

THE AMERICAN SUBSAHARN AFRICAN AS REPRESENTED IN FAR SOUTHWESTERN VIRGINIA

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Big Stone Gap, Virginia

Having discussed the migrations of the Spanish American, the German American, the Scots-Irish, and the original American – the Indian – we now will take on the Negro, the American whose ancestry comes from Africa south of the Sahara Desert. This essay, like the preceding ones, is primarily a discussion of the migration of that group – what caused it to happen, and the geography concerned. While this is not an essay on slavery itself, it is impossible to discuss one without the other.

Since before recorded history began, slavery was an institution among the peoples of East Africa. The routes of slave raids, and the routes of commerce were well established. The main middlemen in this trade were the Arabs, whose caravans covered the Middle East, and whose merchants controlled the Indian Ocean. The island of Zanzibar off the east coast of Africa was the main commercial hub for this traffic. Most of the Black Africans victimized by this trade wound up in Muslim countries, though some found themselves as far away as India and in western Europe.

Two events that happened more or less simultaneously changed all this. The first was the discovery of the New World by Europeans. The second was the invention of the Portuguese caravel.^(1, 2) The first of these events created an insatiable market for labor. The indigenous people that the Europeans found in the New World had never been exposed to Old World diseases, and had a 95% mortality rate to smallpox alone. Moreover, the large square rigged sailing ships used for transatlantic voyages were too cumbersome to sail into the wind, or to twist



and turn along the continental coasts and up rivers. The triangular rigged, shallow drafted, agile caravel was the answer to these problems. The Portuguese took them down the west coast of Africa and into its rivers. They accessed the Indian Ocean, and in doing so they discovered the Arab sub-Saharan African slave trade.^(1, 2) While developing the East African slave trade to meet their own needs, they duplicated it on the west coast of Africa, along what was soon to be called the 'Slave Coast' of Ghana and the Gold Coast. The commercial hub was the castle of Elmina.⁽³⁾ This trade soon attracted the attention of the Spanish, who began their own importation of slaves in about 1503. The business rivalled that of their stealing the gold and silver of the Inca and Aztecs. It took the English another century to catch on.⁽⁴⁾ The English established their first permanent colony in the New World at Jamestown, Virginia in

1607. In 1619, quite unplanned by the English, a Dutch privateer landed with a shipload of slaves they wished to trade for food. The Africans had been captured in Angola by the Portuguese, and were placed on a ship bound for New Spain. That ship was attacked by two



ZANZIBAR
PRISON
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privateers, who stole a number of captives. One of these ships, the White Lion, took off for Jamestown. An unknown number of Africans were traded for food, and the privateer left with the others.⁽⁵⁾ Shortly after this English investors, under charter of Queen Elizabeth and King James I, began to operate their own slave trade to Virginia.⁽⁴⁾ The New Englanders were into the business themselves, by 1646, when the first slave ship left Boston.⁽⁴⁾ In 1774 the Colony of Rhode Island outlawed the importation of slaves⁽⁴⁾, and Virginia followed suit in 1778. The national government outlawed the importation of slaves after 1808.⁽⁴⁾ In 1807 Britain had outlawed the slave trade, and soon thereafter their navy began a very aggressive policing of the South Atlantic to sweep it clean of slavers.⁽⁶⁾

In the two hundred years that Virginia had aggressively purchased slaves Richmond and



ELMINA CASTLE

Alexandria had been the largest slave markets. During the years when foreign importation of sub-Saharan Africans had been the rule, the communities around the lower James River had been

prominent.⁽⁷⁾ In the early years the slaves toiled mostly on large crop plantations which grew tobacco, hemp, corn, and wheat. They followed the frontier and the white settlers up the James and Potomac Rivers, where the large plantations began to transition to small family farms, many of which owned less than half a dozen slaves. About mid 1700's the lead mines on the New River began to open, as well as iron mines and smelters in the Upper James.^(8, 9)

About the time of the Revolution small farmers from the frontier began to travel the Wilderness Trail to Kentucky. They took their slaves with them. More significantly, the slaves were often sent on ahead to prepare a place for their White owners. These slaves were mostly born in America, and were often 'part of the family'. Circumstances were changing dramatically in Virginia. Slavery had become unprofitable. The land had become exhausted from unrelenting farming, and the production dropped dramatically. George Mason of Virginia, the major author of the Constitution, tried to get the importation of slaves outlawed in that document in 1787, but failed. His reasoning was not moral, but economic. Virginia simply could not afford the slave system.⁽¹⁰⁾

Metrics tell the story. In 1860 the USA had 4,000,000 slaves, while in 1790 there had been 700,000. In 1860 Virginia had the next to the lowest gain in population, at 12.29%, among the Southern States compared to 1850. Even more telling were the relative gains of the white population (17.06%) compared to that of the slaves (3.88%). We will return to this issue.

