

**Russell R. Menard**

**Migrants, Servants  
and Slaves**

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# Migrants, Servants and Slaves

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Unfree Labor in Colonial British America

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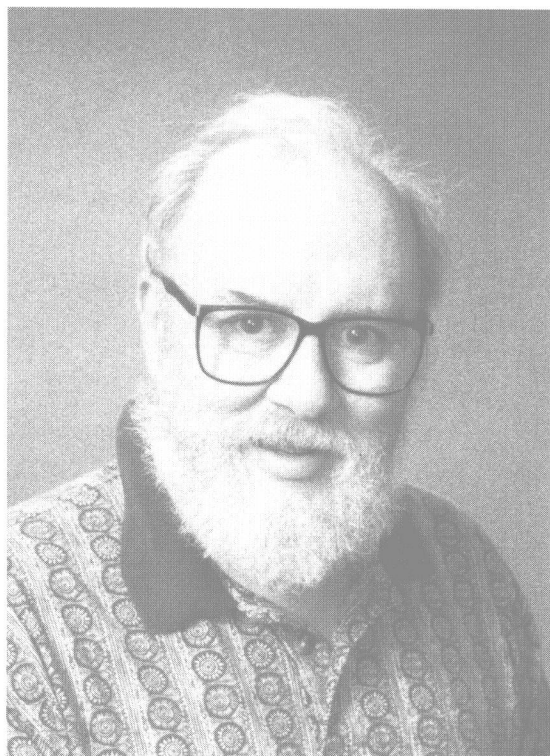
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Professor Russell R. Menard

## INTRODUCTION

When the possibility of publishing a selection of my articles with *Variorum* first arose, I of course had to confront the issues of selection and arrangement. I considered collections focused on the economic and population history of British America, as well as a regional focus on either the Chesapeake colonies or the lower south, but rejected these because I had recently summarized my main contributions to these fields elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> In the end, I settled on essays concerned with unfree labor in British America, especially the transition from a work force dominated by English indentured servants to one dominated by African slaves, an issue that has fascinated me since I entered the field of early American history more than thirty years ago, and one that remains a question of major concern to colonial historians. I should assure my co-workers in the field that publication of this volume does not signal that my interest in the issues addressed here is coming to an end. Indeed, I continue to work on aspects of this issue and expect to do so for the foreseeable future. My interests have shifted, however, away from the mainland colonies and toward the Caribbean, and I expect to begin publishing the results of research on the transition from servants to slaves on Barbados in the next few years.<sup>2</sup>

An interest in the transformation of the unfree labor force in British America is what holds these essays together, for work on that problem led me to consider patterns of migration among indentured servants, how slave purchases were financed and the opportunities available to servants once

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<sup>1</sup> My regional scholarship is summarized in my contribution to Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States* (Cambridge, 1996). My contributions to Early American economic and demographic history are summarized in my book with John McCusker, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> One essay is already in press, 'Law, credit, the supply of labor, and the organization of sugar production in the colonial greater Caribbean: a comparison of Brazil and Barbados in the seventeenth century', in John McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, eds., *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

they achieved their freedom, an interest that recently earned me the label of 'apologist for indentured servitude'.<sup>3</sup> Three of the essays in the volume take up a second, related issue, that of the success of servants and slaves at reproduction in the colonies, coming to the rather startling conclusion that the demographic experience of unfree workers, slaves and recently freed servants was not as different as one might expect. A word of caution is in order here. When I first wrote these essays, I considered them contributions to historical demography. Since moving to the University of Minnesota, where historical demography is taken most seriously, I am not so sure. Perhaps the most that can be said about this work is that it shows that interesting and plausible demographic stories can be constructed out of very thin evidence.

My central argument regarding the transition from servants to slaves is that it was an economic process, driven by changes in the supply of labor.<sup>4</sup> This argument is no longer fashionable. The currently dominant argument interprets the transition as a cultural process, driven by changes in demand, despite the difficulty of making a demand-led argument compatible with the available evidence on prices and quantities. If changes in planter demand drove the shift from servants to slaves, one would expect to see servant prices fall as planters signaled their new preferences, and then to see a decline in the number of servants arriving in the colonies as that change in preferences was gradually communicated to prospective servants. Instead, in the Chesapeake colonies at least, the number of servants arriving fell in the face of rising prices, suggesting that planters would have continued buying servants in large numbers had they been available. Most historians now seem to think that the transition to slavery in British America was driven by the great planter's discovery that racism and white solidarity would serve them well in their effort to control their workers and the small planters who generally did not own either servants or slaves.<sup>5</sup> In addition to being inconsistent with the data on prices and quantities, this argument seems

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<sup>3</sup> See Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> For a more formal statement see David W. Galenson, *White Servitude in Colonial America: An Economic Analysis* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Important works in this tradition include: Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, 1975), and Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1996). It is only fair to note, that the arguments advanced by Morgan and Brown are much more nuanced and subtle than my brief summary indicates.

