

Chapter One

THE LAND, THE PEOPLE, AND THE LAW

A BRAHAM LINCOLN thought that a nation—however much the whole might exceed the sum of its parts—consists of nothing more than its people, its land, and its laws.

For the nations of the Old World, the three parts are inextricably bound up together in the long individual histories of those nations. But the United States, like all nations founded by European settlers in the great expansion of Western culture that began in the late fifteenth century, has no ancient history. At the beginning of American history, there was only the land.

The land that would become the United States presented a world that was at once hauntingly familiar and quite unlike the one in which the first European explorers and settlers had grown up. Western Europe was a world of dense population, concentrated in cities, towns, and villages; intense cultivation of arable areas; limited wildlife; and limited and carefully husbanded forests.

America was located in the same temperate zone and featured often familiar trees, plants, and animals, along with some exotic new ones, such as raccoons, skunks, maize, and rattlesnakes. But beyond the rocky

shore of what is now the state of Maine and the vast sandy beach that stretches nearly unbroken from New Hampshire to Mexico and far beyond, lay a wilderness, upon which the hand of its human inhabitants had lain very lightly indeed.

This wilderness was a forest larger than all of western Europe, broken only by the occasional beaver meadow, bog, swamp, rock outcropping, mountain bald, and the slash-and-burn fields of Indians. It stretched from the water's edge to well past the Mississippi. From there it extended fingerlike along river and creek bottoms into the great plains that covered the center of the continent.

This huge forest was, of course, not uniform. In the North, great stands of white pine—the preferred wood for the spars and masts of sailing ships—alternated with hardwood forests, where maples, sycamores, and ash predominated in the lowlands, oaks and hickories on the drier and higher slopes. Farther south were stretches of different species of pine along the Atlantic seaboard, and these reached inward to where they met hardwood forests at higher elevations.

The eastern shore of North America is a welcoming one. A broad coastal plain made for easy settlement. Peninsulas such as Cape Cod and Delmarva; islands such as Long Island; and the barrier beaches farther south provided shelter for the early sailing ships. A series of rivers—the Merrimac, the Charles, the Thames, the Connecticut, the Housatonic, the Hudson, the Raritan, the Delaware, the Susquehanna, the Potomac, the Rappahannock, the York, the James, the Peedee, the Ashley, the Cooper, the Savannah—provided access to the deep interior for the small and relatively shallow-drafted vessels of the day. As early as 1609, Henry Hudson, an Englishman in the employ of the Dutch, sailed his full-rigged ship *Half Moon* 150 miles up the river later named for him, reaching as far as present-day Albany. An overland trip so far inland would have required a month or more. Hudson, although moving cautiously in unfamiliar and narrow waters, covered the distance in a week.

And because these rivers had been formed when the sea level was

lower than it is today, the subsequent rise drowned the rivers' mouths and provided harbors that rank among the finest on the North Atlantic. Many of the country's first cities—Boston, Newport, New London, New York, Baltimore, Norfolk, and Charleston—sprang up where these harbors are located.

The climate of North America that the first settlers encountered was, like the land, both familiar and exotic. It is temperate rather than arctic or tropical, and with abundant rain. But, being on the eastern edge of a great continent, the climate is continental in nature, whereas western Europe's is maritime, and greatly tempered by the warmth of the Gulf Stream. American winters are much colder than western Europe's while the summers are hotter. The high and low temperature records for London, located north of the fifty-first parallel of latitude, are 99 degrees and 2 degrees and only rarely approach either extreme. The records for New York, just north of the forty-first, are 106 degrees and -15 degrees, and the extremes are approached with disconcerting frequency. By European standards, New England winters and southern summers were long and brutal.

This vast area was not uninhabited. Dubbed "Indians" (*les indiens* in French, *los indios* in Spanish) through the ignorance of the first European explorers, who thought themselves on the fringes of Asia, the aboriginal inhabitants of North America lived throughout the continent. But by European standards, their population was very low relative to the size of the land. Exact figures are impossible to come by and even estimates vary widely, but the Indian population of eastern North America was probably somewhere between one and two million people at the time of Columbus. The number declined, sometimes rapidly, as increased European contact prior to settlement introduced diseases to which the Indians had no immunity.

