SLAVERY was well-established in the Delaware River Valley during the eighteenth century. White residents grew accustomed to a black presence and the many exterior signs that theirs was a slave society. Newspapers, for example, published frequent notices of runaway slaves. An announcement in July, 1759, was typical: A Negro man, straight limbed and about six feet tall, had run away from his master in Bucks County. This notice, however, went on to report that the slave had “a Scar in each Temple, a Hole in each Ear, and Scars cut on each Arm.” He spoke only “broken English” and understood the “making of Corn Baskets.” This slave was probably a recent arrival in Pennsylvania, one of hundreds of Africans imported into the Delaware region during the last years of the colonial era. Just a few weeks before, James Simmons, a Philadelphia merchant who conducted business at a store in Tun Alley, had available for sale a group of about fifty Africans.

Approximately 1243 slaves entered the Delaware River in the seven-year period 1759–65. Nearly half of these arrived in 1762, the summit of the Pennsylvania slave trade. Fully three quarters of the slave influx was made up of blacks acquired in Africa and brought directly to the Philadelphia area. Local residents had to absorb into the social fabric of the region a sizable non-Western and non-Westernized population. The African immigrants, who lacked previous contact with Europeans, faced a major challenge of acculturation.

Prior to the late 1750s slaves entering Pennsylvania came via the West Indies and South Carolina. They were shipped north on consignment or carried on locally-owned vessels that brought sugar and other island produce home for sale. Demand for black labor was limited and
the small groups of slaves proved adequate to local needs. The blacks who made up these small lots or parcels were nearly always seasoned. If not born in the islands or Carolina, they had resided there long enough to become creolized. They spoke European languages—usually English—and had learned the ways of their masters. Often they possessed special training and skills that were valued in the Philadelphia market. Employers of slave labor were familiar with a slave trade that had operated in this way since the late seventeenth century.

Even so, slaves obtained in Africa had occasionally been brought to the Delaware River region. As early as 1684 a Bristol firm imported 150 Africans, who evidently were eagerly purchased by the new residents of Philadelphia. Apart from the ready sale, however, nothing is known about relations between the two races or the social tensions that may have developed. Philadelphia counted about 2000 inhabitants in 1684, so that the Africans represented a notable addition to the population. During the 1730s Robert Ellis, a Philadelphia merchant who conducted an extensive coastwise and West Indian trade, imported several small cargoes of Africans from South Carolina. These slaves were parts of much larger shipments brought into Charleston by the firms of Clelland and Wallace, Joseph Wragg and Co., and Benjamin Savage, all important slave trading organizations. A few years later Charles Willing imported a group of slaves from Guinea via Barbados.

Despite an occasional shipment of Africans, the slave trade in the Delaware region retained its essential characteristics until the late 1750s. Despatched from the plantation colonies to the south, the slaves were well-seasoned and suited to the complex Delaware economy. But developments influencing the region's labor supply occurred in the 1750s, leading to a sudden and dramatic shift in the source of that supply.

White servants had provided the chief labor component in Pennsylvania's rapid and sustained economic expansion. In fact, the transatlantic servant trade centered in the Delaware area, where vessels disgorged cargoes containing as many as six hundred servants. Henry Melchior Muehlenberg reported that in the autumn of 1749 twenty-five vessels carrying 7,049 passengers arrived at Philadelphia. In 1752 a local paper announced that "The Ship Phenix, Captain Spurrier, is arriv'd here from Holland with Palatines. This makes the seventeenth Dutch Vessel this Fall, and several more are yet expected." For several reasons slave labor was deemed less desirable than servant labor. But the advantages of servant labor as perceived by employers broke down in the 1750s when war came to the Delaware area. What
had been a dependable servant supply evaporated. The disruption derived not from problems encountered on Atlantic shipping lanes, but from difficulties on land. War and the activities of the King's recruiting officers precipitated the shift from servant to slave labor.

Enlistment of white servants in the imperial armies was an old problem that often had aggravated labor needs in Pennsylvania. During Queen Anne's War Philadelphians complained of the loss of servants who absconded to enlist in West Jersey. Similar alarms were expressed after war with Spain began in 1739 and servants were enrolled in the king's armies. Responding to public protests, the Assembly declared that "if the Property of the Master is so precarious, as to depend on the Will of his Servant, and the Pleasure of an Officer, it cannot but be expected there will be fewer Purchasers for the future, and that Trade consequently much discouraged." Nearly 300 Pennsylvania servants had enlisted by the end of 1740. Many masters lost their servants' labor permanently. As Israel Pemberton observed, servants "were discharged and their masters Not having any Notice of it made their Escape to their great damage and Loss." The raid on servant labor in the early 1740s led to a temporary expansion of the slave trade, as purchasers turned to a more reliable labor source.

