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An Analysis of the Institution of Indentured Servitude in Early Colonial America

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This paper presents the economic and social issues that lead to the rise of indentured servitude as a means of acquiring labor in Early Colonial America. The text focuses on the condition in Europe, the conditions for those who crossed the Atlantic, and the condition for the servants in the New World. Also, this text provides a comparison of New England and Virginia and the Middle Colonies with regard to their respective uses of indentured servitude.

> *The Genius of the People in a Country where every one can have land to work upon leads them so naturally into Agriculture, that it prevails over every other occupation. There can be no stronger Instances of this [phenomenon], than in the servants Imported from Europe of different trades; as soon as the Time stipulated in their Indentures is expired, they immediately quit their Masters, and get a small tract of land, in settling which for the first three or four years they lead the most miserable lives, and in the most abject poverty; but all this is patiently bourne and submitted to with the greatest cheerfulness, the Satisfaction of being Land holders smooths every difficulty.*[1]

As schoolchildren, the vast majority of Americans are taught the history of America through the stories of the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock, the Boston Tea Party, and Washington's crossing of the Delaware. The unfortunate thing about this "exceptionalist" history is that the period of time between the first event and the latter two, amounting to roughly one and a half centuries, is completely ignored. This is lamentable. Between the settlement of Plymouth and the onset of the American Revolution, there is a history that we can look at through the luxury of hindsight and begin to see the social, political and economic evolution of the emerging United States. Many events transpired in the course of these six or seven generations. Land was cleared, crops planted, distinguished families emerged, and the mechanisms of the political and social life of what would become the United States of America were pieced together. In many ways, one can even begin to see the differences between New England and the Middle and Southern colonies that will eventually lead to the American Civil War.

One of the major developments during this time period was the incorporation of an institution revolving around labor: indentured servitude. I stumbled upon this topic while reading for a class in early-American history and was shocked when I read that as much as 75 percent of those who

immigrated to America between 1620 and 1700 were, in fact, indentured servants—those who had sold their labor for a prescribed period of time, usually four to seven years, to pay for the cost of their transportation.[2] In fact, many Americans who can trace their lineage back to the Great Migration will find that their ancestors did begin their American endeavors as indentured servants.

Indentured servitude was instrumental in solving some of the problems faced by the new, struggling colonists in North America, as well as those experienced back home in their native Britain. In Britain many felt that they were beginning to experience overcrowding as many rural folk moved into more populated areas due to the system of enclosure. Also, the Elizabethan Poor Law (1601) had the effect of displacing a great many people who were classified as "sturdy beggars," meaning those who were able to work but chose not to do so. Through these laws a great number of English citizens were rounded up and placed in correctional institutions or work houses. As the number of these displaced persons increased due to the enactment of enclosure, the populations of these institutions swelled and created, in many of the days' opinion, a need to disperse these people. The new colonies in America served this purpose well. An added benefit of the transportation of these folks to America was the great need for labor throughout the new colonies. Land needed to be cleared, crops planted and harvested, homes needed to be built, and an entire community and government infrastructure needed to be constructed. Community buildings, such as courthouses, churches and meeting houses needed to be built as well. Finally, religion, long portrayed as a determinative reason for the British settlement of America, actually played a much smaller role than most Americans had thought. While religion was a prevalent reason for the settlement of New England, we will see that it played a much smaller role when we examine the Middle and Southern colonies.

It is my intention to familiarize the reader with some of the major social and economic factors that influenced indentured servitude and its creation, and some of the effects indentured servitude had on the social and economic structures of both New England and the Southern Colonies until its replacement by the African slave trade. It is important to note that indentured servitude was used very differently in New England than it was in the tobacco-growing colonies of Virginia and Maryland. Because of this, it could be argued that two very different colonies were being established, and the ideas regarding bound labor that developed at this time would have a lasting effect on the United States.

From England and Europe to America

In the years leading up to England's successful colonization of North America, several movements took place. Movements, such as enclosure (or in earlier records, inclosure), had the effect of moving many rural English into city centers such as London or Bristol.[3] During this period of enclosure, roughly between 1380 and 1588, many stretches of public land were reclaimed, usually by the wealthy, and fenced off. The lands, which for centuries had been used by the commoners for grazing cattle and planting crops for sustenance farming, were essential for many peoples' survival. Without the land for grazing and farming, many peasants were forced to abandon their agrarian pasts and seek out a new future within the increasingly urban landscapes of the major cities. These enclosures, along with other problems such as inventions of

agricultural machinery that reduced the need for labor, the closure of monasteries and their charities, the disbanding of feudal armies, and the rise of commerce through the implementation of "mercantilism" (at the expense of many of the artisans' guilds), all worked in concert to create a large population of English poor.[4] These new poor were, in most cases, untied to land or occupation which gave them a great degree of geographic mobility. Many of these poor laborers then found themselves, amidst a large group of their countrymen, begging and struggling to earn money sufficient enough to allow them to eat. Many of this caste also turned to crime as a means to earn their bread.

