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COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

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Because of the Chesapeake's skewed sex ratio, many men never found the wives needed to form households and families. In 1625, men comprised 74 percent of Virginia's population; only 10 percent were women, and the remaining 16 percent were children. The gender gap later diminished, but throughout the seventeenth century, men greatly outnumbered women in the Chesapeake. The prevalence of single men deprived the Chesapeake colonies of a stable foundation of little commonwealths, increasing the social volatility.

During the seventeenth century, only a quarter of the Chesapeake immigrants arrived as free men and women who could afford to pay their own passage and immediately obtain land. The free arrivals ranged from skilled artisans, farmers, and petty traders to wealthy merchants and gentlemen. Endowed with an immense head start in the race for wealth and political influence, the free emigrants became the councilors, assemblymen, and justices of the colonial government.

Three-quarters of the immigrants arrived as indentured servants. Too poor to afford the £6 cost of a transatlantic passage, the servants mortgaged four to seven years of their lives to a ship captain or merchant, who carried them to the Chesapeake for sale to tobacco planters. Unpaid during their terms, the servants received basic food, clothing, and shelter—generally just enough to keep them alive and working. At the conclusion of a term, the master was supposed to endow his servant with “freedom dues”—a new set of clothes, tools, and food. During the first half of the seventeenth century, Virginia and Maryland also provided each “freedman” with fifty acres of land. Given that a sturdy

beggar could never obtain land in England, the colony offered an opportunity unavailable at home. Of course, that opportunity required men and women to gamble their lives in a dangerous land of hard work and many diseases. Most lost their gamble, dying before their terms expired. Despite importing 15,000 indentured servants between 1625 and 1640, Virginia's population increased by only 7,000.

At mid-century, the Chesapeake became a bit healthier, and many more servants lived long enough to claim their freedom and farms. In 1648 a Virginian marveled that only one in nine immigrants died during their first year, compared to five of six during the preceding generation. In part, health improved as many new plantations expanded upstream into locales with fresh, running streams, in contrast to the stagnant lowlands, which favored malaria, dysentery, and typhoid fever. In addition, over time a growing proportion of the population became "seasoned" by surviving bouts with the local diseases. The seasoned acquired a higher level of immunity, which they passed on to their offspring.