

Indentured Servants in North America

A person who came to America during the 17th to 19th centuries, and was placed under contract to work for another over a period of time, usually from four to seven years then freed of their debt. Generally they included redemptioners, victims of religious or political persecution, persons kidnapped for the purpose, convicts and paupers.



At first, it was the Headright System

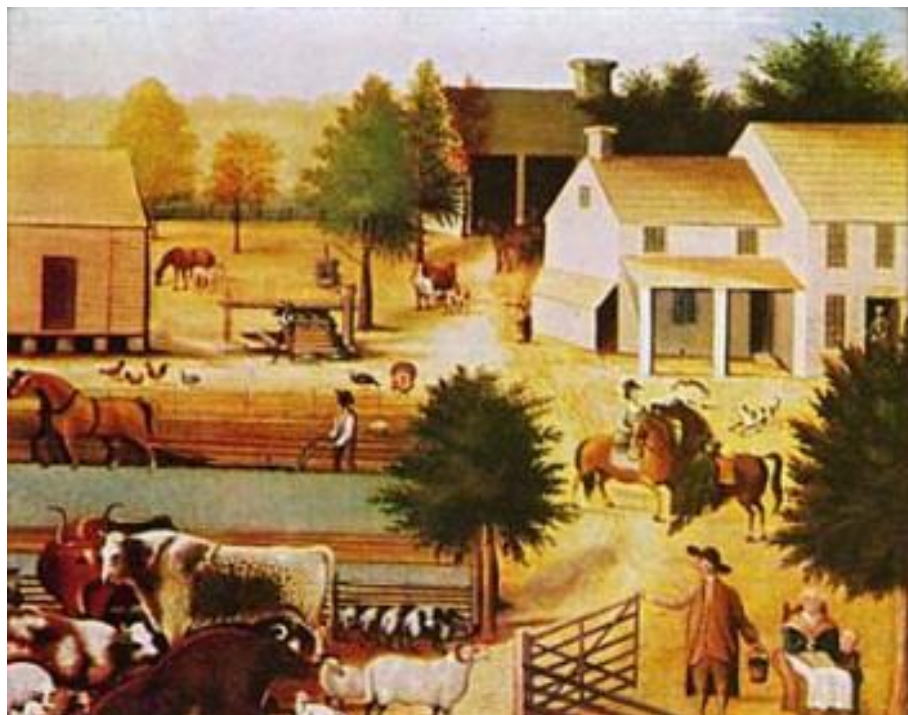
It started in the early 1600's when the Virginia Company was formed to solve the labor shortage in the colonies. Each colonist living in Virginia was granted two headrights, two tracts of land 50 acres each. New settlers who paid their own passage to Virginia were granted one headright. Families were encouraged to migrate together.

IV.
NOVA BRITANNIA:
OFFERING MOST
Excellent fruites by Planting in
VIRGINIA.
Exciting all such as be well affected
to further the same.



LONDON
Printed for SAMUEL MACHAM, and are to be sold at
his Shop in Pauls Church-yard, at the
Signe of the Bul-head.
1609.

