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978-0-521-19581-2 - Defoe's America
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CHAPTER 1

Defoe's America

Near the end of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders,* Moll returns to America with her new husband, Jemy. They disembark on the Virginia shore of the Potomac, as bad luck would have it, near her son's plantation where her former husband (who is also her brother) lives. Moll, desperate to keep her past and present lives from colliding, convinces Jemy that they should seek their fortunes elsewhere. They pitch on Carolina as a place to settle. "We began to make enquiry for Vessels going to *Carolina,* and in a very little while got information, that on the other side of the *Bay* … in *Maryland* there was a Ship, which came from *Carolina,* loaden with Rice, and other Goods" (*MF,* p. 265).

They were, Moll says, "full a hundred Miles up *Potowmack River,* in a part which they call *Westmoreland* Country" (*MF,* p. 265). They sail five days down the Potomac and across the Chesapeake Bay to the Maryland Eastern Shore, a "full two hundred Mile" (*MF,* pp. 265–266). They land at "*Phillips's Point,*" where they had hoped to board the Carolina ship, but it has already departed.

> We immediately went on Shore, but found no Conveniences just at that Place, either for our being on Shore, or preserving our Goods on Shore, but was directed by a very honest Quaker, who we found there to go to a Place, about sixty Miles East; that is to say, nearer the Mouth of the *Bay,* where he said he liv'd, and where we would be Accommodated, either to Plant, or to wait for any other Place to Plant in, that might be more Convenient. (*MF,* pp. 265–266)

So they abandon their plan to move on to Carolina and settle instead on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake.

This brief episode in *Moll Flanders* is fascinating for what it implies about Defoe's knowledge of America. And, at first glance, it implies that he does not know much, for the passage contains a number of geographical errors. First, Westmoreland County is not, as Moll says, "full a hundred Miles up *Potowmack River*"; at that time, its most distant border was only 50 miles from the mouth of the river. In fact, Moll overstates all the

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distances. When she reaches the mouth of the Potomac, she says that the Bay is "near thirty Miles broad" (*MF,* p. 265). It is less than that, about 20 miles. A negligible mistake, to be sure, but not so her next one: from the farthest border of Westmoreland County to Phillips Point, it is only about 75 miles, not the "full two hundred Mile" Moll says it is. And when Moll says that she and Jemy bought land "sixty Miles … nearer the Mouth of the Bay" from Phillips Point, she puts their plantation well into the Atlantic. Most egregious is Moll's statement that this land is "about sixty Miles East" of Phillips Point "nearer the Mouth of the Bay." The mouth of the Chesapeake Bay is, of course, due south.

Such errors seem to confirm our suspicions about Defoe's writing habits. Defoe creates the illusion of a real world by piling up detail after quotidian detail, some drawn from lived experience, some snatched from books or picked up from conversations or lifted from maps or fabricated out of his imagination. But when he writes rapidly and offhandedly, as he often seems to, and the details of his fictional world fail to match the details of the factual world, the patchwork seams of his creations become embarrassingly obvious.

And what else could these errors be attributed to but a lack of knowledge or to carelessness? Although Defoe never visited the Chesapeake, he had available to him very accurate geographical information about the region. Augustine Herrman's 1673 map of Virginia and Maryland spelled out distances and directions with a good deal of precision, and Herrman's work was copied by or deeply influenced almost every map of the region published in England after his.[1] One gets the impression that Defoe wrote this passage with a map in hand – Westmoreland County and Phillips Point can be found on most eighteenth-century maps of the region – but that he wrote it quickly and inattentively, perhaps estimating distances by eye but certainly not measuring them off.

Still, I am not certain about how far or in what direction to press the case. Placing the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay east of Phillips Point rather than due south is so flagrantly wrong that it could easily be a meaningless slip of the pen. True, the fact that he gets all the distances wrong suggests that he was not intimately familiar with the region, but even here one should be careful not to infer a thoroughgoing ignorance. Defoe often *does* make mistakes, but making a mistake about something does not necessarily imply being unknowledgeable. For instance, a few pages earlier in *Moll Flanders,* he wrote that Jemy had "robb'd five Grasiers … going to *Burford* Fair in *Wiltshire* to buy Sheep" (*MF,* p. 243). Burford Fair is in Oxfordshire, not Wiltshire, but even though Defoe is wrong, it would be a

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mistake to conclude that he does not know the region – his *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain* shows us otherwise.[2]

In fact, details about Moll’s journey – particularly details about the three locations Defoe specifies, Westmoreland County, the Eastern Shore, and Phillips Point – suggest that he may have known more about the Chesapeake region than his errors might imply.

