Risk and Opportunity: Tobacco Plantations in Early Maryland

(For Teachers)

The Godiah Spray Tobacco Plantation at Historic St. Mary's City is a re-creation of a typical 17th-century plantation. The plantation, its structures, fields, livestock, and inhabitants represent life in the year 1661. Although the Spray family is fictitious, their lives are based on a true Maryland planter, Robert Cole, and his family. Records including Cole’s will and inventory have provided considerable detail about everyday life on a Maryland tobacco plantation.

The economic opportunity offered by the cultivation of tobacco, as the primary cash crop was one of the most significant reasons why people came to Maryland. Early tobacco plantations were located close to navigable water, providing a means of shipping the tobacco to England. In exchange, manufactured goods were received from England and/or other places. Nearly all time on plantations had to be spent doing activities that either directly or indirectly supported the cultivation of tobacco, so it made little sense to make those items which could be bought.

Agriculture

Tobacco was a highly labor-intensive crop requiring some work nearly year-round. In the 17th century, planters spent more time growing tobacco than on any other agricultural activity. Plantation owners and their families worked hand-in-hand with indentured servants and later, enslaved peoples, to provide the necessary labor.

Indentured Servants and Enslaved Peoples

More than three quarters of the people who came to Maryland in the 17th century came as indentured servants. Most people were in their late teens or early twenties, most were men, and most were unskilled. In exchange for transportation to Maryland, they were bound to a master for an average of four to five years. They were entitled to adequate food, clothing, and shelter and were expected to work ten to fourteen hours a day, six days a week. The law allowed a master to use physical punishment if he believed he had cause. Punishment for servants who ran away was severe. By law, at the conclusion of the contract, an indentured servant received a new suit of clothes, one axe, two hoes, three barrels of corn, and the rights to fifty acres of land. The indentured servant would have to pay to survey and patent this land. Many former servants had to hire themselves out for wages, become tenant farmers, or lease land from a large planter in order to raise enough money to own their own land.

In the early years of the colony, there were few enslaved people. The financial investment of owning a slave was greater than contracting for an indentured servant. However, the risk of an early death was the same for both. Consequently, it seemed wiser to use indentured servants—as long as a sufficient supply of labor was available from England and Europe. Later in the century, as that labor pool shrank, the investment in enslaved labor from Africa and the Caribbean became more common, and by the 18th century, enslaved workers outnumbered indentured servants.
Livestock

Livestock were important to the Maryland colonists in the 17th century not only for food, but because these animals provided an inheritance for their children. Nearly every household had hogs and some cattle that foraged in the woods for food, saving the planter time that could be used cultivating his tobacco. Planters raised few sheep because there was little time to spend protecting them from wolves, and it was more efficient to import cloth than to make it from wool. Many planters also raised chickens that were kept in hen houses to protect them from predators. Initially, horses were rare and very expensive, and they were not used for transportation until later in the century.

Family Life

A plantation family might consist of the planter, his wife, and one or two children. If he was prosperous he might acquire indentured servants and possibly later, enslaved labor. During their first year in the Chesapeake, almost all newcomers became sick from exposure to new strains of diseases to which they had no immunity. Among men, life expectancy for new colonists at age twenty was only about another twenty years, and approximately three quarters of the colonists would die before reaching the age of 50. These factors, combined with a shortage of women and the fact that indentured servants were not allowed to marry until their contracts were complete, put limits on the formation of families.

Men and women married late and died young. They had few children, and nearly half of those children died before reaching maturity. Most children lost at least one parent before coming of age, and a great many lost both parents. Orphaned children were often bound out by the county courts to other families to earn their support. Given the shortage of women, widows remarried quickly, creating new and more complex family structures.

Plantation House and Furnishings

Seventeenth-century plantation houses in the Chesapeake region were small, post-in-the-ground wooden structures with one or two rooms and a loft. They were covered with clapboard on the walls and roof and their chief advantage was that they could be built cheaply and quickly. Even well-to-do people lived in such houses, although they might have windows with glass instead of wooden shutters, brick chimneys instead of chimneys made of wattle and daub (mud and sticks), and wooden floors instead of well-packed dirt. A successful man might add a room after a while, but he was just as likely to build a second house if he wanted more space. Seventeenth-century planters did not usually have outbuildings for cooking, dairying, smoking meat, or for privies. These amenities began to appear later.

A spoon and knife were the most widely-used eating utensils because forks were very rare until the 18th century. Most people ate from a communal dish made of wood or pewter, often with their fingers. They shared communal cups and tankards. Tables for eating or for use in food preparation were not in every household—people probably used chests and counters instead. To have many chairs was a sign of wealth and social status. Most households had none, using benches, stools, chests, or small casks for sitting.
Work on a Plantation

To keep a plantation going and ensure its success, each person was responsible for many different tasks—even small children helped out in some way. Work began at dawn and continued until dark. Women and girls did the cleaning, gardening, food preparation and preservation, cooking, laundry, soap making, dairying, egg gathering, sewing, mending, and sometimes helped in the fields. Men and boys worked in the fields, mended fences, did carpentry, fished, hunted, gathered and split firewood, hauled water, and when there were no women present, completed any household chores and cooking that was necessary.

During what little leisure time the planter and his family had, they played games such as draughts (checkers), chess, and blind-man’s bluff. Children had toys made at home from scraps of fabric or wood. Free time in the evenings might be used for religious lessons, or if a parent was literate, to teach the children to read and write.