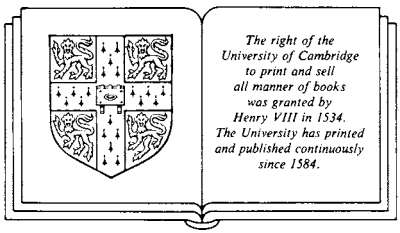
Traders, planters, and slaves

Market behavior in early English America

DAVID W. GALENSON
Department of Economics
University of Chicago



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1

The Atlantic slave trade and the early development of the English West Indies

This book deals with one aspect of the Atlantic economy during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: the transatlantic slave trade to the early English West Indies. It uses an important body of quantitative evidence that has not previously been systematically analyzed in order to draw a series of conclusions about the conduct of the slave trade and the history of early English settlement in the Caribbean. Yet the book also addresses a set of issues that transcend the boundaries of both the West Indies and the early colonial era. These issues lie at the heart of current controversies concerning the origins of modern capitalism and the usefulness of modern economic theory in understanding long stretches of the past.

There is still much to be learned about how and when large-scale competitive markets first began to operate. Although a study of the early slave trade cannot solve that problem, it does reveal that such markets existed and functioned continuously and routinely more than 300 years ago. The participants in these markets were sophisticated traders who, though severely hampered by the lack of modern computers and methods of communication, sought to respond to changes in market prices by adjusting the composition of their cargoes to maximize their profits from trading. They also designed complicated auctions to increase their revenues, developed an extensive network of credit financing, and devised institutional arrangements that allowed risk sharing, not only among partners, but also with employees and purchasers.

This is not intended to suggest that the West Indies was the cradle of modern capitalism, nor is it intended to celebrate a particularly odious form of trade that ethical people later struggled long and hard to banish. It does demonstrate, however, that many of the complex trading arrangements and outcomes characteristic of large competitive markets today are not of such recent origin as is often presumed, but were actually worked out in considerable detail centuries ago. Economists such as Alfred Marshall have suspected that this was so, but the evidence needed to confirm their suspicions has been hard to acquire. The records of the Royal African Company, chartered in

1672 as the successor to the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa, provide a large piece of the elusive evidence.

The growth of the early English West Indies

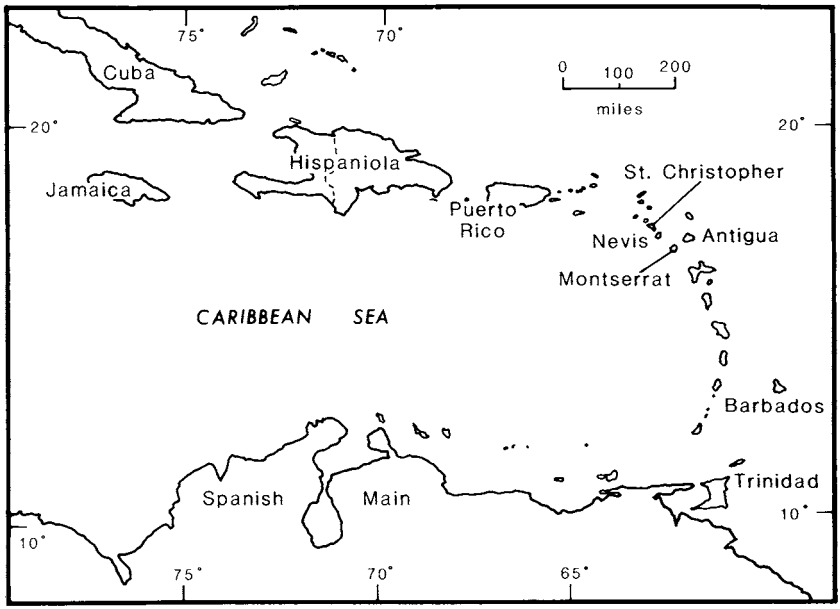
English settlers first arrived in the West Indies in 1624, when Sir Thomas Warner occupied St. Christopher with a small group of followers. English influence in the region soon spread, as settlements appeared in Barbados in 1627, Nevis in 1628, and Antigua and Montserrat in 1632. The last major English settlement of the seventeenth century in the West Indies was established in 1655, when a military expedition seized Jamaica from the Spanish.

