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Making a “Popular Slave Society” in Colonial

British America One of the major historiographical debates about the colonies of British America concerns the seventeenth-century transition from a workforce dominated by British indentured servants to one dominated by African slaves. In Barbados, the transition occurred quickly during the 1650s. In the Chesapeake, the process was much more gradual; slaves did not outnumber servants until the 1690s. As a consequence of such Chesapeake gradualism, the debate has focused on the tobacco coast (Maryland and Virginia). Participants in that debate can be grouped into two categories. The first group, which might be called the “labor-supply school”—represented by Galenson, Main, Clemons, and others—views the transition as an economic process, best approached by attending to labor markets, especially to changes in the supply of labor, and maintains that planters thought slaves to be adequate replacements for servants. The other group, which can be labeled the “planter-preference school”—represented by Allen, Parent, Breen, and others—interprets the transition as a process driven by planter preferences, stressing the differences between servants and slaves as central to the shifts. These historians contend that the transition to slavery was driven by political and cultural imperatives.¹

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1 David W. Galenson, *White Servitude in Colonial America: An Economic Analysis* (New York, 1998); Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720* (Princeton, 1982); Paul G. E. Clemons, *The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland’s Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain* (Ithaca, 1980); Alan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill, 1986). For Menard’s contributions to this debate, see *idem*, *Migrants, Servants and Slaves: Unfree Labor in Colonial British America* (London, 2001). Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1985);

Although these categories cover most of the participants in the debate, they cannot accommodate important recent contributions by such historians as Hatfield, Walsh, and Coombs. Determining which approach carries the most weight is important not only because slavery played a central role in Chesapeake history but also because understandings of how the shift to slavery occurred have implications for other major issues in the region's history, such as the growth of racism, the making of the Chesapeake gentry, and the development of the tobacco economy.²

Like many of the debates surrounding slavery in the British Atlantic, the roots of this one appear in Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*. Strangely, for someone who usually adopted clear and unambiguous positions, Williams provides support for both sides in the transition debate. On the one hand, his general materialistic approach and his arguments "that the colonies needed labor and resorted to Negro labor because it was cheapest and best" and that racism was a consequence, not a cause, of slavery are consistent with the labor-supply school. On the other hand, his stress on the superiority of African slave labor over indentured servants or Indian slaves supports the planter-preference school.³

Although the long debate about the transition from servants to slaves in the Chesapeake colonies continues, most historians since the 1960s seem to have been persuaded by the labor-market approach, viewing the transition in the workforce as an economic process. Planters did not shift to Africans because they preferred slaves but because of changes in the supply of servants. During the

Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (New York, 1994), 3 v.; Anthony S. Parent, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740* (Chapel Hill, 2003); Timothy H. Breen, "A Changing Labor Force and Race Relations in Virginia," *Journal of Social History*, VII (1973), 3–25.

2 April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2004); John C. Coombs, "Building the Machine: The Development of Slavery and Slave Society in Early Colonial Virginia," unpub. Ph. D. diss. (College of William and Mary, 2003); Lorena S. Walsh, *Motives of Honor, Pleasure and Profit: Plantation Management in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1607–1763* (Chapel Hill, 2010).

3 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944), 20, 51–84. For the debate about Williams, see Menard, "Reckoning with Williams: Capitalism and Slavery and the Reconstruction of Early American History," *Callaloo*, XX (1998), 891–799; *idem*, "Capitalism and Slavery: Personal Reflections on Eric Williams and the Reconstruction of Early American History," in Michael Kennedy and William Shade (eds.), *The World Turned Upside Down* (Bethlehem, Penn., 2001).

first half of the seventeenth century, as the English population rose and real wages fell, Chesapeake planters found an adequate supply of workers in British indentured servants. Around 1660, however, the supply of servants began to decline as the English population fell and real wages rose, leading to improved opportunities at home. As a consequence, migration from Britain to America fell after mid-century.⁴

At first, Chesapeake planters did not feel the impact of that decline. The migrant stream, initially divided between three destinations—the Upper South, New England, and the West Indies—centered on the Chesapeake, the only remaining region in British America where demand for labor remained strong and opportunities for newly freed servants abundant. By the 1680s, however, continued decline in the British American migrant stream joined with falling opportunities to create a growing demand for labor along the tobacco coast, and the opening of new regions to settlement led to a shortage of servants in the Chesapeake colonies. At the same time, the destruction of the Royal African Company’s monopoly resulted in an increase in both the supply of slaves and the price of servants relative to that of slaves. Planters responded to these changes by buying more Africans. By the 1690s, slaves outnumbered servants in most regions of Virginia and Maryland.

