

CONTENTS

Contributors.....	x
Reader's Guide.....	xiv
Acknowledgments.....	xvi
Introduction.....	xvii

Volume 1: 1619-1831

John Rolfe's Letter to Sir Edwyn Sandys about Enslaved Africans.....	2
Mayflower Compact.....	16
Virginia's Act XII and III.....	25
Jonathan Edwards: "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God".....	34
Proclamation of 1763.....	50
Quartering Act.....	65
Declaration of Rights of the Stamp Act Congress.....	85
Boston Non-Importation Agreement.....	95
Intolerable Acts.....	102
Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress.....	129
Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" Speech.....	142
Proclamation by the King for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition.....	151
<i>Common Sense</i>	160
Abigail Adams: "Remember the Ladies" Letter to John Adams.....	194
Virginia Declaration of Rights.....	203
Declaration of Independence.....	213
Articles of Confederation.....	225
Treaty of Fort Pitt.....	241
Pennsylvania: An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.....	252
James Madison's Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments.....	265
Northwest Ordinance.....	280
Constitution of the United States.....	294
Federalist Papers 10, 14, and 51.....	312
George Washington's First Inaugural Address.....	335
George Washington's First Annual Message to Congress.....	347

Jefferson's and Hamilton's Opinions on the Constitutionality of the Bank of the United States.....	359
Bill of Rights.....	388
Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.....	398
George Washington's Farewell Address.....	409
Alien and Sedition Acts.....	429
Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address.....	443
Thomas Jefferson's Message to Congress about the Lewis and Clark Expedition.....	455
<i>Marbury v. Madison</i>	467
Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves.....	489
<i>Martin v. Hunter's Lessee</i>	503
<i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i>	534
Missouri Compromise.....	560
Monroe Doctrine.....	573
<i>Gibbons v. Ogden</i>	582
Andrew Jackson: On Indian Removal.....	610
William Lloyd Garrison's First <i>Liberator</i> Editorial.....	623

Volume 2: 1832-1898

Andrew Jackson's Veto Message regarding the Second Bank of the United States.....	634
South Carolina Ordinance of Nullification and Andrew Jackson's Proclamation.....	655
Margaret Fuller: <i>Woman in the Nineteenth Century</i>	674
Joint Resolution of Congress for the Annexation of Texas.....	686
Seneca Falls Convention Declaration of Sentiments.....	696
Compromise of 1850.....	708
Frederick Douglass's "Fourth of July" Speech.....	733
Kansas-Nebraska Act.....	755
<i>Dred Scot v. Sandford</i>	777
Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" Speech.....	818
South Carolina Declaration of Causes of Secession.....	832
Jefferson Davis's Inaugural Address to the Confederacy.....	843
Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address.....	853
Homestead Act.....	867
Morrill Act.....	879
Emancipation Proclamation.....	890
War Department General Order 143.....	900
Gettysburg Address.....	909
Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address	918
Articles of Agreement Relating to the Surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia.....	928
Black Code of Mississippi.....	939

Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.....	950
Civil Rights Act of 1866.....	960
Articles of Impeachment of Andrew Johnson.....	971
Treaty of Fort Laramie.....	986
Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.....	1005
Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.....	1017
Ku Klux Klan Act.....	1027
Act Establishing Yellowstone National Park.....	1039
Rutherford B. Hayes’s Inaugural Address.....	1050
Thomas Edison’s Patent Application for the Incandescent Light Bulb.....	1063
Chinese Exclusion Act.....	1073
Pendleton Civil Service Act.....	1086
T. Thomas Fortune: “The Present Relations of Labor and Capitol”	1099
Interstate Commerce Act.....	1111
Dawes Severalty Act 990.....	1129
Andrew Carnegie: “Wealth”	1141
Sherman Antitrust Act.....	1156
Immigration Act of 1891.....	1165
Populist Party: Omaha Platform.....	1174
Eugene V. Debs’s “Liberty” Speech.....	1184
Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Address.....	1191
<i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i>	1202
William Jennings Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” Speech.....	1225
<i>United States v. Wong Kim Ark</i>	1237
William McKinley’s Message to Congress about Cuban Intervention.....	1252

Volume 3: 1901-1956

The Insular Cases: <i>Downes v. Bidwell</i>	1270
Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine.....	1300
Niagara Movement Declaration of Principles.....	1310
Pure Food and Drug Act.....	1322
<i>Muller v. Oregon</i>	1333
Ida B. Wells: “Lynching: Our National Crime”	1345
Jane Addams: “Why Women Should Vote”	1353
Progressive Party Platform.....	1362
Sixteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.....	1377
Zimmermann Telegram.....	1384
Woodrow Wilson: Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War against Germany.....	1391