The islands of the English West Indies are small. Barbados, the wealthiest island in the seventeenth century, is at most a mere 21 miles long and 14 miles wide; its area of 166 square miles makes it less than one-seventh the size of the present-day state of Rhode Island, or just about two and a half times larger than the District of Columbia. The largest of the Leeward Islands, Antigua, has an area of 108 square miles; adding the 68 of St. Christopher, the 50 of Nevis, and the 33 of Montserrat gives a total of only 259 for the Leewards. Jamaica is of course much larger – 145 miles long and 50 miles wide, with an area of about 4,400 square miles, but even this is smaller than the state of Connecticut.

Yet during the colonial period these small islands had an economic importance far more than proportional to their size, and this was particularly true in the early colonial period that is the focus of this study. One indication of this appears in estimates of their populations; an overview for the relevant period is given in Table 1.1.

Two decades before the beginning of the period considered here, in 1650, Barbados had the largest population of any settlement in English America. Indeed only Virginia had more than half as many white residents.[1] Counting both whites and blacks, the total population of the English West Indies in 1650 was greater than that of all the British colonies in North America.

The white population of the English West Indies declined in the decades after 1650. By 1700 the white population of the West Indies as a whole was only one-third as large as that of New England, and less than half as large as the combined white population of the Chesapeake Bay colonies. The black population of the West Indies, however, had increased more than sevenfold in the second half of the seventeenth century. Whereas blacks had accounted for only one-quarter of the region's total population in 1650, in 1700 they made up four-fifths of the total. At the latter date there were nearly twice as many blacks in Barbados alone as in all the colonies of mainland British America combined. Barbados was still the largest colony in British America in total population, and the West Indies' total population continued to make it the largest region in British America.



Map 1. The West Indies in the seventeenth century. *Source:* Adapted from Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), p. xiv.

There was little change in the size of the West Indies' white population between 1700 and 1730. In 1730 the English West Indies as a whole had a white population only about as large as that of the colony of New Jersey. The West Indies' black population, which had doubled between 1700 and 1730, had risen to more than 85 percent of the region's total population. Jamaica now had by far the largest slave population of any British American colony.

Although the large population of the early English West Indies suggests the region's significance, even more striking evidence of its economic importance can be found in measures of its trade with England. Table 1.2 presents annual series derived from English customs records for the period 1697–1705 on the total value of imports into England from each of the West Indian colonies, as well as similar evidence on the value of English imports from the North American colonies for purposes of comparison.[2] The most remarkable fact revealed by these data is that the mean value of West Indian goods imported into England annually during this period (£608,000) was more than double the mean annual value of England's imports from all the North American mainland colonies combined (£283,000). Barbados alone nearly matched the latter figure, with mean annual exports to Britain valued at £250,000. West Indian goods accounted for fully 12.5 percent, or one-eighth, of the total value of

Table 1.1. *Population of the English West Indies, 1650–1730*

	Barbados			Jamaica			
Year	White	Black	Total	White	Black	Total	White
1650	30,000	12,800	42,800	—	—	—	13,700
1660	26,200	27,100	53,300	3,400	500	3,900	16,800
1670	22,400	40,400	62,800	8,000	7,200	15,200	11,000
1680	20,500	44,900	65,400	8,900	18,000	26,900	11,000
1690	17,900	47,800	65,700	8,600	32,000	40,600	9,800
1700	15,400	50,100	65,500	7,300	42,000	49,300	8,300
1710	13,000	52,300	65,300	7,200	59,200	66,400	9,000
1720	17,700	58,800	76,500	7,100	79,600	86,700	9,400
1730	18,200	65,300	83,500	7,600	100,900	108,500	10,000

Source: West Indies: John J. McCusker, "The Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Continental Colonies, 1650–1775" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1970), pp. 692–9; also see Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), p. 312, and Robert V. Wells, *The Population of the British Colonies in America Before 1776* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 196, 238.

North American mainland: Includes Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Plymouth, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), Part 2, p. 1168.

English imports from all sources in these years. The bulkiness of sugar as a commodity made the West Indian trade loom even larger as a source of employment for English ships: In 1686 the West Indies accounted for an estimated 21 percent of the total tonnage of English ships involved in overseas trade, and this share rose in later decades.[3]

Barbados was the leading West Indian exporter in this period; the annual average value of its shipments to England (£250,000) was greater than the annual mean value of those from Jamaica (£167,000), or the combined value of those from the Leewards (£191,000). The value of Barbados's exports placed it well ahead of the leading exporter among the mainland American regions, the Chesapeake Bay colonies of Virginia and Maryland, which together annually shipped goods to England worth an average of £217,000.