Although most historians still seem persuaded by this version of the shift to African slavery, Walsh and Coombs have recently challenged it forcefully. Based on painstaking empirical work, they demonstrate that the Virginia elite were thoroughly committed to slavery well before the labor shortage and the price changes that supposedly triggered the transition from servants to slaves. They infer from this evidence that the Virginia elite preferred slaves to servants because they expected slaves to be more profitable than, not merely interchangeable with, servants. In their view, the shift to slavery was an “unthinking decision,” taken without regard to long-term consequences. Recent research on Maryland shows that in that colony as well, an elite group of planters led the shift to African slavery.⁵

4 Alden T. Vaughan surveys the debate in “The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 97 (1989), 311–354.

5 Walsh, *Motives of Honor*; Coombs, “Building the Machine.” For evidence that the elite led

It is possible to integrate the labor-supply approach and the emphasis on the elites as leading the colonies into slavery by interpreting the transition to African slavery as a two-stage process. In the first stage, a small number of “early adopters” demonstrated by example that African slaves could be integrated profitably into the Chesapeake system of husbandry; they created the legal and institutional structures needed to guarantee property rights regarding slaves. The activities of these pioneers were sufficient to bring a small but noticeable population of African ancestry to the region. In 1680, the Chesapeake colonies had just fewer than 5,000 Africans, amounting to 7 percent of the total population. During the second stage, toward the end of the seventeenth century, when the labor shortage and the activities of the elite early adopters persuaded many more planters to invest in slavery, the region’s black population jumped sharply. By 1720, more than 40,000 blacks were in the region, 20 percent of the total population, whereas in many districts along the tobacco coast, slaves comprised one-third of the total.

Despite their differences, participants in the debate seem to have reached agreement on one major point. In Hopkins’ and Finley’s terms, the process in the Chesapeake region can be described as a change from a slave-owning society to a society that had become fully defined by slavery—that is, a slave society—by the early eighteenth century, a perspective shared by many historians of the tobacco coast.⁶

These categories are admittedly vague. Historians seldom define the differences between the stages with precision. The fundamental idea is that in a slave-owning society, slaves exist but do not dominate the economy, whereas in a slave society, slavery is “the determinative institution.” In Tannenbaum’s words, “In a

the shift to slavery in Maryland, see Demitri D. Debe and Menard, “The Transition to Slavery in Maryland: A Note on the Barbados Connection,” *Slavery and Abolition*, XXXII (2011), 129–141; Trevor Burnard, *Creole Gentlemen: The Maryland Elite, 1691–1776* (New York, 2002), 38–39. For more on this two-stage approach to the transition, see Debe and Menard, “Transition to African Slavery in Maryland,” and John J. McCusker and Menard, “The Origins of Slavery in the Americas,” in Robert L. Paquette and Mark M. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Slavery in the Americas* (New York, 2010), 275–292.

6 For the Chesapeake as a slave society during the early eighteenth century, see, for example, Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998), 1–2; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 105.

slave society slavery was not something apart from the world in which it existed. It was merely one facet of the world and cannot, in its influence, be separated from or described apart from the total community. Wherever we had slavery, we had a slave society, not merely for the blacks, but for the whites, not merely for the law, but for the family, not merely for the labor system, but for the culture—the total culture. Nothing escaped, nothing was beyond or above or outside the slave institution; the institution was the society in all its manifestations. . . . Nothing escaped, nothing and no one.”⁷

Much of the blame for this anecdotal lack of precision can be laid at Finley’s feet, especially his contemptuous dismissal of what he calls “the numbers game.” Although Finley’s reluctance to rely on a single measure, such as the proportion of slaves in the population, to define *slave society* is understandable, historians’ failure to give attention to a range of measures that might help to clarify the role of slavery in a particular society is not.⁸

This article reviews the transition debate, suggesting how the major disagreements can be resolved by arguing that “early plungers, wealthy older men with political influence who . . . [invested] heavily in slaves . . . [and] built the institutional and legal structures that guaranteed property rights in Africans [were formative] so that when prices and supplies shifted the majority of planters were willing to follow their lead.” Moreover, evidence from St. Mary’s County probate inventories also challenges the broadly shared consensus that the Chesapeake had become a “slave society” by the early eighteenth century. New empirical data about patterns of slave ownership shows that slavery was still in its developmental stages there in the early eighteenth century, not taking root until much later in the colonial period.

