

What is slavery?

Slavery refers to the legal, economic, political and social rules that allow one group of people to own people belonging to another group for their own benefit. Slavery has existed in some form for thousands of years in societies around the world. The particular ways in which people experienced slavery in Virginia are a result of the time and place in which it developed. During the 17th and 18th centuries (1600s and 1700s), some Europeans and Native Americans were also unfree for a period of years (the Europeans) or even a lifetime (the Native Americans). Most unfree people, however, were born in Africa, or were the descendants of African women. Wealthy Virginia landowners working with merchants brought thousands of people from West and Central Africa to work on farms and plantations. They imposed laws taking away the freedom of these Africans and their descendants for nearly 200 years, until the laws changed as a result of the Civil War. Today, many scholars and social activists use the term “enslaved” rather than “slave” to describe the Africans, since the condition of slavery was imposed on them by others and was not fundamental to who they were as people.

Slavery in Virginia

Africans were present on the plantations of wealthy landowners in Virginia in small numbers before 1650. Their population increased after the 1650s, rising steadily after about 1690 as English merchants began to buy Africans in the international business of the slave trade. Most enslaved people were brought to the colony from ports stretching from Senegal to Angola in West and Central Africa. Small numbers of people came from Madagascar in East Africa, and some were sent to the Caribbean for a period of time before arriving in Virginia.

From the 1660s to the 1680s, Virginian voters passed a series of laws that restricted the rights of Africans. Servitude lasted for life. The children of enslaved women were also enslaved. People could not legally travel without permission from their owner. They could not meet in large groups. Their owner could legally kill them under certain circumstances, and could punish them physically without interference by the law. Africans who were Christian, or became Christian, were not exempt from being enslaved. The law defined them as property which could be bought or sold. Enslaved men and women could not legally marry, but slave owners recognized informal unions.

By the middle of the 1700s, many enslaved people lived on small farms, where they worked alongside the farm owner and his family. The wealthiest Virginians, while few in number, owned many slaves, sometimes hundreds of people. These slave owners often owned several plantations, and put people to work in areas, called “quarters” within each plantation. The quarters consisted of houses for workers and farm managers, and buildings for crop storage, craft production (blacksmithing, barrel making, for example) and for sheltering animals. Enslaved people lived in houses (also called quarters) that could accommodate a group of unrelated individuals, or shelter families. Over time, as the population increased and people began to form families, it became more common for enslaved family members to live together.

Most men and women worked in agricultural fields, planting, tending and harvesting crops. Men also performed much of the skilled labor on the plantation that could include carpentry, furniture making, blacksmithing, and shoe-making. They drove carts that carried crops to mills and markets, and performed the services of “watermen,” shipping tobacco and other goods by boat. Some men worked as servants in the planter’s house. On large plantations, enslaved women spun and wove textiles, sewed clothing, and served as cooks, nurses, and maids in the planter’s house. Children and elderly people performed a range of jobs that fit their abilities.

Enslaved people could also be conscripted by the county where they lived to build and repair roads and bridges, and perform other necessary municipal labor. Their efforts supported the needs of the entire community.

By custom, enslaved people living in 18th-century Virginia worked six days each week. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were times when they were not laboring for the owner’s benefit. During these times they worked for themselves and their families—hunting and fishing, gardening, cleaning house, sewing and cooking—or traveled to visit family and friends living on other farms or plantations, attend church, or go to market. In some places, enslaved people lived in multi-generational families with strong social networks that extended across neighborhoods and even between counties. Through work-related and after-hours travel, they maintained family ties, exchanged news, ideas, and goods, and contributed to the development of regional culture in Virginia.