Representation of Slaves in the Eighteenth-Century Virginia Press

Newly discovered published material from colonial Virginia offers a new perspective on the attitudes toward blacks in that slaveholding colony just prior to the American Revolution. Some lines in verse, discovered by this researcher in an almanac thought not to be extant, and an allegorical essay in a newly found newspaper, offer us an alternative view of attitudes toward slaves in the 1760s. While not abolitionist in character, these printed works—never before analyzed—demonstrate that opinions in this slave-holding society were not, in fact, universal and demonstrate sympathetic attitudes toward slaves earlier than previously noted. The fact that these views appeared in print adds weight to their meaning. The dualism of treating slaves as both property and as lesser human beings and the theory of patriarchalism as justifying this dualism are supported here. This research concludes that the very fact that these writings were published demonstrates that at least some residents understood the practice of slavery to be abhorrent and not all Virginians of this time viewed the slaves as less than human.

The predominant image of colonial Virginia is one filled with the evils of slavery and of black people treated as property and less than human. The history of the colony and the state it became is closely intertwined with the involuntary labor of slaves. The verbal imagery within the eighteenth-century press of Virginia prior to the American Revolution generally supports this idea of Africans and African Americans being treated as property rather than as humans deserving of kindness. Newspaper advertisements constantly asked for readers to be on the lookout for runaway slaves, notices to sell slaves were mixed within other ads for household goods and real estate, and short news articles appeared about revolting slaves elsewhere who “committed terrible devastations upon their masters.”

Recently discovered print materials from Virginia of the 1760s belie the concept that the images in the local publications were consistently negative and without sympathy toward slaves. This research uncovers two examples of slaves being considered as people worthy of considerate treatment, in contrast to the typical images. These two writers expressed surprisingly liberal sentiments for this early date and place.

This researcher discovered four pages of an almanac until now not known to have been in existence, buried within the archives of the Library Company of Philadelphia. While historians often ignore almanacs (their contents considered too trivial to be meaningful), one verse about a slave in this almanac fragment has a wealth of significance for readers willing to examine it closely. An unknown author, referred to as a “young Lady of Edinburgh,” wrote the verse portraying a slave as a person deserving of sympathetic and kind treatment. These lines of poetry, published in the slave-holding colony of Virginia in 1767, suggest empathy toward a slave as a person, rather than the more typical piece of property.

A newly discovered issue of the Virginia Gazette from 1764 also presents an alternative attitude towards slavery. In the Rockefeller Library archives at Colonial Williamsburg, this newspaper—not known to be extant until recently—contains an extremely revealing and intriguing article. This anonymous allegorical essay, “A dialogue between a Gentleman and his Dog” was written ostensibly by a dog named “Othello” complaining to his master about the treatment of his kind. It offers an important and critical outlook on the treatment of slaves in this slave-holding colony.

While not opposing slavery per se, when placed in the context of the time and place, these two published writings add an alternative view of attitudes toward slaves in the 1760s.
important perspective to our knowledge of attitudes towards slaves at this time and place. They not only display sympathy for those generally considered less than human a decade earlier than most such writings, but they were published in a slave-holding colony where the press was tightly controlled, giving more weight to their appearance at this time and place.

The colony of Virginia was settled in 1607 by the English, who were looking for financial gain rather than for the religious freedom that motivated the New England Puritans. The new residents were primarily beggars and underemployed Englishmen led by a few gentlemen adventurers. Life was extremely hard, half the colonists died each year, and labor was always in short supply. While Africans were imported to Virginia as early as 1619, indentured servants imported from England made up most of the labor force until the late 1600s, when the importation of Africans enslaved for life became more common. The commercial revolution in Europe and its colonies brought about ruthless exploitation of commodities, including labor and slavery. Lands in the new world needed labor to clear and farm them, and the native Indians and whites proved to be an unsatisfactory solution. Slaves imported from Africa proved to be more controllable and cheaper in the long run. They were commodities. Tobacco was the primary source of income, and large plantations spread upriver with no real urban centers, except for the small capital of Williamsburg. What little printed matter existed was initially imported from England, and local printing was not established in Virginia until 1730.

The Virginia colonists eagerly read newspapers to learn of news from the other colonies, back home in England, and the rest of the world. Initially, such journals had to travel the lengthy voyage from the mother country, but by 1727, the Chesapeake region had its own newspaper; the Maryland Gazette printed in Annapolis. An examination of its news articles and advertisements makes it obvious that this newspaper had a substantial readership in Virginia. The Virginia Gazette began publication in 1736. While the actual circulations of these newspapers were probably not high, wealthier residents did subscribe, the printer would typically post the pages outside his office, and the papers were also read widely in taverns and coffeehouses.

Both of these newspapers were literary in orientation, publishing essays and poems taken directly from British or colonial newspapers or sometimes from local writers. As was typical, such articles were often anonymous or published under pseudonyms. Allegorical essays such as ‘A dialogue between a Gentleman and his Dog,’ were common in the newspapers of both colonies, and readers apparently were accustomed to looking for deeper meaning. The ‘The Plain-Delayer’ wrote pseudonymous essays in the Maryland Gazette, such as a fairy tale that took up a page and a half of the newspaper, with the story of a plain peasant girl who was
made a beautiful queen through magic but eventually realized the folly of such: "Our shepherdess was now contended to live an ugly, poor, unknown Creature at her Village where she tended Sheep." 