In 1860 Wise County had 55 slaves, and Lee County 230.⁽⁴⁾ Topography and ethnic patterns were the explanations for this striking contrast. There is more tillable land in Lee County. Wise County had a larger percentage of German Pietists, who were generally opposed to slavery. However, large numbers of slaves migrated down the Wilderness Trail from Virginia to Kentucky. No one was keeping records at Cumberland Gap, but modern analysis of records in Kentucky show that in 1830 24% of the population were slaves. "From 1790 to 1860 slaves were never more than a quarter of the population". Since the Wilderness Trail was the most common route of immigration into Kentucky, these numbers would seem to reflect the percentages of Blacks that travelled down that route.⁽¹¹⁾

Primogeniture, the legal requirement that property was inherited solely by the eldest son, and entail, which prohibited the breaking up of large estates, were outlawed in Virginia in 1785 and in 1776 respectively.⁽¹²⁾ However, the custom ran deep, and as a matter of practice the large estates that worked significant numbers of slaves passed intact to the eldest sons. The large estates were not often subdivided among the children, either, despite the legal prohibition having been removed. Taken together, these circumstances meant that fathers willed their estates to their eldest son, and bought land for their other sons in the new lands in the West and the Deep South. As a practical matter, Mississippi and Alabama became territories in the United States in 1817. They proved to be well suited for growing cotton, which was just acquiring a market in England due to the invention of steam powered spinning and weaving machines. However, there was a problem in that the cotton boll was filled with very adherent seeds, which required picking out individually by hand. The invention in 1794 of a machine, the cotton gin, that would remove the seeds mechanically revolutionized not only the economics of cotton

growing, but the institution of slavery itself.^(13, 14, 15) All this was happening at the same time that the institution of slavery was collapsing economically in Virginia. Massive numbers of slaves from the established plantations in Virginia were given to the younger sons who were setting up cotton plantations in Mississippi and Alabama. Many surnames assumed by slaves in Eastern Virginia became established in these new Southern territories.

The transfer of slaves from Virginia to Mississippi and Alabama was speeded up by the outright sale of 'excess' slaves in Virginia to slave drovers, who travelled the byways of the Old Dominion, stopping at every plantation along their route, and who asked the owner if he had any slaves to sell. The newly purchased slaves were herded in packs to a river port, and sent South. This is the origin of the term 'being sold down the river'.

This business became so profitable that from about 1830 until the Civil War it sustained the economy in Virginia. Slave breeding for the Mississippi – Alabama market became commonplace. Richmond was the largest such site in the country. It was not alone. Culpeper County acquired a reputation for it. Slave breeding became the number one 'crop' in Virginia. Some slave breeders cut out the expense of supporting a male Negro that would have otherwise been used for this purpose, by doing the breeding themselves.^(16, 26)

Even these measures were not enough to satisfy the voracious appetite for slave labor in Mississippi and Alabama. With the British navy patrolling the Slave Coast of West Africa, the Portuguese east African coast near Zanzibar became the largest exporter of slaves.⁽¹⁷⁾ The French brothers Pierre and Jean Lafitte (Laffite) turned the Gulf of Mexico into a slave smuggling industrial empire. Portuguese slavers would sail into the Gulf, where they were 'robbed' of their slave cargos by the Laffite privateers, released without harm, only to eagerly make the round trip to Zanzibar again and again. This portion of the operation appears to have been a scam to protect the slavers from the US Customs schooners, who with varying degrees of earnest intent, patrolled the area. Before the Battle of New Orleans the slaves were then taken to the private island, Baratavia, located near the Mississippi Delta close to New Orleans. Using small boats the slaves