The immediate cause of increased slave importations in the late 1750s was the military employment of servants on a grander scale than ever before. More than 2700 Pennsylvanians joined the king's forces in 1758 alone, and among them were hundreds of servants. William Cox put the issue in personal terms when he remarked that he was considering buying a slave, since "During these troublesome times have not been able to keep a Servant & have been without a Miller near 6 mos." As enlistment of servants became more widespread, relief was sought through the Assembly. There were far too many Pennsylvanians, a group of petitioners declared, "whose Subsistence depended, in a great Measure, on the Labour of the said Servants...." In a message to the governor, the Assembly concluded that employers would be forced to turn to slave labor:

... if ... a bought Servant ... may at any Time be taken away from his Master at the Pleasure of a Recruiting Officer, perhaps when most wanted, in the Midst of Harvest or of Seed-time, or in any other Hurry of Business, when another cannot be provided to supply his Place, the Purchase, and of course the Importation, of Servants will be discouraged, and the People driven to the Necessity of providing themselves with Negro slaves, as the Property in them and their Service seems at present more secure."
Delaware area merchants were prepared to meet the demand for labor by importing slaves. The size of the labor market suggested the desirability of a direct trade with Africa, even though mercantile firms lacked any prior experience with that continent. Some time elapsed before appropriate connections could be established, vessels outfitted, and financial and other arrangements made for selling Africans in the Delaware region.

The black population, which had grown over time, was almost entirely an Afro-American population by the 1750s. The importation of hundreds of Africans meant the injection of an alien group into the area. Deep cultural disparities could be expected to provoke social tensions. On the other hand, the new immigrants came from no single location in West Africa and did not share a common background or culture. Eight of the fourteen African cargoes that arrived between 1759 and 1766 were listed as entering from either “Africa” or “Guinea”; the remainder were acquired in the Gambia and Gold Coast areas. Despite diverse backgrounds, the Africans shared a common status as black outlanders in a new and strange environment. Still, whatever friendships and social bonds had been forged on board ship during the middle passage, the ability to sustain them was reduced by the character of the slave trade and patterns of slave ownership in the Delaware area.

A plantation economy turning on staple crop production failed to develop north of Chesapeake Bay. Laborers, including slaves, were used in all segments of the complex Delaware economy—in agriculture, manufacturing and shipping. Few employers had a work force exceeding five or six laborers, though in some industries, such as the iron works, this was not unusual. Most slave owners held no more than three slaves. On farms it was common to employ a slave family, a husband and wife and one or two children. Given the pattern of slave ownership, African laborers tended to be sold individually or in small lots. In order to dispose of large slave cargoes, traders were forced to display their merchandise over a wide area. Merchants who dealt in Africans operated in a market that encompassed the entire Delaware region, including Pennsylvania, West Jersey and the Lower Counties.

Well over half of the Africans sold in the Delaware area were handled by Willing and Morris, Garrett and George Meade, and Thomas Riche. Riche, the largest single trader, plunged into the African trade in the 1760s. He sent Guineamen to West Africa on his own account; handled slaves sent to the Delaware on consignment; engaged in the traffic in other mainland colonies and the West Indies; and through an ambitious contractual arrangement with the French government supplied slaves for Cayenne in French Guiana.
Riche entered the local slave market during the summer of 1760. The next year, with partners Daniel Rundle and David Franks, he imported 100 slaves on the schooner *Hannah* "directly from the Coast of Guiney." Aware of the seasonal demand for slaves, Riche grew uneasy as the summer progressed and *Hannah* did not come to port. "The negros is not yet arived," he reported on July 23, "I wish they was." When the vessel came in one week later, about twenty of the slaves were sent to Trenton in West Jersey to be sold by Samuel Tucker. Handbills announcing the sale of the Africans had been prepared and Tucker was given copies for distribution around Trenton. He sold about one slave per day. On August 18 Riche wrote that "Mr Rudel [Rundle] acquaint mee you had Sold the most of the Negros, on which we Furnish you with a fresh parsell & make No doubt of your make good sales." Africans handled by Riche continued to be dispersed throughout the Delaware region. In August 1762 Riche and Tucker together purchased a cargo of Guinea slaves brought to Philadelphia by David Franks and William Plumsted. The slaves were distributed along the Delaware River, where demand was high and sales brisk. "This will advise you," Riche informed Tucker, "of my disposing of 24 of the Negroes to a good advantage I believe if I had 10 More Could have sold them well the proffits Will be near 400 pounds—and no Expense & the Cash Soon." Riche soon had a further supply of Africans, a "few fine slaves" who reached Philadelphia in September. By then, however, the season had ended. Despite the attention of both men, it was no easy matter locating buyers. Eventually the unsold slaves were sent farther south. Dealers in South Carolina received a man and two women, while a wench and boy were transported to New Bern, North Carolina.