Espionage and Sedition Acts.....	1407
Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points.....	1418
<i>Hammer v. Dagenhart</i>	1429
<i>Schenck v. United States</i>	1444
Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.....	1452
Immigration Act of 1924.....	1461
Alain Locke: “Enter the New Negro”.....	1470
Herbert Hoover’s “Rugged Individualism” Speech.....	1484
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Address.....	1495
Tennessee Valley Authority Act.....	1506
National Industrial Recovery Act.....	1525
Social Security Act.....	1550
National Labor Relations Act.....	1583
Paul S. Taylor: “Again the Covered Wagon”	1599
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Campaign Address at Madison Square Garden.....	1611
<i>United States v. Curtiss-Wright</i>	1626
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms Message to Congress.....	1645
Lend-Lease Act.....	1660
Executive Order 8802: Banning Discrimination in Government and Defense Industries.....	1671
Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Pearl Harbor” Speech.....	1682
Executive Order 9066: Internment of Japanese Americans.....	1692
Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Order of the Day.....	1703
Servicemen’s Readjustment Act (GI Bill).....	1712
<i>Korematsu v. United States</i>	1734
George F. Kennan: “Long Telegram”	1745
Truman Doctrine.....	1757
Marshall Plan.....	1771
Taft-Hartley Act.....	1781
Press Release Announcing U.S. Recognition of Israel.....	1816
Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces.....	1827
<i>Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. v. Sawyer</i>	1837
<i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>	1849
Senate Resolution 301: Censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy.....	1862
Southern Manifesto.....	1872
Federal-Aid Highway Act.....	1883

Volume 4: 1957-2019

Executive Order 10730: Enforcing Desegregation of Little Rock Central High School.....	1914
Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Farewell Address.....	1925

John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address.....	1939
Executive Order 10924: Establishment of the Peace Corps.....	1951
John Glenn’s Official Communication with the Command Center.....	1961
Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”	1972
John F. Kennedy’s Civil Rights Address.....	1990
Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” Speech.....	2003
Civil Rights Act of 1964.....	2015
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.....	2047
<i>Griswold v. Connecticut</i>	2057
Voting Rights Act.....	2068
<i>Miranda v. Arizona</i>	2083
National Organization for Women (NOW) Statement of Purpose.....	2126
<i>Loving v. Virginia</i>	2136
Kerner Commission Report Summary.....	2149
Equal Rights Amendment.....	2177
Richard Nixon’s Smoking Gun Tape.....	2186
<i>Roe v. Wade</i>	2198
<i>Regents of the University of California v. Bakke</i>	2221
Ronald Reagan’s “Evil Empire” Speech.....	2247
César Chávez’s Commonwealth Address.....	2262
Andrew Sullivan: “Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage”	2277
George H. W. Bush’s Address to Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis.....	2288
Republican Contract with America.....	2301
Bill Clinton’s Radio Address on the Welfare Reform Act.....	2310
Articles of Impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton.....	2321
<i>Bush v. Gore</i>	2333
George W. Bush’s Address to the Nation on September 11, 2001.....	2366
USA PATRIOT Act.....	2376
Bybee Torture Memo.....	2394
<i>Lawrence v. Texas</i>	2433
Barack Obama’s First Inaugural Address.....	2464
<i>Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission</i>	2477
Barack Obama: Remarks on Signing the Affordable Care Act.....	2492
<i>Obergefell v. Hodges</i>	2502
Donald J. Trump’s Inaugural Address.....	2516
Articles of Impeachment of Donald J. Trump.....	2527
List of Documents by Category.....	2537
Index.....	2543

JOHN ROLFE'S LETTER TO SIR EDWIN SANDYS ABOUT ENSLAVED AFRICANS

AUTHOR

John Rolfe

DATE

1619

TYPE

Letters/Correspondence

SIGNIFICANCE

First documented case of Africans sold into servitude in British North America

Overview



When John Rolfe related in a letter to Sir Edwin Sandys that “20 and odd Negroes” had been off-loaded by a Dutch ship at Point Comfort in 1619, he had no notion of the lasting importance of his account. The seemingly casual comment recorded the first documented case of Africans sold into servitude to British North America. Purchased as indentures in the labor-starved Virginia colony, these twenty-some souls disappeared into the anonymous pool of workers transported to the colony during its first decades. The origins of the Africans and their ultimate fates have long been debated by historians and others studying the account. Rolfe provided little detail and made no further mention of the group.

Rolfe's statement was part of a much longer missive written from the Virginia colony to one of his benefactors back in England. Rolfe hoped to endear himself by relating the recent events of the colony to the new treasurer of the Virginia Company of London, Sir Edwin Sandys. Under Sandys's leadership, the Virginia enterprise had entered a new phase in its existence and had recently undergone reorganization. Part of that process involved the establishment of the

headright system (a system of land grants to settlers), which, in part, was responsible for the growing labor shortage of 1619 and 1620 as well as the rapid increase in the demand for unfree workers obtained through contracts of indenture.

Context

Virginia in 1619 was very much in a state of flux. Established in 1607 by the Virginia Company of London, a joint-stock enterprise, the settlement had endured great hardship, a constant turnover in leadership, and various financial crises. The recently introduced cash crop, tobacco, had for the first time made the prospect of profits from Virginia a realistic but as yet unrealized possibility. It was, however, labor- and land intensive. Another factor creating some upheaval was the death of the leader of the Powhatan Confederacy, known as Powhatan, and his replacement by a chief much less friendly toward the English, Opechancanough, or Mangopeesomon (“Opachankano” in the document). The company was also in the process of making the transition from a merchant enterprise to a colonial property.



