

# Primary Source:

Virginia Governor's Council reply to the petition of Matthew Ashby, November 27, 1769

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## How did enslaved and free Blacks resist the injustice of slavery during the colonial era?

- I can articulate how slavery was at odds with the principle of justice.
- I can explain how enslaved men and women resisted the institution of slavery.
- I can create an argument supported by evidence from primary sources.
- I can succinctly summarize the main ideas of historic texts.

### Essential Vocabulary

<b>Petition</b>	A formal written request, typically to a government or government official
<b>Indentured servants</b>	Men and women who signed a contract or who are indentured to work for a certain number of years in return for transportation to the American colonies and food, clothing, and shelter once they arrived. After completion of their contract, they received their freedom.
<b>Codify</b>	To officially compile into written law what must be followed.
<b>Mulatto</b>	A person of mixed African and European descent.
<b>One hundred and fifty pounds</b>	The pound was a unit of British money. One pound equaled 20 shillings or 240 pence. £150 was a very large sum of money for 1769 and is roughly equivalent to \$36,000 in 2022. <a href="#">Click here</a> to find out how much this would equal in today's currency.
<b>Manumit</b>	To release legally from slavery.

## Building Context

In 1619, when the first Africans were sold in the colony of Virginia, they were slaves who were unfree and worked alongside white **indentured servants**. Some of the slaves, however, were freed. Slavery became **codified** or written into law over the next few decades. By 1662, the colony of Virginia passed a hereditary slave law declaring the child of an enslaved mother, regardless of the status of the father, would inherit the enslaved status of his/her mother. This law (and others over the next 40 years) created a hereditary, race-based system of coerced or forced labor in the colony: black skin color became equated with enslavement and inferiority. Matthew Ashby was born to a white mother, an indentured servant named Mary Ashby, and an unknown man of African descent. As a **mulatto** child born to a white mother, Matthew Ashby was required by law to serve as an indentured servant until the age of thirty-one. His mother was also required to pay a fine of 15 pounds to the parish church. After being indentured for 30 years, Matthew Ashby worked in Williamsburg, Virginia, as a free man.

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Pg. 9: <https://resourcelibrary.history.org/sites/default/files/BiographyBags.pdf> The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, [www.history.org](http://www.history.org)

On the **Petition** of Matthew Ashby, a free **Mulatto** setting forth that he had two Children by his present wife Ann Ashby, while she was a Slave to Samuel Spurr, that he brought her and the two Children of the said Spurr for **one hundred and fifty pounds**, that he now has two children alive by her John and Mary, that she has been a faithful and diligent Wife ever since marriage, and praying that he may be permitted to set her and his Children free; the Board being satisfied therein, were of opinion, that the said Ann, John and Mary were deserving of their freedom, and it was order'd that the said Matthew Ashby have leave to **manumit** and set them free.

Notes

## Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. What do you know about the family of Matthew Ashby, based on their petition?

2. What was Matthew Ashby's status according to the law? What does this reveal about the law?

3. Why were Ann and Matthew Ashby's children enslaved?

4. Matthew Ashby spent one hundred and fifty pounds to buy his family. What does this reveal about him?

5. What did Matthew Ashby have to do to free his family? Does anything surprise you about this process?

6. Based on the evidence in this source, were the laws that governed Matthew Ashby and his family just? Explain.

7. How did Matthew Ashby resist the system of enslavement?

8. Shrink the text: In one sentence, write what this source reveals about slavery in colonial Virginia.