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New Light on the “20. and Odd Negroes” Arriving in Virginia, August 1619

Engel Sluiter

IN his *Generall History of Virginia* (1624), Captain John Smith, speaking about occurrences there in 1619, says: “About the last of August came in a dutch man of warre that sold us twenty Negars.”¹ The statement finds corroboration in two letters written from Virginia and arriving in England before the end of 1619.

On September 30, John Pory, secretary of state of the colony, wrote from Jamestown to Sir Dudley Carleton, English envoy to The Hague:

Having mett with so fitt a messenger as this man of warre of Flushing, I could not but imparte with your lordship . . . these poore fruites of our labours here. . . . The occasion of this ship’s coming hither was an accidental consortship in the West Indies with the *Treasurer*, an English man of warre also, licensed by a Commission from the Duke of Savoye to take Spaniards as lawfull prize. This ship, the *Treasurer*, wente out of England in Aprill was twelvemoneth, about a moneth, I thinke, before any peace was concluded between the king of Spaine and that prince. Hither shee came to Captaine Argall, then governour of this Colony, being parte-owner of her. Hee more for love of gaine, the root of all evill, then for any true love he bore to this Plantation, victualled and manned her anewe, and sent her with the same Commission to raunge the Indies.²

The second letter was written by John Rolfe, pioneer Virginia tobacco planter (earlier the husband of Pocahontas, Chief Powhatan’s daughter), to Sir Edwin Sandys. Rolfe adds some important detail:

About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunnes arriued at Point-Comfort, the Commandors

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¹ Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, Newe-England, and the Summer Isles* . . . (London, 1624); many times reprinted. I have used the “Fourth Booke,” as reproduced in Lyon Gardiner Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia 1606–1625* (New York, 1907), 337.

² “Letter of John Pory, 1619,” *ibid.*, 282–83. Flushing is the English rendering of Vlissingen, a Dutch seaport at the mouth of the Scheldt River, famous for its corsairs and privateers. See also Wesley Frank Craven, “The Earl of Warwick, a Speculator in Piracy,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 10 (1930), 457–79.

name Capt Jope, his Pilott for the West Indies one Mr Marmaduke an Englishman. They mett wth the *Trier* in the West Indyes, and determynd to hold consort shipp hetherward, but in their passage lost one the other. He brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, w^{ch} the Governo^r and Cape Marchant bought for victualle (whereof he was in greate need as he pretended) at the best and easyest rate they could. He hadd a lardge and ample Commyssion from his Excellency to range and to take purchase in the West Indyes.

Three or 4. daies after the *Trier* arriued.³

Because for a very long time—in fact until two years ago—the above were the only known contemporary English sources that mention the arrival of blacks in Virginia, it was generally assumed that these “20. and odd Negroes”⁴ were the first Africans to reach the colony. Consequently, over the years there has been much speculation as to their place of origin and how they got to Virginia. Because the ship that brought them there was Dutch and it is stated that she met her English counterpart, the *Treasurer*, “in the West Indies,” it follows that the blacks they obtained and shared and then delivered in Virginia and Bermuda respectively were taken aboard somewhere in that general area. In 1971, Wesley Frank Craven, a respected authority, wrote: “There is little room for doubt that they came from some part of the Spanish territories lying in or around the Caribbean.” His conclusion: “I am myself persuaded that these people probably were native to America,” in other words, offspring of slaves from Africa brought to the region a generation or more earlier.⁵

There now is credible evidence from Spanish archives that neither of the above surmises is correct and that the blacks brought to Virginia in a Dutch ship in 1619 almost certainly came directly, in two stages, from Africa.

In 1619, the supplying of African slaves for the American market was in the hands of a general contractor (*asentista*). Such contractors, after competitive bidding and agreeing to pay a block sum to the Spanish crown annually, were given authorization to remove a set number of blacks from Africa and to transport these to specified American ports. From 1615 to 1622, Antonio

³ Rolfe to Sandys, Jan. 1619/20, in Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, vol. 3 (Washington, D. C., 1933), 243. “His Excellency” refers to Maurice, count of Nassau, chief commander of the Dutch army, and stadholder of 5 provinces, including Zeeland.

⁴ This view has now been made totally obsolete, owing to the stellar research of the historian and professional paleographer William Thorndale in the Ferrar Papers, preserved in Magdalene College, Cambridge. In addition to the 1624 and 1625 Virginia censuses already known, he uncovered the census, or muster, of 1619, which shows 32 Negroes (15 men and 17 women) “in the service of seu[er]all planters,” “in the begininge of March. 1619.” See his excellent article, “The Virginia Census of 1619,” *Magazine of Virginia Genealogy*, 33 (1995), 155–70. My congratulations to Mr. Thorndale on his notable achievement and my thanks for his generosity in providing me with a photocopy of his article.