A painting depicting Black Africans landing at Jamestown in 1619
(Library of Congress)

A power struggle within the Virginia Company of London had resulted in the ouster of its earlier leader, Sir Thomas Smith, and the recall of Samuel Argall, the settlement's governor, by Sir Edwin Sandys, the company's new treasurer, and his supporters. By mid-1619 the new governor, George Yeardley, had taken up residence in Virginia and initiated the reforms crafted by his colleagues. Among the most significant changes was the establishment of a framework for local governance—the Virginia Assembly and a governor's council—which would collectively be referred to as the Virginia House of Burgesses. Also included in the plan were attempts at economic diversification meant to encourage movement away from a single cash-crop economy based on tobacco cultivation and the creation of the headright system. Sandys's goal was to convert the Virginia venture from a place inhabited largely by transient laborers who sought at least modest fortunes in North America and then planned to return to England into a colony populated by individuals who would become permanent residents.

Sandys's plan produced an unprecedented demand for labor. The headright system was aimed at creating a

sense of ownership in the colony by making landowners of the settlers. The plan distributed one hundred acres of land to all of the "Ancient Planters," or inhabitants of Virginia before 1618. All new arrivals became entitled to headrights, fifty acres of land, upon reaching the colony, as long as they met a few basic requirements: being male, adult, and free of indenture. Those who met the guidelines could also collect headrights on behalf of the others for whom they were responsible, including wives, children, and bound servants. This liberal dispersal of land and the profitability and labor-intensive nature of tobacco were largely responsible for the shortage of field hands. No one in possession of his own land worked on the land of another planter, and to be profitable even fifty acres of land needed many hands.

At this point in their development, Virginia's residents were particularly confused about the uses and nature of unfree labor. Their knowledge base drew upon the experiences and precedents established by their neighbors in the Caribbean: the Spanish and the Portuguese. They knew of the existence and use of slavery as a mainstay of the sugar economy of the Caribbean and South America but were unfamiliar with the specifics of the institution. Their own experiences in Great Britain had offered them no firsthand contact with slavery. English common law also had no provisions for slavery as a codified institution. Virginians were not opposed to slavery; they simply had no legal framework for its utilization. Instead, they relied on a different sort of legal framework, that for indenture. In England, this institution supplied a contractual agreement under which the servant bound himself for a period of years, usually five to seven, to a master, giving up his personal liberties in exchange for the basics necessary for survival: food, shelter, and clothing. At the end of service, the servant regained his freedom and a small payment usually referred to as freedom fees. In Virginia, this system was quickly distorted as the value of labor in the fields increased exponentially. Terms governing the length of service were extended for any violation of the contract, and bound laborers found themselves subject to much harsher conditions than they might have expected in England.

The first record of African laborers in the Virginia colony appears in the census of 1619. This document lists thirty-two Africans, fifteen men and seventeen women, in the employ of several planters as early as March

1619. Their origins are unclear; however, many scholars agree that a majority of the first Africans in the colony came not as resettlements or as natives from the West Indies but rather straight from western and central Africa. The appearance of Africans in early Virginia must also be considered in the larger context of the Atlantic world, where a brisk trade in unfree labor deposited African captives to be sold for their labor from New England southward to the Portuguese colony of Brazil. The dominant factor in this commercial venture was the Portuguese, who were acting under the Spanish *asiento*, or trade monopoly. Others who engaged in this trade, particularly the English and the Dutch, often acquired their cargoes by acting as freebooters or privateers.

About the Author

John Rolfe, born in Norfolk, England, probably in 1585, was not among the first of the Virginia venturers, but he was certainly among the Virginia Company's earliest recruits. He and his first wife left Plymouth, England, in June 1609 on the *Sea Venture*, the flagship of a flotilla dispatched to Virginia by the new governor, Thomas West, 12th Baron De La Warre, and under the command of his lieutenant governor, Sir Thomas Gates. All went well until they were shipwrecked along the coast of Bermuda after an encounter with a hurricane on July 23. In May of the following year, the survivors risked a voyage to Jamestown, completing their journey. Rolfe's wife, unnamed in the records of the time, died shortly after reaching Virginia.

In 1612 Rolfe produced his and the Virginia enterprise's first crop of salable tobacco. The natives of Virginia grew tobacco prior to the arrival of Englishmen, but that product was deemed too harsh. Europeans in general and the English in particular favored the milder, sweeter tobacco varieties produced in the West Indies. Exactly where Rolfe procured his seed remains unclear—whether picked up during his sojourn on Bermuda or secured at considerable cost while he was still in England or after he arrived in Virginia. In any case, his 1612 experiment marked a turning point in the course of Virginia venturers' lives. By 1616 Virginia had its first major cash crop. It was this success that allowed Rolfe to frequent the company of Jamestown's controlling elite.

Those connections served him well, for by 1614 two significant events altered his status in Virginia. Sometime during that year Rolfe began to serve as the secretary and recorder for the colony, and on April 5 he married a young native woman commonly known as Pocahontas. The daughter of a powerful local chief named Powhatan, Pocahontas—or, as she called herself, Matoaka—was perceived by the English as akin to royalty. Taken hostage a year earlier as part of plan to exchange captives, Pocahontas had received considerable instruction in English and the precepts of the Christian faith and had submitted to baptism days before her wedding. The marriage, approved by the governor, Sir Thomas Dale, was perceived as a mechanism for civilizing the local tribes. This union is also generally credited with the temporary peace between the Jamestown inhabitants and members of the Powhatan Confederacy, who had recently been at war.

