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The Sentencings of John Casor & John Punch

In Jamestown, Virginia, two plantation owners, George Yeardly and Abraham Pierson purchased enslaved men and women for planting and harvesting tobacco for profit. With the development of tobacco as a cash crop, workers were needed to plant and harvest the leafy product. To incentivize workers to travel to America, the company implemented an indentured servant policy. Indentured servants agreed to work five to seven years of hard labor in Jamestown in exchange for passage to the New World. Due to circumstances, some indentured servants were born into their plight in Virginia.

In 1619, a Dutch ship arrived in Jamestown with captured women and men from Angola, Africa. Some of the Africans procured indentured servant contracts while the others were enslaved for life. Two plantation owners, George Yeardly and Abraham Pierson purchased enslaved men and women from the Dutch ship for planting and harvesting tobacco for profit.

You are an African indentured servant who agreed to work for your contractor for seven years. You worked with indentured servants from various European nations. As an indentured servant, you share the same rights and privileges as other indentured servants and slaves, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. You are expected to acquire land, tools, and social acceptance after your term ends.

After a hard day of labor, two of your colleagues complained about the harsh conditions. One man said, "The master is working us to the bone! He is trying to work us to death to avoid paying us what we deserve!" Another indentured servant yelled, "Remember how the master treated Mrs. Elliott!" You recalled the white female servant who married a Black man. Months later, the woman became pregnant, and the master extended the time on her contract to compensate for the time the woman missed due to her pregnancy. The plantation owner also added years to the husband's contract, citing he did not work hard enough to fulfill his obligations.

Your friend said, "I agree. The master can extend our term at his desecration without consequences because the laws protect the ruling class. I don't trust him." As you sit and reflect on their words, your dreams of land ownership seem to be slipping away in the Virginia sky. Then you hear the man say, "We all should escape and start a new life!"

Even though he is a tough master, he has never indicated he would extend time on your contract. Yet, do you risk your future in a man who has shown he is willing to extend workers to enhance his pockets? Do you dare risk escape, or will you fulfill your obligations?

Turn to page 2 if you decide to leave.

Turn to page 3 if you decide to stay.

Page 2

In the darkness of night, you and your colleagues collected your items and dart into the night. You headed north with aspirations of freedom and prosperity. You truly believe the journey will be worth the risks of leaving your old

**The African and African American Experience of
Slavery from Pre-Colonial Africa to the New Republic**

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friends at Hugh Gwyn's plantation. You and two European friends crossed over rough terrain. You drink from the fresh springs as you continue to move at night after night. After several days of walking, Victor, a Dutchman, said, "John, we are almost in Maryland!" After a few hours of walking, your group approached the banks of a vast river. James Gregory, a man from Scotland, proclaimed, "Let's craft a boat to travel to freedom!" Being handy with an ax, you chopped down small trees, removed the branches, and tied them together to create your raft. Finally, you reached your destination, Maryland.

Being a visitor to the colony, you attracted citizens' attention. You feel the eyes of several people staring at you. You contemplated what type of work you will find in Maryland. Hopefully, you can find employment quickly so you can support yourself. Nervously, you moved through the town and greeted everyone with a smile. Within a few hours, you were approached by a small group of townsmen. After several questions, you and your two friends are detained by the men and returned to Jamestown.

On August 9, 1640, a council heard the charges against you and the two men. After the closing statements, officials ruled, the two white servants would receive thirty lashes in public to serve as deterrents to other servants. The judge also added four more years to each man's contract. You, John Punch, stood before the judge and braced himself for the court's ruling.

You were mentally prepared before the judge read their findings. Just like the other two servants, you were assigned thirty lashes. But there was a distinct difference in the last phrase of sentencing. The judge said, you, John Punch will "serve his slave master or his assigns for the time of his natural life here or elsewhere."