And the Indians were anything but culturally homogeneous, even by diverse European standards. There were approximately 250 languages being spoken in North America at the beginning of the European exploration (and about 2,000 in the Western Hemisphere as a whole). Even

within languages, the people of North America were divided into many small, often mutually hostile tribes. Low-level warfare was chronic among these groups.

Only the Indians of the Mississippi Valley, socially organized as chiefdoms, depended primarily on agriculture for sustenance. The Indians who lived on the eastern seaboard, mostly organized as tribes, were primarily hunter-gatherers. Less than 1 percent of the arable land of eastern North America was used for growing food crops. Using slash-and-burn methods, the Indians would grow corn, squash, and beans on a patch of land for a few years and then move to new fields as the fertility of the old ones declined.

Technologically the eastern Indians were Neolithic, using sophisticated tools but lacking metal. Their culture was a highly advanced one, however, using hundreds of different materials and techniques in what James Fenimore Cooper, two centuries later, would call "the gentle art of the forest." Developed over thousands of years of extracting a living from the land, these arts, taught to the settlers, would more than once save them from disaster and even extinction as they struggled to establish themselves in the unfamiliar New World.

The more technologically advanced culture that these settlers brought with them and traded with the Indians, however, would, in turn, destroy the latter. Once the Indians became used to the superior metal tools, cloth, and firearms of the Europeans, the skills needed to use the raw materials at hand began to disappear. Before long, the Indians had no choice but to trade for what they needed on increasingly unequal terms and, inevitably, lost their economic sovereignty. Once that was gone, their political sovereignty and the rest of their culture soon followed.

TWO OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT technological developments in human history had brought the European medieval world to an end by

the beginning of the sixteenth century and made the settlement of the New World possible. The printing press had greatly reduced the cost of books, and thus of knowledge. In the mid-fifteenth century there had been only about fifty thousand books in all of Europe, most of them controlled by the Church, which ran the universities. By the end of the century there were more than ten million books in Europe, on an endless variety of subjects, many of them technical and agricultural. They were largely in the hands of the burgeoning merchant class and the landed aristocracy. The Church's monopoly of knowledge was broken and, soon, so was its monopoly of religion, as the Protestant Reformation swept over much of northern Europe in the early sixteenth century, setting off more than a century of warfare as a result.

The other great invention of the late Middle Ages was the full-rigged ship, capable of making long ocean passages. As late as 1400, European ships were mostly small and single-masted, not very different from those that had been used by William the Conqueror almost four hundred years earlier to cross the channel to England. But by 1450, far larger ships with three and sometimes four masts had appeared, and they were pushing out the boundaries of the world known to Europeans.

They had need to. In 1453 the Turks had taken Constantinople, the ancient capital of the eastern Roman Empire. A Muslim power now sat athwart the trade routes to the East, extracting taxes on all goods that passed. More, the Turks were expanding into Europe itself, and by the middle of the sixteenth century would be at the very gates of Vienna. Christendom felt itself under attack as it had not since the Dark Ages a thousand years earlier.

But thanks to the full-rigged ship, western Europeans could do an end run around the Muslim control of the ancient trade routes. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese had rounded the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa and reached India. By 1510 they had reached the Spice Islands, source of the spices, such as pepper, that yielded fabulous profits once brought to Europe.

Columbus, working on a sound theory but with a flawed idea of the size of the globe, stumbled onto the New World when he tried to reach Asia by sailing west in 1492.

Once it was clear that Columbus and other early explorers had, indeed, found a New World, explorations were funded by all the major west European maritime powers. The Spanish were the first to hit the jackpot, with the conquest of Mexico and, ten years later, Peru. Huge sums in gold, silver, and precious stones began to flow into Spain, which became the dominant power in Europe as a result. Portugal began producing sugar in Brazil by the middle of the sixteenth century, an immensely profitable crop when grown with slave labor. By the end of the century, the French had begun to use the St. Lawrence River to sail deep into the continent of North America and establish a great fur trade with the Indians who lived around the Great Lakes.