The rich got richer

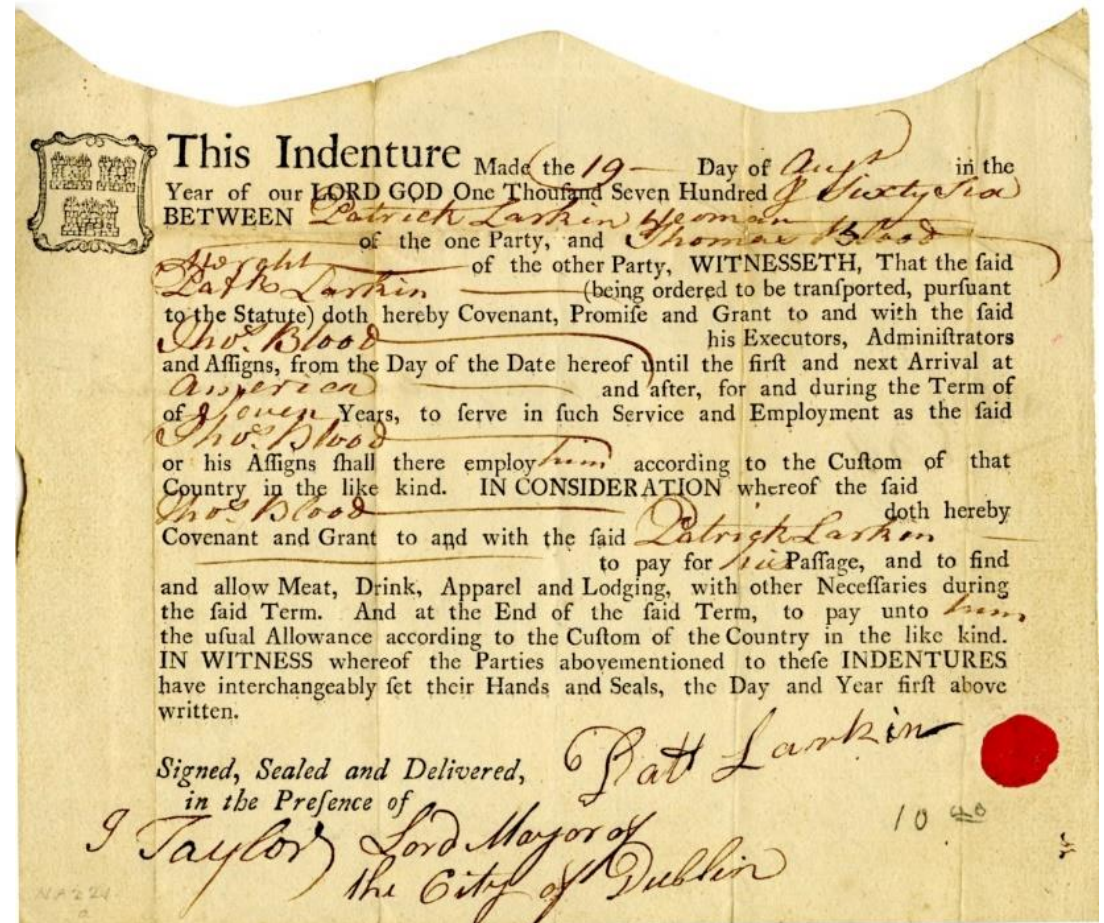


Land ownership was a reason to work hard for their own future but the British economy was weak. Many did not have the money to pay their own passage.

Headrights were given to the wealthy if they paid someone's passage. The law at the time even gave an owner a headright if they imported a slave!

The Indenture System Begins

The first settlers now had too much land and not enough labor. The *Thirty Years War* left many skilled and unskilled workers unemployed. Life in the New World, especially Jamestown, appealed to many. Over half of the early immigrants who came to the American colonies were Indentured Servants.



The terms of Indenture

HANOVER TOWN, *May 12, 1774.*
JUST arrived in *York River*, the *Brilliant*,
Captain *Miller*, from *London*, with a Cargo of choice healthy
INDENTED SERVANTS, the Sale of which will begin at *Richmond*
Town on *Wednesday* the 25th of *May*, among whom are the following
Tradesmen, *viz.* Blacksmiths, Brasiers, Edgetool Makers, Bricklayers
and Plaisterers, Shoemakers, Stone Masons, Capenters, Joiners and
Cabinet-Makers, Cloth Weavers, Stocking Weavers, Barbers and
Peruke makers, Gardeners, Farmers, Labourers and Husbandmen,
Book-keepers and Schoolmasters, Tailors, Silk Dyers, Bakers, Painters,
Leather Dressers, Sawyers, Butchers, a Steward, Groom, Surgeon,
&c. I will sell them very cheap, for ready Money, or Tobacco; and
for those on Credit, Bond and Security will be required.
(1) THOMAS SMITH.

Servants typically worked from four to seven years in exchange for passage, room, board, lodging, and freedom dues.

In 1619 the first black Africans came to Virginia. There were no slave laws so they were also Indentured Servants with limited rights. Then slave laws were passed in 1661 (Massachusetts in 1641).

After the contract expires

When the contract expired, the servant was paid “freedom dues” of corn, tools, clothing and sometimes wages and were allowed to leave the plantation.

On paper, it seemed to be an excellent deal for many but in real life, it was only one step short of slavery.



The “real” story of Indenture

Men, women, and sometimes children signed these contracts. Prices depended on their skills and abilities. Women were domestics, children were servants and men were laborers. Many families were broken up on arrival. They were classed as property, had few rights and they could be inherited or re-sold.



Women were exploited



Indentured Servants could not marry or have children. Their contracts could be extended if a woman became pregnant or if they ran away, were captured and then returned to their owner.

A servant could not keep any money earned nor could he or she work for anyone else while employed under their master.

Punishment of servants was legal!

An unruly servant could be legally whipped or punished for improper behavior. Due to poor living conditions, hard labor, adjusting to the climate and contracting new diseases, many servants did not live long enough to see their freedom or the expiration of their contract.



Many Indentures ran away!

The Delaware Gazette.
F R I D A Y, December 4, 1795.

Ten Dollars Reward.
RAN away from the subscriber, living at Milford, Kent county, and state of Delaware, on Saturday the 23d inst. an apprentice boy named Caleb Duhadaway, about 17 years old, small of his age, of a dark complexion, fair hair, a down, sickly look, middling slim; a saddler by trade, and will profess to be a very great workman: had on when he went away a grey coat, very long, with oval buttons, white dimity vest, green striped cloth trowsers, white linen shirt, white cotton stockings and middling old hat; and took with him a spotted cotton jacket and trowsers.—Whoever takes up and secures the said boy, so that his master may get him again, shall have the above reward, and all reasonable charges, paid by
JAMES MILLECHOP.
Milford, Oct. 26, 1795. 65

