The Washington Post: TOBACCO
By Susan DeFord
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Three hundred sixty years before the U.S. surgeon general issued his warning about cigarettes, an English king had this to say about using tobacco: "A custome Lothsome to the eye, hatefull to the Nose, harmefull to the braine, dangerous to the Lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the pit that is bottomlesse." That vehement "Counterblaste to Tobacco," penned by James I in 1604, was largely ignored by His Majesty's subjects. In fact, the royal author himself soon learned that his government could grow rich by taxing the vile crop. Since the first day that New World natives offered a smoke to curious European visitors, tobacco has earned praise and damnation. Its history of aiding and harming human culture is very old. This thick-stalked, broad-leafed plant helped England's dreams of empire to take root along the Chesapeake Bay and nurtured our country's beginnings in present-day Virgina and Maryland. King James's son and successor, Charles I, complained that Virginia, England's first colony, was "wholly built on smoke." But even in those days, success was costly. The tobacco-based economy brought Africans as slaves to work on plantations and fortified racism in the new society. It also plunged many planters deeply in debt to English merchants. The early English settlers who founded Jamestown in 1607 were not ignorant of tobacco. In the previous century, European explorers had provided detailed descriptions of peculiar native practices that included tobacco use. From Canada to South America, they found native people smoking it in pipes, puffing it in leaf-wrapped cigars and reed-like cigarettes or chewing it. The indigenous American people, believed to have discovered tobacco in the wild in South America, spread its cultivation and used the plant for social ceremony, spiritual contemplation and everyday indulgence. Some Europeans criticized the habit. "In behavior and looks, they were very repulsive," Amerigo Vespucci, the Spanish explorer, reported in 1499. The natives of an island off the Venezuelan coast, he said, "all had their cheeks swollen out with a green herb inside, which they were constantly chewing like beasts, so that they could scarcely utter speech." The plant was known by various local names, but an early Spanish historian mistakenly called it "tobacco," a Caribbean term for a tube used with snuff, and it stuck. Samples of tobacco crossed the Atlantic to Europe during the 1500s with Spanish and Portuguese mariners. Later in the century, English seafarers raiding Spanish territory in the New World brought some back as part of the loot. Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the most famous Elizabethan courtiers, took up pipe smoking and helped to spark a fad that became a fashionable and expensive English habit. During this time, tobacco gained a reputation in Europe as a universal curative, an odd notion that spread despite evidence that it was used only sparingly as a therapeutic measure in the New World. European physicians prescribed tobacco as a powder, ointment, gargle or other concoction to cure sores, asthma, labor pains, flatulence, headaches, cancer and epilepsy, among other ailments. About 1560, Jean Nicot, the French ambassador to Portugal, sent tobacco seeds to the French queen, Catherine de Medici, and told her Portuguese accounts of the plant's medicinal powers. Nineteenth-century chemists gave his name to nicotine, tobacco's chief active ingredient. European explorers unwittingly revealed nicotine's powerful hold when they described how some American natives mixed tobacco with lime or powdered seashells. That chemical combination, originally thought by explorers to be a teeth whitener, actually helped nicotine to move faster into the brain, modern researchers say. The spreading