This article also attempts to bring additional precision to the notion of a slave society by introducing a distinction between an

7 Morgan, “British Encounters with Africans and Afro-Americans, circa 1600–1780,” in Bernard Bailyn and *idem* (eds.), *Strangers in the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 163. Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves, Sociological Studies in Roman History* (New York, 1978), I, introduced the key concepts later made familiar to historians of American slavery by Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York, 1980), 79–80. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (Boston, 1991), 117.

8 Finley, *Ancient Slavery*, 147. Strangely, after dismissing the numbers game, Finley on the following page suggests that in slave societies, slaves accounted for 30 to 35% of the population.

“elite slave society,” in which only a small proportion of the free population—most of them wealthy, older, and politically powerful men—owned slaves, and a “popular or pervasive slave society,” in which slaves were more numerous and slave owning was more widespread. The crude dichotomy between a slave-owning society and a slave society should be replaced with the more flexible notion of a spectrum, which could be helpful in evaluating the place of slavery in various slave regimes.

Given its ambiguity, it is puzzling why the distinction between slave-owning and slave societies has played so prominent a role in the literature. Although the notion of a slave society might encourage scholars to look for the influence of slavery beyond the plantation—on culture, gender relations, the structure of free families, and the like—such research could easily proceed without the distinction. Perhaps historians find the moral, as opposed to the heuristic, value of the notion of a slave society attractive. Calling a nation, colony, or region a “slave society” is a way of condemning it and of undermining nationalist or celebratory historiographical traditions.

The focus on St. Mary’s County to make an argument about a larger region is not to imply that one area can represent the entire Chesapeake; the extent to which it can remains to be seen. The region is much too diverse in all of its features to be represented by a single county. Rather, the point is merely to use data from one locality to test a claim made about a larger region. In any event, of the fourteen counties available on the tobacco coast, St. Mary’s is a good place to start because it has a good set of inventories, which have been closely studied in a recent effort to estimate wealth per capita.⁹

ST. MARY’S COUNTY IN PERSPECTIVE The southernmost county on Maryland’s western shore, St. Mary’s occupies a peninsula bounded on the east and west by the Patuxent and Potomac rivers and on the south by Chesapeake Bay. Its early colonial economy was organized around the production of the Oronoco strain of tobacco for export. Its economy grew impressively during the colo-

9 For regional patterns around the Chesapeake, see Walsh, “Summing the Parts; Implications for Estimating Chesapeake Output and Income Subregionally,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLV (1999), 53–89. For more on St. Mary’s County, see Lois Green Carr and Menard, “Wealth and Welfare in Early Maryland: Evidence from St. Mary’s County,” *ibid.*, 95–120.

nial period, whether measured in aggregate or per capita terms, showing a pattern found in many regions of the Chesapeake—seventeenth-century growth, turn-of-the-century stagnation, and eighteenth-century revitalization. The causal factors behind this pattern are complex. The initial expansion rested on a combination of farm building and gains in production, shipping, and marketing of the tobacco crop as planters and merchants learned to do their business more efficiently. The stagnation reflected the completion of the farm-making process and the inability of planters and merchants to improve productivity further. Rising population and incomes in Europe pulled the region out of its doldrums; a renewed demand for tobacco resulted in increased production and rising prices. Throughout the era, whites in the region profited by the growth of slavery, since slaves could be forced to work more and longer days and more intensely than could free workers.¹⁰

For the immediate purposes at hand, St. Mary’s County is important because of the survival of an especially rich set of probate inventories—several of them for the years around 1740 and a continuous series from 1658 to the outbreak of the War of Independence. As most historians of early America know, probate inventories present problems when employed to track the wealth of a living population. In particular, inventories report the wealth of decedents who are older and thus wealthier than those still living. Second, not all decedents go through probate. In this project, the major worry is that the age structure of the decedent population might change and that the proportion of decedents leaving inventories might shift, thus distorting efforts to measure change over time among the living. However, a recent study of the inventories of St. Mary’s concluded that shifts in the age structure of decedents mirrored changes in the living population, and that the changes in the proportion of decedents whose estates were inventoried were too small to distort the pattern of change in wealth levels among the living.¹¹

The deficiencies of probate inventories are more than offset

10 For more on the economy of St. Mary’s, see Carr and Menard, “Wealth and Welfare”; Carr, Menard, and Walsh, *Robert Cole’s World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill, 1991); Carr and Menard, “Land, Labor, and Economies of Scale in Early Maryland: Some Limits to Growth in the Chesapeake System of Husbandry,” *Journal of Economic History*, XLIX (1989), 407–418.

