

ANTHONY
JOHNSON

(?-1670)



In the early colonial days, blacks from Africa were not the only people to be bought and sold. Native American Indians could be enslaved. White Europeans were often indentured servants, bound to work for a master for a specified number of years. Slavery and servitude were not closely identified with race. In those early times, blacks had many opportunities to secure their freedom by escaping or buying themselves out of slavery, and once free they had a good chance to make their success in the new land. The life of Anthony Johnson illustrates the possibilities for blacks in the early period of European colonization in North America.

Johnson's existence is first documented in 1621, when a slave known as "Antonio, a Negro" was sold to the English at Jamestown. He went to work for a family named Bennett, who commended him for his "hard labor and known service." He was permitted to wed a fellow slave named Mary and to baptize his children. Eventually securing his freedom, he took the name Anthony Johnson. He



remained close to the Bennetts, however, and when they moved across the Chesapeake Bay to the eastern shore of Virginia, he followed.

In Virginia, the Johnson family established their own farm, where they grew tobacco and corn. Like other planters in the region, Johnson needed help to run his farm. He sponsored slaves entering the colony, and the colonial government granted him 250 acres of land in return. When his farm burned in 1653, the government agreed to reduce his taxes so he could rebuild.

The year following the fire, one of Johnson's slaves, John Casar, ran away to a neighboring farm. Johnson went to court to get his slave back. The legal proceedings took a year, but eventually Johnson won his case.

In 1665, Anthony and Mary Johnson moved to Somerset County, Maryland, where the land was richer. They established a 300-acre farm called Tonies Vineyard. Johnson deeded fifty of his acres back in Virginia to his son, Richard. He sold the other 200 acres to two white planters, who promised to pay him in tobacco. Two years later, according to the agreement of sale, planter Edmund Scarburgh delivered 1,344 pounds of tobacco to the Somerset County sheriff as payment for Johnson's land.

But Scarburgh had no real intention of giving up his tobacco crop. By the 1660s, slavery and servitude had become more closely identified with dark skin, and the colonial legal system had begun to preserve the rights of whites and to deprive blacks of theirs. It was much easier for dishonest whites to get away with cheating blacks. Scarburgh forged a note, supposedly written by Johnson, promising to repay a sum of money that matched the value of the tobacco Scarburgh had delivered. Once again, Anthony Johnson took a case to court. This time, however, he lost. Despite the fact that Johnson could neither read nor write, local authorities accepted the note as legal and ruled that Scarburgh could keep his tobacco.

Johnson may have continued to pursue the case, because the final distribution of his land was not made until after his death in 1670. Eventually, a Virginia jury ruled that his original land in that colony could be seized by the colony “because he was a Negroe and by consequence an alien.” The 200 acres he had sold were awarded to Edmund Scarborough. The 50 acres he had deeded to his son Richard were granted to another planter, even though Richard and his family had been living on and working the land.

Johnson’s widow Mary lived on at Tonies Vineyard until her own death in 1680. Their sons managed to hold onto that property. Records of the family cease after the death of Johnson’s grandson, John Jr. The legal situation for blacks in the region was becoming more and more tenuous, however. Major slave codes enacted by Virginia in 1682 became models of repression in the South for the next 180 years. Not only were blacks denied the opportunity to own land, they were also barred from meeting in large numbers, from carrying arms, and from attacking “any Christian.” The era of chattel slavery had begun.