

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION



*“Myne
Owne Ground”*

RACE AND FREEDOM ON
VIRGINIA'S EASTERN SHORE,
1640–1676

T. H. BREEN AND STEPHEN INNES

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T.H. BREEN
STEPHEN INNES

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Contents

Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition: The Free
Black Planters of Pungoteague Creek in
an Atlantic World *ix*

Acknowledgments to the First Edition *xxv*

Introduction *3*

- 1 Patriarch on Pungoteague Creek *7*
 - 2 Race Relations as Status and Process *19*
 - 3 Northampton County at Mid-Century *36*
 - 4 The Free Blacks of the Eastern Shore *68*
 - 5 Conclusion: Property and the Context of
 Freedom *110*
- Notes *115*
- Index *137*

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Preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition

The Free Black Planters of Pungoteague Creek in an Atlantic World

We would be pleased if the current generation regards this book as a product of the time in which it was written. Like so many men and women who came of age during the late 1960s and early 1970s, we responded enthusiastically to the possibility of radically transforming American political culture. We have no desire now to romanticize this period, but it would be disingenuous for us to claim that we do not look back on these years with a certain nostalgia. We joined with many contemporaries in the civil rights movement in the hope that people of different races and economic backgrounds might create a new social order based on genuine equality. Perhaps because of these aspirations, we came to see a distant seventeenth-century past through different eyes. We asked different questions and viewed traditional interpretations with growing impatience. Quite by chance, we encountered, in the Virginia State Library, colonial records suggesting that almost four hundred years ago blacks and whites defined race relations in ways that many modern Americans have difficulty even imagining. As historians, our original intention—one that we still endorse—was to invite readers to challenge assumptions about race and class that not only continue to structure our daily lives, but also make a mockery of social justice.

Like the troubling events that once convulsed Salem Village, the settlement of early seventeenth-century Virginia retains a capacity to disturb modern Americans. Although the general narrative of European settlement in the Chesapeake region is not in dispute, the raw, violent, uncertain society established there continues to generate hard questions about race and class, empire and capitalism, gender and slavery. Each generation returns to the sparse records that survived hurricanes, fire, and the Civil War to ask once again how Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans managed to sort themselves out under conditions radically different from those they had known before colonization. In this world some people emerged as winners—if by that, we mean they seized political and economic power—while others were shoved to the margins, targets of oppression and discrimination. It is a deeply disquieting story. Not only do we confront in Virginia human pain and suffering, a chronicle of greed and broken dreams, but also we suspect that racial divisions that plague our own society may have their origins in that struggling tobacco colony founded so long ago.

In this harsh environment Anthony Johnson and his wife Mary—Africans in America—achieved a striking measure of success.¹ Transported to the New World as slaves, they gained freedom, and on the colony's Eastern Shore they joined others captured in Angola to form a free black community. Almost everything we know about these people challenges what were once accepted categories of historical analysis. In a colony that accepted slavery as a legitimate form of labor, the Johnsons became free, experiencing a kind of rough equality with their poor white neighbors. Although Anthony had been a slave, he purchased a slave of his own. Although he had been born in Africa, he more than held his own in the local English courts. Although many blacks in early Virginia were bought and sold, defined by Virginia statutes as property, Johnson and the other free blacks of the Eastern Shore purchased land and livestock, insisting that the ownership of property gave them a measure of security in a predatory society. And finally, although they were blacks in a society in which Europeans increasingly viewed skin color as a marker of inferiority, they defined social status as much in terms of class as race. As we approach the 400th anniversary of the founding of Virginia, these men and women invite the modern historian to provide a persuasive account of their lives.

That is precisely what we have attempted to do in this volume. Like scientists tracing subatomic particles, however, we were always conscious

that the seventeenth-century records with which we had to work offered at best only clues, hints, and possibilities. We learned almost nothing of the interior lives of people like Anthony and Mary Johnson; no letters or personal reflections have survived. The free blacks of the Virginia East Shore made themselves known to us through transfer of land, sale of animals, tax returns, and legal controversies. They speak to us across the centuries with muted voice.