11 These issues are discussed at length in Carr and Menard, “Wealth and Welfare.”

by their richness and detail. Crucial to this study, the inventories that describe the unfree workers, servants, and slaves owned by each decedent enable an accurate description of the changing patterns of slave ownership. Despite their richness, however, inventories are silent about many matters of interest to students of slave society; they say little directly about the culture of slaves and masters, relationships between great and small planters, or race relations, though they certainly suggest the constraints within which those cultures were built and relationships forged.

As late as the 1720s, slavery was still thinly rooted in St. Mary's County. Nearly two-thirds of the decedent households in the county during that decade were without slaves (see Table 1). Furthermore, few slave owners owned large numbers of slaves. Only five of the county's eighty-three slave owners owned twenty or more of them. Conditions in the 1720s did not persist throughout the eighteenth century because of the remarkable expansion of the slave population. Significantly for the entire Chesapeake, the slave population grew rapidly across the eighteenth century. In the region as a whole, the slave population grew from 42,749 in 1720, roughly 24 percent of the population, to 322,854 in 1770, 37 percent of the population. In St. Mary's, the growth of slavery was even more pronounced. Slaves comprised about 12 percent of the population during the first two decades of the eighteenth century but nearly 40 percent by 1774.¹²

These estimates of the growth of the slave population are crucial to the argument advanced herein. Those who provided the original data upon which these estimates rest seldom divided the population into the categories of slave and free. They were more likely to use the categories of black and white. Conventionally, historians interested in the size of the colonial slave population have assumed an identity between the categories of black and slave. Although this article does not overturn that convention, largely because there is no reasonable alternative, the assumption is not entirely accurate for two reasons: First, not all blacks were slaves (some of them were free), and not all slaves were black (some of them were Native Americans). In the eighteenth cen-

12 For the Chesapeake as a whole, this paragraph follows the population estimates in Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 359. For St. Mary's County, see, Menard, "Five Maryland Censuses, 1700–1712: A Note on the Quality of the Quantities," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXXVII (1980), 37–64.

Table 1 The Distribution of Slaves among Decedent Householders in St. Mary’s County, Maryland, 1720 to 1729

NUMBER OF SLAVES	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS	PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS
0	144	63.7
1	14	7.5
2 to 5	38	16.8
6 to 9	12	5.3
10 to 19	13	5.7
20+	5	2.2
Total	226	

SOURCE St. Mary’s County Inventories, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis.

tury, the exceptions to the assumed identity are rare and, furthermore, tend to cancel each other out. Hence, the data are adequate to support the contention that the slave population in the Chesapeake region grew rapidly from the 1720s to the Revolution.

Although we still have much to learn about the sources of the remarkable growth of the slave population in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake colonies, recent scholarship supports a few generalizations. Much of the increase rested on the importation of new slaves into the region as planters tried to bolster their workforces to take advantage of the expanding demand and rising prices for tobacco. Approximately 100,000 new slaves were brought to the region during the eighteenth century, most of them directly from Africa, although about 10 percent of the total arrived by way of the West Indies. Historians sometimes mistakenly describe the slaves who came from the sugar islands as seasoned and familiar, to some degree, with the English language and English agricultural working routines. But the vast majority of these slaves had stopped only briefly in the Caribbean before heading north.¹³

An unprecedented reproductive increase within the colonies made a significant contribution to the growth of the slave population in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake. As Jones reported in 1724, “The Negroes are not only increased by fresh supplies from Africa and the West India Islands; but also are very prolific

13 This discussion of the slave trade draws on Galenson, *White Servitude*, 217; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 58–101.; Kulikoff, “A ‘Prolifick’ People: Black Population Growth in the Chesapeake Colonies,” *Southern Studies*, XVI (1977), 391–428; Walsh, *Motives of Honor*; Gregory E. O’Malley, “Beyond the Middle Passage: Slave Migration from the Caribbean to North America, 1619–1807,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, LVI (2009), 125–168.