It is impossible to date precisely much of what happens in *Moll Flanders,* but we can be pretty certain about the dates of Moll’s two periods of residence in the New World. Her first sojourn, when she came over as the wife of an established planter whom she later discovered to be her brother, occurred over a period of about eight years in the 1640s. Her second sojourn began in the early 1670s, when she landed near her son’s plantation and then traveled to Phillips Point, and ended in the early 1680s, when she left her Eastern Shore plantation to return to England. The plantation of her first husband, where she goes in the 1640s, is on the York River. Her son’s plantation, which she chances upon in the 1670s, is on the Potomac, in Westmoreland County (*MF,* pp. 85, 258).[3]

Westmoreland County is a particularly apposite place to find a new plantation in Virginia in the 1670s. The county was created in the 1650s, between Moll’s first and second voyages. It immediately became the site of an intense speculative land rush, and between the 1650s and the 1670s almost all the land was snatched up by the colony’s wealthiest, established planters – that is, by planters like Moll’s former husband and their son. The heaviest immigration into the region came from York and Gloucester Counties, on either side of the York River, where Moll’s husband had his original plantation. Although it is an improbable coincidence that Moll disembarks exactly where her son has his plantation, it is more than plausible that the captain chose to discharge Moll and Jemy there, for the Northern Neck, where Westmoreland County is located, was the area where most transported convicts were sold and where they settled.[4]

That Moll and Jemy should settle on the Eastern Shore is credible, too. Much of the Maryland Eastern Shore was just being settled when Moll and Jemy would have arrived in the early 1670s. Somerset County, where they made their plantation, was frontier then, and there was an abundance of cheap land, the perfect place for new planters such as they to settle.[5]

Most striking of all is Defoe’s mention of Phillips Point. On maps of the period, Phillips Point was shown as the tip of a peninsula lying between the Nanticoke river and a river which, depending on which map you read, is named the Catherine, Rappahanock, or Transquaking. (On a modern map, the peninsula is bordered to the south by the Nanticoke river and to

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the north by Fishing Bay; Phillips Point is now named Clay Island.)[6] Here is what Defoe says happened to Moll and Jemy there: "We immediately went on Shore, but found no Conveniences just at that Place, either for our being on Shore, or preserving our Goods on Shore." Surprisingly, Defoe was probably right about Phillips Point. At this time in Maryland, there were few storehouses:[7] goods were loaded and unloaded directly at the docks of individual plantations, and it is doubtful that any "Conveniences" were ever built at Phillips Point. For Phillips Point was then (and still is today) almost totally marshland. Except for a few sand hills – Phillips Point at its tip and Elliott Island halfway up the Fishing Bay shore of the peninsula – the area is all tidal meadows, cut by numerous creeks and providing little fast land to cultivate or to build on. The area surrounding Phillips Point was sparsely populated. The headwaters of the Transquaking, which feeds Fishing Bay, were occupied by the Choptanks and the Nanticoke river above Phillips Point by the Nanticokes. This region of poorly drained salt marsh was not fit for cultivation. It was the last part of the Eastern Shore to be settled by Europeans. A census taken in 1704 gave the whole of Dorchester County – men, women, children, servants, and slaves – as only 2,312, and when Moll landed there in the 1670s, there were only 350 taxable inhabitants.[8]

Perhaps when Defoe wrote of a place where Moll could find "no Conveniences … either for our being on Shore, or preserving our Goods," he chose Phillips Point because he knew Phillips Point was situated in the middle of a vast, uncultivated, and unsettled region, a region that could not support the kind of amenities Moll and Jemy were looking for. Or perhaps he knew nothing at all about Phillips Point. And yet, even if he conjured up this scene entirely in his imagination while dreaming over a name on a map, he still appears to have known enough about the Chesapeake to make an informed guess about what such a place must have been like. For in colonial Maryland, people did not cluster in settlements but lived on plantations scattered thinly along shores of inlets and up bayside rivers and creeks. Trade was conducted by boats that went from plantation to plantation. As a consequence, there were no towns and few villages. This settlement pattern was a matter of concern to English colonial administrators and legislators and to the Board of Trade in London. In 1683, the Assembly of Maryland tried to summon towns into existence by restricting trade to "Ports & places where all Shipps & vessells … shall unlade … all goods wares & Comoditys that shall bee imported into this Province."[9] These "Ports & places" were not ports and places at all but, for the most part, 100-acre plots of empty land the Assembly hoped would