Although the West Indian colonies exported considerably more to England than they received in return, they were nonetheless an important market for British output. Table 1.3 shows the value of goods exported annually from England to the West Indian colonies during 1697–1705, as well as the corresponding figures for British exports to the North American mainland colonies. The average value of total annual English exports to the West Indies in this period (£286,000) was very close to the mean value of annual English exports to all the mainland colonies (£294,000). Shipments to the West Indies ac-

Table 1.1. (*cont.*)

Leewards		All West Indies			All North American mainland		
Black	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black	Total
2,500	16,200	43,700	15,300	59,000	48,768	1,600	50,368
6,400	23,200	46,400	34,000	80,400	72,138	2,920	75,058
4,300	15,300	41,400	51,900	93,300	107,400	4,535	111,935
13,400	24,400	40,400	76,300	116,700	144,536	6,971	151,507
17,800	27,600	36,300	97,600	133,900	193,643	16,729	210,372
22,200	30,500	31,000	114,300	145,300	223,071	27,817	250,888
36,000	45,000	29,200	147,500	176,700	286,845	44,866	331,711
36,300	45,700	34,200	174,700	208,900	397,346	68,839	466,185
52,100	62,100	35,800	218,300	254,100	538,424	91,021	629,445

Table 1.2. *Value of English imports from the West Indies and North America, 1697–1705*

Year	Barbados	Jamaica	Leewards	Total West Indies	Total North America
1697	£196,533	£ 70,000	£ 60,006	£326,539	£281,850
1698	308,091	189,568	132,075	629,734	234,089
1699	273,948	174,845	207,462	656,255	259,636
1700	366,024	239,759	218,463	824,246	397,519
1701	280,678	235,215	222,707	738,600	309,140
1702	114,327	149,390	212,451	476,168	337,582
1703	223,591	182,552	220,345	626,488	257,252
1704	136,557	184,366	168,984	489,907	321,975
1705	353,579	75,388	277,608	706,575	150,964
Annual means, 1697–1705	250,370	166,787	191,122	608,279	283,334

Notes: Values are in £ sterling. The annual totals for the Leewards are based on entries for Antigua, Montserrat, and Nevis during 1697–9, and for those colonies and St. Christopher during 1700–5. The values for North America include entries for Carolina, Hudson's Bay, New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia–Maryland.
Source: Sir Charles Whitworth, *State of the Trade of Great Britain in Its Imports and Exports, Progressively from the Year 1697* (London: G. Robinson et al., 1776), pp. 1–9.

counted for 4.6 percent of the total value of English exports to all destinations during 1697–1705. Within the West Indies, Barbados was the largest importer of English goods, with an annual average value of £129,000, compared to £109,000 for Jamaica and £49,000 for the Leewards. The Chesapeake colonies, which were together by far the largest recipients of English goods on the mainland, accounted for an annual average of £161,000 in imports, somewhat more than any of the West Indian colonies.

Table 1.3. *Value of English exports to the West Indies and North America, 1697–1705*

Year	Barbados	Jamaica	Leewards	Total West Indies	Total North America
1697	£ 77,465	£ 40,726	£ 24,606	£142,797	£141,425
1698	146,851	120,778	38,683	306,312	460,953
1699	150,532	136,733	53,870	341,135	404,560
1700	167,609	100,848	64,596	333,053	344,345
1701	182,046	105,235	51,970	339,251	345,486
1702	104,405	95,658	54,803	254,866	187,786
1703	79,093	165,894	39,848	284,835	296,212
1704	121,519	89,952	55,770	267,241	176,091
1705	127,906	125,048	52,896	305,850	291,725
Annual means, 1697–1705	128,603	108,986	48,560	286,149	294,287

Notes: See Table 1.2.
Source: Same as for Table 1.2.