After the ceremony the couple returned to the property granted to Rolfe by the Virginia Company on Hog Island near Jamestown. There, Rolfe continued to refine his tobacco experimentations. Probably with the help and guidance of his wife, his crops flourished, and he solved some of the problems surrounding the curing and drying of tobacco (or the “weed,” as many referred to it) that plagued his counterparts. In 1615 Pocahontas, by this time known as Rebecca Rolfe, bore the couple a son, Thomas. The following year John, Rebecca, and Thomas Rolfe, at the company's suggestion, traveled to England with Governor Dale on the *Treasure*, captained by Samuel Argall, a part owner of the vessel. The Rolfes and their native companions quickly became celebrities in London and received an introduction to Court. It was also during this period that Rolfe made the acquaintance of Sir Edwin Sandys, the person soon to be the controlling factor of the Virginia Company of London.

While the journey was a social and political success for the company, it was a personal disaster for the Rolfes. Rebecca Rolfe and her native companions did not fare well physically. By the end of 1616 all were affected by infectious diseases that proved much more virulent among Native Americans. In March 1617 the couple and their company made plans to return to Virginia with Argall, who had become the governor of the outpost. Shortly after leaving London, Rolfe requested that the captain dock at Gravesend because his wife had grown too ill, probably with pneumonia,

to travel. Rebecca died and was buried in the churchyard there shortly afterward. At this point, Rolfe also made the difficult decision to leave his son, Thomas, who was also affected by the contagion, behind with family in England.

Back in Virginia tobacco flourished, but all else foundered. The illness that had felled Rebecca spread rapidly among the local tribes. Powhatan, her father and longtime peacekeeper, also died in 1618, leaving the much more militant and anti-English Opechancanough in charge. Among the English community, Governor Argall faced continuing high death rates, shortages of food and other supplies, and growing frustration with the company's quasi-military rule. From England he received conflicting orders, bad advice, and complaints about the lack of profits. Rolfe, acting pragmatically, continued to curry favor with Argall and the soon-to-be secretary of the company, Sir Edwin Sandys. Shortly after Sandys's takeover and the arrival of his new governor, George Yeardley, Rolfe wrote an extensive missive to Sandys exhibiting his allegiance and intimate knowledge of Virginia and citing the presence of indentured African servants. He reminded Sandys of his connection to the Indians through his marriage to Pocahontas (Rebecca) but failed to reveal his recent marriage to Joan Pierce, the daughter of his friend and neighbor William Pierce.

Rolfe's plan evidently worked, for in 1621 he received an appointment to a newly reorganized council aimed at colonial restructuring. The officers of the Virginia Company, most particularly Sandys, knew enough of Rolfe's name and reputation to name him to the elite governor's council in the fledgling House of Burgesses. His tenure, however, was short-lived. Just before the Powhatan uprising of March 22, 1622, Rolfe contracted an illness from which he would not recover. He dictated his will on March 10, making provisions for his son, Thomas; his third wife, Joan; and his new daughter, Elizabeth. At the age of thirty-seven he died during yet another war with his second wife's people. This conflict had lasting repercussions for the Virginia settlements; in 1624 the financial problems that had plagued the colony from its beginning, combined with the effects of the war and yet another wave of pandemic disease, led to its bankruptcy. Within a year it would be reorganized as a royal colony under the new king, Charles I.

Explanation and Analysis of the Document

John Rolfe's statement in his 1619 letter to Sir Edwin Sandys concerning the arrival of "20 and odd Negroes" at Point Comfort, Virginia, represents the first documented arrival of Africans in the Virginia colony. The related sections of the letter constitute two short paragraphs about one-third of the way into a much larger missive. The reference to "negroes" appears almost casual in its tone and is certainly not the focus of Rolfe's interest or his purpose in writing the letter to Sandys.

By late 1619 Rolfe's personal political position in the colony, similar to that of Virginia itself, was in a state of flux. His earlier allegiances to the former governors Thomas Dale and Samuel Argall had become liabilities rather than advantages, and he had to quickly realign himself and find new patrons. The recent London upheaval within the controlling body of the Virginia Company and the ouster of its treasurer, Sir Thomas Smith, and his replacement by Sir Edwin Sandys called for action on Rolfe's part if he was to maintain his status in the colony. Although, in the letter, he continues to defend the deposed governor, he also begins to distance himself from Argall's actions and policies. He promptly reminds Sandys that he, Rolfe, has value in his connections through his late wife, Pocahontas, and their son, Thomas, to the leadership of the Powhatan Confederacy.

Rolfe's letter is interesting in the way in which he positions himself in reference to the colony's new governor, George Yeardley, and Yeardley's secretary, John Pory. While Rolfe clearly defers to their authority and their responsibility to report officially on the state of the colony, he points out that his ties and insider knowledge of the colony's personalities and inner workings might prove invaluable. In this vein, Rolfe pens his long and detailed letter to Sandys, recounting the happenings in the colony from the spring of 1619 through the winter of that year and thus illustrating his insight and his value to the new regime.

Paragraphs 1–7

In the opening paragraph of his letter to Sandys, Rolfe gently reminds the new treasurer of the Virginia Company of his identity and offers his service "as a token of my grateful remembrance for your many favors and constant love shown me." In the next several paragraphs Rolfe relates the developments in the colony since the



A painting depicting the wedding of Pocahontas to John Rolfe
(Library of Congress)

arrival of Yeardley, the new governor. These developments include the calling of the House of Burgesses, two trials held “according to the laudable Laws of England,” and the dispatch and successful return of a ship under the command of a Captain Ward and another, the *George*, to the northern colony, probably New England, and to Newfoundland, respectively, to trade for fish to feed the hungry colonists. He also reports that the cattle that had arrived on board the *Trial* fared well during the voyage and that the horses and the mares should be easy to sell, as the population continued to grow through constant immigration to Virginia.