When "*Myne Owne Ground*" first appeared it sparked a critical conversation that still informs the interpretation of race and freedom in early seventeenth-century Virginia. One reader reported that the book redirected the entire focus of his research. Matthew Emerson, an archaeologist with training in Africa, set out to find the actual plantation on the Eastern Shore where the Johnsons had lived. Emerson knew, of course, that after so many years no surface evidence remained, but drawing upon his technical knowledge of how to organize the excavation of an ancient site, he led a group of students to Pungoteague Creek in search of a lost material culture. He argued quite plausibly that however hard it might be to locate the precise settlement, the enterprise was well worth the effort. "The Anthony Johnson site," Emerson explained, "represents a significant opportunity to examine a settlement site that has a high potential for African-cultural survivals as evidenced through artifacts and living patterns. A central hypothesis to be tested . . . is [whether] the Johnsons' lifestyle and hence material remains are significantly different from that found at contemporary English colonial settlements."² Even the discovery of a small piece of pottery bearing a distinctive West African design would help us to understand better the transfer of non-European cultures to North America. During the late 1990s, the dig went forward. The carefully sifted soil of the Eastern Shore carried tales of earlier times, of human occupation, of anonymous people who had farmed this place during the nineteenth century, but Emerson never uncovered any object indisputably connected to the world of Anthony Johnson. Although the search will continue, Emerson and others who have conducted this kind of archaeological research know that success will ultimately require abundant financial support and a lot of luck.

Until we find the kind of physical evidence that Emerson desires, we must rest content with insights pieced together from traditional documentary sources. No one has done a better job in this regard than have historians Edmund S. Morgan and Winthrop D. Jordan.³ They provide an enduring framework in which to interpret an evolving relationship

between race and freedom in the Chesapeake colonies. These classic studies explain how white English settlers, lured to Virginia by the promise of instant wealth, stumbled across tobacco, the one staple crop that these New World planters were able to sell for a profit on the European market. They would, of course, have preferred to find gold or silver along the banks of the James River, but, adjusting to the demands of a cruel environment that brought early death to most of the migrants, they quickly realized that control of dependent laborers was the key to economic success. During the early decades of colonization thousands of white indentured servants cultivated the tobacco fields. But after 1619 so too did a small number of Africans. The dominant planter class did not immediately classify all blacks as slaves, and for several decades the legal status of these people remained ambiguous. As Morgan and Jordan show, however, the whites regarded Africans from the first as different, as inferior, as somehow deserving to suffer forms of discrimination that even the poorest European colonists did not endure, simply because of skin color. By the end of the seventeenth century, doubts about the standing of the blacks in Virginia had been resolved. They were slaves. These detailed histories recount not only how the members of one race deprived Africans of their liberty but also how they rationalized their decisions so that by the late 1600s white planters accepted the institution of slavery as rational and just.

We never intended to replicate the efforts of Morgan and Jordan. Indeed, we were not directly concerned with the development of slavery in Virginia or with the complex history of white racism. To be sure, both developments profoundly affected the free blacks who lived on the Eastern Shore, but we aimed to reconstruct the world of Anthony Johnson. In other words, we wanted to explore this society as best we could from Johnson's perspective, to comprehend how he and others like him managed against all odds to hold their own. Some critical reviewers took us to task for failing to devote as much attention to the poor white planters and the white indentured servants as we did to the free black planters. In *"Myne Owne Ground"* we never attempted to provide a complete social and demographic history of a Virginia county.⁴ Rather, the book offers insight into one often-overlooked group within that society, and, as such, it should properly be seen as a contribution to African American history.