But, except for a Spanish settlement in the Chesapeake Bay that was attacked by Indians and abandoned in 1572, the eastern shore of what is now the United States was largely ignored. It was too far north for tropical crops such as sugar to be grown there, and too far south for the best furs to be found there. Nor was there any sign of precious metals.

England had funded the explorations of Giovanni Caboti (an Italian known in the English-speaking world as John Cabot) in search of a northwest passage. But it came late to the race to exploit the New World by colonization. Here was an opening. In 1585 and again in 1587, Sir Walter Raleigh had tried to establish a colony on Roanoke Island in Albemarle Sound, in what is now North Carolina. The colony vanished, leaving only a cryptic message carved on a tree trunk. But twenty years later England tried again, and this time succeeded.

THE COLONY AT JAMESTOWN was not founded by the English state; it was founded by a profit-seeking corporation.

Tangible inventions, such as the printing press and the full-rigged

ship, usually get far more attention from historians, but intellectual inventions are often just as important. And two intellectual inventions of the Renaissance, double-entry bookkeeping and the corporation, proved vital to the development of European civilization in the New World and particularly in what is now the United States.

Accounting had been known since civilization arose in Mesopotamia. Indeed, writing, the defining attribute of civilization, was in all likelihood invented to help keep the books. But accounting did not advance much for several thousand years thereafter, until double-entry bookkeeping was developed in Italy in the fifteenth century. Double entry makes it much easier to detect errors and allows a far more dynamic financial picture of an enterprise to emerge from the raw numbers. Because of double-entry bookkeeping, it became possible for people to invest in distant enterprises and still keep track of how their investment was doing. Ferdinand and Isabella saw to it that an accountant sailed with Columbus on his first voyage, to ensure that they got their full share of the hoped-for profits.

The joint-stock company proved equally important. Exploring far distant lands in full-rigged ships was both hazardous—many ships simply never returned—and extremely capital-intensive by the standards of the sixteenth century. At first, it was largely done by expeditions funded by the crown in each country. But England was a small country with a small population and lacked the financial resources available to France and Spain. The Dutch Republic as well, once it revolted from Spain in 1572, needed another method to finance these costly but potentially immensely profitable enterprises that were far beyond the financial reach of even the wealthiest individual private citizens.

Partnerships, of course, had been around since ancient days. But in a partnership, each partner is liable for the debts of the entire enterprise. Thus an investor, by investing even a small sum, might find himself bankrupt if the enterprise failed. Few were willing to take on such risks, especially in an enterprise over which they would, necessarily, have very

limited control. The joint-stock company solved the problem by limiting each investor's liability to what he had invested. This, of course, shifted some of the risk to the corporation's creditors but made it possible for large sums of capital to be amassed from many small investments. Next to the nation-state itself, the joint-stock company was the most important organizational development of the Renaissance and, like the nation-state, made the modern world possible.

Several English joint-stock companies for purposes of facilitating trade in various areas were established in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the Moscow Company (1555), the Levant Company (1583), and the East India Company (1600) among them. The Dutch also established an East India company. It quickly wrested away most of Portugal's far eastern empire and made the Netherlands, a country with few natural resources, the foremost trading nation in the world and the richest country in Europe in the early seventeenth century.

The Virginia Company, established by a group of London merchants, was chartered by King James I in 1606. The charter stated that the purposes of the company were to help build up England's merchant fleet, increase the number of the country's able mariners by broadening its trade, find precious metals, found a Protestant colony in a land that was under Spanish threat, and, while they were at it, convert the heathen.

The last objective would, in fact, receive precious little attention. Indeed, the English sent no missionaries at all. Instead, they apparently intended to Christianize the Indians through a sort of economic osmosis, intending "to settle and plant our men and diverse other inhabitants there, to the honour of Almighty God, the enlarging of Christian religion, and to the augmentation and revenue of the general plantation in that country, and the particular good and profit of ourselves."