JEAN LAFITTE

were smuggled up the bayous into the interior. The business was winked at. The Lafittes maintained a warehouse in New Orleans. The folk lore along the coast is that some famous personages in New Orleans society were active participants. The US Customs Office seemed to have been working against itself. The leadership had Baratavia invaded, all the while the local officials seemed to be cooperating with the smugglers. During the Battle of New Orleans the privateers actively aided the Americans, supplying them with musket flints, and artillery expertise. After the battle, the Lafittes were allowed to go to Galveston Island, which was then part of Mexican Texas. They set up an independent entity of several thousand people, and smuggled slaves on an industrial scale into Texas and into Louisiana. They set up an elaborate scheme

where they turned themselves and their slaves in to the customs officials, who kept half the proceeds, and gave the slaves back to the smugglers, who were allowed to 'legally' sell the slaves ashore.⁽¹⁸⁾

No one will ever know the numbers of east Africans who were smuggled into the United States between the outlawing of the importation of slaves and the onset of the Civil War. The numbers were impressive enough that the author of the 'Introduction to the 1860 Census' devoted a paragraph to discussing the mathematical discrepancies in the census numbers. He calculated the expected increase in slaves from 1808 to 1860 due to the known birth rate alone, and after comparing it to the census count of actual slave numbers, he observed that "the subject appears to be open to a more full explanation."⁽⁴⁾ The slave smuggling was, of course, an open secret. This comment was a shot across the bow of the citizens of the Gulf Coast warning of the coming Civil War. It is widely rumored in the Deep South that it was no accident that Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard of New Orleans eagerly led the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter.

The DNA of the East African is easily distinguished from that of the West African. East African DNA turns up in modern analyses among Americans of Sub-Saharan African descent, especially along the Gulf Coast, and on up the Mississippi River.⁽¹⁹⁾

As mentioned above, in 1860 Wise County had 55 slaves, and Lee County 230.⁽⁴⁾ In 1870 there were 4,717 White residents, and 68 Blacks in Wise County.⁽²⁰⁾ There had been a net movement of Blacks out of the slave holding farms of Lee County into the mountains of Wise. The total numbers are too small to make much statistical significance. It does tell us that there were very few Blacks among the general population just after the Civil War. By the 1950 census there were 2,365 Blacks in Wise County.⁽²¹⁾ Obviously something fundamental had changed.

After the Civil War the USA underwent explosive industrialization and urbanization. This required monumental increases in iron and steel production, which required the development of coal mining and of coke production.⁽²²⁾ Wise County in particular underwent a massive transformation with the development of entirely new communities and rural industrial 'coal camps'.⁽²³⁾ World War I greatly accentuated these phenomenon.

The larger coal companies sent agents to the New York docks, where they met the immigrants coming in from Central and Mediterranean Europe. They offered the immigrants deals providing free transportation to the new camps in Wise Co., where jobs, new housing, schools, churches, theaters, pool halls, and community centers awaited them.

In the meantime, the boll weevil had struck the cotton belt, including the States of Mississippi and Alabama. By 1909 this pestilence, which ate up the cotton on the stalk, had crossed the State of Mississippi and had entered Alabama.⁽²⁴⁾ It made cotton growing impossible, and destroyed the civilization that had been supported by it. Tens of thousands of Blacks had the economic props knocked out from under them. Tens of thousands of acres of cotton fields reverted to pine forests. Either the Virginia Coke and Coal Company, or its operating company, the Stonega Coke and Coal Company, sent entire passenger trains to Birmingham, Alabama.



BOLL
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Hiring agents were stationed there who contracted with the desperate displaced people to come to Wise County to accept a new life in the coal camps. The railroad crewmen were issued army colt 45s with instructions to shoot anyone who had changed their mind, and who jumped off of the train.⁽²⁵⁾ Thus, hundreds of people from the East Coast of Africa, and who had been in the country less than half the time that Blacks from the West Coast of Africa, came to Wise County. Numerous

among these were descendants of slaves who had originated in Eastern Virginia, and who had either accompanied the migration of Whites from there, or had been 'sold down the river'. Numerous among these World War I immigrant Blacks from the Deep South are people with surnames recalling the First Families of Virginia. This phenomenon explains the massive increase in the Black population of Wise County from 1870 to 1950.