Increasingly cognizant of the seasonal nature of the Delaware slave trade and the related problem of adjustment faced by Africans, Riche was distressed when he learned in October 1763 that the schooner *Africa* had entered the bay from the African coast with about 100 slaves. The schooner's owners, a New York firm, had consigned the slaves to Riche. Sickness struck the vessel on the middle passage and thirty-three slaves—men, women, boys and girls—died. Prospects seemed dim when Riche wrote his New York friends:

> I Shall Sett off direckly for Willmington where I have orderd the Vessell & I Shall Cloath them, as the Season is far advanced and the flux rages much. I Shall take them ashoar & recover them a littel & then Shall dispose of them... had you been 5 or 6 weeks Sooner you[r] Slaves would Sold for half as much more—than they will now fetch. Capt. More writes they die fast.
After traveling to Wilmington and viewing the Africans, Riche concluded that they were "in bad order." Five had died since their landing "& now Ten at Lodgings under the dockr. Ceare." Riche blamed the slow sales on the weather. It is "so Cold," he wrote, "we Cannot move them about the Country for Sales." Nevertheless, he was about a short while later to report some progress:

Since my last we have lost two more slaves, and many of them so Low not able to Stand & Cold weather Coming on fast. We Concluded to dispose of them at Vendue accordingly advertised at Wilmington Fare on the 4 Inst. whare was Two Thousand Peopel & we Finnishd the whole much better than we Expected . . . I due assure you we have takeing all the Pains men Could due Carreeing them about to the Fares.  

Buyers received long term credit and many later complained that the slaves died soon after purchase. Probably these buyers did not pay the full purchase price; it may be that they refused any payment at all.  

Even though he regarded the Africans sold in 1763 as a burden, Riche noted the next spring that Philadelphia had five sail of Guineamen out, two of which were his own. They reached the Delaware in August carrying a total of about 170 slaves. Apprehensive about disposing of so many slaves, Riche informed his correspondents, some as distant as the West Indies, that he could "serve you with Slaves." As it turned out, most of the Africans were sold in and around Philadelphia, where "the price was great for them."  

Convinced that Negroes "Should be here in Augst. or the Sales is injured on Accot. of the Season Comeing on Coald," Riche was upset when 100 slaves arrived from the Guinea Coast in mid-September, 1764. Landed in Jersey, opposite Philadelphia, the cargo of men, women, boys and girls was offered "for cash or short credit." The sales, conducted "from 10 to 1 o'clock and from 2 til 5 in the afternoon," were slow and eventually many of the slaves were shipped to southern provinces. Eight men, three boys, four women and three girls were sent by Riche to North Carolina.  

Riche abandoned the Philadelphia slave trade in 1765, when he turned his attention to an enterprise of international dimensions supplying French Guiana with 1000 slaves. Selling slaves in the Delaware region proved a precarious business. The market, fragile and easily glutted, was highly seasonal and required that the slaves be moved about for inspection by prospective buyers. Africans sold by Thomas Riche underwent experiences that were by no means unique. Others encountered many of the same difficulties
induced by weather and climate, and were marketed in the same way as the slaves sold by Riche. The 170 Gold Coast slaves imported in 1762 by Willing and Morris also suffered from illness that inhibited sales. Landed first at Wilmington, the unsold slaves were later moved to Cooper’s Ferry, opposite Philadelphia in West Jersey. But not all of the Africans, even a month after reaching the market, could travel. “Fourteen Slaves of the said Cargo,” the vendors announced, “[are] left at Wilmington, under the Care of Doctor John M’Kinley, who will sell them off, as they recover their Healths.” A shipload of seventy Gold Coast slaves sold by Willing and Morris three years later arrived in better condition, but like the previous arrivals they were distributed throughout the Delaware region.32