nicotine habit proved to be the salvation of the troubled colony at Jamestown. In its first years, disease, famine and hostile Indians plagued the settlement, which nearly collapsed in 1610. The England-based company that founded Jamestown kept it going with shipments of food, supplies and new colonists. But the company and the English government grew increasingly anxious because the settlement appeared unprofitable. Besides finding gold and silver, the colonists were to produce goods for England that included copper, iron, steel, ship timber, masts, wood ashes, furs, wine and dyes. The colonists sent samples of various goods, but the struggle to survive left little time to build the hoped-for industries. Then, in 1612, John Rolfe, a young Englishman and future husband of Pocahontas, planted seeds of a West Indian variety of tobacco. The plants flourished and produced tobacco stronger and sweeter than the short, tough variety grown by the local Algonquian Indians. During the next few years, colonists sent small amounts of their tobacco to London, where it competed well with imported Spanish leaf and commanded steep prices. Ralph Hamor, a friend of Rolfe and a leader in the Jamestown colony, boasted that "no country under the Sunne, may, or doth affoord more pleasant, sweet and strong Tobacco." In 1617, Capt. John Smith, another Jamestown leader, wrote that the colony's new governor arrived to find "but five or six houses, the Church downe, the palisades broken, the Bridge in pieces, the Well of fresh water spoiled" but, in a sign of success, "the market-place, and streets, and all other spare places planted with Tobacco." Virginia had found its moneymaker, much to royal dismay. James I and the Virginia Company, which supported the settlement, at first tried to discourage the colonists from cultivating the "deceivable weed." They repeatedly exhorted colonists to develop traditional industries such as silkworm cultivation and vineyards because ready markets existed for these products, and their development in America would allow England to avoid importing from belligerent European neighbors. But the London marketplace welcomed increasing shipments of Virginia tobacco. The crop of 1618 was 20,000 pounds. Four years later, despite an Indian attack that killed nearly one-third of Virginia's 1,200 colonists, the settlement sent a crop of 60,000 pounds. By 1627, the shipment totaled 500,000 pounds, and two years later, that tripled. "The discovery that tobacco could be successfully grown and profitably sold was the most momentous single fact in the first century of settlement on the Chesapeake Bay," Joseph C. Robert wrote in his history, The Story of Tobacco in America. "Tobacco had guaranteed that the Jamestown experiment would not fail." King James and his successor continued to complain, but since their governments collected taxes on all colonial exports, they eventually took pains to protect the new enterprise. It quickly became the government's richest source of revenue. Tobacco's success brought increasing shiploads of immigrants, who spread north to the Potomac valley and the Chesapeake's eastern shore. After the colony of Maryland was founded in 1634, tobacco quickly became its chief money crop. In Maryland and Virginia, the leaf became legal currency. Early in Virginia's settlement, for example, tobacco could buy a wife for a colonist, who simply paid 120 to 150 pounds of tobacco to choose one of the women shipped over by the Virginia Company. Taxes were paid and ministers' salaries calculated in tobacco, and even a meal at a tavern could be had for a few pounds of tobacco. In 1693, a special tobacco tax helped to establish the College of William and Mary at Williamsburg, one of the first institutions of higher learning in the colonies. By the end of the 17th century, the tobacco culture dominated an area from the southern boundary of Pennsylvania to the northern tidewater

area of North Carolina, according to Robert's history. The 40 million pounds of tobacco produced each season represented nearly all of the leaf commercially grown in the British dominions. Though tobacco gave Virginia and Maryland colonists a livelihood, it wasn't an easy one. Unless they could purchase or capture Indian fields, planters had to clear forests. They searched for fertile, well-drained soil, then girdled the trees to kill them. In late winter or early spring, they sowed seed in a special bed. About mid-spring, workers transplanted the seedlings to fields, where they were hoed daily and tended by hand. Workers pinched off the top flower bud to force the plant's growth into the leaves. For this task, planters often grew a long thumbnail and hardened it over a candle flame. At summer's end, they cut mature tobacco leaves and began the curing process. The leaves were hung, usually in ventilated barns, to produce a dry but pliable leaf that would survive the long trip across the Atlantic. These cured tobacco leaves were packed tightly into large wooden casks called hogsheads that could weigh more than 1,000 pounds when full. The hogsheads, bearing the planter's insignia, were rolled overland or carried by small boats to riverfront landings where they were loaded aboard ships bound for England. Because tobacco sapped the soil's fertility, a field was productive for only a few years. The quest for new land thus exerted one of the early pressures for America's westward expansion. Such hard work demanded field hands, a scarce commodity in the early years of the overwhelmingly male, scattered settlements of Virginia and Maryland. Recruiters for the tobacco colonies stationed themselves in England's market towns and port cities, collaring thousands of the country's landless, jobless poor and promising new starts across the Atlantic. They also negotiated with the English government to take convicts from overcrowded prisons. The price these emigrants paid for passage to Virginia and Maryland was "indentured servitude" -- from four to 15 years of labor for planters who bought their contracts. Through most of the 17th century, white English servants were the primary source of labor in the tobacco colonies. Those who withstood the high mortality rate from disease, harsh living conditions and terms of their indenture won the chance to strike out on their own. Some became landowners and planters, but for many the climb was too steep. No such promises were made to Africans, who in later years were brought to the tobacco colonies. The earliest mention of their presence refers to them as commodities purchased by Jamestown colonists. "About the last of August came in a Dutch man-of-warre that sold us 20 Negars," John Rolfe wrote in 1619. Following an already established racial hierarchy, legal slavery first appeared in Virginia and Maryland in 1660. Virginia later gathered its slavery laws into a systematic code in 1705. Slaves were valued in pounds of tobacco, typically at higher rates than for white servants because slaves remained property for life. African women were especially prized because, unlike English women, they were put to work in the fields and any children they bore enriched the owner's estate. Starting in the late 1700s, the numbers of indentured servants began to decline as tobacco cultivation spread and wealthy and middle classes expanded. As a result, planters imported increasing numbers of Africans and blacks from the West Indies. In Virginia, shipments by British and colonial "slavers" helped to increase the black population from about 12,000 in 1708 to 30,000 in 1730. In Maryland, the number of blacks rose from about 8,000 in 1710 to 25,000 in 1720. By the end of the 18th century, Virginia and Maryland had more than 395,000 blacks, 57 percent of the slave population in the newly formed United States, according to Arthur Pierce Middleton's Tobacco Coast. "Without slave labor, the