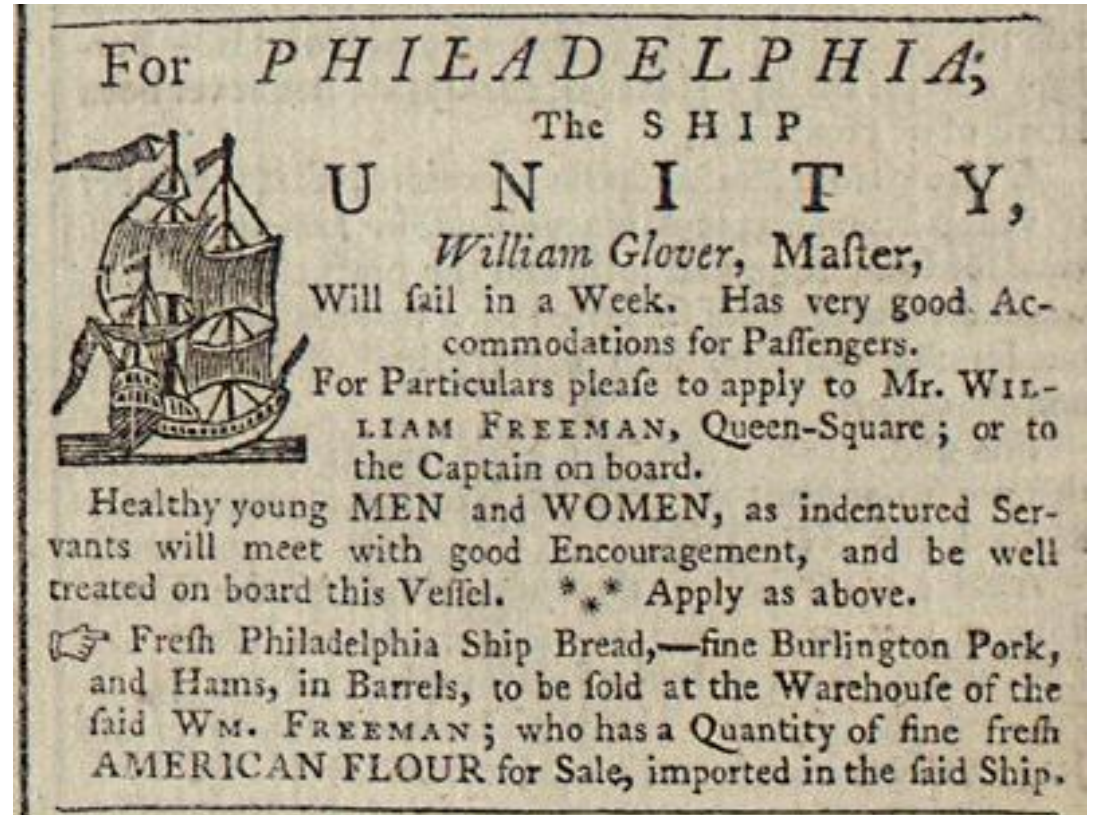
Since most runaways spoke English and were white, they were more difficult to capture than black slaves. Records of the number of Indentures were not recorded so most information about them was taken from court records and runaway notices in the newspapers.

Most Indentures were Criminals!

Convicts, both men and women, were sold to the plantation owners. Most were male, young, unskilled, and poor.

One-Fourth of the British immigrants to the colonies were convicts!

Usually, they had been guilty of grand larceny and sent to the colonies for rehabilitation.




For *PHILADELPHIA*,
The SHIP
U N I T Y,
William Glover, Master,
Will sail in a Week. Has very good Accommodations for Passengers.
For Particulars please to apply to Mr. **WILLIAM FREEMAN**, Queen-Square; or to the Captain on board.
Healthy young **MEN** and **WOMEN**, as indentured Servants will meet with good Encouragement, and be well treated on board this Vessel. * * * Apply as above.
➡ Fresh Philadelphia Ship Bread,—fine Burlington Pork, and Hams, in Barrels, to be sold at the Warehouse of the said **WM. FREEMAN**; who has a Quantity of fine fresh **AMERICAN FLOUR** for Sale, imported in the said Ship.


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Decline in the need for Indentured Servants

To Be DISPOSED of,
A Likely Servant Mans Time for 4 Years
who is very well Qualified for a Clerk or to teach
a School, he Reads, Writes, understands Arithmetick and
Accompts very well, Enquire of the Printer hereof.



Lately improted from Antigua
and to be Sold by Edward Jones in
Isacc Norris's Alley.
A PARCEL of likely Ne-
gro Women & Girls from thirteen
to one and twenty Years of age, and have
all had the Small-Pox.



To Be SOLD,
TWO verly likely Negroe
Boys, Enquire of Capt. Benjamin Chri-
stian, at his House in Arch-Street.
Also a Quantity of very good Lime-juice
to be Sold cheap.

From a Philadelphia newspaper

As demands for cheap labor grew, so did the cost of indentured servants. Many landowners felt threatened by those freed after service and competing against them. African slaves were now seen as a more beneficial and cheaper source of labor. Some freed indentures achieved elite status but most only led modest lives in the colonies.



**INDENTURED SERVITUDE
ADVERTISED AS PAID LABOR
OPERATED AS SLAVE LABOR**

THE END