



Colonial Virginia

In A Nutshell

In the hundred years following [Bacon's Rebellion of 1676](#), Virginia became the colony that we now imagine when we think of Virginia. Prior to 1676, Virginia was a profitable but socially crude and politically unstable tobacco factory. But after the rebellion, it matured into the colonial powerhouse that provided much of the political and philosophical leadership for the [American Revolution](#). During these years, Virginia's [House of Burgesses](#) expanded its powers and developed its sense of political purpose. The colony's tobacco economy expanded to the west and south, generating enormous wealth for American planters and English merchants. The slave labor force on which this economy depended grew from a few thousand to close to a quarter million. And the social and cultural order that completed these political and economic developments took shape.

By 1776, Virginia looked like Virginia—a colony of small farms and great plantations, its tobacco fields filled with slave laborers, all ruled by a planter elite whose political and social power blended seamlessly together.

Why Should I Care?

Colonial Virginia was many things.

It was [Thomas Jefferson](#) sitting on a hilltop thinking deeply about the natural rights of all humankind, and [Patrick Henry](#) rising to the floor in the House of Burgesses and declaring that he would rather die than sacrifice his liberty.

But colonial Virginia was also 90,000 people kidnapped in Africa and carried to the colony in the death-filled hold of a slave ship.

Colonial Virginia was the great plantations of [Westover](#) and [Gunston Hall](#)—enormous testimonies to genteel living nestled among fields of sweet-smelling tobacco.

But it was also planter William Byrd II forcing a young slave to drink a pint of urine because he wet his bed—and [Robert "King" Carter](#) cutting off the toes of a slave who resisted other forms of discipline.

Virginia was [George Washington](#) painstakingly copying the rules of good behavior into a diary as an adolescent. But it was also cockfights on Saturday and drunken militia marches through the slave quarters on Sundays.

Virginia was genteel and barbaric, all at the same time. Which was the *real* Virginia? They both were.