The economic importance of the colonial West Indies stemmed directly from the production of sugar. Sugar was introduced into the region in Barbados in the early 1640s. The climate and soil of the islands proved to be nearly ideal for sugar cultivation. The abundant yields of the newly planted cane fields combined with high prevailing European prices to make sugar an extraordinarily profitable crop, and it quickly became the dominant product of the English colonists in the West Indies. The rise of sugar production in the islands soon made England a major power in European sugar markets. In fact, it was during the period 1680–1720 that the English colonies probably reached their strongest competitive position in world sugar markets, for it has been estimated that during these four decades they were the single largest sugar producers in America, ahead of Brazil and the French West Indies. Indeed in 1700 the English West Indies produced nearly half of all the sugar consumed in Western Europe.[4]

West Indian production had a major impact on English sugar consumption. Falling sugar prices in England resulting from the enormous volume of imports from the West Indies transformed sugar from a luxury consumed primarily by the wealthy in the mid seventeenth century to a commodity consumed even by the poor in the eighteenth.[5] The increase in the use of sugar in England was dramatic: Estimates of per capita consumption suggest a fourfold increase between 1660 and 1700, and a further doubling between 1700 and 1725.[6] This increase was part of a major change in the diet of the English population in this period, because the greater use of sugar was closely tied to the rise of tea, and to a lesser extent coffee, during the eighteenth century.

Barbados dominated sugar production in the early English West Indies. Estimates for 1669 suggest that Barbados might have accounted for 80 percent of the islands' total sugar exports to England at that date.[7] This share fell over time as production increased in both the Leewards and Jamaica, yet at the close of the seventeenth century Barbados still accounted for roughly half the region's exports of sugar. The small size of the island, however, and perhaps also declining yields per acre owing to the intensive cultivation of past years, put a stop to further increases in Barbados's production, whereas total output in the Leewards and Jamaica continued to increase rapidly in the early eighteenth century. The Leewards began to export consistently larger quantities of sugar than Barbados during the 1710s and early 1720s, and Jamaica passed Barbados in this regard in the latter part of the 1720s. During the 1720s Barbados accounted for about one-quarter of the total sugar imported by Britain from the West Indies, with Jamaica sending about one-third of the total and the Leewards two-fifths.[8] Later, just after midcentury, Jamaica took advantage of its much larger area and became the largest sugar producer in the English West Indies.

Consequences of the sugar revolution

The introduction of sugar cultivation and its subsequent drive toward monoculture produced fundamental changes in the economy and society of the early English West Indies. Among the elements that together constituted the sugar revolution, no other had as great an impact on virtually all the conditions of life in the region at the time or implications as far-reaching for its future as the growth of slavery. This occurred first in Barbados. The process there has been somewhat better documented than for the Leewards and Jamaica. Available evidence from the other islands does suggest, however, that although there were differences in the timing of their experiences – both in the dates at which particular changes occurred and in their speed – the basic features of the process were similar in each case.

Slavery was present in the English West Indies almost from the time of the first settlement. When Captain Henry Powell brought the first shipload of English settlers to Barbados in 1627, among those who disembarked from the *William and John* were 10 Africans, who had apparently been captured from a Portuguese ship during the voyage out.[9] More blacks were brought into the colony during the next few years, but their numbers remained small. Any doubt about their status was eliminated by a declaration made in 1636 by the governor and council of Barbados that "Negroes . . . that came here to be sold, should serve for Life, unless a Contract was before made to the contrary."[10] Yet slavery remained a marginal institution in Barbados; in 1640 there were probably no more than a few hundred blacks among the island's total population of about 10,000.[11]

1. Atlantic slave trade and English West Indies

The economy of Barbados before 1640 was based on mixed farming on a relatively small scale. The settlers in the colony were forced to grow their own food while they searched, unsuccessfully, for a profitable staple crop. Initial hopes of making Barbados a thriving exporter of tobacco were disappointed when the tobacco grown there proved to be of a quality too poor to compete in European markets with the superior Virginian product. Subsequent experiments with cotton and indigo were even less successful. The inability of the early settlers to find a profitable staple crop meant that the demand for labor in Barbados grew relatively slowly in the 15 years after the colony's initial settlement.[12]

The colonists' demand for labor in these years was satisfied primarily by the importation of English indentured servants. Indentured servitude had been devised by the Virginia Company as a solution to the problem of how the major source of hired labor in England, service in husbandry, could be connected to the labor demands of New World planters. In seventeenth-century England, the majority of all hired labor was done by "servants in husbandry," young individuals of both sexes in the teen ages and early twenties who lived and worked in the households of their employers, usually on annual contracts.[13] The servants were provided with room and board and were often paid supplementary wages in cash or kind in return for their labor. English yeomen and husbandmen who had taken this source of labor for granted in England discovered that a problem arose of obtaining access to it when they transplanted their enterprises to America. The principal problem was that the £6 cost of transportation across the Atlantic was far beyond the savings of most young English servants. Consequently even those workers willing to accept the risks of migration in performing their life-cycle service in America were unable to travel there.