In the early issues of the *Virginia Gazette*, "The Monitor" wrote allegories that critiqued society and fashion, for example: "Miss Fidget; She’s here and there and every where; she never misses a Tea-Table … There she hears Slander, Back-biting, and Scandal." These essays appear to be morality lessons in social behavior and by the 1760s, readers of the newspapers in the Chesapeake colonies were certainly familiar with allegorical essays.

Williamsburg became the legal and social center for the colony and the one print shop was the center for communications within that town. In addition to the printing presses, it was a busy spot for commerce, with a bookbindery, a bookstore, and the post office. The *Virginia Gazette* newspaper was published from information gleaned primarily from the latest British and colonial newspapers brought in by ship captains, from personal letters, and from letters and essays sent to the printer. These small shops made money from newspaper subscriptions and advertisements as well as publishing annual almanacs, pamphlets, and other printing paid for privately. In his store, the printer also sold books printed in England but bound locally, he was paid to run the post office, and he had an annual salary to print official business of the colony. This retainer of 375 pounds per year had to be approved by the House of Burgesses and then by the governor, meaning that the printer had to stay in the good graces of all of those in political power.

Royal Governor Francis Fauquier himself admitted an apparent influence over what was printed in the colony: "the press was then thought to be too complaisant to me." In a 1766 *Virginia Gazette* piece, a "Man of Principle" wrote that a few years earlier, while Joseph Royle was only printer in Virginia, the press "was not renowned for its freedom," also alleging that Governor Fauquier was allowed to read the newspaper before it was circulated and actually censored it: "Has it not been said that Mr. Royle owned a private license, and that a paper was constantly carried to a certain house in Palace street [the Governor’s palace] to be inspected before it could be seen by the public?" The author of this piece claimed that Royle acted as though he was dependent upon a license to print, and that the governor was checking everything before it could be published. Just as the crisis over the Stamp Act came to a head in 1765, printer Royle died and Alexander Purdie and John Dixon took over his newspaper. At the same time, in an effort to have their viewpoints published, more radical Virginians brought in printer William Rind from Maryland to publish a second newspaper, also called the *Virginia Gazette*. Direct control by the governor over the press appears to have weakened after this transition, but the royal official certainly remained influential and had to approve the government subsidy that now went to the Rind press.

The most widespread secular printed matter in the American colonies was the almanac, originally spelled "almanack." These ubiquitous small pamphlet-like books were inexpensive and circulated well down the social scale, but historians have largely downplayed their relevance. Philip Davidson, for example, found that while newspapers and pamphlets were extremely important for their political influence just before and during the American Revolution, "almanacs, and magazines were of less importance as vehicles of propaganda" because of their lack of timeliness. Marion Barber Stowell notes that while researchers emphasize the political influence of newspapers and pamphlets, most have minimized the relevance of almanacs. She suggests that because
position for even the lowest on the social scale of freemen. The institution of slavery “conferred a presumption of superiority” on all whites, even those who were not slaveholders themselves. Interaction between slaves and whites produced a complex and hybrid culture. “Relations between the races were as destructive as they were unequal.”

In discussing the odd contradiction in leaders of American freedom such as George Washington owning slaves, Peter Henriques notes the core complication and dilemma of treating human beings as property. It was no longer legal to manumit a slave in the colony and only one percent of the blacks in the colony were free. “Blacks were universally viewed as degraded human beings,” and the deep-rooted concept of racial superiority meant that most Virginians never could have any emotional connection to the plight of those held in bondage. “[T]he vast majority of colonists” embraced the practice of brutal plantation slavery and “few people spoke out against the rise of African slavery in the colony,” according to Owen Stanwood. He suggests that the originally benevolent aim of converting heathens to Christianity had been abandoned by the mid-eighteenth century, replaced by economic need and a cruel plantation system that “increased the psychological distance between masters and slaves.”

Philip Morgan also wrote that slave-owners treated their bondpeople as property, but suggested that by the 1760s, when the Chesapeake slave society reached what he called the “mature phase,” white owners adopted an attitude of “patriarchalism” that led to closer personal relations between slaves and their masters. The subsequent inherent contradiction—treating people as property—was at the root of slavery and a key problem, Morgan theorizes. He suggests that humane treatment of slaves was often the result of their status as property. While owners often had to force recalcitrant slaves into submission, as rebellious slaves lacked the appropriate deference, excessive abuse could lead to a loss of investment.