Table 2 The Distribution of Slaves among Decedent Householders in St. Mary's County, Maryland, 1760 to 1769

NUMBER OF SLAVES	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS	%HOUSEHOLDS
0	109	42
1	24	9.3
2 to 5	73	28.2
6 to 9	42	16.2
10 to 19	16	6.2
20+	19	7.4
Total	158	

SOURCE St. Mary's County Inventories, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis.

among themselves." Jones' observation may have been slightly premature for the region as a whole, since the slave population did not register a surplus of births over deaths until the 1730s. However, as Walsh has noted, the slaves owned by elite planters who invested heavily in Africans before mid-century began to register a reproductive increase much earlier than those who did not turn to slavery until the end of the seventeenth century. Jones may have been generalizing from the experience of elite planters to that of the population as a whole. Be that as it may, the number of slaves throughout the Chesapeake eventually attained uniform levels; reproductive increase made a major contribution to the growth of the slave population.¹⁴

Some of the results of this growth are apparent in Table 2, which describes the distribution of slaves taken from St. Mary's County inventories in the 1760s. By the 1760s, only 42 percent of the decedent householders did not own slaves, and large holdings had become common. In addition to changing the frequency of slave owning and the size of holdings, the growth of the slave population changed the structure of slavery in St. Mary's in other, more subtle ways—in the relationship of slave holding to both age and wealth, in the shifting geographical distribution of slaves in the county, and in the importance of slaves to the wealth of free household heads.

14 In addition to the works by Morgan, Walsh, and Kulikoff, cited above, this discussion of reproductive increase among slaves draws on Menard, "The Maryland Slave Population, 1658 to 1730: A Demographic Profile of Blacks in Four Counties," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXXII (1975), 29–54; Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*. The quotation is from Hugh Jones (ed. Richard L. Morton), *The Present State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1956), 80.

Table 3 Percentage of Households with Slaves by Life Cycle, St. Mary’s County, 1720s and 1760s

LIFE CYCLE	1720S	1760S
Unmarried	16.4	50.0
Married, all children under 18	39.7	62.5
Married, children over 18, living at home	40	75
Married, children over 18, living away	40	83.3

Slave Owning and Age Unfortunately, the data are insufficient to describe precisely the changing relationship between slave owning and age, since the age of decedents is unknown in most cases. However, it is possible to classify most decedents according to “life cycle,” which can serve as a rough proxy for age (see Table 3). Although the data indicate that the probability of a household head owning slaves increased with age during both the 1720s and 1760s, two developments between the beginning and end of the eighteenth century are worth noting. First, young men were more likely to own slaves during the 1760s than the 1720s. Second, the probability of owning slaves rose on a steeper slope during the 1760s than the 1720s, suggesting that during the 1760s, those who did not own slaves or who did not own many of them were likely to acquire slaves or see their holdings grow as they aged, as confirmed by Albert’s research.¹⁵

This broadening of slave ownership was further sustained by the emergence of a sizable rental market during the last half of the eighteenth century. As the slave population began to register a surplus of births over death, many elite planters who had invested in slaves early in the transition acquired more slaves than they could efficiently use on their plantations. They addressed the problem by renting out their surplus slaves, thus creating a widespread rental market that, according to one estimate, tripled in size during the second half of the eighteenth century. The opportunity to rent permitted small planters who could not afford to purchase slaves access to them for short periods to perform specific tasks or address an immediate labor shortage. It also permitted those reluctant to

15 Peter J. Albert, “The Protean Institution: The Geography, Economy, and Ideology of Slavery in Post-Revolutionary Virginia,” unpub. Ph. D. diss. (Univ. of Maryland, 1976).

Table 4 Regional Patterns of Slave Owning in St. Mary's County, 1720s and 1760s

REGION, DATE	HOUSEHOLDS WITHOUT SLAVES (%)	HOUSEHOLDS WITH 20+ SLAVES (%)
Potomac, 1720s	74.5	.003
Patuxent, 1720s	54.3	.006
Potomac, 1760s	67.2	.008
Patuxent, 1760s	52.3	.005
St. Innigoes, 1720s	77.1	0
St. Innigoes, 1760s	65.7	.003

SOURCE St. Mary's County probate inventories, Maryland State Archives, Annapolis.

invest in slaves to experiment with them, easing into the business of becoming a master.¹⁶

Slave Owning and Location The evidence for the location of decedents is hardly precise, but it is adequate to make an important point regarding the changing geographical distribution of slaves during the eighteenth century. Dividing St. Mary's County into two parts by drawing a line down its spine to distinguish its Potomac and Patuxent sides shows the two districts to be strikingly dissimilar (see Table 4). During the 1720s, households on the Potomac side of the county were much less likely to have slaves than those on the Patuxent side. Moreover, 84 percent of the households in the St. Innigoes district at the southern end of the county on the Potomac side did not own slaves, and none of those who did own them had more than six. Although it would be a stretch to call slaves rare, or to claim that St. Inegoes was a "free soil" district in the 1720s, such a label would certainly apply to certain areas there during the 1720s—the seaside district of Somerset County and parts of Virginia's lower Eastern Shore, for example.