Thus, from the very beginning, the English approach to colonization was profoundly different from that of the Spanish and French. The governments of Spain and France sought to control all aspects of their sub-

jects' activities in the New World and made concerted efforts to bring the Indians to the Catholic religion, whether they wanted to convert or not.

Further, only approved colonists were permitted to immigrate to New Spain and New France, lest heretics and ne'er-do-wells taint them. But the government of England had little at stake in the enterprise and was only too happy to get rid of its troublemakers—religious and criminal—and the unemployed, of which it had far too many.

The English economy had been going through wrenching change for most of the sixteenth century. The population had grown rapidly, from about three million in 1500 to four million a century later and five million by 1650. But employment did not keep pace. The cloth industry, the mainstay of English manufacturing since Flemish weavers had settled there in the mid-fourteenth century, had been losing ground to its continental competition.

Meanwhile, the old feudal system of landholding had been decaying rapidly. The gentry and the aristocracy—the 5 percent of the population who owned most of the agricultural land in England—had been enclosing their estates, dispossessing tenants to run far more profitable flocks of sheep with hired hands. In the century between 1530 and 1630, about half the English peasantry lost their tenancies, and many of them had great difficulty in finding other employment.

In addition, the great influx of gold and silver into the European economy from the New World, thanks to the Spanish conquests, had set off a rapid inflation, and prices rose about 400 percent in the sixteenth century.

The dispossessed peasants and unemployed cloth workers, known as "sturdy beggars" to distinguish them from the traditional beggars disabled by disease or injury, took to the road, often pushed from parish to parish by local officials who did not want to have to care for them. They tended to gravitate toward the market towns and seaports. London, by far the largest city in England already, saw its population rise from 120,000 in 1550 to 200,000 only fifty years later. By 1650, London's vast

rabbit warren of narrow, crooked streets and tenements was home to 350,000 people, many of them desperately poor.

It was people from these ranks, fleeing starvation or the sheriff, whom the Virginia Company recruited, together with gentlemen adventurers, often the younger sons of gentry families. In December 1606 three ships, the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery*, left England and arrived in the Chesapeake Bay on April 26, 1607, with 105 men on board (39 had died at sea). Sailing some sixty miles up the James River to make their presence less obvious to the Spanish, the three ships anchored on May 13 at the site of what became Jamestown, named, like the river, for England's king.

But other than its relative security from Spanish assault, the chosen site, on the north bank of the James and beside a swamp, had very little to recommend it. The swamp, while perhaps providing some protection from Indians, bred mosquitoes by the millions in the spring and summer, and these spread malaria through the colonists. More, the water in the shallow wells the colonists dug was often brackish, especially when the river was running low. This caused salt poisoning among the colonists as they sweated in the fierce Virginia heat and drank copiously. And, when the river ran low, the garbage and sewage thrown into it did not pass out to sea, but festered and promoted such diseases as typhoid and dysentery.

The result was a slaughter. Of the 105 original colonists, only 38 remained alive nine months later.

The basic problem was that the Virginia Company was venturing into a brand-new business—American plantations—that had been made possible by a radically new technology—the full-rigged ship. As has so often been the case since—railroads in the early nineteenth century, the Internet in the late twentieth come to mind—there was a very steep and expensive learning curve to be mastered before steady profits could be achieved under these circumstances. The commercially savvy and often very wealthy London merchants who dominated the Virginia Company

simply had no idea what it took to establish a successful colony on the edge of the American wilderness, three thousand miles and three months from home.

As a result, they made mistake after mistake. By holding out the promise of gold, they made the colonists reluctant to undertake the back-breaking labor of farming in virgin soil. There was, of course, no gold to find, but the colonists found quantities of the local mica and convinced themselves that it was a rich gold ore. "There was no talke," Captain John Smith, reported in his best-selling *Description of Virginia*, published in 1612, "no hope, no worke, but dig gold." Shipped back to England, it was found to be worthless.

