"In 1671, Sir William Berkley listed the number of indentured servants as about eight thousand, slaves at two thousand, and freemen at forty-five thousand. Within a few decades, slaves would begin to outnumber the indentured servants from England. This is the heart of the American paradox. Better conditions and greater liberty for indentured servants would come only at the expense of unoffending Africans."

This passage hopefully suggests several unanswered questions.
1. Why did slaves come to outnumber indentured servants by the end of the century?
2. How did such a transformation took place?
3. What kind of society emerged?

The following websites will help you to answer those questions.

On the Origins of Slavery in the Chesapeake in the 17th Century and the subsequent growth of slavery throughout the colonies see the following:
2. The case of Anthony Johnson
3. From Africa to Virginia: http://historyisfun.org/From-Africa-to-Virginia.htm
View Video Resources, Image Gallery, and Background Historical Essays.

For Bacon’s Rebellion and its significance in the growth of slavery in 17th century Virginia, see:
2. The following student essay by Chuma Ogunwole of Georgetown Preparatory School, Bethesda, Maryland explaining the transition from a labor system based on white indentured servitude to black slavery in the Chesapeake.

Slavery and Bacon’s Rebellion

Bacon’s Rebellion, which occurred in 1676 in the colony of Virginia, significantly impacted the growth of slavery in early America. The socio-economic dilemma between the poor whites and the gentry-elite in 17th century Virginia came to a head in Bacon’s rebellion, and was ultimately solved by institutionalized slavery. Paradoxically, greater freedom and opportunity for ordinary whites in Virginia were inextricably tied to the increasing debasement and enslavement of Africans. As historian Edmund Morgan points out, the two seemingly contradictory but intertwined notions of freedom and slavery constitute the central paradox of American history.
Prior to Bacon’s Rebellion, Virginia was a colony in crisis. In 1673, the English Parliament enacted the Navigation Acts, one of which required that farmers pay a duty on all inter-coastal trade, thus significantly increasing costs for them as most commerce had to move by water given the poor roads. Also, as the general mortality rate declined in Virginia as a result of greater availability of foodstuffs, an increasing number of indentured servants lived out their terms of bound service and became free. Many were able to purchase small plots of land on which to raise tobacco, or to work for a while as tenants for someone else and then purchase land. The resulting overproduction of tobacco, however, sent its price plummeting and many new land owners fell into debt and lost their property. By 1676, twenty-five percent of white men were landless. To limit competition during the hard times, the gentry-elite lengthened the terms of service for indentured servants, and prohibited landless men from voting. In addition, wealthy Virginians bought up the remaining best farmland along the coast, forcing small farmers to buy land closer to the frontier where they were susceptible to attack by Native Americans. The frontier farmers requested an expedition against the Indians to prevent attack and to gain more land for themselves, but the Royal Governor William Berkley, who conducted a lucrative trade in furs with the Indians, refused permission. He did offer to build forts on the frontier but the frontier residents regarded these as expensive and ultimately useless for defense, but helpful for the governor’s Indian trade. The Navigation Acts, coupled with falling tobacco prices, lack of available farmland, and problems with Native Americans took a toll on poor white Virginians struggling to make a living. Many, having fallen into debt, were forced to become tenant farmers or even indentured servants once again.

Nathaniel Bacon played on the grievances of these poor whites. Recently arrived in Virginia from England, and related distantly to the governor, Bacon came from an elite background. He became a member of the Governor’s Council and expected to become part of the inner circle. Instead, Berkeley refused to include Bacon in the Indian fur trade that Berkley and his cronies monopolized. Bacon thereupon gathered a group of armed followers who were fed-up with the power and privileges enjoyed by Berkeley and his henchmen. Bacon’s "army" included slaves (who constituted just 5% of the population of the colony) as well as indentured servants, and poor white farmers. Bacon promised freedom to slaves and indentured servants who followed him, and land for them and for small farmers to be taken from the Indians. Bacon and his "army" entered Jamestown and forced the governor and the House of Burgesses to approve his expedition against the frontier Indians. After Bacon departed, Governor Berkeley declared Bacon a rebel and gathered a force to deal with him. Bacon retaliated by attacking Jamestown, burning it to the ground, and forcing Berkley to flee to a ship in the James River. The rebellion only ended with Bacon’s sudden death from dysentery. The rebellion then collapsed and Berkley regained authority, although within the year he had been recalled to England.

In order to prevent future rebellions in which a disgruntled member of the elite might appeal to poor blacks and whites, the gentry-elite took a number of steps that impacted Virginia society. Each step increasingly transformed Virginia from a society with slaves, into a slave society. In order to defuse the anger of poor whites, the assembly restored the right to vote to the landless and lowered taxes. It also made more land available to ordinary white men by opening to white settlement the lands that had been cleared by Bacon’s Indian expeditions. Because of the growing availability of slaves as a result of the slave trade and of the decreased mortality rate in Virginia that made buying slaves a more reasonable economic move, over succeeding decades
planters were able to replace volatile indentured servants with slaves as the main workforce. Slaves were now more profitable than indentured servants, because they served for life and the master held title to the children of the slaves. Finally, the assembly passed laws that both reflected and widened racism in order to separate poor whites and blacks and to ensure that they would form no future alliances. It banned interracial marriage and prohibited slaves from buying their freedom, which many had been able to do because of their skill in farming and in raising livestock. The assembly also prohibited whipping white servants on bare back, but this did not apply to slaves. These laws encouraged racism and hatred of black slaves. The elite emphasized white solidarity against the increasing numbers of non-Christian, alien blacks. Since poor and rich whites were now equal before the law, at least in theory, ordinary whites no longer challenged the economic dominance of the gentry-elite. They prided themselves on sharing the same legal status and skin color as the elite, and began to view blacks as their natural inferiors.

As historian Edmund Morgan points out, Bacon’s rebellion led to a series of measures that granted greater opportunity and freedom to whites at the cost of greater degradation and enslavement of blacks. This intertwining of slavery and freedom – this great American paradox as a result of which slavery made greater freedom possible for whites – would haunt succeeding generations of Americans.

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