By the 1760s, the regional differences in the county had not entirely disappeared, but they were less pronounced. Slavery had become much more common in St. Innegoes; the free-soil districts of the 1720s had become indistinguishable from the region as a whole; and others had not appeared to take their place. One ef-

16 For the rental market, see Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 404–409; Sarah S. Hughes, "Slaves for Hire: The Allocation of Black Labor in Elizabeth City County Virginia, 1782–1810," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXV (1978), 260–286; Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 351–352, 415–416.

fect of the expansion of slavery was to make the Chesapeake region much more homogenous with regard to the distribution of slaves in the 1760s than in the 1720s. Table 5, which lists the number of slaves reported in all of St. Mary’s County’s inventories by neighborhood in the early and late eighteenth century, tells a similar story. During the 1710s and 1720s, several neighborhoods had so few slaves that free residents might not have encountered or even caught sight of a slave for several weeks. Since regular encounters with slaves would likely be essential to a society in which nothing escaped slavery’s influence, the absence of them would appear to be powerful evidence that St. Mary’s County had not become a full-fledged slave society between 1710 and 1729. By the period from 1760 to 1775, however, the distribution of slaves had changed dramatically. Slaves were distributed so much more evenly across the county’s neighborhoods that encountering a slave could hardly have been a rare occurrence.

Slave Owning and Wealth The growth of slavery also changed the relationship between slave owning and wealth. One clue to what happened is provided by the connection between owning slaves and owning land. Kulikoff reports the emergence of a “new group of slaveholding tenants” in eighteenth-century Prince George’s County. The St. Mary’s County data describe a similar process. In the 1720s, it was unusual for a landless person to own slaves; only 20 percent of the decedent households without land owned them. By the 1760s, however, the connection between owning land and owning slaves was no longer so strong. The fact that half of the decedents without land owned slaves at that point suggests that slavery had become available to poorer households, as confirmed by the data on the relationship between total estate value and slave ownership reported in Table 6. Although these data show that poor people were unlikely to own slaves at either the beginning or the end of the eighteenth century, they also indicate that as the century progressed, it became increasingly likely that households in the middling wealth ranges would own slaves.¹⁷

Given the rapid expansion of the slave population and modest increases in slave prices, it is not surprising that preliminary work shows that slaves accounted for a larger share of the wealth of

17 Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 136.

Table 5 Slaves by Neighborhood, St. Mary's County, 1710 to 1729 and 1760 to 1775

NEIGHBORHOOD	1710 TO 1729	1760 TO 1775
Resurrection	279	434
Harvey	36	110
Chaptico	48	114
St. Clements	155	506
Poplar Hill	43	68
St. Georges	10	57
St. Mary's	56	89
St. Inigoes	11	34
St. Michaels	9	153
Ressurrection/Chaptico	1	10
Beverdam manor	6	47
Chaptico manor	6	35
Chaptico St. Clements	3	100
St. Clements/Newton	33	19
Newton/Poplar Hill/St. George	0	33
Harvey/St. George/St. Marys	84	28
St. George/St. Marys	6	23
Proprietary Manor	2	109
St. Mary's/St. Innegoes/St. Michaels	21	29
Unknown	5	0
Total	950	2,283

Table 6 Percentage of Households with Slaves, by Wealth Categories, St. Mary's, 1720s, 1760s

WEALTH CATEGORY (POUNDS)	1720S	1760S
1 to 22	0	0
23 to 36	0	0
37 to 48	10	17.4
49 to 67	16	47.1
68 to 94	17.1	63.9
95 to 135	63.2	63.9
136 to 225	77.8	76.9
226 to 490	95.6	95.2
491+	98.2	98.1

NOTE Values are in pounds, current money, deflated by a commodity price index, as described in P. M. G. Harris, "Inflation and Deflation in Early America, 1634–1860: Patterns of Change in the British American Economy," *Social Science History*, XX (1996), 469–505.

