacco plantation:

We had to toe the mark or be flogged with a rawhide whip, and almost every day there was from two to ten thrashings ... We all hated what they called the ‘nine ninety-nine', usually a flogging until fell over unconscious or begged for mercy ... Sometimes Negro slave runaways who were apprehended by the patrollers, who kept a constant watch for escaped slaves, besides being flogged, would be branded with a hot iron on the cheek with the letter R.

New Year's Day was the worst day of the year, for, according to Silas Jackson, "we were all scared, that was the time for selling, buying and trading slaves. We did not know who was to go or come." This was the day unproductive or disruptive slaves were sold.

Not all tobacco plantations were large operations. Booker T. Washington grew up on James Burroughs' 207-acre tobacco farm in southwestern Virginia. Burroughs owned ten slaves, but Washington recollected, "My master and his sons all worked together side by side with his slaves ... There was no overseer, and we got to know our master and he to know us."

The experience of slaves in tobacco factories was very different from that of field hands. William "Box" Brown worked in Richmond, Virginia, in a tobacco factory and wrote in his 1851 narrative, "Our overseer at that time was a coloured man, whose name was Wilson Gregory ... he instructed me how to judge of the qualities of tobacco, and with the view of making me a more proficient judge of that article, he advised me to learn to chew and to smoke which I therefore did." Henry Clay Bruce began work as a factory slave in Keytesville, Missouri, when he was ten years old, reporting in his narrative, "It was so prison-like to be compelled to sit during the entire year under a large bench or table filled with tobacco, and tie lugs all day long except the thirty minutes allowed for breakfast and the same time allowed for dinner. I often fell asleep. I could not keep awake even by putting tobacco in my eyes."

Green Gold

In 1701, England's second most important trade partner after Holland was its New World Empire. The Tobacco Coast colonies of the Chesapeake exported an average of £205,000 worth of commodities from 1701-1710, representing roughly 75 percent of the value all North American exports. They also imported £200,000 worth of English goods, 56 percent of the value of all North American imports. Fifty years later, the Chesapeake colonies' trade with Great Britain was worth £1,197,000. The Tobacco Coast provided Britain with 54 percent of all its imports and consumed 30 percent of its exports. Of the £1,750,000 worth of North American exports in 1770, tobacco alone still accounted for over half, at £900,000. The profits of slave-produced tobacco to the mercantile system were enormous, as well as to the individual tobacco planter.

The Tobacco Coast was targeted by Cornwallis during the Revolutionary War, as the British attempted to prevent export of the rebellious colonies' premier cash crop. The tobacco economy recovered in the new United States; in 1790, the value of tobacco exports was $4,355,136, or 44 percent of total exports. Centuries of tobacco cultivation had depleted the soil of the Chesapeake region, and tobacco production shifted westward in Virginia, and then across the Appalachians to Kentucky. By the eve of the Civil War, tobacco production had doubled, but only half was exported (about $16,000,000 worth), while the rest

was consumed domestically. Tobacco accounted for roughly five percent of U.S. exports and six percent of domestic manufactures in the decade before the Civil War. In 1859, Kentucky produced 108 million pounds of tobacco, a quarter of the national total. North Carolina only produced 33 million pounds that year, although its "Bright tobacco" was fast attracting consumers. However, Virginia still led the nation's tobacco production in 1859 with 122 million pounds, which sold for $7,000,000. Virginia also sold $12,000,000 worth of processed tobacco products, such as chewing plugs. Of the total slave population of the United States in 1860, an estimated 350,000 were involved in tobacco cultivation.

Slavery did not survive the Civil War, but tobacco cultivation did despite the Confederate government urging planters "to refrain from the cultivation of cotton and tobacco and devote their energies to raising provisions." In 1862, the Belgian consul reported widespread compliance through Virginia, "Like cotton, the crop hardly existed. It is estimated at not over a fifteenth of an average crop." As the Union armies converged on North Carolina and central Virginia in late 1864 and 1865, unsupervised slaves produced little of the cash crop, and some ran away to Union lines, emancipating themselves. Although the states of the old Tobacco Coast would resume producing tobacco following the war and cash in on the newest smoking craze, cigarettes, the loss of slave labor marked the end of the days when tobacco was "green gold." For emancipated slaves, the new challenge would be whether they could use any of the agricultural, manufacturing, or commercial skills they had learned producing tobacco to earn a living in a wage economy.

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