In any case, a broader investigation of the interactions and experiences of the members of three races is now available. For those who want to

know more about marginal white people or about the blacks who never escaped slavery, or the Indians among whom they lived, we recommend J. Douglas Deal's *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia*.⁵ His careful research complements the work of Susie M. Ames, a scholar who truly understood the Eastern Shore and to whom we dedicated our book. Relying largely on local court records, Deal carries the story of these three races well into the eighteenth century, and he offers deeply disturbing material that testifies to the suffering of the white indentured servants who came to Virginia expecting to better the quality of their lives only to find themselves cruelly exploited by avaricious masters. For example, when in 1647 a young Dutch boy, a servant on John Nuttall's plantation, was found dead under suspicious circumstances, the other servants "sate very mellanchoolye in the quartering house." One distressed friend who was also a servant declared, "Lord have mercye upon us that ever it was my hard fortune to come to this countrye, for if this [death] bee suffered, it maye bee my turne to morrowe or next daye." Out of fear for their lives, all the Nuttall servants "wept bitterlye."⁶

Deal draws critical attention to one aspect of our interpretation that should now be addressed. He argues that well before the end of the seventeenth century the free blacks of the Eastern Shore came under severe pressure. Social and legal constraints made them increasingly vulnerable to the demands of the white planters. Thus, while Deal accepts that Johnson and other Africans attained meaningful independence during the early decades of European settlement, he also maintains that they steadily lost ground. He believes that perhaps by the time of Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 it may have been no longer possible to sustain, much less duplicate, their achievement. As Deal explains,

The less predictable interplay of race and class before 1700 had given opportunities to freed slaves who possessed drive, a winning personality, or, simply, better luck than their fellow Africans. Once other Africans became the mainstay of the region's tobacco and grain plantations, the social space that the first free blacks had claimed for themselves shrank considerably. Their descendants were hemmed in by laws, by the deepening racism of whites, and by a social structure that defined them as an anomaly.⁷

We have no problem with Deal's interpretation. Although it is impossible to assign a precise date to the moment when Johnson's world collapsed, we know that it did not survive. Johnson's family moved to Mary-

land; other Africans experienced a kind of freedom that must have seemed more like servitude than personal independence. All that is true. But, as Deal acknowledges, at mid-century, drive, personality, and luck still counted for something in the story of freedom.

The nettlesome question about the free blacks on the Eastern Shore ultimately turns on their significance for African American history. Deal worries that their small number made these people an anomaly, an interesting group of people, of course, but perhaps at the end of the day not capable of sustaining broad generalizations about the character of race and freedom in early Virginia. The numbers lend themselves to strikingly different interpretations. The Africans who attained freedom—and we detail in the book the various ways that they managed to do this—never amounted to more than several dozen men and women. Since the total population of the Eastern Shore at mid-seventeenth-century was small, however, this modest figure serves only to mask their substantial impact upon the life of the community. As historian Ira Berlin reminds us, it is percentages that matter. On the Eastern Shore free blacks represented about 20 percent of the black population at mid-century. That percentage may have reached a high of 30 percent by 1668. As Berlin explains, “although a minority, these free men and women defined the boundaries of black life and the character of race relations in the Chesapeake during the first fifty years of English and African settlement. . . . the free blacks’ presence and growing numbers subverted the logic of racial slavery in the eyes of white and black alike.”⁸ While Deal agrees that the story of black freedom at this early date “is interesting in its own rights and needs no other defense,” he raises the possibility that the Eastern Shore may itself not have been typical of mid-century Virginia society as a whole.⁹ Even if Deal is correct—and the surviving evidence from other Tidewater counties of Virginia is extremely thin—we reject any interpretive move that reduces Johnson and the other free Africans to the status of historical oddity, as if their experiences could not meaningfully bear witness to the broader forces shaping freedom and race throughout the early modern Atlantic World.