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become settled by virtue of legislative fiat. The legislation of 1683 was the first of such acts by the Assembly. But all these attempts to create towns and ports in places where there was no rational economic reason for them were doomed. "There are indeed several places allotted for towns," complained an observer in 1699, "but hitherto they are only titular ones."[10]

The problems of settlement patterns, of low population density, and of the lack of towns were conditions of business that any merchant who traded in the Chesapeake would know well, and they were serious enough to be mentioned in many of the tracts and books written about the region. In point of fact, there were few places where "Conveniences … for being on Shore" were to be had, and so, even if Defoe knew nothing about Phillips Point, he appears to have known enough about the Chesapeake to know what was and what was not to be found there. After all, he did know enough to know that the Eastern Shore was a more than likely place to meet an "honest Quaker" such as Moll does. Quakers had begun to arrive on the Eastern Shore in the late 1650s and had flourished there, and Somerset County, where the "honest Quaker" has his plantation, had a substantial population of them.[11]

Finally, one more detail about Phillips Point is suggestive about how much Defoe knew about the Chesapeake. "We … got information," says Moll, "that on the other side the *Bay* … in *Maryland* there was a Ship, which came from *Carolina,* loaden with Rice, and other Goods." Moll is at Phillips Point sometime in the early 1670s; rice was not introduced to Carolina until the late 1670s at the earliest, more likely not until the 1680s, and it was not cultivated extensively enough for export until 1695. Defoe's reference to it as an item of export is anachronistic, and perhaps one could cite this as one more example of his ignorance, but in fact it is an error that tells us how much he did know about the region. Though he was not correct about the exact date Carolina began exporting rice, he knew that rice was an important export for Carolina, and he knew that Maryland, though it had recently become self-sufficient in producing food, produced no rice and would have to import it.[12]

About all of this – the land boom in Westmoreland County, the opening up of the Eastern Shore, the conditions at Phillips Point and the scarcity of settlements and amenities in the Chesapeake, the prevalence of Quakers in the region, the production of rice in Carolina – about all of this Defoe might have been right by chance, but it is more plausible that he knew of many of these as matters of fact, for all of them are related to his deep interest in religion, economics, geography, and trade. Such information was readily available to anyone willing to search it out, and

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Defoe easily could have learned it from books or from conversations with acquaintances and merchants who lived and traded there. He had many ties to the New World through family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, and business associates, all of whom were potential sources of information: his uncle, Henry Foe, whose business as a saddler was mostly with the colonies of America; his friends Charles Lodwick and Charles' half-brother, Matthew Clarkson, both of whom were prominent in New York during the 1680s and 1690s and acted as Defoe's factors there; Charles Morton, his teacher at the Newington Green Academy, who immigrated to New England in 1686. Defoe had other acquaintances who had lived in or traded with America: John Dunton, William Penn, Josiah Abbott, John Sharp, Joseph Beaton, Dalby Thomas, and the printers John Watts and Samuel Keimer. And he had a direct connection with Virginia and Maryland. In 1688, he was a partner in a trading venture on the *Batchelor of London,* which sailed to Boston and New York, delivering merchandise and passengers, and from there to the Chesapeake, where it offloaded servants (whose indentures Defoe had invested in) and took on tobacco.[13] On this voyage, Defoe's factor in the Chesapeake was Samuel Sandford. When Moll and Jemy established their plantation south of Phillips Point, they were settling near Sandford's plantation in Accomack County, on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.[14]

Defoe's references to America bear paying attention to for they suggest that his level of knowledge about the region, though imperfect, was more than superficial. About some extremely important, even obvious, matters he was quite misinformed, and the knowledge he did have was not comprehensive. His interests, though sometimes deep, were usually rather narrow. Still, he did know some things about America, and certain kinds of experiences in the New World interested him intensely, and he returned to them again and again in his novels. In many cases, we will probably never know for certain what he knew, but knowing for certain what he knew is less important than learning about his interests and preoccupations by taking his references to America more seriously than we have.

Defoe sets much of his fiction in the Americas. Captain Singleton begins his freebooting career in the Caribbean, and in *A New Voyage round the World,* the anonymous narrator and his crew traverse the lower tip of South America. Three other novels of his take place almost wholly in the Americas or have lengthy and significant episodes set there: *Robinson Crusoe,* on an island at the mouth of the Orinoco; *Moll Flanders,* in Virginia along the York and Potomac rivers and on the Eastern Shore of

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Maryland; and *Colonel Jack,* on the Western Shore of Maryland, near the Potomac, and, in the final episodes, in Cuba and Mexico.