And the company at first retained title to the land, expecting the colonists to work it as, essentially, peasants. But neither the gentlemen adventurers nor the recruits swept up from the docks of London and Bristol were inclined to work hard for the company. Nor, indeed, did they possess the necessary skills, the gentlemen for lack of need, the "sturdy beggars" for lack of opportunity.

The result was often starvation in the winter, as the Indians had scant surplus to trade and often even scanted inclination to do so. Although the company shipped more and more colonists every year, the total number rose only slowly. In December 1609 Jamestown counted 220 English souls. By the time spring arrived, there were only 60 still alive, thanks largely to lack of food. One desperate colonist had killed and eaten his wife (and was burned at the stake for his crime).

The remaining colonists abandoned Jamestown in June 1610 and sailed for home, only to meet up with three ships at the mouth of the James River carrying three hundred new recruits. They returned once more to the tiny settlement.

Numerous attempts were made to find an export that would pay the bills and generate a profit to the stockholders. Because glass was increasingly in demand in England, but the wood needed for fuel in its production was increasingly scarce, the company tried exploiting Virginia's

endless forest and abundant sand, but could not ship it profitably across the Atlantic. Iron, pitch and tar, clapboards, and sassafras likewise did not yield anything like enough revenue.

By 1616 the Virginia Company had transported more than seventeen hundred people to Virginia and invested the staggering sum of 50,000 pounds in its enterprise on the Chesapeake. To give some idea of what that sum meant in Jacobean England, a gentleman at that time might have an annual income from land of only 50 pounds. The annual crown revenues from customs duties, a major source of the king's income, averaged about 75,000 pounds. But for all this money, all the company had to show for it was a rickety fort on the edge of the James River that was home to 350 people, many of them sick and hungry.

After nine years, the English toehold on the North American continent was still threatened with extinction by many means, Indian attack, Spanish assault, disease, and starvation among them. But by no means the least of the threats to its existence was the fact that the Virginia Company had not yet learned how to make its colony generate more wealth than it consumed.

THE ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM turned out to be a common plant native to the Americas, *Nicotiana tabacum*. Originally found in what is now Peru and Ecuador, tobacco had been cultivated for thousands of years before the coming of Europeans. It is not known when smoking the dried leaves for pleasure first began, but the addictive nature of the practice must have been revealed not long afterward. By the time Columbus arrived in the New World, the habit had spread to all temperate parts of the Western Hemisphere where tobacco could be grown and beyond.

Columbus brought tobacco back to Europe from his first voyage. In the next century the habit spread rapidly in the Old World, and the cultivation of tobacco had begun to spread around the Mediterranean

Basin. The Spanish began growing it in the West Indies as well, for export. The habit soon swept through Britain. King James loathed tobacco, which he regarded as an instrumentality of the devil, and he wrote and published a pamphlet entitled *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*. Not surprisingly, his subjects paid no attention whatever to the royal opinion, and smoking continued to increase in popularity.

But Britain's cool, rainy climate did not favor growing tobacco commercially, and the country had to import most of its needs from Spain, a country with which it was frequently at war.

The local Indians of eastern Virginia were also addicted to tobacco, but the variety they grew was not popular with the English colonists who had appeared in their midst. The colonists preferred the tobacco produced by the Spanish in the West Indies. Then, in 1612, a man named John Rolfe brought some seeds he had obtained there, probably from Trinidad, and planted them. They grew abundantly in Virginia's hot, humid climate, and with the help of the local Indians (in 1614 Rolfe married the Indian princess Pocahontas), he learned the exacting art of growing and curing tobacco.

In 1616 he took the first commercial crop to England, along with his wife. They both caused sensations, although the English climate soon killed Pocahontas. When Rolfe returned to Virginia in 1617, Virginia celebrated the first American Thanksgiving because that year's tobacco crop was safely in and promised commercial salvation for the colony.

The first American economic boom was under way. Captain John Smith, back in England, reported that when the new governor arrived that year, he found Jamestown more or less of a wreck, but "the marketplace, and streets, and all other spare places planted with tobacco."