Anthony Parent prefers a slightly different form of the term: “patriarchism.” He theorizes that as the number of slaves increased along with a dependence on their labor, a fear of slavery developed—not just for the enslaved, but also for the masters who recognized the unstable relationship. From this, the planters developed the concept of patriarchism, the idea that the master was “a fictive father,” within a familial model of authority. The plantation owner was responsible for the care of the slaves, but in return, the slaves were responsible for supplying their labor. Planters treated their slaves as inferior family members who “needed and benefited from their master’s protection.” This became a rationalization legitimizing slavery, leading at times to more humane treatment, but at other times justifying the use of violence against the slaves.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, there were some calls in Virginia and many of the American colonies to end the slave trade, some literature expressing sympathy for the slaves, and a few calls for freeing the slaves. Lorenzo Dow Turner explored anti-slavery literature and suggested that much of it was written by Puritans and Quakers and was based on religious and moral grounds. By the decade before the Revolution, published works in support of the essential humanity of African people were extremely rare, in contrast to the essay and poem being examined here. Written works showing sympathy for slaves did not become common until 1770 and later, according to Turner. In 1773, one of the Virginia Gazettes published what appears to be a biblical justification for enslaving black Africans. However, according to Winthrop Jordan, this letter to the editor had been published first in Pennsylvania and was actually a tongue in cheek ridicule of slavery and of the defenders of slavery. By this time, as the Revolutionary fervor was advancing and the rhetoric about Great Britain enslaving colonists had heated up, more Americans were speaking out against slavery, but primarily in the North, and especially in Pennsylvania where Quakers were the most outspoken opponents of slavery.

Much of the published material from this period treated slaves as dangerous property with subhuman qualities. Washington considered Africans and African Americans to be inferior human beings, ignorant, careless, deceitful, and without conscience. However, Washington always took great care with his public statements on controversial issues, and his distaste for slavery was only expressed privately, not publicly. Thomas Jefferson wrote that he suspected that blacks were “inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind.” Jefferson had a comparatively progressive attitude towards Africans for his time and place. His intellect could never find a moral justification for slavery. However, he remained a slave-owner his entire life and he never envisioned blacks and whites living together in freedom. Jefferson also noted that Virginians viewed their slaves “as legitimate subjects of property as their horses and cattle.” Fellow Virginian Arthur Lee called them, “a race—the most detestable and vile that ever the earth produced.”

Records from the 1760s and earlier show slaves being considered more as property than as lesser family members. In 1705, Virginia law explicitly reduced slaves from humanity to real estate property. While at times the law needed to recognize the slave as a person, “the fact remains that in becoming a slave the Negro had become a piece of property first and a man only secondarily.” When wealthy slave-owners died, the estate’s executor drew up a listing of valuables and presented it to the court for settlement. Even in these probate inventories, carefully recorded in the county courthouses, the slaves were listed simply as property. Entered along with the household goods and livestock, each slave was included with a first name but not with a last name, and sometimes there was a description and the slave’s value in British pounds. Twenty-seven “Negroes” were listed right after “1 Bay Colt” and “1 White Horse” in Thomas Chinn’s 1768 estate appraisal from Lancaster County, followed by “1 Canoe” and “2 Share and Colter ploughs.” Major William Walker’s estate inventory from Stafford County, Virginia in 1763 listed, “Negroes: Bristol £45, Joe £40, Jack £50, Mahomet £30. Jo: Dowdy 1 Year £10. … Jenny a girl £10. Will £30. 8 oxen @ 50 £20. 4 Sows £2.”

The status of slaves was somewhere between a lesser form of human and an inanimate piece of property. While beating a horse or another animal could mean a $50 fine, beating a slave was legal, if the slave was not killed or maimed. Killing a slave could lead to murder charges after 1723, but only if a witness testified that the death was willful and malicious. No one was convicted of such. As an important investment and a valuable part of an estate, the slave’s continued well-being was essential to the owner. Abuse of
a slave that led to death or injury meant the loss of a large investment. Thus, masters had to recognize the humanity of the slaves that they essentially treated as property. As David Waldstreicher wrote as he explored Benjamin Franklin’s contradictory attitudes and actions towards slaves, the Africans were in a sort of limbo. Owners needed to recognize slaves as people, yet they bought and sold them as mere commercial goods or commodities.

The portrayal of the African slave in colonial printed material demonstrates this idea of blacks as less-than-human commodities. The slave trade and growing consumerism, including the expanding commodity of print, were among the common factors tying together the entire English Atlantic world. The commercial revolution in Europe and her colonies brought about ruthless exploitation of many commodities, including labor and slavery. Virginia and the southern colonies had economies more tightly tied to slavery, but ads for slaves and negative images of blacks in print were widespread and found even in the prints of the northern colonies. Examining the reflection of Africans in the Maryland Gazette, Darold Wax noted that the newspaper “portrayed black people as inferior, simple, child-like and in general undesirable.” But Wax also concluded the portrayal “was many-sided and complex, an image which saw the Negro as property but which also revealed his human qualities.” David Copeland also noted this duality was visible in colonial newspapers. While owners treated the slaves as property, their humanity and desire for freedom was evident in the many published notices seeking the return of runaway slaves. These advertisements for escaped slaves in the colonial Virginia Gazettes regard them like just another lost piece of property. Sandwiched between property for sale and lost horses are the ads for missing slaves. Rather than treating them as errant humans, the context and copy implies that these blacks are simply property to be returned:

RUN away from the subscriber in Dinwiddie county, about the middle of July last, a Virginia born Negro man, named SCIPIO, about 38 years old, 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, has a large bump on the top of one of his feet, a scar on one of his legs, a great many scars on his back, occasioned by whipping, and a very down look. Had on when he went away, an old check shirt, crocus breeches, but neither hat nor shoes. Whoever conveys the said runaway to me, shall have 3 l. [pound] reward.

