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## The First Africans in Virginia

*Submitted by Tom Davidson, Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation*

A recently discovered historical document indicates that the African population of Virginia during the Virginia Company period (1607-1624) was larger and more widely dispersed geographically than previously had been thought. The first Africans known to have arrived in Virginia came in August or September, 1619, and numbered "20 and odd". They were purchased by George Yeardley and Abraham Piersey, who both lived in Jamestown, then Virginia's capital. However, a new group of Virginia Company records discovered by Dr. David Ransome contains an official muster or census of the Virginia colony for March, 1619/1620. This document reads in part:

Others not Christians in the service of the English

Indians in the service of several planters 4  
Negroes in the service of several planters 32  
negro men 15  
negro women 17

*taken from a microfilm copy of the Ferrar papers compiled by David Ransome (Item 159, Ferrar Papers, Magdalene College, Cambridge, Microfilm Academic Publishers)*

The muster shows that in March, 1620, only seven months after the "first" Africans arrived, Africans constituted 3.3 percent of all non-Indians in Virginia and that they were living at multiple locations in the colony. Since the total number of late Company period sites in Virginia is not very large, the odds of encountering traces of these early Africans during archaeological field work are high enough to merit some serious attention. Archaeologists should keep the possibility of an African presence in mind whenever they encounter an early seventeenth-century site in Virginia.