⁵ Craven, *White, Red, and Black: The Seventeenth-Century Virginian* (Charlottesville, 1971), 80–81.

Fernandes Delvas, a Lisbon financier, served as contractor. He was to pay 115,000 ducats a year for the privilege of importing into Spanish America up to 5,000 but never fewer than 3,500 blacks a year, and only through two ports, Vera Cruz and Cartagena.⁶

In the accounts of the income and outgo of the Vera Cruz treasury for the fiscal year, June 18, 1619, to June 21, 1620, is an account detailing receipts from head taxes paid on African blacks arriving at that port.⁷ During that year, six slavers arrived at Vera Cruz. All had loaded their human cargoes at São Paulo de Loanda, the capital of Portuguese Angola. Out of some 2,000 blacks they had taken aboard in Africa, 1,161 were delivered alive in Vera Cruz. The losses were caused not only by the rigors of the Middle Passage but also by shipwreck and, in one case, by corsair attack.

The story of the one slave ship that was attacked en route to Mexico is told in barest outline in the account book. It reads (my translation) as follows:

Enter on the credit side the receipt of 8,657.875 pesos paid by Manuel Mendes de Acunha, master of the ship *San Juan Bautista*, on 147 slave pieces brought by him into the said port on August 30, 1619, aboard the frigate *Santa Ana*, master Rodrigo Escobar. On the voyage inbound, Mendes de Acunha was robbed at sea off the coast of Campeche by English corsairs. Out of 350 slaves, large and small, he loaded in said Loanda (200 under a license issued to him in Sevilla and the rest to be declared later) the English corsairs left him with only 147, including 24 slave boys he was forced to sell in Jamaica, where he had to refresh, for he had many sick aboard, and many had already died.⁸

The entry in the account book speaks about an attack on the slaver by "English corsairs," with not a word about Dutch participation. Yet we know from the Pory and Rolfe letters that the *Treasurer* in the West Indies met a Dutch ship from Flushing in Zeeland and made a consortship with her, that is, a temporary agreement to cooperate in preying on Spanish commerce and presumably sharing the loot.

The meeting between the *Treasurer* and the Flushing man-of-war in the West Indies may not have been quite as accidental as Pory suggests. From 1585 to 1616, Flushing was one of three "cautionary towns" in the rebel Netherlands with an English garrison, placed there at the insistence of Queen Elizabeth I to insure that she would be reimbursed for authorizing 5,000 English mercenary troops for service in the Dutch army.

⁶ A contemporary printed copy of this *asiento* is in José Antonio Saco, *Historia de la esclavitud de la raza africana en el Nuevo Mundo* . . . 4 vols. (Havana, 1938), 2:96ff.

⁷ Contaduría 883, Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Sevilla.

⁸ In Indiferente General 2795, AGI, there is a "Relacion" confirming the above entry in the account book, stating that Mendes de Acunha was "robbed by corsairs on the coast of Campeche, and from there the civil authorities transported them [the 147 blacks, to Vera Cruz] on the frigate, master Rodrigo Descobar, who entered the said port on August 30, 1619."

For more than a generation, therefore, English relations with Flushing were close. When Elizabeth died and her successor James I made peace with Spain in 1604, legal English privateering came to an end, and seafarers who had made their living by attacking Iberian shipping found themselves unemployed. Many then sought and obtained privateering commissions in the Dutch navy until 1609, when the Twelve Years' Truce between Spain and the Netherlands began and legal privateering therefore also ended in the Netherlands. The Truce produced special hardship in Zeeland towns, especially in Flushing, where enterprise was geared to privateering and searching out new trades overseas.

The consortship of the *Treasurer* and the Flushing man-of-war in the West Indies in 1619 should be seen in this context. It is extremely likely that these two ships were the ones that attacked the slaver *San Juan Bautista* off Campeche in late July or early August of that year. After the attack, there presumably was time enough to sail from Campeche through the Florida Strait so as to reach Virginia by the end of August. Although the two vessels became separated en route, they arrived at their chosen destination within four days of each other.

The *San Juan Bautista* was the only slave ship among the thirty-six named as arriving at Vera Cruz during the fiscal years 1618–1619 through 1621–1622 to be attacked, inbound from Angola, by corsairs.