Right below the ad for this heavily whipped man was a similar notice, for a runaway horse. Advertisements put slaves for sale right in between furniture, stable tack, and livestock: “sundry HOUSEHOLD and KITCHEN furniture, also a genteel new CHARIOT, with harness for four horses, several valuable NEGROES, HORSES, CATTLE, &c.” “This placement, between household goods and land for sale, was appropriate for the time as a reflection of their legal status.

The classification of slaves as a type of property is also apparent in the notices for their sale. In the same issue that included the Othello essay was an announcement that “forty Virginia born slaves” were for sale, “consisting of men, women and children.” A few years earlier, one advertisement listed, “To be sold, a very valuable House Wench, and a Chaise.” Following an ad for “fourteen hundred acres of rich level tobacco land” in one 1767 newspaper is another ad for a sale of “A parcel of very fine Negroes … also the crop of corn, flock of cattle, hogs, sheep, and horses.” While “negroes” often appeared in advertisements, there were fewer references to them in the news stories. There were some reports of slave revolts in other colonies and sometimes reports of crimes by slaves. One mulatto slave and one black slave were reportedly burned at the stake for committing arson, and two escaped slaves were described as “daring and dangerous villains, capable of attempting the most horrid crimes.” Most newspaper stories reflected both the assumed inferiority of blacks, and the whites’ fear of rebellion and insurrection.

Despite the majority of negative images in colonial newspapers, a few more sympathetic views did occasionally make it into the northern prints. In New England, Samuel Sewall wrote a famous pamphlet attacking slavery that he published in 1700. “Man Stealing” is Sewall’s description of slavery, which he “ranked amongst the most atrocious of Capital Crimes.” Copeland’s extensive research of colonial newspapers found that the first anti-slavery newspaper article appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette in 1740. This open letter by the minister George Whitefield to the colonies of the South denounced slavery as abhorrent to God and charged that, “God has a Quarrel with you for your Abuse of and Cruelty to the poor Negroes.”

By the 1760s, slavery was so ingrained in the colonies that there were few protests against slavery, according to John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. While the colonists had begun to see a real inconsistency with holding slaves in bondage and complaints about British oppression, no political leader had really denounced the institution. Arguments against slavery become more common after the Boston Massacre in 1770, especially in Pennsylvania, but less so in the slave states of the South. Until that time, “any doubt which the average [Virginia] colonist ever had about the wisdom of slavery stemmed either from the unpleasant prospect that slaves would one day rise up and butcher the master class or else from suspicion that, as a business proposition, slavery simply did not pay.
its way.”

Until the revolutionary rhetoric about human liberty, the idea of questioning the morality of slavery had occurred to very few Virginians, or colonists anywhere, for that matter. In his first published essay in 1775, revolutionary propagandist Thomas Paine wrote against slavery, decrying the “inhumane trade,” and the “barbarous treatment” of slaves. Newspaper articles supporting abolition of slavery began appearing in New England and Pennsylvania by 1770, and while Virginians certainly read some of these works, no such articles are visible in the Virginia press of this time. Humanitarian ideals regarding Africans did not really have any influence in the English-speaking world until after 1800. However, several Virginians did write about the evils of slavery, including its negative influence on slave-owners and their children, and a few actively supported banning the slave trade. In 1736, William Byrd II wrote in a private letter that Parliament should “put an end to this unchristian Traffic of making Merchandise of Our Fellow Creatures.”

In 1738, Virginia minister Anthony Gavin wrote in a letter to the Bishop of London that he felt buying of slaves was “Unlawful for any Christian.” In 1765, George Mason argued that the practice of cultivating the land with slaves reduced immigration of free people “not to mention the ill Effect such a Practice has upon the Morals & manners of our People.” This is an argument he made more forcefully and publicly some years later in opposing the slave trade, but he did not propose an end to slavery itself. Banning the slave trade was far different from abolition. Since the large plantation owners in Virginia had an excess of slaves by the second half of the eighteenth century, banning their importation would in reality increase the value of their investment in slaves, allowing them to continue to profit on the sale of their slaves’ offspring.

The image of slave-holding colonists crying out against the British government for treating them as slaves has been a puzzling paradox for historians. The essay and poem being considered here appeared in print just as the colonies began the fight over taxation. The word “slave” appeared many times in the revolutionary rhetoric, but in that context, “slave” typically referred to the colonists themselves, not to African slaves. Revolutionary voices accused Britain of making the colonists “slaves to the ministers of state.” Using the pseudonym of the “Monitor,” Arthur Lee wrote, “What remains to make our slavery complete? Nothing but our acquiesance [sic] and submission.” While many historians have puzzled over this paradox of slave-owners objecting loudly to their own supposed enslavement, Parent suggests that the revolutionary leaders actually learned about the importance of liberty from the struggles of their black slaves.

