

FUR TRADERS AND FIELD HANDS

Blacks in Manorial Maryland

1634 - 1644

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Mathias de Sousa

Fullwood may have been a Virginian, but Mathias de Sousa was a Marylander, and a Marylander whose career shared many of the ups and downs of his white contemporaries.

De Sousa was a charter member of the Maryland experiment. In 1634, he sailed into the Potomac on the Ark, one of nine servants brought to Maryland by the Jesuit missionaries, Father Andrew White and John Althem^(a). From de Sousa's name, we can safely surmise that he was Portuguese^(b), but how he found himself in the employ of the Jesuits is a mystery. Was he a Catholic resident of London, attracted by the vision of a brave new World? Or was he an unhappy Catholic inhabitant of Barbados, "redeemed" from an indenture in a Protestant colony by the Missionaries?^(c) Or was his arrival in Maryland due to more prosaic reasons, perhaps the Jesuits need for an experienced boatman (which de Sousa was or became)? Whatever he was, he was not unique, as two years later, the Jesuits imported another apparently Portuguese mulatto, one "Francisco"^(d).

Of the first five years of de Sousa's life in Maryland we know nothing. A servant for most of this time (the normal indenture for an adult male was four years), he and his white fellows were dependents of the Jesuits. As "apprentices," they had the legal status of minors and could neither sue nor be sued, sell or purchase, or participate in government. In short, except by involvement in a tragedy or crime,

they could do nothing to enter a historic record consisting largely of legal documents. However, we do know more than usual about the economic activities sustained by the labor of de Sousa and his fellow servants. The Jesuits prided themselves on being the foremost agriculturalists of the Province. On St. Inigoes Manor, their overseer produced bumper crops of tobacco, Indian corn, beans, peas, and smaller amounts of English grain.^(e) And, while they were critical of the other manorial lords' preoccupation with trade, they themselves maintained a boat and traded with the Indians for furs and corn^(f). And while de Sousa may have spent much of his time at husbandry--opening up new fields with axe and grubbing hoe, and tending and harvesting crops -- almost certainly he spent some of his time on the Jesuits' pinnace as it sailed from Indian village to Indian village trading cloth, axes, and knives for beaver pelts and baskets of corn^(g).

De Sousa reappears in the Maryland records in 1639, when, now free, he owed the estate of Justinian Snow the very minor debt of twelve pounds of tobacco "in roll."^(h) It may be significant that both in the list of debts that the estate hoped to collect and later did collect, de Sousa's name appears with a cluster of others linked to the Indian trade: those of John Hallowes, Thomas Boys, and Roger Oliver. Is the clustering accidental, or had these men come together to Snow's store to make their purchases? In any event, these

were the men with whom de Sousa was linked through his last appearance in the Maryland record in December, 1642.

De Sousa's name is missing from the Maryland records for the next three years, an absence, in large part, due to the loss of the 1639-1641 Provincial Court records.⁽ⁱ⁾ Council and Assembly records survive, but these contain no comprehensive lists of freemen except for the elections of February, 1639, at which time most of the Province's mariners were away trading for furs.^(j)

De Sousa's career snaps in focus with the resumption of the surviving Provincial Court records late in 1642. They outline his 1641-1642 employment: first as a pinnace captain for the Jesuits, then as a servant to John Lewger, Esquire, secretary of the Province, and finally as a debtor to John Hallows, mariner and fur trader.

On the third of November, 1642, Secretary Lewger transcribed the following deposition into the court book:

Mathias de Sousa made oath that about March was twelvemonth he was appointed by mr Pulton to goe in his pinace as skipper & trader to the Sesquihanoughs & by him appointed to hire men at Kent for the voyage, & that he would write to mr brent to assist him in it & that at his coming to Kent with the knowledge & consent of mr brent he hired John Prettiman to goe vpon the

voyage, & that he hired him for 200 lb tob. per month, and that accordingly John Prettiman was out vpon the voyage 2 months (within 3.daies) & that by his meanes & presence he verily beleeveth the pinace & men were saved at that time from destruction by the sesquihanowes.

Jurat coram me

Jo: Lewger^(k)

Mr. Pulton was the Reverend Ferdinand Poulton, Superior of the Jesuit mission.^(l)

De Sousa's deposition was no venture into journalism or historiography, but a favor for a friend. The next day, Prettiman filed with the court a demand against the Jesuit missionaries for 300 lbs. tobacco in back wages. Prettiman needed the tobacco. He was heavily in debt to John Hallowes, Captain Cornwaleys, and Governor Calvert.^(m)

For the colony, 1642 was a bad year. Tobacco prices had fallen, economic growth had slowed, and the outlook for the 1643 fur trading season was grim--the Susquahannocks had attacked the Province in August.⁽ⁿ⁾ One of the victims of the economic depression was de Sousa. The same day that de Sousa gave his deposition for Prettiman, Secretary Lewger moved to block an "execution awarded against the person of the said Mathias at the suit of John Hollis [Hallowes]." A restraining order was issued and at the December court session, Lewger proved that de Sousa's person--his labor--was not free to be attached by Hallowes. De Sousa was already indentured to the