Judging from these novels, Defoe had a range of interests in the New World: piracy, trade, colonization, the Amerindians, African slaves. But in *Moll Flanders* and in *Colonel Jack,* he was especially fascinated by an institution peculiar to America, indentured servitude. Indentured servants made up the majority of emigrants from Britain up to Independence. They were the principal source of labor in America through the seventeenth century, and though increasingly replaced by African slaves, they remained a significant source of labor in the eighteenth century. Throughout the fictional time periods of *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack* and during the time Defoe himself wrote, the mid-Atlantic colonies were the most important destination for servants, and this apparently is why he set these two novels in Virginia and Maryland. In the seventeenth century, about 130,000 British immigrants came to the Chesapeake, and probably at least four out of every five came as servants. Between 1700 and 1780, over half of the 270,000 British immigrants who came to the thirteen colonies came as indentured servants, and the majority of them came to the Chesapeake. Defoe wrote in 1724 that "within thirty years past above 200000 [have] gone away voluntarily to *Virginia,* and the neighboring Colonies, meerly to seek their Fortunes."[15] His numbers are inflated, but they testify to his sense that what was happening in the mid-Atlantic colonies was of great moment.

People came to the colonies as indentured servants for many reasons. At various times throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, beggars, Gypsies, prostitutes, the poor, the orphaned, "lewd and dangerous persons, rogues, vagrants, and other idle persons, who have no way of livelihood, and refuse to work" were swept off the streets and packed off to the colonies.[16] During the Civil War, royalist prisoners were sent to the Americas, as were Scottish rebels between 1678 and 1685, the Monmouth rebels in 1685, and the rebels who took part in the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite risings (some of the rebels of 1715 end up on Colonel Jack's plantation). A number of individuals – though probably many fewer than contemporary rumor claimed – were kidnapped and forced into servitude (which is how Jack comes to Maryland). Large numbers of Irish were transported by force, often under the pretense of their being vagabonds.[17]

But, by far, most British indentured servants were of two kinds: those who immigrated to the New World and entered into servitude freely and those who were sent to the New World and forced into servitude because they were felons.

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Those who entered into servitude freely did so as a way of getting to the New World. They sold a term of their labor to pay for the cost of their transportation to America. Usually, the servant bound himself (or, much less frequently, herself) by contract to perform such-and-such work for such-and-such a period of time. The master, for his part, promised to provide food, clothing, and shelter for the duration of servitude, and he often awarded his servant so-called "freedom dues" at the end of the stipulated term of service. In the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, a servant typically bound himself for four to five years, and the freedom dues were specified amounts of food, clothing, tools, and weapons. In Maryland, a right of land was included in the freedom dues until 1683.

Criminals made up the second class of indentured servants. Before 1718, the prescribed penalty for all felons was death. Since nearly 300 crimes were counted as felonies, the principal way of making discriminations and mitigating the harshness of the law was to grant royal pardons to felons whom judges thought worthy of mercy, freeing them from the sentence of death on the condition that they be transported out of the country. The 1718 Transportation Act changed this policy radically by declaring transportation a punishment for a large body of non-capital offenses, mostly crimes that came under the heading of grand larceny. The older system of using transportation as a pardon for more serious, capital felonies was retained. How many criminals were transported before 1718 is not known, but between 1718 and 1775 perhaps as many as 40,000 convicts were sent to the colonies, the vast majority to Maryland and Virginia.[18]

Defoe is fascinated with indentured servitude, and in *Moll Flanders* and *Colonel Jack* he rehearses, sometimes by dramatic incident, sometimes by lengthy exposition, the gamut of ways through which one became indentured in the New World and the fate of those who came as servants. Moll first comes to Virginia as the wife of a successful planter, but the episode itself says next to nothing about the typical life of a free immigrant, chronicling instead Moll's mother's career as an indentured servant, highlighting the opportunities the colony offers criminals and portraying the New World as a place where transported felons can be reformed by servitude. In her second journey to Virginia, Moll and Jemy are themselves transported felons. Colonel Jack is an indentured servant, too, though he does not come to the New World as a transported felon. He is kidnapped by a ruthless agent. Still, as in *Moll Flanders,* transportation permeates the novel, for Jack himself sees his kidnapping as a kind of symbolic transportation, a punishment for his being "born a Thief, and

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bred up a Pick-pocket" (*CJ,* p. 123). The life stories of felons who actually were transported to Maryland as servants are interspersed throughout the novel. When the number of immigrants to the Chesapeake fell sharply in the 1680s, the shortfall was made up by turning to groups other than the young English males who had made up the preponderance of indentured servants to that point, groups who "lived near the margin of British society: women, the Irish, convicts, homeless orphans, young children, the poor."[19] It is an interesting fact that, taken together, Moll, Jemy, and Colonel Jack are representative of almost every one of these classes.