In 1618 twenty thousand pounds of tobacco were grown in Virginia and shipped to England. Four years later—despite an Indian attack that year that killed one-third of the colonists, including, most likely, John Rolfe—the crop had tripled. By 1627 it amounted to five hundred thousand pounds, in 1629 it was one and a half million pounds. By 1638

Virginia was exporting three million pounds of tobacco to Britain every year and had become the major source for western Europe, outstripping the West Indies.

By no means the least of the reasons that tobacco production increased so quickly was that the Virginia Company in 1616 changed its land policy. Instead of colonists being expected to work the land for the benefit of the company, colonists could now own their own land. Also, in hopes of getting more men to immigrate, it gave land away free to new settlers under a system known as head rights. Every man who could pay his own way was awarded fifty acres, with another fifty acres for every relative he brought and for every servant whose way he paid. These "indentured servants," who agreed to work for a term of years to pay off the cost of their passage, were also entitled to fifty acres of land once their indentures were paid off. Of course, they had to survive to collect, and about 25 percent of immigrants died in their first year in the Chesapeake in these early decades of English settlement.

Still, despite the dangers, the prospect of owning a hundred, two hundred, or more acres of land free and clear was a powerful inducement. In an age when agriculture was the foundation of all national economies, wealth was measured less in pounds sterling than in acres. In land-starved Europe, two hundred acres of prime agricultural land made one rich. The Virginia Company, by giving it away, was exploiting, very effectively, what has always been one of America's most profound comparative advantages: its nearly inexhaustible supply of land.

And the tobacco-growing colonists were only too glad to pay for the passage of these indentured servants. Tobacco is a labor-intensive crop, and if the amount available for export was to grow quickly, the population of Virginia had to grow quickly as well. Already, what would prove another enduring characteristic of the American economy was manifest: a shortage of labor.

The tobacco boom saved Virginia, but it could not save the Virginia Company. With the company already deeply in debt, the great Indian

attack of 1622 and its costs proved more than it could bear. In 1624 King James revoked the bankrupt company's charter and took Virginia into his own hands as a crown colony. And while he hated tobacco and the habit of smoking it, he had no qualms whatever about taxing it. As Virginia tobacco production began to soar and its trade with England and Europe to increase rapidly as a result, James established a monopoly to closely regulate this quickly growing trade. Within a generation, tobacco would provide fully a quarter of the customs revenue of the crown.

THE YEAR 1619, with tobacco already changing Virginia's landscape and economy, would prove a fateful one in the history both of Virginia and of the country of which it would one day be a part.

Since the colony's founding twelve years earlier, Jamestown's population had been overwhelmingly male as the Virginia Company struggled to establish a viable colony in the New World. But in 1619 the company brought the first shipload of women to the colony, ninety in all, and the bachelor settlers, many long starved of female companionship, snapped them up as wives at the price of 125 pounds of tobacco each. Immediately, a subtle shift in Virginia society began. The masculine atmosphere reminiscent of a mining camp or military bivouac faded slowly away, to be replaced, equally slowly, by something far more like the normal human society the new Virginians had left behind in England.

And that year as well, the first representative assembly in the Western Hemisphere was constituted. The great parliamentarian Sir Edwin Sandys was elected treasurer of the Virginia Company that year, effectively making him the chief executive officer. He soon sent out a new governor, Sir George Yeardley, with instructions for him to form a representative assembly, called the House of Burgesses, with the governor and his council sitting as an upper house of the new legislature. This miniature Westminster met for the first time on July 30, 1619, in the church at Jamestown.

While seen as momentous in retrospect, it was not thought so at the time. The English had long enjoyed the least intrusive government in Europe and the greatest personal rights, the concept of which—bound up in the word *liberty*—had been evolving since Magna Carta. The English gentry were used to running their own local, county affairs and equally used to sitting in Parliament, where, together with the sovereign, they enacted the laws of the country.

With the Parliament at Westminster much too far away to be practical, giving Virginia its own legislature for local affairs was considered nothing more than giving Virginians the “rights of Englishmen.”