great plantations could never have existed," says T.H. Breen, author of Tobacco Culture. A humble planter could aspire to the gentry if he could purchase a few slaves, put more land into tobacco, then reinvest his earnings in still more slaves and even greater production. Along mid-Atlantic rivers rose estates testifying to the tobacco wealth of their owners -- such as the Fitzhughs, Byrds, Carters, Randolphs, Lees, Diggeses and Wormeleys -- and the labor of their slaves. Believed to be among the richest was Robert "King" Carter of Virginia who, at his death in 1732, was reputed to own 300,000 acres and 700 slaves. Despite fluctuating prices, production in the tobacco colonies continued to rise. In 1775, Virginia and Maryland's tobacco production exceeded 100 million pounds, enough to supply England and much of Europe.

But all was not well in the tobacco grower's world. Tidewater planters had incurred huge debts to British tobacco merchants, who had extended them large sums of credit in good years to import British goods favored by the upper class. After 1750, financial crises abroad forced English merchants to demand payment from the planters, who often couldn't produce the cash. George Washington was among those planters, according to Breen's book.

"It is but an irksome thing to a free mind to be always hampered in Debt," Washington complained in a 1764 letter to a British merchant. Washington, Breen wrote, eventually failed at tobacco but was more successful at growing wheat. Thomas Jefferson also was deep in debt to British merchants and wrote sourly that "planters were a species of property, annexed to certain mercantile houses in London." The situation humiliated planters who considered themselves independent producers and managers of large enterprises. Increasingly, tobacco was viewed as the product of an era that was ending. After the Revolutionary War, negotiators calculated that Virginians accounted for nearly half of the debt owed by Americans to British citizens, a sum totaling millions of pounds sterling that took a quarter century to resolve. After the revolution, many planters in Virginia and Maryland turned to corn and wheat. In 1791, a report to President Washington on Northern Virginia agriculture noted appprovingly that "people are generally exchanging tobacco for wheat . . . our Country will soon assume an appearance that will not only do honor to our climate, but ourselves." Of course, tobacco didn't disappear, and its production expanded with the frontier in areas such as North Carolina and Kentucky. Susan DeFord is a freelance writer in Silver Spring and a regular contributor to The Post.
CAPTION: Historic St. Mary's City in Southern Maryland features a farm where tobacco is grown and processed the old-fashioned way. Here, a worker examines the dried leaf. CAPTION: An English tobacco label from about 1700 shows slaves enjoying their produce on a Virginia tobacco plantation. CAPTION: A colonial planter and his clerk oversee slaves packing tobacco leaves for shipment to England in this hand-colored 18th-century engraving.