Lewgers by a "covenant of the said Mathias for disposing of his person to the satisfaction of Mrs. Lewger's just debts."^(o)

What are we to make of these references? Debts owing to Mrs. Lewger could refer only to something outside of her husband's mercantile transactions, something connected with housewifery. And the debts seem to have been substantial, as de Sousa was indentured to the Lewgers for more than four months. It seems unlikely that a winter's lodging could have mounted to so much, especially as de Sousa could have worked it off long before the autumn.^(p) Another reference places de Sousa in the Lewger's home the previous March. Had de Sousa worked for Lewger, perhaps as master of his ketch? Did he, during the summer of 1642, suffer some mishap that left him bedridden at St. John's, a condition resulting in debts for nursing and physic as well as lodging? The Lewgers' home had served as a hospital before.^(q) When well again, de Sousa would have been of service to Lewger. A chance reference from September reveals Lewger's mariners sailing his ketch from Kent Island to St. Mary's Town.^(r)

December, 1642, was Mathias de Sousa's last appearance in the Maryland records, at which time he still had three more months to serve the Lewgers. Unlike some of his indebted white peers, de Sousa did not flee to Virginia to escape his Maryland debts.^(s) Did disease fell him? If he lived long enough to start working off his debt to Hallowes, he may not have lived much longer.

The 1643 fur trading season was a disaster. Hallowes and his partner, Thomas Boyes, had invested several hundred pounds sterling in trade goods, vessel hire, and perhaps salaries, but the winter found Maryland still at war with the Susquahannocks, Nanticokes, and Wicomisses. (t)

On the first of March, Governor Leonard Calvert renewed a proclamation against trading with the Eastern Shore Indians and issued a warrant for Hallowes to be brought before him so that Calvert could have Hallowes' direct word that the proclamation would be obeyed. (u) The proclamation was too late or it was not enforced long enough. Hallowes and Boyes ventured out, and the predicted tragedy occurred. While attempting to buy beaver, they were attacked. In a later deposition, Hallowes described part of the melee:

being upon the deck, and called by Thomas Boys to help Roger Oliver, he leaped down into the hold, and saw an Indian and the said Roger struggling together, whereupon this deponent knocked the Indian on the head with the barrel of a gun, and presently after he saw the said Roger fall and being distracted some time with perils of his life in the hold with other Indians...

It was six hours before his mates had a chance to check on Oliver. His throat had been cut. If de Sousa was with them,

he may have died too. Our only knowledge of the fracas resulted from Roger Oliver's widow suing the survivors for her husband's effects. With true Anglo-Saxon concern for property, the resulting depositions sought only to establish how Roger died, what he owned when he died, and what happened to his goods. All, it turned out, had been delivered to the widow except for twelve feet of rope.^(v) Omitted from the account were all the where, whys, and whoms that might answer today's historical questions.

These documents tell us relatively little about de Sousa's career, let alone how he felt on an English frontier far from Portugal or Africa. But what is very clear is that however much de Sousa's fellows may have been aware of his blackness, that affected his status little if at all. He served an apprenticeship no longer than his white fellows, he could give testimony under oath and he could vote. He rose in his profession as his skill allowed, and he fell when his luck or health ran out. If he lived into 1643, he was not the only person working off a debt to Hallowes. In December, 1642, John Hillierd, a white man, indentured himself to Hallowes for a year in return for Hallowes paying off Hillierd's debts totaling 1,000 lbs. of tobacco.^(w)

In the history of Maryland, de Sousa's premier accomplishment is his status as Maryland's first black voter and legislator. And the facts on which this claim are based are

undeniable. At the March, 1642, Assembly of all the freemen at St. Mary's, Mathias de Sousa attended the final, afternoon session of March 23rd. His name appears well up in the list of members--after the gentlemen's names that begin it, but well ahead of most of the other freemen. That afternoon de Sousa and the others heard petitions, passed and tabled legislation, and appointed a committee to assess the charges of the assembly.^(x) But to laud de Sousa's accomplishment as a legislator is to interpret his deeds by 20th-century standards. Would de Sousa have considered participation in the political process of the community an accomplishment? Or a nuisance? Did de Sousa plan to attend the Assembly, or was he engulfed in an Assembly that came to him? Why doesn't de Sousa's name appear on the lists of freemen who attended the first two-and-a-half days of the Assembly, sessions that met in Governor Leonard Calvert's house within the St. Mary's Fort? Why does de Sousa's name appear only on the attendance list for the final session convened at Secretary Lewger's house at St. John's?^(y) Was it because de Sousa was living in Lewger's household? I think so. And from this we can surmise the real status of Mathias de Sousa. De Sousa was an ordinary man who happened to be black. And like most of the other freemen (who ignored the Assembly or gave their proxies to others), de Sousa preferred to avoid political participation.

