

The First Blacks at Plymouth

Black history in the continental US had its beginnings in Virginia, yet Plymouth appears to have been first in having blacks as freemen. In 1622, Thomas Weston, a merchant capitalist who had led the Pilgrims' Mayflower financial group, organized a group of adventurers and fortune seekers to create a startup settlement just north of Plymouth.

Juan (sometimes John) Pedro came to Plymouth Colony with this group. "Juan Pedro deserves the distinction of being Plymouth's first black Pilgrim." (Gauquier, Cad Cod Times) Let's look back ...

Early African Slave Trade

In the 15th century, Portugal became the first European nation to take significant part in African slave trading. (College of Charleston) By the 1480s, Portuguese ships were already transporting Africans for use as slaves on the sugar plantations in the Cape Verde and Madeira islands in the eastern Atlantic. (Britannica)

By the 16th century, the Portuguese dominated the early trans-Atlantic slave trade on the African coast. As a result, other European nations first gained access to enslaved Africans through privateering during wars with the Portuguese, rather than through direct trade. When English, Dutch or French privateers captured Portuguese ships during Atlantic maritime conflicts, they often found enslaved Africans on these ships, as well as Atlantic trade goods, and they sent these captives to work in their own colonies. (LDHI, College of Charleston)

When Portuguese, and later their European competitors, found that peaceful commercial relations alone did not generate enough enslaved Africans to fill the growing demands of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they formed military alliances with certain African groups against their enemies. This encouraged more extensive warfare to produce captives for trading. (LDHI, College of Charleston)

The Portuguese developed a trading relationship with the Kingdom of Kongo, which existed from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries in what is now Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Civil War within Kongo during the trans-Atlantic slave trade would lead to many of its subjects becoming captives traded to the Portuguese. (LDHI, College of Charleston)

Angola is a country on the west coast of southern Africa. Like other areas there, portions had been colonized by the Portuguese. The Portuguese established several settlements, forts and trading posts along the coast. Despite Portugal's territorial claims in Angola, its control over much of the country's vast interior was minimal. (Hashaw)

During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, Angola was the leading exporter of slaves. Starting in the early 1500s to the mid-1800s, nearly six million captives were embarked for the Americas from West Central African ports. (Slave Societies)

The Catholic Church has a long history in Angola. Catholic missionaries had been active in Angola an entire century before 1619 and had won thousands of voluntary converts. In 1621, the Portuguese campaigns went deep into Kongo, and thousands were captured at the battle of Mbumbi at the very end of the year. These would all have been Christian, indeed, probably third or fourth generation Christian. (Hashaw)

Angolans Were the First Africans to English America

The first Africans in Virginia in the 17th century came from the Kongo/Angola regions of West Central Africa. They were part of a large system established by the Portuguese in Africa to capture and supply slaves to the Spanish colonies in Central and South America. (Marks)

The Spanish slave frigate *São João Bautista* ('Baptist'), captained by Manuel Mendes da Cunha, left Africa with 350 slaves. At the end of June, one month into the voyage, they 'had many sick aboard, and many had already died.'

Before the frigate crossed the Atlantic and reached the West Indies a few weeks later, more than one hundred Africans on the *Bautista* had died of sickness. And Vera Cruz, her intended destination, was still nearly one thousand miles away.

Fearing the entire shipment would be dead before reaching Mexico, they paused briefly in the Caribbean for medicine and supplies that he paid for with twenty-four 'slave boys he was forced to sell in Jamaica where he had to refresh.' (Hashaw)

Of the original 350 Angolans who crossed on the *Bautista* in the summer of 1619, only 147 would finish the voyage to Vera Cruz in August. However, not all of the slaver's losses were due to sickness.

Leaving Jamaica in early July, the slave ship had entered the Gulf of Mexico between Cuba and the tip of the Yucatan Peninsula when, on July 15, and less than five hundred miles from Vera Cruz, the captain, while gazing at a massive band of low, ominous clouds coming in from Africa, first noticed that the *Bautista* was being stalked.

The *Bautista* was captured in the Gulf of Mexico in the summer of 1619 by two English pirate ships - the *Treasurer* (the same ship that in 1616 had delivered Pocahontas to England) and the *White Lion*.



