Indentured Servitude in Colonial America

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One half to two thirds of all immigrants to Colonial America arrived as indentured servants. At times, as many as 75% of the population of some colonies were under terms of indenture. Even on the frontier, according to the 1790 U.S. Census, 6% of the Kentucky population was indentured.

Citizens of the colonies would deal with indenture on a daily basis. My intent is to give the reenactor or interpreter some of the background about working beside, owning or having been an indentured servant.

This was a labor system, not a system of apprenticeship. (Galenson, 6) The historic basis for indenture grew out of English agricultural servitude and began because of labor shortages in England and in the colonies. It developed at a time when England had a great number of people being displaced from farming. This led to an early growth of the indentured labor system.

The importation of white servants under contracts known as indentures proved more profitable as a short-term labor source than enslaving Indians or using free labor. Eventually, the final attempt to ease labor shortages was enslavement of Africans. Wherever you find slavery, you first find indentures.

A labor-intensive cash crop such as tobacco required a large work force. The earliest indentured servants were brought to Virginia as farm laborers. The importance of indenture can be seen in Virginia, where in 1618 the colony offered a headright, a grant of 50 acres per servant, as an incentive to planters to import more servants from England. The headright became the property of the owner, not the servant. (Galenson, 12) According to Galenson, “the basic elements of the system were in use by the Virginia Company by 1620, and may have been worked out earlier …”(3)

In practice, the servant would sell himself to an agent or ship captain before leaving the British Isles. In turn, the contract would be sold to a buyer in the colonies to recover the cost of the passage. The crossing in steerage was grim. One indentured servant, Thomas Morally, was given three biscuits a day to eat and each mess of five men was given three pints of water per day.

Criminals convicted of a capital crime in England could be transported in lieu of a death sentence (for the theft of an item with a cost of as little as one shilling). Servitude also could result from indebtedness, where a person, their spouse or parents owed money, and the person was sold into servitude to recover the debt. In other cases, a parish indentured orphans in order to keep them off the poor roles. Plus, the poor sometimes sold themselves into indenture just to survive.

In most cases, the work of the indentured servant would be household or agricultural unskilled labor. There was also a great demand for skilled craftsmen. If an indentured servant had a skill that was in demand, like weaving, smithing or carpentry, the change of negotiating a shorter contract was quite good.

In theory, the person is only selling his or her labor. In practice, however, indentured servants were basically slaves and the courts enforced the laws that made it so. The treatment of the servant was harsh and often brutal. In fact, the Virginia Colony prescribed “bodily punishment for not heeding the commands of the master.” (Ballagh, 45) Half the servants died in the first two years. As a result of this type of treatment, runaways were frequent. The courts realized this was a problem and started to demand that everyone have identification and travel papers. (A.E. Smith 264-270).

If a servant worked their full indenture, they received freedom dues, which were based on Hebrew law from the Old Testament. (Deut. 15:12-15) Many colonies also granted land to the newly freed servant.
As reenactors of the eighteenth century, every one of us would interact with indentured servants on a daily basis. A fairly large number of us would have been servants at one time. Yet, at most reenactments, this institution is noticeably lacking, along with travel papers and identification papers. As an early Virginian, John Pory, put it, “Our principal wealth … consisteth in servants.” (Galenson 3)

Part II

Indentured Servants In The U.S.

Indentured servants first arrived in America in the decade following the settlement of Jamestown by the Virginia Company in 1607.

The idea of indentured servitude was born of a need for cheap labor. The earliest settlers soon realized that they had lots of land to care for, but no one to care for it. With passage to the Colonies expensive for all but the wealthy, the Virginia Company developed the system of indentured servitude to attract workers. Indentured servants became vital to the colonial economy.

The timing of the Virginia colony was ideal. The Thirty Year's War had left Europe's economy depressed, and many skilled and unskilled laborers were without work. A new life in the New World offered a glimmer of hope; this explains how one-half to two-thirds of the immigrants who came to the American colonies arrived as indentured servants.

Servants typically worked four to seven years in exchange for passage, room, board, lodging and freedom dues. While the life of an indentured servant was harsh and restrictive, it wasn't slavery. There were laws that protected some of their rights. But their life was not an easy one, and the punishments meted out to people who wronged were harsher than those for non-servants. An indentured servant's contract could be extended as punishment for breaking a law, such as running away, or in the case of female servants, becoming pregnant.

For those that survived the work and received their freedom package, many historians argue that they were better off than those new immigrants who came freely to the country. Their contract may have included at least 25 acres of land, a year's worth of corn, arms, a cow and new clothes. Some servants did rise to become part of the colonial elite, but for the majority of indentured servants that survived the treacherous journey by sea and the harsh conditions of life in the New World, satisfaction was a modest life as a freeman in a burgeoning colonial economy.

In 1619 the first black Africans came to Virginia. With no slave laws in place, they were initially treated as indentured servants, and given the same opportunities for freedom dues as whites. However, slave laws were soon passed – in Massachusetts in 1641 and Virginia in 1661 –and any small freedoms that might have existed for blacks were taken away.

As demands for labor grew, so did the cost of indentured servants. Many landowners also felt threatened by newly freed servants demand for land. The colonial elite realized the problems of indentured servitude. Landowners turned to African slaves as a more profitable and ever-renewable source of labor and the shift from indentured servants to racial slavery had begun.
Part III

Indentured Servants

The growth of tobacco, rice, and indigo and the plantation economy created a tremendous need for labor in Southern English America. Without the aid of modern machinery, human sweat and blood was necessary for the planting, cultivation, and harvesting of these cash crops. While slaves existed in the English colonies throughout the 1600s, indentured servitude was the method of choice employed by many planters before the 1680s. This system provided incentives for both the master and servant to increase the working population of the Chesapeake colonies.

Virginia and Maryland operated under what was known as the "HEADRIGHT SYSTEM." The leaders of each colony knew that labor was essential for economic survival, so they provided incentives for planters to import workers. For each laborer brought across the Atlantic, the master was rewarded with 50 acres of land. This system was used by wealthy plantation aristocrats to increase their land holdings dramatically. In addition, of course, they received the services of the workers for the duration of the indenture.

This system seemed to benefit the servant as well. Each INDENTURED SERVANT would have their fare across the Atlantic paid in full by their master. A contract was written that stipulated the length of service — typically five years. The servant would be supplied room and board while working in the master's fields. Upon completion of the contract, the servant would receive “freedom dues,” a pre-arranged termination bonus. This might include land, money, a gun, clothes or food. On the surface it seemed like a terrific way for the luckless English poor to make their way to prosperity in a new land. Beneath the surface, this was not often the case.

Only about 40 percent of indentured servants lived to complete the terms of their contracts. Female servants were often the subject of harassment from their masters. A woman who became pregnant while a servant often had years tacked on to the end of her service time. Early in the century, some servants were able to gain their own land as free men. But by 1660, much of the best land was claimed by the large land owners. The former servants were pushed westward, where the mountainous land was less arable and the threat from Indians constant. A class of angry, impoverished pioneer farmers began to emerge as the 1600s grew old. After BACON'S REBELLION in 1676, planters began to prefer permanent African slavery to the headright system that had previously enabled them to prosper.