(Sir Edwin Sandys never visited Virginia, but his brother George, a distinguished poet, lived there for ten years, from 1621 to 1631, serving as treasurer of the colony. It was in Jamestown that he wrote his translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the first English poetry composed in the New World.)

Three weeks after the House of Burgesses met for the first time, a Dutch ship sailed into the Chesapeake, its captain intent on selling its cargo of human beings to the planters who were avid for laborers to work the ever-expanding tobacco fields. There was nothing unusual about the arrival of the ship except for one thing: the men had not been loaded on board of their own free will in one of the English ports. They came, instead, from Africa, where they had been sold to the captain.

Still, they were not quite slaves. The planters, including the governor, who bought most of them for his own plantation, purchased the indentures, not the men. When they had finished their term of servitude, they would be free, just as English indentured servants were. Indeed, many blacks transported to Virginia in the early years of the colony became exactly that and ended up owners of substantial property themselves and even of their own slaves. Given the short life expectancy of immigrants to Virginia, slaves, who cost more, were not an economic proposition compared with indentured servants.

In 1650 there were only about three hundred slaves in Virginia, less

than 2 percent of the population. It would be the 1660s before black slavery was even formally recognized in Virginia law, and as late as the 1680s, indentured servants still far outnumbered slaves. But as economic conditions improved in England, lessening the pressure to immigrate, and life expectancy improved in Virginia as the colony expanded and developed, slaves began to overtake indentured servants as the prime source of labor. The number of slaves doubled in the 1680s and doubled again in the next decade.

At the end of the seventeenth century, an indentured servant cost about 15 pounds to purchase four years of his labor; a slave cost 25 to 30 pounds but was bound for life and even beyond in the form of his children. Black slaves began to surge as a percentage of the population, constituting almost 14 percent by 1710.

It is hard for us, who are the beneficiaries of so much hindsight, to understand, but people in the seventeenth century did not regard slavery as a moral issue. It would be the middle of the eighteenth century before the idea that slavery was inherently and ineluctably immoral took hold. Once born, that idea then spread very quickly throughout both Europe and America. At least it did among the nonslaveholding parts of society, for economic self-interest is always a severe impediment to clear thinking on the moral and political aspects of an issue.

In the seventeenth century, when most people felt one’s “station in life” was determined by God, slavery was regarded as nothing more than a personal misfortune, not the abomination we see it as today. Nor were slavery and race, at least at first, intertwined. In the middle of the seventeenth century a black man named Anthony Johnson owned a 250-acre tobacco plantation on Virginia’s Eastern Shore and at least one slave. He regarded himself, and indeed he was largely regarded by his neighbors, as an equal. He had no hesitation asking the court to enforce his rights when his slave ran away, and enforced they were.

But as the number of black slaves increased steadily both absolutely and as a percentage of the population, while tobacco began to be less

profitable per unit of labor as the market reached saturation, attitudes changed. Strictures on the activities of slaves, and of free blacks as well, increased as the fear of rebellion and the economic necessity to get more work out of the slaves increased. By the beginning of the eighteenth century blacks could not assemble in groups of more than four and needed written permission to leave their home plantations. Patrols enforced the new strictures. Discipline increased as well. One "unhappy effect of owning many Negroes," planter William Byrd wrote, "is the necessity of being severe. Numbers make them insolent, and then foul means must do what fair will not."

As the social chasm between blacks and whites deepened and the treatment of slaves grew harsher, the justifications for their social status and economic condition slowly congealed into a virulent racism. That racism proved to be a cancer in the body politic of the United States that would cost much blood and much treasure to excise. Indeed, only three hundred years later is it at long last—and now rapidly—vanishing.

That black slavery and the racism it engendered came about through an attempt to alleviate a chronic American economic problem, a shortage of labor, is of course no excuse. But it is at least an explanation. The most grievous of our self-inflicted wounds and our greatest moral failing as a people was acquired innocently and without forethought.

With the success of tobacco as a reliable export crop, Virginia's economic viability was soon assured. The English-speaking people were in the New World to stay.