Paragraph 9

Rolfe then recounts events of August 1619, stating, “About the latter end of August, a Dutch man-of-war of the burden of a 160 tons arrived at Point Comfort, the Commander’s name Captain Jope, his Pilot for the West Indies one Mr. Marmaduke, an Englishman.” The ship, which was unnamed in Rolfe’s letter, was the *White Lion*, which John Pory, the secretary of the colony, names as a “man of warre of Flushing,” a privateer sailing from Vlissingen, a Dutch seaport noted as a haven for corsairs, or pirates. Rolfe describes this

ship as capable of carrying a burden of 160 tons. In the seventeenth century that term referred to a measure of volume, usually wine or beer, in a cask rather than to a measure of weight. Point Comfort refers to the location of the ship’s landing in Virginia and rests at the juncture of the James and York rivers as they empty into the Chesapeake Bay. The officers of the Virginia Company in London constantly recommended the maintenance of a “fort” at this location despite the fact that this point of land was largely swamp land and unhealthy in its aspect. Rolfe lists the ship’s general officers rather incompletely as a Captain Jope and a Mr. Marmaduke. The *White Lion*’s captain was, in reality, John Colyn Jope, an Englishman hailing from Cornwall. The gentleman named Marmaduke is identified by Pory as Marmaduke Rayner.

Rolfe continues by establishing the credentials of the Dutch ship and its relationship to its consort ship, the *Treasure*: “They met with the *Treasure* in the West Indies and determined to hold consort ship hitherward, but in their passage lost one the other.” For Rolfe’s contemporaries reading the letter, this statement was among the most important. The *Treasure*—among

whose stockholders were Robert Rich, the Earl of Warwick, and Samuel Argall, the deposed governor of Virginia—was captained by Daniel Elfrith and sailed under the English flag with a license from Victor Amadeus, the Duke of Savoy, to seize Spanish shipping. These two vessels met in the West Indies, and their captains agreed to sail in cooperation in search of Spanish plunder. Successful in their attempts, they boarded the *São Juan Batista*, a Portuguese slaver sailing out of Loanda, Angola, under a Spanish *asiento* (contract), and removed a number of the Africans held captive on board. On their way toward friendlier territory, the two ships lost sight of each other; the *White Lion* made port in Virginia in late August 1619.

Rolfe's next statement—"He brought not anything but 20 and odd Negroes"—represents the first recorded instance of Africans in captivity brought to Virginia and traded or sold in the colony. Although census data suggest that there were others brought to Virginia earlier, there is no extant record of their arrival or their disposition. According to Rolfe, Jope exchanged his Africans for food and other supplies needed to refit his ship. The governor, George Yeardley, and Abraham Piersey, the cape merchant for the Virginia Company, purchased the lot, with seven of the Africans going with Yeardley back to Jamestown and the remainder in the possession of Piersey.

Rolfe spends the rest of this paragraph detailing Jope's credentials as a privateer, stating, "He had a large and ample Commission from his Excellency to range and to take purchase in the West Indies." The commission to which he refers came from Maurice, the Count of Nassau, and gave him license to raid Spanish shipping in the Caribbean Ocean and its surrounding water. This was significant, because Jope's actions—the raid on a Spanish ship—could not, therefore, be seen by officials back in England as instigated by the English, who had recently signed a treaty with Spain.

Paragraph 10

The next paragraph, while not directly commenting on Jope's sale or the fate of his twenty-some Africans, does illuminate Rolfe's position in the colony. Rolfe reports that the *Treasure* made landfall not far from Point Comfort, three or four days after the *White Lion*. Captain Daniel Elfrith, thinking that Argall was still in command, "sent word presently to the Governor to know his pleasure." Elfrith's presence in Virginia seriously

disconcerted the newly arrived Governor Yeardley on several fronts: The *Treasure* was at least partially owned by members of the regime that he and Sandys had replaced; Argall was not only part owner of the vessel but also the former governor chased from the colony under clouds of suspicion; and, finally, the *Treasure* sailed and raided under an English flag, threatening James I's fragile new peace with the Spanish. Elfrith, taking heed of his hostile reception—"the unfriendly dealing of the Inhabitants of Keqnoughton"—quickly abandoned Virginia for Bermuda, where he found a friendlier welcome and a market for his cargo of captive Angolans.

Paragraphs 11–23

In the remainder of the letter Rolfe describes the events occurring in the colony over the rest of the year. The most important of his accounts focus on a warning from Elfrith that a Spanish attack might come in the spring as well as on the deteriorating relationships with the local tribes, the establishment of new plantations and the division of land under Sandys's new system, and arrivals and departures from the colony. He closes with a pledge of his loyalty and a plea for Argall, his former patron.

Audience

The audience named by John Rolfe in his salutation consisted of a party of one, Sir Edwin Sandys. It is clear that much of what Rolfe says was intended specifically for Sandys. This is particularly true of the first and last paragraphs of the text. Rolfe was interested in cultivating a relationship with the man he perceived, quite correctly, as holding the keys to his and his family's future. His tone is deferential, and his language throughout the letter is almost penitent. However, in Rolfe's seventeenth-century world, both would be normal in a communication between an official and a subordinate and clearly define the relationship between the two men.