At least one contemporary saw the paradox in Virginians demanding their own freedom from slavery by the British ministry while owning and mistreating slaves of their own. Writing pseudonymously in a 1771 issue of the Virginia Gazette, “Associator Humanus” criticized his fellow patriots who had spoken out against unfair taxation:

I have often thought that we should have been more strenuous in our Opposition to ministerial Tyranny, spoken out with more Boldness against it, and manifested a more genuine Abhorrence of Slavery, had we not been too familiar with it, or had not been conscious that we ourselves were absolute Tyrants, and held Numbers of poor Souls in the most abject and endless State of Slavery. He went on to note that such slave owners, with souls filled with avarice, tyrants over their own slaves, “could have no true Idea of Liberty.”

The verse contained in this almanac is startlingly different from the normal almanac fare. Written pseudonymously by a young Lady of Edinburgh, the verse portrays a young slave as a person who is deserving of care, support, and kindness.

Arthur Lee was alone among prominent Virginians to publish anti-slavery sentiments, according Patricia Bradley. Lee was a member of an influential slave-owning family of Virginia gentry, but while a student in England, he wrote and published a pamphlet in 1764, An Essay in Vindication of the Continental Colonies of America, responding to Adam Smith’s attack on Virginians’ character and treatment of African slaves. Lee defended his fellow colonists and he wrote negatively of the general character of Africans, saying their “hearts [are] cruel, vindictive, stubborn, base, and wicked.” However, he did criticize the institution of slavery. He quoted Baron Montesquieu as saying, “slavery is in its own nature bad.” In a startling comment for a member of the Virginia gentry, he concluded that the practice of slavery was indefensible, very un-Christian, and “shocking to justice and humanity.” Just a few years later—in 1767—Lee published a more highly-developed opinion in the Virginia Gazette where he argued that “long and serious Reflection upon the nature & Consequences of Slavery has Convinced me, that it is a Violation both of Justice and Religion; that it is dangerous to the safety of the Community in which it prevails; that it is destructive to the growth of arts & Sciences; and lastly, that it produces a numerous & very fatal train of Vices, both in the Slave, and in his Master.”

While Lee intended to publish a second essay on the subject, printer Rind apparently chose not to publish it. The printer of the rival Virginia Gazette also declined to use the controversial “suppressed” piece, stating that “after perusing, we do not choose to insert, until we have a conversation with the author.” Lee’s essay was later published elsewhere (in somewhat edited form) due to the efforts of anti-slavery Quakers. It was never printed in Virginia.

Arthur Lee’s writing was revolutionary and extremely subversive for its time and place. In Virginia or any of the slaveholding colonies, any discussion about ending the institution of slavery was considered inflammatory and subversive, as Gary Nash has observed. Cheap
slave labor was the backbone of the southern economic system, and even those who saw the evils in slavery did not see any easy way out of the widely accepted system.98 By the same standards, the essay and poem examined here were also somewhat subversive. It is possible that Arthur Lee was actually the author of the essay, “A dialogue between a Gentleman and his Dog.” He and his brother Richard Henry Lee published many articles in the Virginia Gazette, many of them anonymously or pseudonymously.92 The Othello essay is consistent with Arthur Lee’s opinions on slavery, although the style is much more muted. It is less likely that Lee wrote the lines of verse credited to a “young lady,” but the cloak of anonymity was sometimes used to hide gender.99

The four pages of an almanac with the verse being examined here were discovered during this researcher’s examination of a forty-page Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God, 1768 printed by Alexander Purdie and John Dixon. It was evident that the pages with the verse were part of a previously unknown almanac, apparently misfiled into a box containing the other. Both almanacs have a list of the “MEMBERS OF His MAJESTY’s COUNCIL of VIRGINIA,” but the appearance is different. While both have exactly the same names of the council members, the list included in the scrap of four pages has a different appearance—different type fonts and spacing—making it evident that this is a separate almanac. Included in the newly found almanac are “Common Notes for the Year 1768,” which are different from the Purdie and Dixon issue, yet this identifies for us the year of the almanac. The listing of the Virginia council members identify for us the colony for which the almanac was printed.94

There is strong evidence as to who is likely to have published this second almanac. When Rind moved to Virginia in 1766, he printed not only a second Virginia Gazette newspaper but also an almanac for the year 1767. It was not known that he had printed an almanac for 1768; it does not appear in bibliographic references for that year.95 However, this research has tentatively identified this scrap of an almanac, confirmed by the archive, as printer William Rind’s Virginia Almanac for the Year of Our Lord, 1768, published in Williamsburg in 1767.96

The verse contained in this almanac is startlingly different from the normal almanac fare. Written pseudonymously by a “young Lady of Edinburgh,” the verse portrays a young slave as a person who is deserving of care, support, and kindness. We know nothing of the writer, not even if she was indeed from Virginia. There was an Edinburgh in that colony, as well as in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and the original in Scotland. While such verse was typically reprinted from other sources, research did not uncover any other printing of this poem. Its publication in Virginia is significant no matter what the original source. Appearing in print in a colony heavily dependent on slavery in the 1760s, this verse offers a different reflection of the cultural attitudes towards slaves from what was normally published in that time period.

