“SERVANT” WAS NOT ALWAYS A SOFTER WORD

THE INVENTION OF RACE-BASED SLAVERY

Black and white laborers in the British colonies started out under the same legal status.

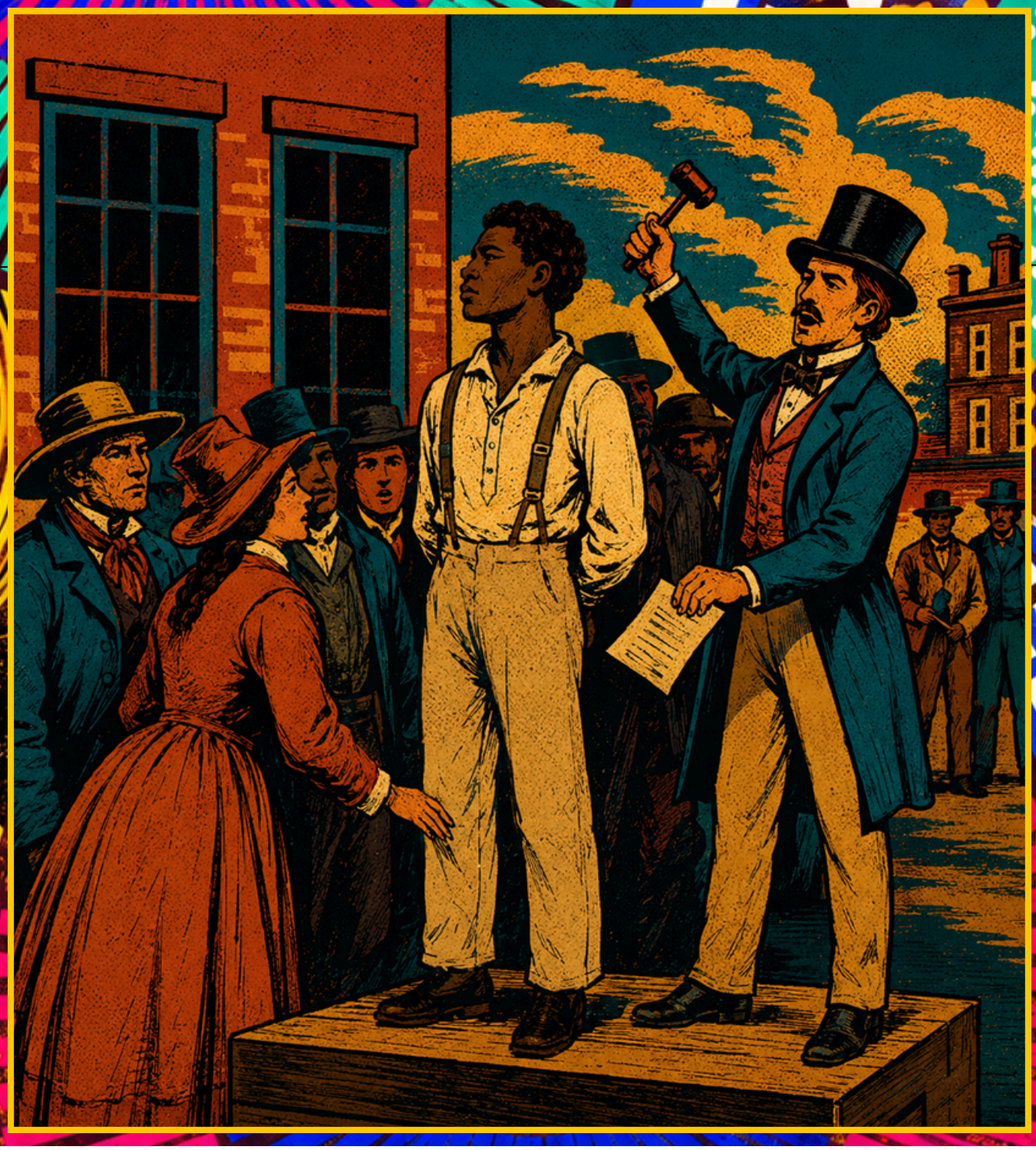
Visual Essay w/Evidence

1



1619–1621 — THEY STARTED AS SERVANTS, NOT SLAVES

Virginia regulated indentured servitude starting in 1619, the same year the first documented Africans arrived. Anthony Johnson arrived enslaved in 1621, earned his freedom, became a landowner, and later won a court case reclaiming a servant of his own.



2

1640 – ONE CASE SHOWED THE SHIFT

Servant John Punch ran away with two white servants. They got four years added to their contracts. Punch was sentenced to serve “for the time of his natural life,” one of the earliest legal records of race-based slavery in the colonies.

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3



1643–1655 – WHITE SERVITUDE HAD LIMITS

Legal historian Bradley Nicholson notes colonial punishments for white servants, secret marriages, unequal terms for Irish servants, were harsh but finite, quantified in years, and reversible by law.