The 140-ton White Lion, that sailed out of Plymouth, England, and Flushing, in the Netherlands, was captained by a Calvinist minister, thirty-nine-year-old Reverend John Colyn Jope. The White Lion carried Dutch letters of marque (this paperwork allowed Jope, as a civilian, to attack and plunder Spanish ships).

The Bautista was destroyed in that attack before she could reach her intended destination of Vera Cruz, Mexico. Figuring ship capacity, food, water, and the distance to Jamestown, they selected sixty or so of the healthiest Bantu men, women, and children and transferred them to their vessels - about thirty or so for the White Lion and the same number for the Treasurer. (Hashaw)

The first Africans in English North America were those pirated in 1619 by the White Lion and the Treasurer from the Spanish frigate San Juan Bautista in July, and delivered to Jamestown six weeks later at the latter end of August.

John Rolfe confirms their arrival saying, "About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunes arrived at Point-Comfort, the Comandors name Capt Jope, his Pilott for the West Indies one Mr Marmaduke an Englishman. ... He brought not any thing but 20. and odd Negroes, w[hich] the Governo[r] and Cape Merchant bought for victuall[s]." ("Rolfe's reporting the White Lion as a Dutch warship was a clever ruse to transfer blame away from the English for piracy of the slave ship to the Dutch.") (NPS, Historic Jamestowne)



The Angolans arrived in Virginia in 1619 when Jamestown still teetered on the brink and seemed about to disappear like the many doomed Spanish and English colonies before it. Their arrival coincided with the Virginia Company's decision to change its course from seeking treasure to building communities.

The White Lion did not stay long at Point Comfort (Virginia), probably sailing to Jamestown before the arrival of the Treasurer a few days later.

The colony's officials saw the Africans as valuable commodities and their labor as profitable; food supplies were scarce in Virginia between 1618 and 1624, and the Africans from the White Lion were desirable enough that the Governor and Cape Merchant parted with the Company's dwindling stores.

Three or four days later, the Treasurer arrived at Point Comfort with additional enslaved Africans from the San Juan Bautista. The Treasurer did not stay long, departing quickly to avoid an ensuing scandal and potential seizure. Before departing, "two or three negroes they caste at Virginia," and the remaining 25-27 Africans were taken to Bermuda, where a friendly governor allowed the Treasurer to trade. (Austin, Hampton History Museum)

Bermuda Governor Butler was aware of the piracy scandal brewing over the Bautista slaver, and the need to be discreet.

Juan Pedro was one of the Bautista slaves that landed in Bermuda. Born in Angola in 1593, Juan Pedro, the baptized son of Bantu Christians, was taken prisoner of war at the age of twenty-five when the Imbangala forces under Governor Vasconcelos overran the Ndongo army of soba Kaita ka Balanga in 1619.



Butler assigned Juan Pedro and the two dozen or so other Treasurer Africans to work on both his and Lord Rich's plantations at Bermuda. Butler also seized an additional fourteen Africans that Kendall had recently acquired from the White Lion, claiming that Kendall had "stolen" them. These he set to work on the company's general lands.

Over the next four years, a half dozen of these Africans were sent back to Jamestown. Names of Bautista Africans first appear in the 1625 Jamestown census, and from the faceless anonymity of Rolfe's 1619 general description of "Negroes" emerge John Pedro, Antonio and Maria Johnson, and Antonio and Isabell Tucker and their young child, William, along with John Graweere, Margaret Cornish, and others. (Hashaw)

Bermuda's Governor Butler acknowledged he had three Africans in his possession (Juan Pedro, Antonio (Anthony) Johnson and Maria (Mary Johnson). In 1621, Governor Butler put all three of them aboard the James, and they sailed to the port of Bristol to testify in cases related to the piracy of the Bautista – through that, the Treasurer was implicated.