The title reads, “A Copy of Verses sent by a young Lady of Edinburgh to a Relation with a Present of a Negro Boy,” and it begins in the voice of the slave, who is called both Ferdinando and Fernando:

Doom’d in my Infancy a Slave to roam,
Far, far, from Africk’s Shore, my native Home,
To serve a Caledonian Maid I come.—
In me no Father does his Darling mourn,
No Mother weeps me from her Bosom torn!

Both now are Dust: The filial Tear I owe;
But who they were, alas! I ne’er shall know!

[Here quotation marks are added to the verse, and it shifts from Ferdinando’s perspective to a message from his former mistress to his new owner. It appears that the slave is either reading or has memorized these words.]

“Lady, to Thee her Love my Mistress sends,
“And bids Your Grandsons be Ferdinando’s Friends;
“Bids Thee suppose, on Africk’s distant Coast,
“One of Thy Lilly-colour’d Fav’rites lost;
“Doom’d in the Train of some proud Dame to wait;
“To serve as she should Will, for Use or State;
“If to the Boy You’d wish her to be kind,
“Such Grace from Thee let Ferdinando find.”97

This unusual poem clearly viewed this slave as a human worthy of kind treatment and capable of friendship. It treats Ferdinando sympathetically, and recognizes that slaves took him from his home at a young age to be a vassal in a foreign land. While being treated as if a possession, this slave is also being considered as an actual person. The author of the verse is sending him—as a slave—to a relative, so as a material gift he is certainly being treated as property. Yet, what is unusual about these words is that they regard Ferdinando as a human being, capable of suffering from his situation. It recognizes that he was torn from his mother’s breast, sent to a foreign land, and had parents he never knew, who now are dead. As he is to recite these words, the assumption here is that he is intelligent enough to read or to memorize a poem. The writer goes so far as to ask the recipient of this slave to compare him to her own children, asking the new owner to be as kind with Ferdinando as she would have her own treated. The author writes as if this slave—this property—is worthy of kindness and comparison with a slave-owner’s children.

It is also worth noting that the verse specifically suggests that the recipient’s “Grandsuns be Ferdinando’s Friends,” that the white, Christian, slave-owner’s grandchildren mix with the black, African, presumably non-Christian Ferdinando. (The verse refers to him as both “Ferdinando” and the diminutive “Fernando.”) It goes on to ask the recipient to imagine her “Lilly-colour’d Fav’rites,” or her grandchildren, lost on the shores of Africa. This comparison of an African slave to the colony’s white children is quite unusual in a time when most white citizens of Virginia considered Africans and African-Americans to be inferior human beings, yet the author of these lines asked that he become the friend of the new owner’s grandchildren.98

Twice the unknown author refers to Ferdinando as “doom’d.” Doomed while still an infant to a life of slavery, and now doomed to serve, doomed to be treated as any slave-owner wishes. Doomed suggests not only being consigned to a horrible fate, but also insinuates a judgment or a sentence, as the old English meaning of the word, current in the eighteenth century but now archaic, related more to law than it did to fate.99 A slave or any heathen of another race would typically be automatically designated a less-than-ideal future. To discuss this slave as being doomed suggests the author believed that was not a natural state, in contrast to the typical cultural attitudes of this time and place, that heathens of a different race were less human than were white Christians. The writer appears to have believed that the slave and all black people were actually “doomed” by British law to an inferior position.

While these sentiments perhaps did not go so far as to express abolitionist sentiments, or to suggest freeing this slave, this verse
did portray an outlook upon slavery, or at least upon one individual slave, that was atypical for that time and place. It is not known whether this verse stirred up any controversy—there is no known response to these lines, either published in a local almanac or the local newspapers. Printed in a slave colony, these words stand in sharp contrast to the extremely disparaging, and perhaps more typical, verse written earlier by John Saffin of Massachusetts:

_Cowardly and cruel, are those Blacks Innate, Prone to Revenge, Imp of Invertebrate hate, He that exasperates them; soon espies Mischief and Murder in their eyes._

The newspaper essay written by an unknown author, printed in a _Virginia Gazette_ of 1764, also presents an alternative view of slavery. It appears to be a covert critique of the way that some owners treated their slaves, specifically that the slaves were treated as less than human. The essay appeared in a recently discovered issue of the newspaper now at the Rockefeller Library in Colonial Williamsburg. A dog named Othello is complaining to his master about the treatment of his kind:

_I am mortified, Sir, when I think what my species suffers from the injustice of mankind. As if it were not enough to be despised and kicked about by every unfeeling blockhead, glorifying in the dignity of human nature, to be hanged by the neck in our old age by those ungrateful wretches we had served through life with care and fidelity, to be cut up alive by the damned merciless doctors in the bloom of youth, as if all these, I say, were not enough, we are daily loaded with a thousand unmerited reproaches, and the imputation of vices of which we are entirely ignorant._

The dog assures his master that in his case, he is treated kindly and has nothing but “love and gratitude to my benefactor.” Othello goes on to complain that the very name of his species has become an insult, and that dogs are often accused of fawning. Such complaisance, Othello suggests, is the prerogative of those in power, not of the lesser sorts. While the superficial meaning is that dogs are ill-treated by their masters, the underlying message is clearly about the treatment of slaves.