While Rolfe specifically addresses Sandys in the letter, he must also have intended for his work to be read by others. Given the common practice in early-modern England of reading aloud letters from distant places, it is reasonable that Rolfe expected Sandys to share at least selected passages from his text with others, most specifically those shareholders in the Virginia Company. Sandys's position in the company as secretary also

suggests that he served as a conduit for information to and from the officers and holdings.

Impact

It is quite clear that Rolfe's mention of the sale of those twenty-some Africans in August of 1619 bears much more historical relevance in the eyes of twenty-first century Americans than it did in the eyes of seventeenth-century Englishmen or Virginians. Sandys, or perhaps his secretary, recorded at the end of the letter the items of importance discussed by Rolfe. That list contains no mention of the *White Lion* or the twenty or so Africans sold at Point Comfort in August of 1619. That sale is significant only in retrospect. Those doing the selling and the buying did not comprehend that their actions were the first steps toward a massive forced migration of Africans to British North America and the codification of the institution of slavery.

We know something of what became of two of the Africans who arrived in Virginia on that August day in 1619. According to Tim Hashaw, these two Afri-

cans, captives from the Angolan Kingdom of Ndongo, are found in a later Jamestown census under the names "John" Gowan and "Margaret" Cornish. John was taken as a servant by the planter William Evans ("Ewens" in the document), and Margaret became the slave of the planter Robert Shepphard. Although they lived apart, John and Margaret had a son. Many Africans in Jamestown were initially held as indentured servants, to be freed after a period of up to seven years. John soon gained his freedom and went on to start his own farm, but Margaret remained a slave.

Their story was not unique in early colonial times. It was typical for black men to be indentured but for black women to be held as slaves, creating an imbalance in possible marriage partners for these indentured black men when they gained their freedom. The freed black men went on to marry Indians and even white women and became planters with their own servants, some of them white. Within a generation such mixed marriages were banned, and the rights of free blacks were curtailed as the slave trade burgeoned and Virginians began to fear slave uprisings.

Questions for Further Study

1. Describe the economic and agricultural circumstances that gave rise to slavery in what would become the United States.
2. Imagine that John Rolfe's first tobacco crop had failed. How might the history of the colonies and of the United States have been different?
3. What political intrigues in the Virginia colony and England contributed to the development of the institution of slavery?
4. How did the institution of slavery affect the Virginia settlers' relationships with Native Americans?
5. In 1619 the Spanish and the Portuguese had long had a foothold in the Americas and were using slave labor. How did the history of Spanish and Portuguese slavery affect the development of slavery in the North American colonies?

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—Commentary by Martha Pallante

JOHN ROLFE'S LETTER TO SIR EDWIN SANDYS ABOUT ENSLAVED AFRICANS



Document Text

Honored Sir:

Studying with myself what service I might do you, as a token of my grateful remembrance for your many favors and constant love shown me, as well in my absence as when I was present with you I could not at this time devise a better than to give you notice of some particulars both of our present estate and what happened since the departure of the *Diana*. And though I am well assured, you will be satisfied herein more fully by our Governor, yet I desire your kind acceptance of this my poor endeavor.

Presently, after the *Diana* had her dispatch, Sir George Yeardley (according to a Commission directed unto him and to the Council of State) caused Burgesses to be chosen in all place who met at James City, where all matters therein contained were debated by several Committees and approved and likewise such other laws enacted as were held expedient & requisite for the welfare and peaceable government of this Commonwealth. Captain Martin's Burgesses for his Plantation were not admitted to this Assembly; the reasons I am assured you shall receive from our Governor, who sends home a report of all those proceedings.

These principal men being at James City, Captain William Epps (who commands Smythe's Hundred Company) was arraigned (as near as might be) according to the laudable Laws of England, for killing one Captain Edward Roecroft alias Stallenge. He came hither from the North Colony in a ship of Sir Ferdinan-

do Gorges (as he said) for some necessaries which he wanted and to coast along the shore to find and discover what Harbors and rivers he could. But through neglect of the Master of the ship and others, she was forced aground in a storm near Newport News and there sprang so great a leak that he could not carry her back again. This mischance happened through uncivil and unmanly words urged by Stallenge (there being no precedent malice) with which Captain Epps being much moved did strike him on the head with a sword in the scabbard such an unfortunate blow that within 2 days he died. The Jury . . . , hearing the Evidence, found him guilty of Manslaughter by Chance medley. The Governor finding him (though young) yet a proper civil gent and of good hopes, not long after restored him to his Command.

Captain Henry Spelman, being accused by Robert Poole (one of the interpreters of the Indian language) of many crimes which might be prejudicial to the State in general and to every man's safety in particular, received Censure at this general Assembly. But the Governor hoping he might redeem his fault, proceeding much of Childish ignorance, pardoned the punishment upon hope of amendment. In trial whereof he was employed as interpreter to Patowmack to trade for Corn.

Captain Ward in his ship went to Monahigon in the North Colony in May and returned the latter end

of July, with fish which he caught there. He brought but a small quantity, by reason he had but little salt. There were some Plymouth ships where he harbored, who made great store of fish, which is far larger then Newfoundland fish.