A solution to this problem was developed by the Virginia Company within little more than a decade after the first settlement at Jamestown. The company provided for English servants to be transported to Virginia in return for promises from the servants to work for the company for specified periods of years under conditions similar to those of servants in husbandry in England. The company was to provide all maintenance for the servants during their terms, and to give them freedom dues at the conclusion. These agreements were written into legal contracts of a standard English form, known as indentures. When these were made transferable, in order to enable the company to sell the workers' promises of service to planters for lump-sum payments, other English merchants entered this industry, effectively providing credit to prospective migrants.[14] Many English merchants who imported colonial tobacco recruited and indentured servants in England, sent them to Virginia on the ships bound there to collect the tobacco, and sold the servants' contracts to colonial planters upon the ships' arrival in port. Often these transactions were carried out as direct exchanges for tobacco. Indentured servants quickly be-

came the principal source of hired labor in early Virginia, and white servitude became a central institution there and in other colonies of mainland North America. When the English began to settle in the West Indies, indentured servitude was readily extended to that region. As on the mainland, indentured servants drawn from England and Ireland became the major source of labor for the early planters in Barbados.[15]

The introduction of sugar cultivation in Barbados in the early 1640s radically changed this situation. The availability of a profitable export crop caused a sudden large increase in the demand for labor as planters scrambled to increase their output of the new crop. The existing flows of relatively small numbers of indentured servants were inadequate to provide the labor to produce sugar in the quantities desired by the colony's planters. Although firm quantitative evidence on the extent of the shortage is lacking, the urgent tone of planters' requests to their English merchants for new recruits in this period makes plain their dissatisfaction with the available supplies of bound white workers. In 1645, for example, William Hay wrote from Barbados to his uncle in Scotland:

> Theise that are Upon the designe of Sugar here prosper well and make exceeding good Sugar . . . want of servants is my greatest bane and will much hinder my designe. The bilding of my house and setting Upp of my Ingenue [i.e., sugar mill] will cost above 50000 lib of Tobacco because I have not work men of my owen. In January next god willing I shall begin to make sugar. So pray if you come neare to any port where shiping comes hither indenture procure and send me [servants] . . . Agree for theire passages to be payed here . . . Lett them be of any sort men women or boys of 14 years of age, what I make not use off and are not serviceable for mee I can exchange with others especially any sort of tradesmen.[16]

Yet during this early period of sugar cultivation, changes in the attitudes of prospective migrants were apparently contributing to the scarcity of servants. As knowledge of the harsh working conditions involved in growing sugar under the tropical conditions of the West Indies spread in Britain, young Englishmen became increasingly reluctant to travel to the islands under indenture. The desperation of some planters to obtain workers may have led them further to aggravate the problem of the dwindling white labor supply with their response, as a number of English and Irish youths were apparently kidnapped to work in the sugar fields of Barbados. Although it cannot be determined how common this was, the reputation of the West Indies as a destination for kidnapped Englishmen – and even as a rumored site of white slavery – that was to haunt the efforts of merchants to recruit white workers for the islands for decades to come appears to have been established within a decade of the introduction of sugar cultivation in Barbados.[17]

It was in the face of this increasingly severe shortage of indentured white labor that Barbados's planters turned to the use of black slaves. Interestingly,