On Maryland's first frontier, status was a matter of worth, not race. De Sousa's status is clear. He was an able man in whom the Jesuits relied. They put him in charge of their vessel, their trade goods, and a white crew. They delegated to him the responsibility to hire other crew members and to venture among an unfriendly, powerful Indian tribe. This was real responsibility. Note, too, as with John Fullwood, that we know of de Sousa's race only by accident. Never is it noted in the Provincial Court records, and why should it have been? In the early court records, ethnic and occupation labels are identifiers, not slurs. "White" John Price is labeled such to avoid confusion with "Black" John Price, a swarthy Welshman. John Hollis is carefully noted as a carpenter to avoid confusion with John Hollis [Hallowes], the mariner.⁽²⁾ But Fullwood and de Sousa had distinctive faces and distinctive names. They did not need further identifiers. The only reason that we know of de Sousa's race is because the Jesuits engaged in a bitter, self-destructive controversy with their landlord, Lord Baltimore. Among the missionaries early losses were many of their land grants. As a result, the Superior of the Society carefully re-recorded their land rights--the names of the immigrants that they had brought to Maryland. The first entry, in 1638, had been merely a list of names. In the second, 1641 list, the Jesuits carefully added all the detail possible to authenticate their valid rights. The list is subdivided by year of

immigration and whether or not the Jesuits imported the servants or purchased them after their arrival. Charles is noted as a Welshman, and de Sousa and Francisco are listed as mulattos. (aa)

De Sousa and Fullwood were freemen--the one a Marylander, the other a Virginian. There is not the slightest indication in the surviving record that they were considered anything less than full citizens. And why--thirty years before slavery became a significant factor in the Chesapeake--should they have been anything less? Fullwood was English born. De Sousa was Portuguese. Consequently, both were Christians. Thus, when they took an oath prior to testifying in court, they and their judges shared the same God. Thus, too, when the Kent Islanders were attacked by the Eastern Shore Indians or the Marylanders by the Susquehannocks, there was no a priori reason to suspect that Fullwood or de Sousa would side with the heathen enemy. By the Stone Age mores that govern most men at most times, Fullwood and de Sousa were members, if perhaps adopted members, of "our" tribe. Other early Maryland Blacks were not. They were pagans, and as such, they could be used or abused as slaves.

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- a. Maryland, PATENT LIBERS (Annapolis, Maryland, Hall of Records), 1:19-20, 37-38.
- b. Md. Arch., 2:330; 4:171. The Portuguese had long established trading stations on the west coast of Africa: T. H. Breen and Stephen Innes, Myne Owne Ground: Race and Freedom on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1640-1676 (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 70.
- c. Later the Jesuits report having "redeemed" Catholic servants from Virginia. Peter Force, Tracts and other Papers,... (reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963), Vol. 4, no. 12, p. 28.
- d. PATENTS, 1:19-20, 37-38. "Francisco a molato" never reappears in the records. Most likely he, like many of his white peers, died from disease before the end of his indenture.
- e. The Calvert Papers, Number One. (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1899), p. 206; Garry Wheeler Stone, "Society, Housing, and Architecture in Early Maryland: John Lewger's St. John's," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1982), pp. 43-44.
- f. Calvert Papers, 1: 164-68, 209.
- g. Md. Arch., 3:63; 4:34, 138, 148.
- h. Ibid., 4:84-85.
- i. Stone, "Society, Housing, and Architecture," pp. 82-84.
- j. Md. Arch., 1:28-31. Roger Oliver and Thomas Boys did participate the previous year: Ibid., 1:6,7.
- k. Md. Arch., 4:138.
- l. Edwin Warfield Beitzell, The Jesuit Missions of St. Mary's County (Bushwood, Maryland: by the author, 1960), pp. 5-6.
- m. Md. Arch., 4:139, 117, 120.
- n. Stone, pp. 21, 32, 45-47, 112, 133; Dennis J. Pogue, Patuxent River Naval Air Station Cultural Resources Survey, Volume 1: History and Archaeology (Patuxent River, Md.: Public Works Dept., Naval Air Station, 1983), p. 24.

- o. Md. Arch., 4:138, 155-156.
- p. Ibid., 4:128.
- q. Ibid., 4:51, 107-108; Stone, p. 119.
- r. Md. Arch., 3:119, 122.
- s. De Sousa is not included on an April, 1643, list of fugitive debtors. (Md. Arch., 4:187-88, see also pp. 114, 127, 163, 203). De Sousa's name does not appear in the Virginia records: Ransom B. True, ed., Biographical Dictionary of Early Virginia, 1607-1660 (Richmond: Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, 1982).
- t. Md. Arch., 4:206, 3:116-117, for the location of these tribes, see Christian F. Feest, "Nanticoke and Neighboring Tribes," Handbook of North American Indians (
- u. Md. Arch., 3:129; 4:186.
- v. Ibid., 4:209-10.
- w. Ibid., 4:173.
- x. Ibid., 1:120-22.
- y. Ibid., 1:115-20.
- z. Ibid., 3:120-23; PATENTS, 1:37-38.
- aa. PATENTS, 1:19-20, 37-38.