John Pedro, also known as Juan Pedro, returned to Virginia in 1623 on the Swan with one of the Earl of Warwick's allies, Francis West, and resided at West's plantation. (1619 Genealogy)

Having avenged himself against the Virginia Company for the African Bautista affair and the confiscation of the corsair Treasurer, Lord Rich, in support of the settlements being built on his lands, commissioned Captain Thomas Jones to take the Discovery to New England to fish and trade with Plymouth and Weston's new colony. (Hashaw)

Pedro lived in Plymouth, and during his time there, he marched with Myles Standish to explore Massachusetts. Onboard the Sparrow, he fished along the New England coast. He met the famous Squanto. He was there during Plymouth's own terrible 'starving time' and shared hardships with the Pilgrims. He joined the Pilgrims in cutting trees for pales (pickets) to ring the tiny Plymouth settlement in defense against hostile attack. (Hashaw)

He would remain in Plymouth for about a year and a half. But the New England colony was not to be his home. Given the Pilgrims' evangelistic urge, there is little reason to believe that the Catholic Juan Pedro in Plymouth was not once more targeted for Protestant conversion. Once again, he refused.

In 1623, Juan Pedro went on to the colony of Jamestown. The 1625 Jamestown census identified 'John Pedro, a Neger aged 30' in the muster of Captain Francis West at his plantation in Elizabeth City on the Hampton River but revealed little else than that he had arrived two years earlier on the Swan. Whether Juan Pedro was regarded as a temporary or permanent servant is not clear, since the unfinished contracts of indentured servants could be inherited, .bought, traded, and, turned over for debt. (Hashaw)

It would be decades before Jamestown forbade Africans from carrying guns. John Pedro, listed in West's muster, served as a soldier at Fort Algernon. Since West, as both a Virginia captain and the New England admiral, seems to have paid more attention to military and civic duties than to raising tobacco, it is also probable that Pedro accompanied him on various military expeditions both at sea and on land.

Whether Juan Pedro was regarded as a slave, an indentured servant, or a professional soldier by Captain West, he was a free man by the early 1650s when he was clearing land for his own plantation and purchasing servants, white and black, to extend his holdings through headrights. Land records show him progressing from Isle of Wight County to adjoining Surry County and to Lancaster County as newer shires were carved from older counties.

Juan Pedro's patent for land in the Lancaster, later Middlesex, area of Virginia places him on the Dragon Run Swamp just before he mysteriously disappeared from colonial records in 1653. Before this time he had reunited with fellow Angolans who had crossed the Atlantic with him on the Bautista, including John Graweere in Surry County, and Anthony and Mary Johnson at Bennett's Welcome, which was next door to West's plantation.

He also became reacquainted with Antonio and Isabel, living with their young son, William, at Captain William Tucker's farm at Elizabeth City. They were all Angolan Christians like himself.

In 1648, there were three hundred Africans in Jamestown among the fifteen thousand European settlers; and by then the first malungu communities of Angolan Christian free men, many of whom had arrived via the Black Mayflower, were beginning to pop up in half a dozen places in Tidewater Virginia.

But in addition to his community, Juan Pedro had another loyalty – to his faith. His business dealings as a freeman show him involved with an emigrant from the English country gentry named William Eltonhead who was a Catholic and a friend of Lord Calvert, Baron of Baltimore.

The Eltonheads had an enslaved Angolan man named Francisco, who would later become the freedman Francis Payne. By this time Juan Pedro had married a woman (not yet identified), and they had at least one child, Matthew, who married into the Mayo family and from whom many descendants survive in Virginia to this day, though the Pedro surname has now been anglicized in a variety of forms.

It should be noted that Juan Pedro, John Graweere, Francis Payne, and Anthony and Mary Johnson became the earliest, freed blacks in Jamestown and, with other Angolans then living in Dutch New York, also the earliest free black property owners in all of North America. (Hashaw)

Slavery was not the inevitable fate of all the Africans who arrived in Virginia in the 17th century. By the middle of the century about a third of all Africans in the colony were free persons.

Most had been either slaves or indentured servants at some time in their lives, although a few had come as free persons or had been born there to free parents. Until the late 17th century there were no restrictions on free Africans in Virginia, and they lived similar lives to those of their English neighbors. (Marks)

Lots here is copied and pasted from Tim Hashaw, *The Birth of Black America: The First African Americans and the Pursuit of Freedom at Jamestown*; Hampton History Museum, Marks; McCarthy; NPS, *Historic Jamestowne*

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young