The verdict of John Punch was the first documented case in American history in which ethnicity played a distinct role in court sentencing. Punch case was the beginning in codified slavery within Virginia and the English Colonies laws.

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Your name is John Casor, and you decided to stay and work for the man who acquired your services. Unlike most Virginia planters, your master looks like you. His name was Anthony Johnson, and he owned the farm. Anthony Johnson was one of the original twenty Africans who arrived in Jamestown on the Dutch ship in 1619. After fulfilling his obligations as an indentured servant, Mr. Johnson acquired 250 acres of land in Northampton County, Virginia, and five indentured servants (four white and one African).

You desired to model Johnson's success of finding a spouse and obtaining land to start your tobacco enterprise. Every day, you work hard for Mr. Johnson planting and cultivating rows of tobacco. You wanted to fulfill your contractual obligations to Mr. Johnson so that you can move on to the new phase of your life. The work was hard, but you have pride in yourself and the future you are building. You envisioned yourself as a fair master who will bring in new servants, offer them minimum years on their contracts, and release those servants to pursue their dreams and aspirations.

The years started to blend, and you know you completed your original term of seven years; yet, you continued to work for Mr. Johnson for months. When you inquired about the conclusion of your time, Mr. Johnson does not give you a straight answer. After a huge fire in 1652, the Johnson farm experienced tremendous damages. You realized Anthony Johnson needed servants to work the tobacco fields to compensate for his lost product. Your future is in doubt. The Johnson family intention was to keep you in a position of indefinite servitude status; therefore, you entered into a new indentured contract with Robert Parker.

You work for Robert Parker and his brother, George, for a few days. One day, Mr. Parker approached you and said, "We are to appear in court." You asked, "Why?" George Parker continued, "Anthony Johnson sued us for employing you. He states he never released you from your contract." On March 8, 1655, both parties presented their case to ruling officials, including Captain Samuel Goldsmith. After a short recess, Captain Goldsmith stated, "The court seriously considered and maturely weight the premises, does find that the said Mr. Robert Parker most unjustly kept the said Negro from Anthony Johnson, his master." Captain Goldsmith continued, "I ordered that said, John Casor, Negro, returns unto the service of his said master, Anthony Johnson. And that Mr. Robert Parker makes payment of all charges in the suit."

The court system failed you. You returned to the Johnson farm to work as his slave for your entire life. With no hopes of being a farm owner or tobacco merchant, you asked yourself, "Is this the American dream?"

Page 1 Question

1. Why was 1619 a significant year in America's history?
2. Who were George Yeardly and Abraham Pierson?
3. What was the major cash crop that saved Jamestown?
4. Explain the indentured servant system.
5. What were the goals of indentured servant at the conclusion of their contract?
6. What excuses were used by masters to extended servants labor obligations?
7. Did you escape the plantation or remain? Why?

Page 2 Readers Only

1. Name the master of the plantation you escaped from in the night.
2. What is your name?
3. Name the men who accompanied you.
4. What nationalities were the men?
5. What colony did you enter to start you new life?
6. What happened on August 9, 1640?
7. For you and the two servants, how were your sentences similar?
8. How was your ruling different from the other men?
9. Why was your sentence different from the other servants?
10. Why was your consequence important to America's history?

Page 3 Readers Only

1. What is your name?
2. Who is Anthony Johnson?
3. How and when did Anthony Johnson arrive in Jamestown?
4. How is Anthony Johnson different from other masters?
5. How did Anthony Johnson acquire his farm?
6. What type of work do you perform?
7. What are your dreams?
8. Why did you decide to work for Robert and George Parker?
9. Describe Captain Samuel Goldsmith ruling in your case.
10. What impact did Anthony Johnson and John Casor have on American history?

NAME:
Date:
Period

Johnson, Punch & Casor

Anthony Johnson

John Punch

John Casor

Sources used to create this resource:

This document has been adapted from multiple sources. Below is a list of sources that contains information about both cases.

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