It is no coincidence that the name of the dog complaining to his master is Othello. The main character in _Othello, the Moor of Venice_ by William Shakespeare was an important image in English-speaking lands of that time. The dark-skinned Moor was noble but different from white Englishmen. As Carl Degler noted, Shakespeare's black Othello was a symbol of “the seventeenth-century Englishman’s consciousness of the Negro’s differences,” indeed he was considered a “thing” rather than a person. In this essay, the dog Othello represents the black slave, and he is complaining about discrimination against his “species”—or race. To his master, he says, “Sir, however meanly you think of us, we are endowed by nature with sense, reason, instinct, or whatever you please to call it, sufficient to direct us in the pursuit of our proper happiness, and to accomplish the ends of that station allotted us in the scale of being.”

The dog is pleading for the capability and needs of his kind, or rather for the blacks in Virginia. In the end, his “master” notes that he loves Othello more than he does most men, and regarding the ill treatment, “I am sorry for it.”

Inherent in this allegory is another lesson in moral behavior, that Virginians should treat their slaves with greater kindness and sympathy. Also implicit in Othello's comments is the idea that slaves are indeed more human than property, capable of sense and deserving of happiness, an idea at odds with the prevailing attitudes towards black Africans. As readers accustomed to both the image of Shakespeare's black Othello and allegorical essays, it is certain that many of the colony's readers understood the message here.

For a Virginia printer to publish such a work tells us a great deal about public attitudes. Prior to 1765, there was only one printer functioning as the gatekeeper controlling the information within all of the colony's own limited mass media of the time—the one newspaper, almanac, pamphlets, broadsides, and an occasional book. As such, the printers had a great deal of power, controlling the messages that could reach a large audience. The printer was an intellectual leader and the print shop was the center...
of communication for the entire colony. Of course, the colony’s one printer could not completely control the flow of printed information at the local level. Private letters and powerful sermons, by both local pastors and traveling preachers also were influential information sources. Newspapers and printed material from other colonies and Great Britain had some circulation, and many of these outside prints were available for reading and discussion at the taverns and coffee houses. The printer in the colony of Virginia, without an urban center, was just at this time becoming part of a growing marketplace, with public demand becoming more important and official approval part of a waning influence. However, as craftsmen running small businesses dependent on public goodwill, colonial printers typically refrained from publishing anything too controversial to avoid alienating any possible sources of income. A government subsidy (which had to be approved by the legislature, the royal governor, and his councilors) made up a large part of the printer’s income, so the words that came off his presses could not offend powerful individuals or groups. The printer of this essay, Joseph Royle, was considered a timid publisher, fearful of angering anyone—especially those in power. This allegorical essay suggesting that owners should treat their slaves better must not have been terribly offensive to many readers or Royle would not have printed it. It is quite possible that because neither piece suggested an outright abolition of slavery or violent opposition to it, no offense was taken. No other issues of the newspaper from the next few months are extant, so if it did indeed stir a controversy, that is now lost to history.

While the colony of Virginia was a slave colony and in the 1760s most of the white residents undoubtedly did support slavery and considered the slaves less than human, this new research suggests that viewpoint was not universal. The colonial Virginians of this period did not all speak with one voice, even regarding the matter of slavery. What we have here is new evidence that there were some residents who viewed slaves not simply as property, but as human—deserving of better treatment—at an earlier date than previously recognized, prior to the 1770s when Franklin, Turner and others point to an increase in literature sympathetic to slaves. This conclusion is supported by the fact that these writings were not just private letters, but were published by printers who could ill afford to offend powerful clients or the public. While the dominant opinion in Virginia of the 1760s, as reflected in the prints of the time, was that slavery was necessary and that the enslaved were simply property or at best a lesser type of human, there were alternative opinions not entirely hidden from view. The evidence here supports the idea of white masters applying the social ethos of patriarchalism to justify the practice of slavery. This resulted in a confusing dualism where slaves were considered property, but they were also treated as human beings—albeit an inferior form. These newly found printed writings did not attack the system of slavery per se, but rather pleaded for more humane treatment, an attitude that is consistent with such patriarchalism.

The prerevolutionary patriot rhetoric accusing Britain of forcing the colonists into slavery clashed with the reality of southern slavery. As Patrick Henry stated so forcefully, “is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!” Surprisingly, there were some people—even in Virginia—who believed that blacks should share in that liberty soon to be won. As history has seen, such an opportunity for a more inclusive freedom was lost.

NOTES
1 The terms used in colonial American for the slaves imported from Africa were typically variations of Latin, Portuguese, and French terms for black. (In more formal references, such as the newspaper advertisements in Virginia, the term “Negro” was often used.) The informal terms became unacceptable as pejorative and the terms “colored” and “Negro” became more common by the mid-twentieth century, but by the 1960s, “black” had become the more acceptable term and thus is used here. The terms African American or Afro-American are generally avoided here as many of those being considered were born in Africa rather than in the colonies.