Table 7 Patterns of Slave Owning in South Carolina Probate Inventories, 1678 to 1764

DATE	1678 TO 1698	1722 TO 1726	1743 TO 1745	1764
Number of inventories	50	158	154	142
Percentage of wealth in slaves	21	58	65	54
Slaves/estate	2.6	9.6	16.7	17.9
Percentage of estates with slaves	62	78	81	88

SOURCE Menard, “Economic and Social Development of the South,” in Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States. I. The Colonial Era* (New York, 1996), 278.

St. Mary’s County’s decedents as the eighteenth century progressed. This result is observable in other datasets. Burnard reports that slaves accounted for 19 percent of the wealth among members of Maryland’s elite who left inventories before 1708 but 34 percent of the wealth among those whose estates were probated after 1760, Table 7 shows a substantial increase in the share of wealth represented by slaves in South Carolina’s probate inventories during the eighteenth century. Kullikoff reports a smaller but still significant increase in the share of wealth represented by slaves among decedents in eighteenth-century Prince Georges County.¹⁸

HOW REPRESENTATIVE IS ST. MARY’S COUNTY? The question of whether St. Mary’s County can provide clues to a broader, region-wide process regarding slavery can be addressed through a focus on the key indicator, proportion of households with slaves. Table 8 reports the proportion of households that contained slaves in the early and late eighteenth centuries in several Chesapeake counties. These data show that St. Mary’s is fairly representative of the eighteenth-century tobacco coast, at least in the relevant respect. During the 1720s, slavery was relatively sparse throughout the region, but by the 1760s, a dramatic growth in the slave population steadily transformed the Chesapeake into what can accurately be described as a slave society.

Not only do changes in the pattern of slave ownership in eighteenth-century St. Mary’s reflect a general process in the entire Chesapeake region; they may also describe a process common to all of the plantation colonies of British America. The slave pop-

18 Burnard, *Creole Gentlemen: The Maryland Elite, 1691–1776* (New York, 2002), 48; Kullikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 84. For slave prices, see *ibid.*, 133.

Table 8 Percentage of Households with Slaves, Various Chesapeake Counties, 1720s and 1760s

COUNTY	1720s	1760s
Somerset, Maryland	39.8	55.1
Kent, Maryland	30.6	54.1
Southside, Virginia	52.4	67.1
York, Virginia	66.9	68.4
Talbot, Maryland	27.0	49.4
St. Mary's, Maryland	36.3	58.0
Anne Arundel, Maryland	43.4	63.1

SOURCES Probate inventories of listed counties, Virginia State Library, Richmond; Maryland State Archives, Annapolis.

ulation in all the plantation colonies grew rapidly during the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, many of the details about the changing patterns of ownership that accompanied that growth are still lacking. However, South Carolina, the one colony where such information is available, evinces a pattern similar to that described by the St. Mary's County data (see Table 8). Although North Carolina's slave ownership did not extend as much as that of Virginia and Maryland, perhaps because its demand for labor was lower due to a weaker export sector, slave ownership there clearly moved in a direction similar to that of its neighbors to the north. As in the colonies along the tobacco coast, North Carolina also had its "early plungers" who led the way toward establishing slavery socially, economically, and legally.¹⁹

Several historians have noticed the changing pattern of slave ownership in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake colonies. As long ago as 1922, Wertenbaker published detailed empirical evidence documenting the pervasiveness of slave ownership in late eighteenth-century Virginia. In the early 1960s, Brown and Brown, provided additional support for Wertenbaker's conclusions. Unfortunately, Wertenbaker's notions about race and the Browns' quirky political ideas and determination to force all of their findings into anachronistic categories limited the influence of this

19 Several sets of population estimates are available, but this article follows those in McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985). My comments on North Carolina rest on evidence presented in A. Roger Ekirch, *Poor Carolina: Politics and Society in North Carolina, 1729–1776* (Chapel Hill, 1981); Marvin L. Michael Kay and Loren Lee Cary, *Slavery in North Carolina, 1748–1775* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

impressive empirical work on scholars who came of age during the 1960s.²⁰

More recently, Beeman, Kullikoff, and Price provided additional evidence that the growth of the slave population transformed Chesapeake society by the spreading of slave ownership beyond the elite in eighteenth-century Maryland and Virginia. Taken together, this scholarship indicates that there is no need to be shy in generalizing from St. Mary’s County to the wider region.²¹

Unrepentantly quantitative, this article is firmly rooted in the tradition of the Chesapeake school. It is clearly an exercise in head history rather than heart history, to use the categories recently advanced by Demos. One of the points that it hopes to make is that in this age of the cultural turn, the lessons of the Chesapeake school remain valuable.²²

The more substantive finding is that it is an error to describe the transition from servants to slaves as the mechanism by which the Chesapeake transformed into a slave society. Rather, it was only the first step in a century-long process by which slavery gradually took root, until, by the eve of the Revolution, the Chesapeake finally bore the imprint of slavery in every avenue of its activity; “nothing escaped, nothing and no one.”