Running up the edge of the Appalachian Plateau to the northeast the next two large coal companies one encounters are the Virginia Iron and Coal Co. at Tom's Creek, and the Clinchfield Coal Company at Dante. Both of these companies had a labor force similar in composition to the Stonega Coke and Coal Company ie. there were significant numbers of Blacks who worked there. Just as at Stonega there were no pools of local Blacks to have provided these employees. At neither place are there any surviving oral traditions of the companies running passenger trains into Alabama or Mississippi. However, there is one third generation Dante citizen who recalls with interest that "all those Blacks at Dante sent letters to a three county area in Alabama". He mentions several common surnames from among the group, and, sure enough, they are Virginia Tidewater FFV in origin. Perhaps significantly these two companies were owned by the same man, a man who also had indirect ties to Virginia Coal and Iron and the Stonega Corp. One wonders if all three of these companies did not participate in the labor transport trains to Alabama.⁽³²⁾

In the rest of the Commonwealth there were dynamics in the economy that affected the movements of the Black population. Virginia was industrializing slowly. The largest iron works in the South was the Tredegar Works in Richmond.⁽²⁷⁾ It was staffed by leased slave labor. The great Tidewater plantations had little use for all their slaves in the winter months, and leased them out to the developing industry. It soon grew into a year around pattern. Virginia was terrified that what is now West Virginia would pull away if a means of transportation ending in Virginia's ports were not provided to the northwestern part of the Commonwealth. The success of the Erie Canal mesmerized and terrorized Virginia. It was rapidly turning New York City into the leading port in the country, all at the expense of the Chesapeake ports of Virginia. The Commonwealth sought to emulate this process by vigorously building the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and the James River and Kanawha Canal.⁽²⁸⁾ These projects used massive amounts of leased slave labor. With fewer topographic obstacles to overcome a railroad was built to

Tennessee. Again, leased slave labor was used. To feed Tredegar pig iron an extended network of iron mines, blast furnaces, and charcoal pits were built in the upper James Valley, and in the New River Valley. These were worked by slaves. It is not known if they were wholly owned or leased by the furnaces. The lead mines at Austinville had been worked since the French and Indian War, and slave labor was used.⁽⁹⁾ The biggest salt operation in the South was at Saltville, and they used 700 owned slaves.⁽²⁹⁾

With the emancipation of the slaves, Tredegar, Saltville, and the Lead Mines continued to work. No analyses of any changes in the numbers of the workforce required are available. In the early twentieth century iron mines and carbide manufacture at Ivanhoe started, and employed large numbers of Blacks, many of whom by oral tradition had come from Saltville.⁽³⁰⁾ None of this affected the Black population of Southwestern Virginia beyond Saltville.

There was, however, a third class of Black that is seldom referenced, and little known about - the skilled craftsman. Brick masons, blacksmiths, skilled finishing carpenters, stone masons, and wrought iron workers were almost always enslaved Blacks. All those beautiful plantation mansions were built by slaves.⁽³¹⁾ When the Civil War ended these skilled craftsmen were the first to leave. Especially the skill of decorative stone masonry died for a generation after the war, as no one among the Whites knew how to practice it, and the skilled Blacks moved to the Northern Cities. When the rich coal barons wanted to build fancy mansions about the turn of the twentieth century, they had to import stone masons from Italy. Their work, though pleasing in its own right, did not include the decorative inscribed patterns of the Black artisans, nor their graceful conclave stone lintels, which are skills totally lost in America today. There are a few houses, and a few free standing chimneys left in the back country of the region that stand as mute testimony of these lost artisans.

In 1950 the Black population of Wise County was about 5%. Currently it is closer to 1%. Mechanization of the coal mines in the mid 1950s caused a mass exodus of all peoples in Wise County, but especially so the Blacks. These expatriates moved to the industrial cities of the Midwest, such as Akron and Detroit.

In summary, there are three definable groups of Blacks in Wise County. First of all, there are the descendants of those who came in with the first settlers, and whose surnames are those of the pioneer White settlers; then there are those from the Deep South, but who originally came from Virginia, and whose surnames can be found among the FFV; and then there are those 'recent' arrivals from the Deep South, but who originated in East Africa.

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