According to an old joke, it takes twelve Virginians to change a light bulb: one to replace the bulb and eleven to talk about how much better the old one was. At times in recent years, it has seemed that something similar might be said of historians of the early Chesapeake, with the preponderant majority described as surrounding the expired fixture, comparing it to others further north, and debating the causes of its decline. Beneath this caricature, however, lies a more complex reality. Analysts of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake have assessed its social stability and engaged in a related debate over the origins of slavery and racism in America. Among eighteenth-century scholars, the lines of battle are less clearly drawn, but the primary concerns have been the extent to which the gentry class dominated their society and the American Revolution's effects upon that dominance.

Since the late 1960s, Edmund S. Morgan (American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia, 1975) and other historians have described the region as a chaotic place during the first century of English settlement. High mortality rates, the vacillating fortunes of the tobacco economy, and other factors encouraged a dispersed settlement pattern, cutthroat competition among the well-to-do, and unrestrained exploitation of smaller farmers, servants, and slaves. All of this hampered the development of strong communities or even of a sense of permanent commitment to life in the New World. More recently Darrett B. and Anita H. Rutman (A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650-1750, 1984), James Perry (The Formation of a Society on Virginia's Eastern Shore, 1615-1655, 1990), and others have insisted that despite these problems seventeenth-century settlers created social networks and communities within which they ordered and lived their lives. Some of these scholars argue that much of the disorder portrayed in earlier studies reflected mistaken attempts to judge the Chesapeake by the standards of the harmonious towns which seemingly characterized early New England. They further assert that the Chesapeake experience rather than New England's represented the mainstream of early American development. Such sentiments have become so strong in some quarters that one participant in a recent conference on New Directions in Virginia History felt compelled to warn against excessive "New England bashing."

Coinciding with this debate on stability has been a related discussion of the origins of slavery. Some historians suggest that the small size of the African American population and the relative fluidity of Anglo-American society in the Chesapeake made acculturation and the acquisition of freedom and significant economic and social standing much easier for blacks in the seventeenth century than would be the case later. Others have asserted that white racial prejudice overwhelmingly oppressed blacks from the beginning.

By the early eighteenth century, most scholars agree, the Chesapeake was becoming a more settled place. The growing reliance on African American slavery promoted solidarity among whites of all economic classes, even though the economic opportunities for poorer colonists may have been declining. The emergence of a larger native-born population and perhaps an...