The lives of Moll and Jack follow the pattern that writers of colonial promotional literature claimed was the pattern of the lives of indentured servants who came to the New World. America was a place where the poor, the idle, and the criminal began as servants and ended as masters, a transformation that was not only economic but also moral. Of course, Defoe plays significant variations on this pattern (Moll, though transported, buys herself out of servitude; Jack, though a criminal and a servant, is not transported), but these variations simply give complex nuances to the moral and psychological trajectory that was implicit in the movement from servant to master: the rehabilitation of a life given over to guilt, criminality, and idleness through the discipline of exile, punishment, and hard work. Moll and Jack end as the colonial promotional literature promised all transported servants would end, richer and better people. Both prosper in the New World, and, though we might quibble about the depth and sincerity of their regeneration, both end at least morally reformed, if not spiritually renovated.

But the Defoe novel that plays out most fully the drama of moral rehabilitation that is brought to pass by indentured servitude is *Robinson Crusoe.* There are two reasons, I think, why this has never been seen very clearly before. First, the entire sequence – imprisonment, judgment, transportation, servitude, and the founding and improvement of the plantation – is acted out in *Robinson Crusoe* on a figurative level whose terms of reference are religious and psychological, not legal and economic. Second, the episodes that plot this American story of servitude are neither univocal (the island, for instance, is figured as Crusoe's prison *and* the place of his servitude *and* his plantation) nor do they unfold neatly in the sequence they did in reality. In reality, one was imprisoned and then transported and then set to work on a plantation; in *Robinson Crusoe,* Crusoe is set to work on his plantation simultaneously to his being imprisoned on his island, and he is transported before he is imprisoned. There is a reason for this. In *Robinson Crusoe,* the plot of American servitude takes place less

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on the level of the sequence of literal events than on the level of Crusoe's unfolding consciousness: on the level of plot sequence, Crusoe is "transported" to his island before he is "imprisoned" on it; but on the level of his awareness, he first is *conscious* of the island as a place of imprisonment, then he becomes *aware* that he has been judged, and then he *understands* that his condition is that of a transported indentured servant, and so on.

Ever since the work of J. Paul Hunter and George A. Starr, we have become aware of how much *Robinson Crusoe* dramatizes emblematically the protagonist's spiritual crime, punishment, and redemption.[20] What I want to call attention to is the fact that Defoe shapes this story of Crusoe's spiritual bondage and deliverance as a narrative of transportation, indentured servitude, and the establishment of the plantation. For the "ORIGINAL SIN" of his innate rebelliousness, Crusoe is confined on his island, made a "Prisoner lock'd up with the Eternal Bars and Bolts of the Ocean, in an uninhabited Wilderness" (*RC,* pp. 200, 140). As a prison, the island becomes the place where he is held for judgment (prisons in eighteenth-century England were rarely places of punishment; the accused were held in prison until they were brought to trial and, if found guilty, they were punished by death, whipping, transportation, branding, or fining). Here, Crusoe meditates on his crime, assesses his guilt, worries about the judgment that will be passed on him. Only when he begins to realize that "the Island was certainly a Prison to me, and that in the worse Sense of the Word," does he begin to recognize his culpability and to understand that he needs to be delivered not simply from this physical "Captivity" but from the "Load of Guilt" that comes from his "Sin" (*RC,* pp. 128–129).

Crusoe is judged guilty, and he acknowledges that the consequence of this "Judgment from Heaven" is his being "cast on this dreadful Place" in the Americas (*RC,* p. 123). In short, the judgment of God and the consequences of Crusoe's sin are figured as his being transported to the New World and forced to labor in the fields as if he were an indentured servant until he can redeem himself from his bondage.

In *Robinson Crusoe,* this punishment and servitude is portrayed very ambiguously, and the terms of this ambiguity are those which defined criminal transportation. Before 1718, transportation was not legally conceived of as punishment. The punishment for a felony was death, and transportation to the colonies was considered a pardon extended by the sovereign as a gracious act of mercy (thus, Moll Flanders speaks about how her mother "obtain'd the Favour of being Transported to the Plantations" [*MF,* p. 28]). Of course, this was a patent charade, for to be forced into exile and hard labor was a punishment, and those who suffered it thought

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