The *George* was sent by the Cape Merchant (with the Governor's consent) to Newfoundland to trade and buy fish for the better relief of the Colony and to make trial of that passage. One other reason (as I take it) was, for that the Magazine was well stored with goods, it was somewhat doubtful, whether a ship would be sent to carry home the crop so soon as the *George* might upon her return back. She departed hence about the 9th of July and arrived here again about the 10th of September. She made her passage to Newfoundland in less than 3 weeks and was at the bank amongst the French fishermen in 14 days. She came back hither again in 3 weeks, with bare wind and brought so much fish as will make a saving voyage, which, beside the great relief, gives much content to the whole Colony.

The *Sturgeon* ship and the *Trial* departed hence together [in] July. Mr. Pountys has taken great pains in fishing, and toward Michaelmas (the weather being somewhat temperate) made some good sturgeon. He hopes by the spring to be better fitted, with Cellars and houses, and to do some good therein.

The Cattle in the *Trial* came exceeding well, and gave the Colony much joy and great encouragement. Both the horses and Mares will be very vendible here a long time, the Colony increasing with people as of late.

About the latter end of August, a Dutch man-of-war of the burden of a 160 tons arrived at Point Comfort, the Commander's name Captain Jope, his Pilot for the West Indies one Mr. Marmaduke, an Englishman. They met with the *Treasure* in the West Indies and determined to hold consort ship hitherward, but in their passage lost one the other. He brought not anything but 20 and odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Merchant bought for victuals (whereof he was in great need as he pretended) at the best and easiest rate they could. He had a large and ample Commission from his Excellency to range and to take purchase in the West Indies.

Three or 4 days after the *Treasure* arrived. At his arrival he sent word presently to the Governor to know his pleasure, who wrote to him, and did request my-

self, Lieutenant Peace, and Mr. Ewens to go down to him, to desire him to come up to James City. But before we got down, he had set sail and was gone out of the Bay. The occasion hereof happened by the unfriendly dealing of the Inhabitants of Keqnoughton, for he was in great want of victuals, wherewith they would not relieve him or his Company upon any terms. He reported (whilst he stayed at Keqnoughton) that if we got not some Ordinance planted at Point Comfort, the Colony would be quite undone—and that ere long—for that undoubtedly the Spaniard would be here the next spring which he gathered (as was said) from some Spaniard in the West Indies. This being spread abroad does much dishearten the people in general for we have no place of strength to retreat unto, no shipping of certainty (which would be to us as the wooden walls of England) no sound and experienced soldiers to undertake, no Engineers and earthmen to erect works, few Ordinance, not a serviceable carriage to mount them on; not Ammunition of powder, shot and lead, to fight 2 whole days, no, not one gunner belonging to the Plantation, so our sovereign's dignity, your honors or poor reputations, lives, and labors thus long spent lies too open to a sudden and to an inevitable hazard, if a foreign enemy oppose against us. Of this I cannot better do, to give you full satisfaction, than to refer you to the judgment and opinion of Captain Argall, who has often spoken hereof during his government and knows (none better) these defects.

About the beginning of September, Japazaws (the King of the Patawamack's brother) came to James City to the Governor. Among other frivolous messages, he requested, that 2 ships might be speedily to Patawamack, where they should trade for great stores of corn. Hereupon (according to his desire) the Governor sent an Englishman with him by land, and in the beginning of October, Captain Ward's ship and Somer-Island frigate departed James City hitherward.

Robert Poole, being wholly employed by the Governor of message to the great King, persuaded Sir George that if he would send Pledge, he would come to visit him. Our Corn and Tobacco being in great abundance in our ground (for a more plentiful year than this it hath not pleased God to send us since the beginning of this Plantation, yet very contagious for sickness, whereof many, both old and new men, died) the

Governor sent two men unto him, who were returned with frivolous answers, saying he never had any intent to come unto him. The Governor being jealous of them (... because we had many straggling Plantations, much weakened by the great mortality, Poole likewise proving very dishonest) requested Captain William Powell and myself ... to go in a shallop unto Pomonkey river, which we did. Going up that river within 5 miles of his house, we sent Captain Spelman and Thomas Hobson unto him with the Governor's message. The ship and frigate (being not far out of their way to Patawamack) went in the night about 12 miles into the river, and we hasting up with our shallop, the messengers were with Opachankano, before or as soon as any news came to him either of the ships or our arrival, which much daunted them and put them in great fear. Their entertainment at the first was harsh (Poole being even turned heathen), but after their message was delivered, it was kindly taken, they sent away lovingly, and Poole accused and Condemned by them, as an instrument that sought all the means he could to break or league. They seemed also to be very weary of him. Opachankano much wondered I would not go to him, but (as I wished the messengers) they said I was sick of an ague, wherewith they were satisfied. We had no order to bring Poole away, or to make any show of discontent to him, for fear he should persuade them to some mischief in our corn fields, hoping to get him away by fair means. So we returned in great love and amity to the great content of the Colony, which before lived in daily hazard, all message being untruly delivered by Poole on both sides....

All the Ancient Planters being set free have chosen place for their dividend according to the Commission. Which giveth all great content, for now knowing their own land, they strive and are prepared to build houses & to clear their ground ready to plant, which gives the great encouragement and the greatest hope to make the Colony flourish that ever yet happened to them.