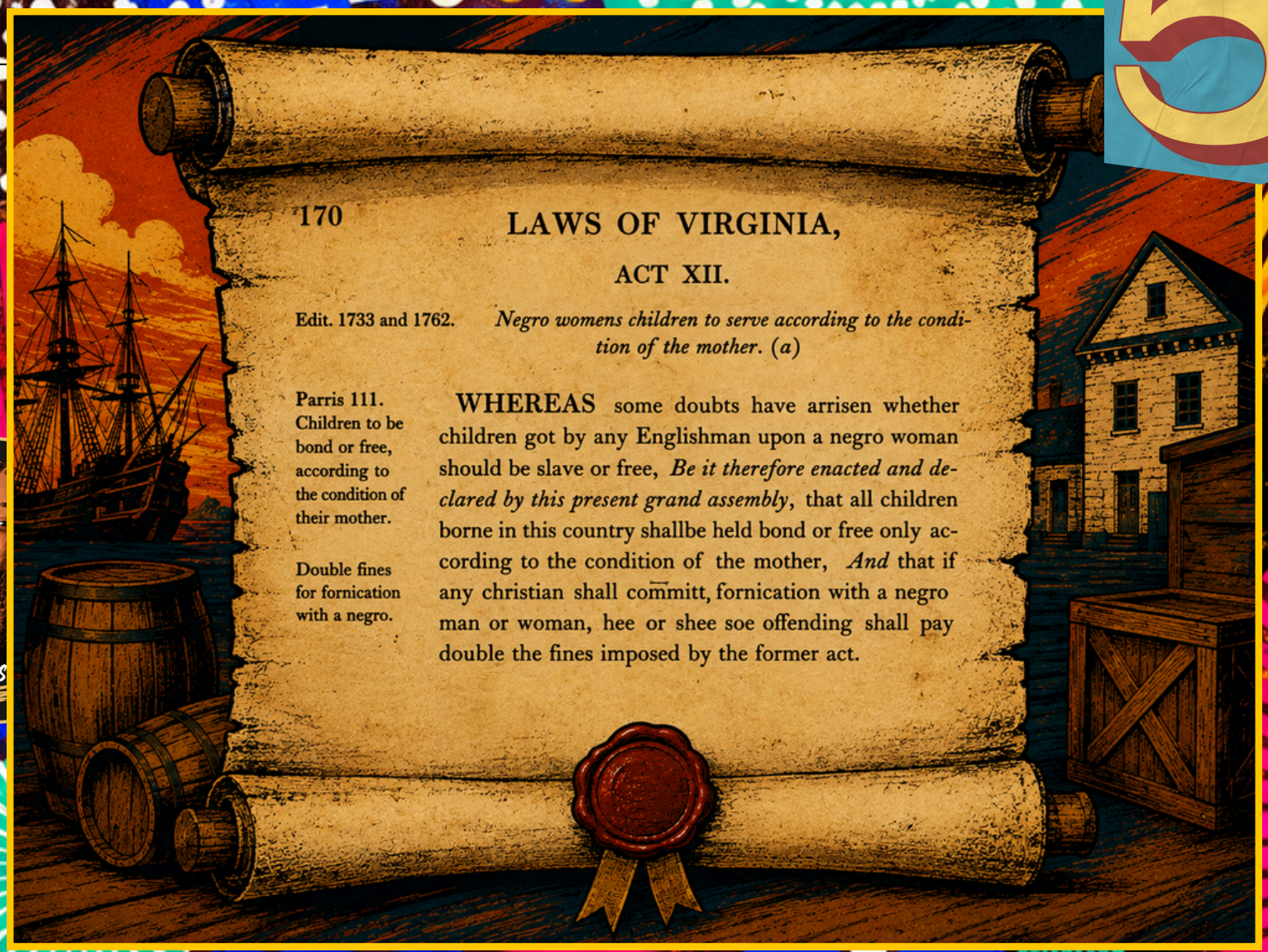
4



1661 – BARBADOS BUILT THE BLUEPRINT

Barbados passed the first comprehensive slave code in the English colonies. Nicholson traces how Jamaica, Antigua, South Carolina, and Georgia all borrowed it in the decades after.

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LAWS OF VIRGINIA,

ACT XII.

Edit. 1733 and 1762.

Negro womens children to serve according to the condition of the mother. (*a*)

Parris 111. Children to be bond or free, according to the condition of their mother.

Double fines for fornication with a negro.

WHEREAS some doubts have arrisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman should be slave or free, *Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly*, that all children borne in this country shallbe held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother, *And* that if any christian shall committ, fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.

5

1662–1667 — THE LAW MADE IT PERMANENT

Virginia tied a child's status to the mother's, making slavery hereditary. When conversion to Christianity threatened the religious justification for bondage, Virginia ruled in 1667 that baptism would no longer change a person's status.



6

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1676 – BACON'S REBELLION

Historian Ira Berlin, interviewed for Slate's History of American Slavery podcast, explains that after Black and white laborers rose up together against Virginia's elite, planters deliberately built racial privilege and hierarchy to prevent that alliance from recurring.

7



1680s – THE MATH STOPPED FAVORING WHITE SERVANTS

Economic historian David Galenson found indentured labor prices jumped nearly 60% in the Chesapeake as enslaved labor hit its cheapest point in decades. Buying outright became cheaper than financing a contract.





8

THE DOOR THAT STAYED OPEN FOR ONE SIDE

Virginia contracts show white servants, a child in 1665, a tradesman in 1755, walked free at term’s end, sometimes with a reference letter. John Punch, the Black servant sentenced in 1640 after running with two white servants, got no such exit. Historians point to his case as the first legal record of lifetime slavery for a Black person in the English colonies, the door closing for good.



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