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# Costa, Antônio Vieira da

(c. 1732–1796),

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*liberto* (freed person) gold miner, farmer, and field commander of the *pardo* (mixed-raced) militia of Sabará, in the Portuguese colonial captaincy of Minas Gerais. Brazi, was born in Passagem de Mariana in the mineral-rich interior of southeastern Brazil. His father, Jacinto Vieira da Costa (?–1760), was a wealthy Portuguese miner from Braga; his mother, Inácia, was a Yoruba-speaking West African slave. Antônio assumed control of the family estate after his father's death in 1760, becoming himself a wealthy man. An officer in the local militia, Antônio rose to the highest rank of field commander in the early 1780s. Yet while his father had been field commander of the white militia, Antônio served in the *pardo* militia. An example of socioeconomic mobility among persons of mixed European and African descent in colonial Brazil, his story also illustrates how colonial institutions categorized and interacted with African descendants.

Costa was born a slave to a mother who, like many slave women, was driven to or forced into a sexual relationship with her white master, yet Costa experienced little of the typical life of a Brazilian slave. Instead of being forced to pan for gold or labor in sugar canefields, he learned to read and write and helped to manage his father's estate. He was declared free, along with his siblings, in his father's will, and thus experienced manumission under more advantageous circumstances than most manumitted slaves, who either purchased or exchanged their freedom for a term of servitude.

Through manumission, Costa moved up in the social hierarchy. His father's death in 1760, moreover, propelled him into a socioeconomic position achieved by few free African descendants in colonial Caribbean and Latin American societies, where a small but distinguishable population of mixed descent was a common feature of slave society. One of eight appointed heirs, all children of slave women, Costa was entitled to an impressive inheritance. More important, two days before his father's death Costa bought in partnership with his godfather his father's entire estate, which included mining plots, farms, townhouses, and 391 slaves. The sale of property between living relatives was a common strategy families in colonial Brazil used to avoid property losses caused by a member's death. Costa's father, aware that his *pardo* children would have difficulties proving his paternity and claiming their inheritance, arranged a sale that tied up the estate and left his oldest son the *de facto* owner of his property and a very wealthy man.

Between 1760 and 1796, Costa strove to minimize the potential drain that his father's creditors, his half-siblings' inheritance, and the decline in local gold production posed to the value of his estate. He invested in cattle ranches and African slaves to diversify and maintain the productivity of his economic pursuits. The size and value of his estate at the time of his death attests to the success of his efforts.

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His focus on agriculture and cattle raising and continuous employment of slave labor contributed, moreover, to the economic shift away from gold mining and toward slave-based production of foodstuff for internal markets that characterized late colonial Minas Gerais.

Around 1771, Costa was appointed captain and later, in 1785, field commander of the auxiliary regiment of the infantry of *pardo* men of Sabará, a town of 7,589 inhabitants within a judicial district of 39,925 inhabitants in 1776. The auxiliary forces, or militias, created in the sixteenth century to supplement the regular troops, were ordered in 1766 to recruit *pardo* (colored) and *preto* (black) men, along with whites, resulting in regiments organized by these categories. In 1780 the governor of Minas Gerais further strengthened the militias by appointing field commanders to each regiment. Because officers in the auxiliary force were often chosen based on social connections rather than military record, Costa's nomination as field commander reveals prominence in local society. The crown's confirmation of his rank, moreover, allowed him to enjoy privileges and some of the prestige reserved to the military class. He was also expected to defend the colonies from foreign invasion and internal threats. In 1794 he was asked to guard the town jail during festivities held for the birth of the Portuguese princess—to which white officers of the colonial militia had been invited.

Antônio Vieira da Costa died unmarried in 1796. He had no appointed heirs. One document mentions a daughter, but she does not appear in his probate records. His household included a half-sister and the freed mother of one of his brothers. He died a wealthy man, the owner of plots of land, mining sites, three large farms, three cattle ranches, and 143 slaves employed in a variety of trades centered on the regional mining economy. He also died a central figure within a social circle and community comprising free and freed persons of African descent like himself. Antônio's wealth and influence, however, did not exempt him from being categorized by his ancestry and possibly skin color when he was appointed to the highest rank within the local militia. With that appointment he was given authority over several of his fellow townsmen, but only those who shared his mixed African and European ancestry. His economic success, while extraordinary for a former slave of African descent, did not challenge the institutional and social categories that framed hierarchical relationships in colonial Brazil.

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