
Race, Slavery, and Christianity in Colonial America

- I. Introduction: Elizabeth Key Case
 - A. Biography
 - 1. Born to a white father and a slave mother
 - 2. Became an indentured servant
 - 3. Listed as property when John Mottram died
 - B. Key's Case
 - 1. Claimed she could not be a slave because her father was white, she had served her term, and she was a Christian.
 - 2. Ultimately won her case
 - C. House of Burgesses' Response
 - 1. 1662: Condition of slavery follows the mother
 - 2. 1667: Baptism does not free "slaves by birth."
 - D. Key Questions of Episode
 - 1. How did it happen in colonial Virginia that some people came to be seen as appropriately property or as "slaves by birth"?
 - 2. Why, in America, were those people with some African ancestry?
 - 3. What was the role of Christianity in the identification of race and slavery?

- II. Making Slavery Black in Virginia
 - A. Factors in identification of slavery with being black
 - 1. Existing transatlantic slave system.
 - 2. Christian evangelization
 - 3. Rebellion
 - 4. Greed
 - B. Transatlantic Slave System
 - 1. Turn from "quick" money to labor intensive ventures increases demand for labor.

2. Europeans imported Africans to the Americas, Africans worked cash crops, Europeans sold the crops in Europe, and Europeans took money to Africa to purchase more slaves.

3. System not fully in place in Virginia in the early 17th century—but was by early 18th century.

C. 1705 Act Concerning Servants and Slaves

1. Differentiated between white people and non-white people

a) White servants could only be whipped naked with permission of the justice of the peace; non-white “servants” could be whipped naked without permission.

b) Black people and white people—free or otherwise—could not marry.

c) Conversion did not free people whose ancestry was African

d) White people could not be slaves; black people seen as naturally slaves.

III. Why Limit Slavery to Black People?

A. Money

1. Labor supply for England was inconsistent, particularly after Great London Fire of 1666.

2. Slavery, unlike indentured servitude, possibly self-perpetuating

B. Why not enslave poor white people?: Rebellion

1. Bacon’s Rebellion witnessed black slaves and white indentured servants making common cause against elites.

2. Giving white people—rich or poor—a common identity and the shared right not to be slaves made poor white people more likely to align themselves with white elites, not black slaves.

IV. What’s Christianity Got to Do With It?

A. Some slaves used Christianity to argue against slavery

B. The possibility that Christianity might undermine slavery made slaveowners reluctant to have slaves evangelized.

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1. 1667: Assurance (by church and colony) that baptism did not free slaves
- C. Theological Implications of 1667 Decision:
1. Freedom grounded in race, not religion.
 2. Earthly parentage more determinative of status on earth than heavenly parentage.
 3. Anglican Church supported slavery.
 4. Identification of being Christian with being white.
 - a) In 1705 Act, non-white Christians have descriptors; white Christians were simply “Christian.”
- D. 1723 Letter
1. Written by a slave or group of slaves to the Bishop of London
 2. Claimed that the Christian message was about freedom and kinship.
 3. Noted that slavery made important Christian practices impossible.
- V. Slavery and What It Means to be Black and White
- A. By 1705:
1. Laborers classified based on race.
 2. Race—not religion or class—has become the most significant marker of difference among people.
 3. Racial identification has buried commonalities, including shared religion.