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# Johnson, Anthony

(?-1670),

John Howard Smith

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a planter on Virginia's eastern shore, arrived in Virginia in 1621 aboard the *James* along with a handful of other Africans or Afro-Caribbeans listed as “servants.” His place and date of birth are not known, though it is supposed that he was born a free man in Africa. He worked his way out of slavery, became a farmer in Northampton County, and later a slaveholding planter in neighboring Accomack County, Virginia. Between his arrival and 1635, he belonged to Richard Bennett of Warresquioake County, on the south side of the James River, at which time he apparently won his freedom and that of his wife, Mary, who was also a slave of the Bennetts. Anthony and Mary Johnson produced at least four children and were married until Anthony's death.

Known in 1621 simply as “Antonio,” Johnson was listed in a 1625 census as a servant, though whether that meant an indentured servant or a slave remains unclear. While there were African Americans working as indentured servants throughout the English colonies by the mid-seventeenth century, there is no reason to presume that Johnson and his wife were not slaves. Sometime after 1635 the Johnsons acquired their freedom, presumably through self-purchase, and relocated to Northampton County. There Anthony acquired a small farm sometime around 1640, where he became a prosperous breeder of cattle and hogs, which were as vital to the Virginia economy as tobacco. Johnson did so well, in fact, that he was able in 1651 to purchase five headrights (50-acre allotments granted for each indentured servant transported from England) from neighboring planters, which garnered him a modest 250-acre estate on Pungoteague Creek in Accomack County. There he embarked on a career as a tobacco farmer, which was temporarily aborted by a fire that destroyed most of his property in February 1653.

This “unfortunate” event, as the Northampton Court termed it, forced Johnson to seek government relief in the form of a tax waiver, which the county granted, excusing Anthony and Mary from paying taxes on their two daughters for the remainder of “their naturall lives.” A 1645 act of the legislature had explicitly stated “That *all negro men and women*, and al other men from the age of 16 to 60 shall be adjudged tithable,” and it is significant that the Northampton Court made such an exception for the Johnsons. This extraordinary ruling, attributable at least in part to patronage from Bennett and possibly also the Scarboroughs, allowed Johnson to reestablish himself. More evidence of Johnson's rising status through patronage comes from another court case in October 1653 when Johnson and a white neighbor, Lieutenant John Neale, clashed over a matter that “concerned a cove.” The court ordered Captain Samuel Gouldsmith and Robert Parker, members of ambitious and influential Eastern Shore families, to investigate the matter rather than simply finding for Neale, as might have been the case with any other free black farmer in dire straits. They determined that Johnson's recent misfortunes left him vulnerable to harassment and attempted exploitation, and that Neale was trying to take advantage of him.

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Gouldsmith frequently did business with Johnson, and on one occasion in 1654 “a Negro called John Casor” appealed to Goldsmith, claiming that Johnson held him illegally as a slave for the past seven years, when in fact he was an indentured servant (Breen and Innes, 13). Parker took up Casor's cause and sent him to work on his farm, while Johnson conferred with his family, which now included two sons with new families of their own. Johnson initially conceded Casor his freedom and paid appropriate freedom dues owed to a released servant, but changed his mind in 1655, accusing Parker of unlawful interference. Gouldsmith submitted a deposition to the Northampton Court in support of Johnson, and the court indeed ruled in Johnson's favor, compelling Casor's return and Parker to make restitution, including court costs.

Despite the fire that nearly destroyed his original estate, Johnson was able to recoup his losses and establish himself as a well-connected middling planter by 1660. He and his family formed the core of a vibrant, free black planter community in Northampton, which included Anthony Payne and Emmanuel Driggus, whose careers closely resembled Johnson's. Anthony Johnson's son John patented 450 acres of land abutting his father's, and his other son Richard likewise established himself on 100 acres adjoining theirs. In 1665 the entire Johnson clan pulled up stakes and moved to Somerset County, Maryland, along with two wealthy white Eastern Shore planters, Ann Toft and Randall Revell, who claimed the Johnsons as headrights when they purchased their 2,350 acres. The Johnsons' free status was never in question in this unusual transaction, but it is clear that there were pecuniary benefits for all involved. Profits from land transfers and subsequent sales between Anthony Johnson and his sons allowed the latter to become formidable planters in their own rights. Anthony Johnson leased a 300-acre plantation that he named “Tonies Vineyard,” where his wife lived until her death around 1675. His sons built on their initial prosperity and, after their father's death in 1670, passed property on to their sons, the most prominent of whom was John Johnson Jr., who purchased a plantation in Somerset County in 1677 that he named “Angola,” perhaps in memory of his grandfather's homeland.

Anthony Johnson's life is but one thread in an intricate tapestry that constituted race relations in seventeenth-century Chesapeake society. T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes called him the “patriarch on Pungoteague Creek,” and noted that in spite of his enslavement, upon emancipation he fully participated in the local planter culture, sharing his white neighbors' preconceptions about property rights and the legitimacy of slavery (Breen and Innes, 7). He moved easily as a peer within a planter-dominated society that—at a time when the differences in treatment of slaves and servants were narrow, and slavery was poorly defined by colonial law—conformed to no single pattern. The opportunities open to men and women like Anthony and Mary Johnson significantly narrowed after 1670, when race relations hardened as African and African American slaves became the preferred labor force and white planters gradually drove their black counterparts out of business.

## Further Reading

Breen, T. H., and Stephen Innes. “Myne Owne Ground”: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640–1676 (1980).

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