

## Indentured Servitude in the Chesapeake

(1640)

Virginia General Court

### Introduction

Taken from the court records of Virginia, this judgment describes what happened to indentured servants who ran away and suggests something of the social order in seventeenth-century Virginia.

### Questions to Consider

The document is essentially the last event in a narrative, containing several preceding incidents. To obtain a better idea of what happened, it is often useful to summarize the events by putting them in order and to identify the principle actors by organizing details scattered through the document. Answer the following:

- a. When did the servants escape?
  - b. Who was involved in the escape? Who were the leaders?
  - c. What did they do in process of carrying out their escape?
  - d. Where did the men want to go? Why?
  - e. Where were they apprehended?
  - f. Who confessed? Who was examined by the court?
  - g. What were the punishments meted out to each of the men?
2. When you have finished answering the questions, write a brief summary of the material. You might begin, "On Saturday night, July 8, 1640, six men attempted..."
3. Although the document is very short, it does suggest some interesting ideas about life in the Chesapeake. Thinking about these issues tells us something more about the "big" historical picture. Answer the following:
- a. What indicated to the court that this escape was, perhaps, more dangerous or serious than other instances of runaway servants?
  - b. Why did the court consider the act of running away a "dangerous precedent?"
  - c. Why did the escapees receive different punishments? Did the punishments have any correlation with racial or ethnic differences? Did the punishments correspond to whether or not a servant confessed to his misdeed?
  - d. What does the document suggest about the social order in Virginia? What does the document indicate about the development of slavery in the nation?

### Source

July 22nd, 1640. Whereas complaint has been made to this Board by Capt. William Pierce, Esqr., that six of his servants and a negro of Mr. Reginald's has plotted to run away unto the Dutch plantation from their said masters, and did assay to put the same in Execution upon Saturday night, being the 8th day July, 1640, as appeared to the Board by the Examinations of Andrew Noxe, Richard Hill, Richard Cookeson and John Williams, and likewise by the confession of Christopher Miller, Peter Milcocke and Emanuel, the foresaid Negro, who had, at the foresaid time, taken the skiff of the said Capt. William Pierce, their master, and corn, powder and shot and guns to accomplish their said purposes, which said persons sailed down in the said skiff to Elizabeth river, where they were taken and brought back again, the court taking the same into consideration as a dangerous precedent for the future time (if left unpunished), did order that Christopher Miller, a dutchman (a prime agent in the business), should receive the punishment of whipping, and to have thirty stripes and so be burnt in the cheek with the letter R and to work with a shackle on his leg for one whole year and longer if said master shall see cause, and after his full time of service is expired with his said master to serve the colony for seven whole years, and the said Peter Milcocke to receive thirty stripes and to be Burnt in the cheek with the letter R, and after his term of service is Expired with his said master to serve the colony for three years, and the said Richard Cockson, after his full time Expired with his master, to serve

the colony for two years and a half, and the said Richard Hill to remain upon his good behavior until the next offense, and the said Andrew Noxe to receive thirty stripes, and the said John Williams, a dutchman and a chirurgion [surgeon] after his full time of service is Expired with his master, to serve the colony for seven years, and Emanuel, the Negro, to receive thirty stripes and to be burnt in the cheek with the letter R and to work in shackles one year or more as his master shall see cause.

**Source:** "Decisions of the General Court," 1640, reprinted in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (Vol 5. 1897-1898), 236-237.