But, of course, they did. They helped us to rethink categories of race and class in defining social relations. On the basis of our reconstruction of the everyday lives of the free blacks on the Eastern Shore, we proposed a transactional model which seems as useful today as it did twenty-five years ago. When we began our research, the explanation of the social be-

havior of people such as Johnson often involved little more than present-minded assertions about identity. In other words, historians working in this field tried to show how the activities and beliefs of the men and women who happened to be Africans in America reflected a core identity or dominant sense of self. This type of analysis usually focused on a cluster of cultural, even racial values which allegedly informed the individual's relations with other members of his or her community. When identity was employed in this manner it almost always triggered a kind of circular reasoning: people assumed to possess a core identity acted in certain ways; persons who acted in certain ways were linked to the master identity. From this perspective resistance to authority served as persuasive evidence of an authentic African core identity. By the same token, accommodation to the demands of those who held economic and political power had to be rationalized—described as cunning strategies of survival or cynical manipulations of personal relations—since by definition such actions could not possibly be accepted as a sincere expression of self.

"Myne Owne Ground" repudiated this sort of reductionist logic.¹⁰ Drawing primarily upon the theoretical writings of the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth, we put forward a "transactional" model for comprehending how Johnson and the other free blacks established networks of human relations with Europeans and Africans on the Eastern Shore. As we argued, Johnson displayed different social personalities within different contexts. Sometimes class considerations defined human relations; sometimes race was the major factor. What we today label "identity" was in fact a fluid set of possibilities, for as Johnson and the other free blacks understood, legal exchanges with members of the white planter elite demanded forms of social and cultural knowledge quite different in character from those assumed in conversations with poor white neighbors or with other free Africans. It is not that Johnson did not possess a core identity. The problem is that from the fragmentary records with which historians must work, it is impossible to say with certainty whether he was being more "authentic" in one sphere of his activities than in another, more true to an imagined self when he sued a white planter in the county court, purchased an African slave, or sold a horse to another free black. Like other people living in this society, Johnson learned to interpret situations, negotiate opportunities, and calculate contingencies.

Yet over the years few historians have adopted our transactional model. Identity retains a strong appeal for scholars working in multi-racial societies. Recent analysis of relations between whites and Native Americans along the frontier has developed a different perspective, one that places greater interpretive stress than we did on actual spatial boundaries. In this literature we encounter discussions of a "middle ground" or a "cross-roads." These were places or regions where Europeans and Indians regularly confronted one another, sites where they negotiated power, assessed the relentless demands of empire and commerce, and struggled to preserve cultural independence. More than anyone else, Richard White deserves credit for providing a compelling framework in which to analyze racial encounters in an unstable backcountry environment.¹¹ We would argue, however, that in many situations where neither the frontier nor imperial rivalries were directly at issue our transactional perspective provides insight into how people of different races negotiated cultures and power.

We are keenly aware of a second reason why the free blacks of Virginia's Eastern Shore cannot be dismissed as an anomaly in the history of race and freedom. Although we did not originally make the point with sufficient force, we want to stress in this updated edition of *"Myne Owne Ground"* that the experience of Johnson and the other free blacks makes little sense detached from the development of a larger sphere of human interaction known as the Atlantic World. The story of seventeenth-century English colonization is but a single chapter in a complex story of commercial expansion, a narrative of capitalism opening new markets in distant African and American ports.

As we reexamine patterns of daily life on Pungoteague Creek, we should always remember that the men and women who acquired freedom in Virginia did not want to be there. Before they became free planters, they had been slaves, defined by European merchants as articles of trade, as sources of profit, or most crudely, as not fully human. No one has recounted more persuasively the transforming impact of capitalism on ordinary people living on three continents than has Robin Blackburn. He chronicles how the flow of new consumer goods like sugar and tobacco into middle-class households throughout Europe brought immense suffering to the people compelled to cultivate these crops. To be sure, the merry smokers of London and the complacent tea drinkers throughout England who added sweetener to their favorite beverage did