

## Document A- “Mastering the New World-Antonio”

“About the Last of August came in a Dutch Man of Warre that sold us Twenty Negars.” John Rolfe’s Diary, 1619

Anthony Johnson, an African, arrived in Virginia in 1621 with only the name Antonio. Caught as a young man in the Portuguese slave-trading net of the *Bautista* piracy, he had passed from one trader to another in England until he reached Virginia. In 1621 Antonio was placed with John Pedro, Maria, and other survivors of the *San Antonio* wreck, on board the ship *James*, bound for England. Antonio and Maria were taken to the Earl of Warwick’s great manor at Leighs Priory in Felsted, Essex as stolen contraband. It was at Leighs Priory that Antonio converted from Catholicism to become a Protestant and eventually adopted the English spelling of his name Anthony, just as his future wife Maria, became Mary. They did not abandon their Angolan identity. In America, Anthony and Mary Johnson’s grandson would name their plantation Angola in memory of their homeland. Lord Rich who participated in the piracy of the *Treasurer* on the *Bautista*, did not want Antonio and Mary to remain in England, put them on the ship *James* a second time and bound them to Bennett’s Welcome. Bennett’s Welcome was a Virginia plantation owned by Edward Bennett, a wealthy Puritan and Lord Rich’s friend accepted the christianized African slaves. Once in Jamestown colony he was purchased by Richard Bennett and sent to work at Warrasquoke, Bennett’s tobacco plantation on the James River. Antonio was already trained in skills of care of livestock and tobacco and wheat growth. In the next year, Antonio was brought face to face with the world of tri-racial contact and conflict that would shape the remainder of his life. On Good Friday-March 22, 1622 the Powhatan tribes of tidewater Virginia fell on the white colonists in a determined attempt to drive them from the land. Of the 57 people living on the Bennett plantation, only Antonio and four other men survived the massacre.

Antonio, anglicized to Anthony, labored on the Bennett plantation for some 20 years, slave in fact if not by law, for legally defined bondage was still in another formative stage. During this time, he married the slave Mary, another African trapped in the labyrinth of servitude, and fathered four children. Some Jamestown slaveholders in the early years allowed Africans to raise cattle and crops of their own to purchase their freedom. This practice was akin to an ancient Roman custom that permitted slaves to accumulate property to eventually acquire their liberty. The Siete Partidas laws, later adopted by Spain and Portugal, were an ancient acknowledgement that slavery was not a natural condition for mankind. In the 1640’s, Anthony and Mary Johnson gained their freedom after half a life-time of servitude. Probably at this point they chose a surname, Johnson, to signify their new status. Already past middle age, the

Johnsons began carving out a niche for themselves on Virginia's eastern shore. By 1650, they owned 250 acres due to the headright system, a small herd of cattle, and two black servants. In a world in which racial boundaries were not yet firmly marked, the Johnson's had entered the scramble of small planters for economic security. Antony's servant was taken from him by a white planter and he won his case in court having the servant eventually returned to him. Ships trading for tobacco at Jamestown also docked at the Johnson wharf on the Eastern Shore, to purchase more tobacco before returning to England. Anthony seemed to have carved out a successful life for himself and his family. He is described in the court records as hard working and of service to the community.

By schooling themselves in the workings of the English legal process, carefully cultivating white patronage, and working industriously on the land, the Johnson's gained their freedom, acquired property, established a family, warded off contentious neighbors, and hammered out a decent existence. Their house was destroyed by fire in 1652, and Anthony and Maria were excused from paying tithables by the courts. By the 1650's, as the lines of racial slavery tightened, the Johnson's felt the customs of the country begin to close in on Virginia Free Blacks. Africans and their descendants were beginning to be seen as bound for life.

In 1644, convinced that ill winds were blowing away the chances for their children and grandchildren in Virginia, the Johnson's began selling their land to white neighbors. The following spring, most of the clan moved north to Maryland, where they rented land and again took up farming and cattle raising on Tonies Vineyard. In 1667 years later, Anthony died leaving four children and his wife. The growing racial prejudice of Virginia followed Anthony beyond the grave. A jury of white men in Virginia declared that because Anthony Johnson "was a Negroe and by consequence an alien," the 50 acres he had deeded to his son Richard in Virginia before moving to Maryland should be awarded to a local white planter.

Johnson's children and grandchildren, born in America, could not duplicate the modest success of the African-born patriarch. By the late seventeenth century, people of color faced much greater difficulties in extricating themselves from slavery. When they did, they found themselves forced to the margins of society. Anthony's sons never rose higher than tenant farmer or small freeholder. John Johnson, the eldest son, moved farther north into Delaware in the 1680's, following a period of great conflict with Native Americans in the Chesapeake region. Members of his family married local Indians and became part of a tri-racial community that has survived to the present day. Richard Johnson stayed behind in Virginia. When he died in 1689, just after a series of colonial insurrections connected the

overthrow of James II in England, he had little to leave his own four sons. They became tenant farmers and hired servants, laboring on plantations owned by whites. By now, in the early eighteenth century, slave ships were pouring Africans into Virginia and Maryland to replace white indentured servants, the backbone of the labor force for four generations. To be black had first been a handicap of the Johnson's. Now it became a fatal disability, an indelible mark of degradation and bondage.

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