3 “A Copy of Verses sent by a young Lady of Edinburgh to a Relative with a Present of a Negro Boy,” Virginia Almanac (Williamsburg, Va.: Rind?, 1767.) Identification and provenance will be discussed later in the notes. Original spelling, punctuation, capitalization, italicization, and spacing retained here.

4 Anonymous, Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Va.: Joseph Royle, July 6, 1764), 1.


7 Early in the 1600s, Africans were not necessarily in bondage for life, but by 1640, slavery for life had become the norm. See John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 56-59.

8 Franklin and Moss, From Slavery to Freedom, 28-35.

9 The capital of Virginia moved from Jamestown to Williamsburg in 1699. See Taylor, American Colonies, 140-53.

10 Douglas McMurtrie, The Beginnings of Printing in Virginia (Lexington, Va: Journalism Laboratory of Washington and Lee University, 1935), 15-21. In an oft-quoted rant, Royal Governor Sir William Berkeley decried both education and the printing press: “I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!” Berkeley was responding to, “Enquiries to the Governor of Virginia,” submitted by the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations in London, from “Inquisitions, &c. 1665 to 1676,” 239. The first printing press in Virginia arrived in 1682, but the printer and the press were quickly thrown out of the colony. See Lawrence Wroth, The Colonial Printer, 2nd ed. (Portland, Maine: Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1938; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 16-17 and 38; and Isaiah Thomas, The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers, 2nd ed. (Albany: Munsell, 1874; repr., New York: B. Franklin, 1967), 550-52.


13 Thomas, History of Printing, 558.


19 Ibid.

20 From 1714 to 1768, resident governors, who were technically lieutenant governors, ruled while the actual royal governors were absentee merely collecting the salary. Francis Fauquier was referred to in contemporary writings as “governor,” when in fact he was the lieutenant governor acting as governor.

21 Francis Fauquier to the Board of Trade, Williamsburg, April 7, 1766. Handwritten transcription, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Great Britain PRO CO 5, container v, 1331-97: 106 [137-48].

22 Joseph Royle was the only printer in Virginia until his death in 1765. The government portion of his salary was voted on by the Burgesses and then approved


Parent, Foul Means, 5.

Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Va.: Purdie & Dixon, July 18, 1771), 1.

Ibid.


Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Enslaving Virginia: Becoming Americans, Our Struggle to be Both Free and Equal (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1999), 345-46.

Bradley, Slavery, Propaganda, and the American Revolution, 140.


Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Va.: Purdie & Dixon, April 16, 1767), 2.

See also MacMaster, “Arthur Lee’s Address,” 142.

By a respected Member of the Community [Lee], Extract from an Address in the Virginia Gazette, of March 19, 1767, quoted in MacMaster, “Arthur Lee’s Address,” 145-47.


Laurie E. Godfrey, “The Printers of the Williamsburg Virginia Almanacs” (Rind?), 1767. See the Library Company of Philadelphia's online catalog at http://paccl.exlibrisgroup.com:8499/f/RBC4G6KC14MVHGX82YAQN2UNNAAH91LE DHQB577FXUVURY3F6L-858804func-full-set-cset_number=034634&cset_ entry=000001&format=999. This tentative identification was confirmed by James N. Green, librarian, the Library Company of Philadelphia.

“A young Lady of Edinburgh,” Virginia Almanac for 1768 . . . (Rind!).

As Edmund S. Morgan noted in Virginians at Home, Family Life in the Eighteenth Century (Williamsburg, Va.: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1952), 65, “On most plantations the children, white and colored, played together, and children are great leaders, so far as the distinctions established by adults are concerned.”


Very few issues of this newspaper from this year exist, and this issue was thought to be not extant. It is not listed in Clarence Brigham, History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820; Including Additions and Corrections (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1962), 1159-1160, nor is it included in the extensive Library of Congress collection, or in the microfilm collections. No issues of the Virginia Gazette from 1764 are currently online in the Rockefeller Library’s extensive collection at http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/va gazettes/. This issue was apparently part of a gift to the foundation, according to Del Moore, reference librarian, e-mail message to author, May 3, 2010.

Anonymous, Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Va.: Joseph Royle, July 6, 1764), 1, from digital images supplied to this researcher from Special Collections, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. This same essay was published the following month in the New-York Mercury on Aug. 6, 1764. Such reprinting from other colonial and English newspapers was common at this time.


Anonymous, Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Va.: Joseph Royle, July 6, 1764), 1.

Ibid.


It took from ten days to six months for newspapers to arrive from the northern colonies or Great Britain, limiting their influence. See Copeland, Colonial American Newspapers, 18.


“A Man of Principle,” Virginia Gazette (Williamsburg, Va.: Purdie & Dixon: Aug. 22, 1766), 2, suggests that Royle (then deceased) had all of his copy approved by the governor before printing and that Royle’s press “was not renowned for its freedom.”


Speech delivered by Patrick Henry to the Second Virginia Convention on March 23, 1775, St. John’s Church, Richmond, quoted in Moses Coit Tyler, Patrick Henry (Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1887), 128.