Upon the 4th of November the *Bona Nova* arrived at James City. All the passengers came lusty and in good health. They came by the West Indies, which passage at that season doth much refresh the people.

The proportion of Victuals brought for those 100 men fell so short that Captain Welden and Mr. Whitaker were forced (notwithstanding our plenty) to put

out 50 or thereabout for a year by the Governor's and Council's advise, for whom they are to receive the next years 3 barrells of corn and 55 n of tobacco for a man; which their sickness considered (for seldom any escapes little or much) is more than they of themselves could get. By this means the next year, they will be instructed to proceed in their own business and be well instructed to teach newcomers. With the remainder (being about 25 apiece, the one is seated with one Captain Mathews 3 miles beyond Henrico for his own security, and to his great content. And Mr. Whitaker within 4 miles of James City on the Company's land.

Upon Saturday the 20th of November at night Mr. Ormerod died at James City, after a long and tedious sickness, the chief occasion the flux, which of late hath much reigned among us. His death is generally much lamented, the Colony receiving hereby a great loss, being a man of so good life, learning & carriage as his fellow here he left not behind him.

One Mr. Darmer, agent sent out by the Plymouth Company, arrived here about the end of September in a small bottom of 7 or 8 tons; he had coasted ... to our Plantation, and found an Inland sea ... , the depth whereof he could not search for want of means, and winter coming on. He is fitting his small vessel and purposes this spring to make a new trial.

Captain Lawne, at his arrival, seated himself in Waraskoyack Bay with his Company, but by his own sickness and his people's (wherein there was improvidence) he quitted his Plantation, went up to Charles City, and about November died. So his piece is likely (unless better followed and well seconded) to come to nothing.

Smythe's Hundred people are seated at Dauncing Point, the most convenient place within their limit. There has been much sickness among them: so yet this year no matter of gain or of great industry can be expected from them.

Martyne's Hundred men seated at Argall Towne with good & convenient houses have done best of all Newcomers. Many who were industrious having reaped good crops, but most not of equal spirit and industrious have less, yet exceeded other Newcomers. Many of these have also died by sickness, but not comparable to other places.

About the beginning of December Captain Ward with his ship and the frigate came from Patawamack. Japazaws had dealt falsely with them, for they could get little trade, so that they brought not about 800 bushels, the most part whereof they took by force from Japazaws' Country who deceived them, and a small quantity they traded for. But in conclusion being very peaceable with all the other Indians, at their departure they also made a firm peace again with Japazaws.

At this time also came Captain Woodiff in a small ship of Bristow, who brought his people very well, and made his passage in ten weeks.

Thus far as part of my duty (ever ready at your service) have I briefly made known unto you, some particulars of our estate and withal in conclusion cannot chose but reveal unto you the sorrow I conceive, to hear of the many accusations heaped upon Captain Argall, with whom my reputation has been unjustly joined, but I am persuaded he will answer well for himself. Here have also been divers depositions taken and sent home by the *Diana*; I will tax no man therein. But when it shall come to farther trial, I assure you that you shall find many dishonest and faithless men to Captain Argall, who have received much kindness at his hand & to his face will contradict, and be ashamed of much, which in his absence they have intimated against him. Lastly, I speak on my own experience for these 11 years, I never among so few, have seen so many falsehearted, envious, and malicious people (yea among some who march in the better rank), nor shall you ever hear of any the justest Governor here, who shall live free, from their scandal and shameless exclamations, if way be given to their report. And so desiring your kind acceptance hereof, being unwilling to conceal anything from yourself (who now, to mine and many others' comfort, stands at the helm to guide us and bring us to the Port of our best happiness, which

of late we say principally by your goodness we now enjoy) either which you may be desirous to understand or which may further you for the advancement of this Christian Plantation I take my leave and will ever rest

At your service and command in all faithful duties.

Jo: Rolf.

[Indorsed by Sir Edwin Sandys:] Mr. John Rolfe from Virginia Jan. 1619.

By the George.

Narration of the Late proceedings in Virginia.

Cape Cod fish larger than that of Newfoundland.

The fishing voyage of the *George*.

The *Treasure's* return: Extreme fear of the Spaniards: Want of all things.

Ships sent to the King of Patawamack.

Voyage to Opachankano. Poole's villainy.

The 4 Burrough & public land set out.

Joy and good success of dividing the Lands.

The Voyage of the *Bona Nova*. Vide C. Welden's seat. Vide Death & praise of Mr Ormerod.

Mr. Darmer of Plymouth's discoveries.

Captain Ward's Voyage for Corn.

In favor of C. Argall. That people ill-conditioned to Sir Edwin Sandys.

[Addressed by self:] To the Honored and my much respected friend Sir Edwyn Sandys Kt, Treasurer for the Virginia Company these.

Glossary

ague: fever

bottom: cargo ship

burgesses: representatives to an assembly

chance medley: from the Anglo-French *chance-medlée* (“mixed chance”), a term from English law used to describe a homicide arising from a quarrel or fight; akin to manslaughter as a killing without malice aforethought

earthmen: sappers, military specialists in field fortification

flux: dysentery, or another disease causing loss of bodily fluid

magazine: warehouse, storage building

Michaelmas: September 29, celebrated as the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel

ordinance: weapons

shallop: a large, heavy boat

wooden walls: warships