to me to confuse cause and consequence, and to greatly oversimplify the origins of American racism. Despite their substantial disagreements, the participants in the debate over the transition from servitude to slavery in the Chesapeake colonies have reached agreement on one important point. The process was finished by the early eighteenth century, by which time the Upper South had become a slave society. I expect to challenge this consensus in the near future by contending that slavery in the Chesapeake colonies was still in its developmental stage in the early eighteenth century, and that it is premature to call the region a slave society until much later in the colonial period. Despite the emerging consensus, slavery was but thinly rooted in the Chesapeake colonies as late as the 1720s. This contention rests on several indices. For one thing, many households in the region did not contain slaves. For another, among those that did have slaves, few had what would be considered a large number by mid-18th century standards. Further, slaveowning was largely a rich man's affair. Poor and middling householders rarely owned slaves. In addition, during the first quarter of the century, there were many neighborhoods in the region where slaves were rare, so rare in fact, that they could be considered 'free-soil' districts. Things changed after 1725 as slavery's roots sank deeper and deeper due to the remarkable growth of the slave population. In what could be regarded as the central process in the region's development, the number of slaves grew from 42,749 in 1720, roughly 24% of the population, to 322,854 in 1770, 27% of the population.<sup>6</sup> By the eve of the Revolution, the Upper South had become a slave society. Most households owned slaves, and those household heads that did not, were likely to acquire slaves within a decade. Further, large slave holdings were common, while many poor and middling householders owned slaves. Finally, slavery had become ubiquitous, and the 'free soil' neighborhoods common at the beginning of the century had virtually disappeared.

Historiographically, the essays in this volume are contributions to what has become known as the 'Chesapeake school'. The exceptions to that generalization, the several essays focused on the Carolina lowcountry, can be read as efforts to extend southward some interests and approaches closely identified with the Chesapeake tradition. When I first encountered that term about a decade ago, its use was confined to graduate students preparing for exams and trying desperately to impose some order on the vast literature

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<sup>6</sup> Ira Berlin, *Many Thousand's Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 69.



for which they were responsible. More recently it has gained a wider currency to refer to the mostly quantitative efforts to reconstruct the structure of Chesapeake society in the seventeenth century<sup>7</sup>.

One of the pleasures in assembling a collection of essays is that it provides an opportunity to thank those who helped along the way. In my case, this long list must begin with the Hall of Records Gang, a.k.a. 'the Maryland Mafia', Lorena Walsh, Mike Harris, Carville Earle, Ron Hoffman, Paul Clemons, Alan Kulikoff, Gloria Main, Jean Russo, Ed Papenfuse, Greg Stiverson, and our peerless leader (Godmother if one continues the metaphor) Lois Green Carr, who nearly thirty years ago made me an offer I had the good sense not to refuse, by inviting me to join a still ongoing collaborative effort to understand the world of the early Chesapeake. Special thanks are also due to Stan Engerman, Bob Gallman, George Green, and David Galenson, who tried to teach me enough economics so I wouldn't embarrass myself, and to my friend and collaborator John McCusker who helped me put what I was learning together, and helped me generalize it from the Chesapeake colonies to British America a whole, and to Stuart Schwartz, for persuading me that there was an America beyond that claimed by the British. More recently, I have been blessed with a terrific group of colleagues and students at the University of Minnesota, while these are too numerous to mention by name, I am particularly indebted to the members of Minnesota's Early American history workshop, a group nearly as lively as was the Maryland Mafia at an earlier time. The mainstays of the Minnesota workshop in its formative years 1990–1995 must at least be listed: Lisa Norling, Jeanne O'Brien, John Howe, Ed Griffin, Brett Mizelle, Ginny Jelatis, David Rayson, Dave Ryden, Dave Hacker, Matt Mulcahy, Jen Spear, Jean Russo, Sean Condon, and Lucy Simler, the glue who held us together, during the workshop's formative years.

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This volume is dedicated to Kathleen, the love of my life, and still after 35 years of marriage, my best friend.

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<sup>7</sup> See Gordon Wood, 'A Century of Writing Early American History: Then and Now Compared; Or How Henry Adams Got It Wrong', *American Historical Review*, 100 (1999), 697–716. Three anthologies were especially important in defining the movement's characteristic interests and methods: Aubrey C. Land, Lois Green Carr, and Edward Papenfuse, eds., *Law, Society, and Politics in Early Maryland* (Baltimore, 1974); Thad W. Tate, and David L. Ammerman, eds., *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-*

*American Society* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), and Lois G. Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo, eds., *Colonial Chesapeake Society* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988). While work in the tradition continues to appear, I have long regarded two books as capstones to the movement: Alan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985); and Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Coles World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1991). The notes to these books provide a guide to the literature produced by the Chesapeake school. For more recent work in the tradition, see, for examples: Jean Elliott Russo, 'The Interest of the County: Somerset County, Maryland (Ph. D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1999); and Steven Sarson, 'Landlessness and Tenancy in Prince George's County, Maryland', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., LVII (2000), 569–598.

RUSSELL R. MENARD

*St Paul, Minnesota*  
*July 2000*

## **PUBLISHER'S NOTE**

The articles in this volume, as in all others in the Variorum Collected Studies Series, have not been given a new, continuous pagination. In order to avoid confusion, and to facilitate their use where these same studies have been referred to elsewhere, the original pagination has been maintained wherever possible.

Each article has been given a Roman number in order of appearance, as listed in the Contents. This number is repeated on each page and is quoted in the index entries.

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