

John Punch

Essay by Mason Mooneyham

John Punch is an interesting name, but is the guy just as interesting? In this essay, I'll explain John Punch's life and how he relates to today.

John Punch was an indentured servant in Virginia in ~1635 and in 1640 Punch attempted to escape to Maryland with two other servants of Gwyn, a wealthy landowner and member of the House of Burgesses. Punch and the two European servants were caught and returned to Virginia. On 9 July, the Virginia Governor's Council, the colony's highest court, sentenced both Europeans to have their servitude extended by another four years each, essentially doubling their time. However, they sentenced Punch to "serve his said master or his assigns for the time of his natural Life here or elsewhere." In addition, the council gave the three men thirty lashes each. Historians consider John Punch the "first official slave in the English colonies," and his case as the "first legal sanctioning of lifelong slavery in the Chesapeake."

Genealogical research indicates that some time in the 1630s, Punch married a white woman, likely also an indentured servant. By 1637 he had fathered a son called John Bunch (labelled by genealogists as "John Bunch I"). While researchers cannot definitively prove that Punch was the father of Bunch, he is the only known African man of that time and place who is a possible progenitor. Punch and his wife are known as the first black and white couple in the colonies who left traceable descendants. It remains possible that the father of Bunch was another African, of whom there is no record, but the similarity of the names would still need to be explained.

According to ancestry.com, John Punch was the great x12 grandfather of President Barack Obama on his mother's side, on the basis of historic and genealogical research and Y-DNA analysis. Punch's descendants were known by the Bunch or Bunche surname, and nobody can really figure out why or how the surname was changed. Punch is also believed to be one of the paternal ancestors of Ralph Bunche, the first African American to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

In conclusion, John Punch was important to our society today, as Barack Obama changed our society a good bit, and a first for anything usually changes how people think about their society anyway.

*This information was compiled and edited from the following site(s): Wikipedia*