How dispersal worked in practice is suggested by the sale of a group of Gambia slaves brought to the Delaware in 1762. Arriving on May 22 aboard the schooner Sally, the thirty-one men, twenty-six women, four boys and fourteen girls were brought up to Wilmington. The Philadelphians who shared in this adventure acquired provisions, including a keg of rum, and provided clothing and shoes for the slaves. A month went by before the sales were completed, and in the meantime several of the slaves managed to escape, though they were pursued and retrieved. The surviving ledger sheets record the sales of twenty-five of the Gambias. Fifteen different buyers acquired the slaves. Thomas Lowry, the largest single purchaser, gave £205 for five women. Ten slaves were purchased singly. Samuel Hunt was the sole purchaser of a man and woman. Whatever friendships the Gambias had made on the middle passage and prior to sale ended when the buyers departed with their purchases. Certainly, too, little opportunity existed for living with a partner of the opposite sex.33

The Africans entering the Delaware were not random cargoes. They were sorted specifically for the local market, with the region’s labor requirements firmly in mind. Thus, the seventy Gold Coast slaves imported by Willing and Morris in 1765 comprised “various Ages, and both Sexes.”34 While some American markets sought prime field hands, mostly adult males capable of performing demanding agricultural tasks, the Delaware region absorbed as many females as males and readily accepted boys and girls ranging in age from twelve to sixteen. Such cargoes reflected the preferences of Delaware residents.

Because buyers purchased female slaves as well as males, a nearly balanced sex ratio obtained among new African immigrants. This fact had meaning for the Africans, for it enhanced the possibility of African cultural survivals through opportunities for marriage, creation of
families, and arrangements for child rearing. In plantation societies where individual planters employed large labor gangs and authentic slave communities evolved, Africans often had optimum conditions for salvaging some of their African heritage. In Pennsylvania and the Delaware area, however, the advantages conferred by nearly equal imports of males and females were vitiated by the wide distribution of the slaves. Africans seldom became members of an African, or even Afro-American, community. Their homes were in the midst of white settlements, surrounded not by blacks but by whites. In such settings it was hardly a case of continuing their former ways. Africans were called on to begin the process of accommodating to the customs and values of white society. Their physical and emotional survival depended upon their ability to adjust to particular local conditions.

Africans had few opportunities to engage in collective activities, including organized forms of resistance to slavery. White colonists had never been troubled by serious rumor of black insurrectionary activity, much less actual outbursts of resistance to bondage. Nevertheless, whites were not oblivious to the dangers posed by a servile population, and from time to time they had expressed concern about slave behavior. Pennsylvania leaders in 1693, for example, noted the "disorders of negroes" and commented on "the tumultuous gatherings of the negroes in the towns of Philadelphia, on the first days of the week." No similar expressions of concern accompanied the entry of Africans after 1759; the new arrivals were not perceived as posing a challenge to the existing order. Unable to mount any organized efforts of resistance, Africans responded to their unfamiliar surroundings as individuals.

Living among whites, often as members of white households, Africans were expected to develop a language facility within a few years. A fifteen-year old Guinea girl employed as a family servant mastered English in about a year, but her case appears unusual. More typical was a middle-aged man who after four years residence could speak "tolerable English for the Time." Another man who had lived three years along the Delaware was said to speak "very broken English." A master attempting in 1762 to recapture a runaway Guinea man who came to the Delaware in 1759 reported that he "yet speaks but poor English." While the evidence is scanty, it is clear that Africans often were unable to communicate with whites for a considerable period of time, thus adding to the confusion and uncertainty of their situation. A "very black" man who had "two holes through his Nose, and two through his Ears" resided in Berks County and could speak "neither English nor Dutch." White colonists usually had little difficulty
recognizing African slaves, but the inability of a slave to speak a European language was itself sufficient evidence to infer new Negro status.

Unable to continue associations with fellow Africans, the new immigrants were forced to seek fellowship and human contacts among established members of their new communities. Legal and social codes limited the range of acceptable behavior, though laws and mores could be flouted. A young male brought from Guinea and employed by Benjamin Jackson and Company in the Northern Liberties managed a series of liaisons with white women. On more than one occasion he fled in company with a white woman, soon developing a predictable pattern. When he escaped in the summer of 1763 his owners speculated that “Tis supposed he is harboured by some base White Woman, as he has contracted Intimacies with several of that Sort lately.”