Furthermore, the St. Mary’s County data indicate that the long-standing vague dichotomy between a society with slaves and a slave society proper is much too simplistic to make sense of the plantation colonies of British America. The more flexible notion

20 Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *The Planters of Colonial Virginia* (Princeton, 1922); Robert E. Brown and B. Katherine Brown, *Virginia, 1705–1786: Democracy or Aristocracy?* (East Lansing, Mich., 1964). A detailed accounting of Wertenbaker’s frequent racial slurs is unnecessary. His remark about “savage blacks, the crudest of workers” in *The First Americans* (New York, 1927), 43, will suffice.

21 Richard A. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia, 1746–1832* (Philadelphia, 1984); Kullikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*; Jacob M. Price, “Merchants and Planters: The Market Structure of the Colonial Chesapeake Reconsidered,” in *idem*, *Tobacco in Atlantic Trade: The Chesapeake, London and Glasgow 1675–1775* (Farnham, 1995).

22 For John Demos’ categories, see Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, “The Problem of Authority in the Writing of Early American History,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, LXVI (2009), 472–473. For the Chesapeake school, see Gordon S. Wood, “A Century of Writing Early American History: Then and Now Compared: Or How Henry Adams Got it Wrong,” *American Historical Review*, C (1999), 697–716; Menard, *Migrants, Servants and Slaves*, ix–xi.

of a spectrum, the boundaries of which might be defined by the experience of St. Mary's County during the eighteenth century, is more appropriate. The occasional use of such adjectives as "infant" or "mature" elsewhere in the literature to modify the notion of a slave society suggests that discomfort with the old dichotomy may be growing.²³

The St. Mary's County data indicate that the general category of slave society can be factored into two distinct components: (1) an "elite slave society," in which about one-third of the households headed by free persons contained slaves, most slave owners were wealthy older men with political influence, and slaves accounted for perhaps 10 to 25 percent of the population; and (2) a "popular, or pervasive slave society," in which more than half of the free households contained slaves, slaves accounted for about 40 percent of the population, and young men of middling wealth without political power often owned slaves. By these definitions, St. Mary's County had become, at most, an "elite slave society" by the 1720s. As the data on slaves by neighborhood show, however, St. Mary's County was by no means a fully developed elite slave society during the 1720s. Indeed, some parts of the county barely qualified as slave-owning societies or societies with slaves at all, to use the traditional categories. But by the 1760s, the rapid growth of the slave population had certainly turned it into a "popular slave society."

Given these definitions, many regions around the Chesapeake Bay qualify as elite slave societies during the late seventeenth century, before slaves had become the majority of the workforce in the region. Although the categories of elite and popular slave societies seem adequate to bookend the structure of slavery in the plantation colonies of mainland British America, the spectrum that they define is not adequate to contain the plantation regimes that emerged on the sugar islands. In the Caribbean colonies, slaves comprised a much larger proportion of the population, and plantation workforces were much greater, than on the mainland.²⁴

The elite and popular slave societies of the eighteenth-

23 See, for example, Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint*, 1.

24 There is considerable evidence regarding the distribution of slaves and patterns of ownership in the Caribbean. See, for example, Barry W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore, 1984); Natalie Zacek, *Settler Society in the English Leeward Islands, 1670–1776* (New York, 2010).

century Chesapeake colonies were intimately connected; it is hard to imagine the latter appearing without the prior existence of the former. The elite slave owners paved the way for the subsequent spread of slavery more widely in the region. As recent work by Otremba reveals, by the mid-eighteenth century, owning a slave had become a key marker of elite or gentry status. Thereafter, young men who aspired to join the elite or claim gentility could announce their goals or their arrival by buying slaves.²⁵

25 For property rights, see Gavin Wright, *Slavery and American Economic Development* (Baton Rouge, 2006); for the Chesapeake system of husbandry, Carr, Menard, and Walsh, *Robert Cole's World*. Eric Otremba, “Conspicuous Production: Slaves, Consumables, and Material Culture in the Chesapeake,” unpub. paper presented at the conference “The Early Chesapeake: Reflections and Projections,” sponsored by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Solomon’s Island, Maryland, 2009.