there appears to have been a sharp contrast between the eagerness with which the colony's planters switched from servants to slaves and the reluctance with which the planters of the mainland's tobacco colonies made the same substitution four decades later.[18] The difference might have resulted in part from the low quality of the white workers in early Barbados. From the beginning the West Indies had seemed a dangerous place to Englishmen. Like many other frontier areas in history, it initially attracted those willing to gamble, some with their wealth, but all with their lives. Unlike in the mainland colonies, however, the society of the islands did not settle down as time went on, and the region's immigrants apparently continued to be drawn from the tougher elements of British society.[19] The planters' efforts to increase the numbers of white workers in the early years of sugar cultivation may have worsened this situation, by lowering the average quality of those recruited. One young English visitor to Barbados in 1654, who was struck by the natural beauty of the island, was equally impressed by the depravity of its population, remarking: "This Illand is the dunghill wharone England doth cast forth its rubidg. Rodgs and hors and such like peopel are thos which are gennerally Broght heare."[20] Unlike in the mainland colonies, a stable population of small planters and free white workers failed to grow in Barbados because of the shortage of land on the island, and the spread of sugar cultivation, with the economic superiority of large estates, made the prospects even worse for small planters and recently freed servants. Heavy migration out of Barbados began in the 1640s, and the overall white population of the island probably peaked and began to decline as early as the 1650s.[21] The transition to the use of slave labor by Barbados's planters therefore might have been speeded by the lack of a strong commitment to the use of white labor, perhaps because of the poor quality of many of the indentured servants they had relied on in earlier years.

Large numbers of black slaves began to arrive in Barbados early in the 1640s.[22] Initially the island's planters simply added the blacks to their field gangs, where they worked alongside white servants. In the course of two decades, however, the balance shifted, as slaves replaced the whites whose terms ended, and the numbers of new white recruits dwindled. By about 1660 it was probably unusual to see whites at work in the cane fields.

The substitution of slaves for servants in field work did not bring the use of white servants in Barbados to an end. It did produce a change in the role of indentured labor, however, for servants were now seen by planters primarily as a source of skilled labor. Consequently, in an intermediate phase there arose a racial division of labor by skill, as small numbers of indentured carpenters, coopers, potters, and a variety of other craftsmen were employed in constructing the buildings of the sugar plantations and refining and packing the sugar grown by the much larger numbers of slaves. This change in the role of indentured labor can be seen in descriptions of plantation labor forces and in the correspondence of West Indian planters. Unlike the earlier requests for

any servants their English agents could send, specialized requests for those with particular skills appear in the later decades of the seventeenth century.[23]

This was not the final stage in the evolution of the West Indian labor force, however. Over time plantation owners increasingly had white servants teach their skills to slaves. In some cases they hired servants specifically for this purpose; for example in 1667 an estate manager in Jamaica reported to the absentee owner that he had indentured a white potter who would train slaves to refine sugar: "I have agreed with Thomas fforde Potter to serve you Three yeares . . . teaching two of your negroes to make potts and dripps and burne and Sett as well as himselfe."[24] In part, the lag of this replacement of skilled servants behind the initial transition from servants to slaves in field work might have been caused by the discovery by some planters that those blacks born in the West Indies were more easily trained than Africans.[25] It might also have been forced on planters by an increasing difficulty of obtaining even the smaller numbers of white craftsmen they needed in the late seventeenth century. In 1682 a group of West Indian planters complained to the king that

> there is in a manner a totall stop of sending any more Servants into yor. Maties said Plantations, which will in a short time disable the Inhabitants of them from carrying on their Trade by leaving them without any persons to governe and direct their Negros and utterly disable them from furnishing the proportion of men to the Militia, which yor. Maties Laws there require.[26]

Two years earlier the governor of Barbados had written to the Lords of Trade and Plantations on the same issue. In his letter he detailed the causes of the shortage of servants:

> First my Lords by reason of the great numbers of people gon off from this place to Carolina Jamaica Antega and the rest of the Leeward Islands where they hope to gett land which this Island having none to give; Supplies will not come at us and those that doe come wch are not many are bound to serve only for foure or att most five yeares; their time expired they are ready for to seeke a new fortune as they hope to obteyne else where besides my Lords Since they [i.e., the planters] have found the conveniency by the Labor & cheape keeping of Slaves they have neglected the keeping of white men with whom alone they formerly carried out their Plantations neither for the former reasons and for the strict acts in England for Trade can they have any white servants to come to this place though for their owne safety they would willingly embrace him thus farr for some of ye reasons of the Diminution of the Militia.[27]

By the close of the seventeenth century there were few white servants in the West Indies; indentured servitude survived into the eighteenth century only as a marginal supplier of skilled craftsmen. After 1700 most of the indentured workers in the West Indies served in managerial positions on large plantations, under conditions very different from those earlier bound white laborers who had arrived in the region in the early years of the sugar revolution.[28]

The displacement of white servants by black slaves, and the rise of a black