There is, unfortunately, almost no information on how new Africans were received by the Afro-American population. Bondage and inferior status bound the two groups together. Afro-Americans may have found Africans, with their scarified bodies and filed teeth, repugnant. Then, too, a language barrier separated the two groups. Still, at least among free blacks, the most acculturated segment of the Afro-American population, the tendency seems to have been to lend support to the Africans. Free blacks gravitated toward Philadelphia, where job prospects and an urban society offered attractions. Africans who ran away and successfully avoided recapture were often believed to be protected by Philadelphia free blacks. Seeking to recover Negro Peter, his master surmised that “he is harboured by some free Negroes about this City.” The owner of an African woman missing from her home in Chester County concluded that the slave was cared for “by some of the free Negroes in or near Philadelphia or Germantown.”

Africans who ran away had few resources on which to rely. Unfamiliar with the countryside, theirs was a thrust into the unknown. As outlanders, Africans carried with them many telltale signs of their origins and status. The “Negro wench” Phebe remained at large ten weeks after fleeing her master on August 1, 1763. She spoke “but bad English,” her owner reported, and had “three or four large Negro Scars up and down her Forehead.” But Phebe was “an arch cunning Wench.” Thus, she “is apt to wear a Handkerchief round her Head, to hide” her facial scars. She glossed over her inability to speak English by talking fast. Despite Phebe’s handicaps, her master anticipated that she would change her name and apparel and attempt to “pass for a free Negro.”
Phebe sought to compensate for her lack of assimilation and to render obscure her African origins. In most cases, Africans may have tried to shed the obvious indications of their African heritage. But this was not always true. John Hamer's African man ran away from his home in New Providence Township in Philadelphia County. Although he had been given the name of Jupiter, Hamer thought it likely that "he may call himself by his Negroe Name, which is Moeyon, or Gunree." Most Africans settled quietly and as best they could into their new role as slave laborers. Neither aggressively belligerent nor totally surrendering, they soon learned the configurations of the slave system. With experience, they located the soft spots in the institutional structure and appropriated physical and psychological space. Riche was forced in 1767 to deal with an African who had been hired out but was unable to agree with his employer on the terms of his labor. A nineteenth-century Philadelphian recalled from her childhood days before the Revolution an African domestic, Daddy Caesar, in her grandfather's house. Daddy Caesar's dialect "was as much African as English," and he often entertained family members by singing African songs.

In the end, while they offered labor and useful skills, the African immigrants who came to the Delaware between 1759 and 1766 left few traces of their African heritage. Their numbers were too few, their contacts with kinsmen too limited.

NOTES

1. Pennsylvania Gazette, July 5, 1759.
2. Ibid., May 24, June 21, 1759.
4. See the Pennsylvania Gazette, Dec. 29, 1757, for a Negro man about eighteen years of age, imported from Montserrat, who could "talk pretty good English, and is fit for Town or Country Business."


13. "A Return of the Number of Men raised by the Colonies in North America for the Service of the year 1758, under the immediate Command of Major General Abercrombie," Thomas Penn Correspondence . . . Richard Penn with James Hamilton, 1747-1771, p. 597, American Philosophical Society; Orders of Commissioners, Servants Time, Norris' of Fairhill Manuscripts, HSP.


16. Ibid., V, 4187.


20. Riche to Mr. Kortright, Sept. 1, 1760, Thomas Riche Letter Book, I (1750-64), HSP.


22. Riche to Tucker, Aug. 16, 25, 1762, ibid.

23. Riche to Tucker, Sept. 14, Oct. 18, 1762, Riche to Shirley and Martin, Nov. 10, 1762, ibid.; Bills of Lading, 1716-1772, HSP.


25. Riche to Gampirt, Heyman, Hill, and Jacob Miller, Oct. 21, 1763, ibid.


27. Riche to Jacob Miller, n.d. (Feb. 1764), ibid.


29. Riche to Gampirt and Heyman, Apr. 23, 1764, ibid.; Pennsylvania Journal, Spec. 20, 1764.

30. Riche to Samuel Cornell, Oct. 11, 1764, Thomas Riche Letter Book, II (1764-71); Bills of Lading, 1716-1772.


