THE ANGOLAN CONNECTION AND SLAVERY IN VIRGINIA

The first Africans in Virginia in the 17th century came from the Kongo/Angola regions of West Central Africa. They were part of a large system established by the Portuguese in Africa to capture and supply slaves to the Spanish colonies in Central and South America. Two privateering vessels raiding in the Caribbean took some of the Africans from a Portuguese ship and brought them to Virginia, where they sold them. The status of these early Africans as either servant or slave in Virginia is unknown. They did go to work for tobacco planters, laboring side by side with English indentured servants. After the 1622 war that the English fought against the Powhatan Indians, however, fewer English servants were willing to immigrate into Virginia. Certainly by the 1650s the excess population in England began to be reduced and more job opportunities arose there for impoverished English workers. But because the tobacco economy was labor-intensive, Virginia planters increasingly had to rely more on people from Africa.

In the 1630s the Dutch seized control of the African slave trade from Portugal, which had maintained it for many years. The Dutch built or took over fortified trading posts which the Portuguese had established along the coast of West Africa, closer to supplies of gold and ivory. But the Dutch did not keep control very long, as other European powers competed for the lucrative trade. By the 1660s there was a clear demand for slaves in Virginia, and slave ships began to arrive more frequently. They no longer brought people primarily from Kongo/Angola. Now ships brought them from the coast of West Africa. These people were taken from different parts of West Africa, and so had diverse cultural backgrounds. The slave trade system created by Europeans in

Africa was much more damaging to African societies than the traditional forms that already existed in Africa. The people were exploited and their families were divided.

In the middle of the century there was no organized, systematic trade in slaves between Africa and Virginia. Slaves arrived in the colony at irregular intervals, usually when slave ships trading in the Caribbean area or Central Africa made unplanned stops in Virginia. In 1672 the Royal African Company was chartered by the English government to bring slaves to Virginia. The Company was involved in the triangle trade in the Atlantic. English manufactured goods were sold to Africa for gold, ivory and slaves, and Africa was a ready market for these products. The slaves were then taken to Virginia to be sold to planters. The planters' tobacco was picked up and taken to England for sale for goods and services the planters needed. By the 1680s the Royal African Company was bringing several hundred slaves to Virginia each year.

Most of these slaves landed at either Jamestown or Yorktown. The Royal African Company maintained a factor or business agent at Jamestown to oversee the sale of the slaves. Several prominent Virginians served as the Company's agent at Jamestown, including Colonel Nathaniel Bacon and Colonel John Page, both members of the Governor's Council.

Africans formed a very small part of Virginia's population and at first lived much as indentured servants did. Slaves sometimes lived with white servants, and they worked alongside white servants and white masters in the fields. Toward the end of the 17th century as populations of slaves increased, slave owners began to create separate quarters for the enslaved people to live together. Slave quarters varied in size, and the number of enslaved people who lived in a particular quarter might range from a single individual or family group to more than a dozen unrelated people. The people in the quarter might be strangers who came from different West African cultures and spoke different languages. When family groups did form in the colony, slave owners did not necessarily respect ties of marriage and kinship, and families might not get to live together in the same quarter.

Slavery was not the inevitable fate of all the Africans who arrived in Virginia in the 17th century. By the middle of the century about a third of all Africans in the colony were free persons. Most had been either slaves or indentured servants at some time in their lives, although a few had come as free persons or had been born there to free parents. Until the late 17th century there were no restrictions on free Africans in Virginia, and they lived similar lives to those of their English neighbors. Although most were poorer than other free persons, some did prosper and acquire their own plantations. Free persons could even own slaves and, until 1670, they had the legal right to purchase white indentured servants. As the century progressed, however, some of the rights and status of free persons were reduced, and some of them were forced onto marginal lands, while others moved from Virginia to colonies to the north.
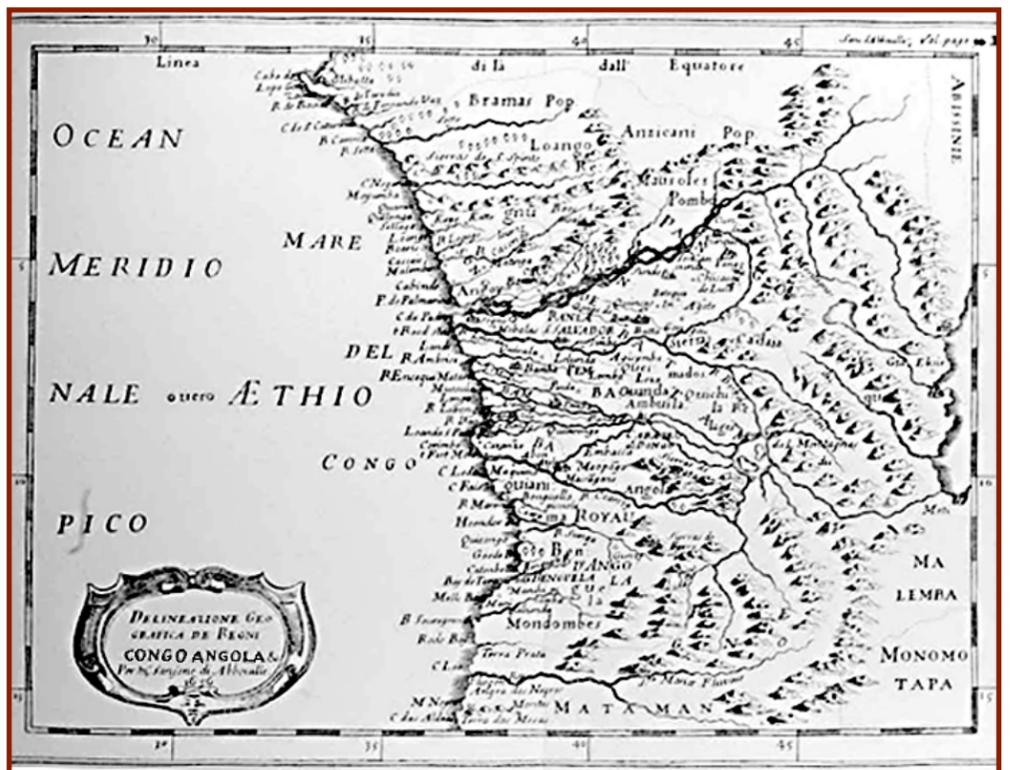
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