Due in large part to the huge influx of poor into the cities' centers, Queen Elizabeth I passed the Poor Law (1601). These laws were meant to provide for the roaming poor, who were seen to be a civic nuisance in many cases due to their begging and thievery, as well as the settled poor who might be suffering from illness or a weak harvest. This aid was defined in two ways: "indoor" and "outdoor" relief. Outdoor relief was used for the settled poor who would receive either a "dole" of money to use for their living expenses, or "relief in kind," which could come in the form of clothing or food.[5] The second form, indoor relief, provided that wandering poor would be taken to the local almshouse, orphans would be taken to an orphanage, the ill would be taken to a hospital, and the idle poor or sturdy beggars would be taken to a workhouse where they would be put to work and paid the local rate. The Elizabethan Poor Laws were an extension of the Statute of Artificers (1558-63), which stated that anyone between 12 and 60 years old was to be employed in husbandry, if they were not otherwise employed; youths who would not submit to apprenticeships were subject to being impressed into service, military or otherwise; and, any person below the rank of yeoman was not allowed to leave agriculture to be apprenticed in a trade.[6] Richard B. Morris explains the Elizabethan Poor Laws as such:

> In the Elizabethan act for the punishment of rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars, wandering persons and common laborers who refused to work at the ordinary rate of wages were included, along with beggars, peddlers, palmists, gypsies, fences, petty chapmen, and other, in a comprehensive list of persons who fell into these categories and were subject to whipping and to sentence to labor in the house of correction. Children of persons who could not maintain themselves were to be taught a trade and set to work, for the mercantilists strongly advocated the labor of women and children of the working classes. In short, those living "without a calling" were compelled to work or were punished by the criminal machinery.[7]

Though unintended, the Poor Laws had the side effect of drastically increasing the number of the population relying on some form of public assistance. This rise in the number of displaced persons in poor houses, work houses, and prisons, coupled with the influx of people into towns and cities, gave the appearance of a sudden overpopulation within England. Many of those in power sought to find a solution to the problem of this overcrowding. Indentured servitude would be one of their solutions.[8]

The transportation of convicts to the New World solved the problems of overcrowding in the almshouses, prisons, and even orphanages, but first the English would have to figure out a way

to get around the high prices of transportation. Very few prospective colonists in seventeenth century England had the resources to pay their own way across the Atlantic. In 1609, the London Company, a joint-stock company chartered by King James I (divided into two subsidiaries: the Virginia Company and the Plymouth Company) stepped in to help those who did not have the full amount of the fare available to them. In their initial agreements, the Virginia and Plymouth companies agreed to pay the price of transportation to the New World, and the transported, who would be known as "Adventurers," agreed to pay back their fare from their earnings in the colonies and, in turn, they would be granted a share of the company's profits after a term of seven years was completed. Several problems arose from this agreement. The greatest of these problems was the inability of the London Company to recoup all of its investment because of the high mortality rate of the adventurers. The new frontier was a hard and brutal place. Colonists had to contend with harsh winters, Indian raids, sickness and starvation.[9] In some cases entire shiploads of servants would die before completing their indenture, either on the sea or during their first period of "seasoning." Consequently, the London Company decided, in 1619, to start renting the labor to the local planters. This ensured that the London Company recouped its expenses and it placed the risk of death or desertion firmly on the planters in the New World.[10] This was a very shrewd business move for the London Company since it did not constitute a good deal for the planters who purchased the indentured servants' contracts.

So, a prospective colonist would present himself for transportation under an indenture, or a convict, sturdy beggar, gypsy, rouge or vagabond would agree to be transported to America in lieu of serving his sentence in England. Two copies of the person's indenture agreement would be made on the same sheet of paper then the sheet would be cut in two. This cutting provided two copies, each with an "indented" edge, which could be put together to verify authenticity, thus leading us to the term "indentured." The servant would carry his portion of the contract, and upon his arrival in the New World the other portion of the contract would be auctioned off by the company that provided for his transportation. This was the basic principle used by transporters of labor for the next two centuries.

Another classification of servants that were seen during the colonial period was the "Redemptioners." More often in the eighteenth century, these redemptioners came primarily from the continent of Europe, particularly Germany and Switzerland. Redemptioners came, in most cases, as whole families, with all of their household goods and with some of the money needed to pay for their passage. The balance of the fare was usually negotiated by their agreement to labor for a designated period of time. This debt could be paid by certain members of the family for the transportation of the family as a whole. For instance, parents could opt to bear the responsibility for the labor in exchange for their children's passage, or parents could agree to allow their children to pay for the family's passage through their labor as apprentices. Lengths of service for redemptioners varied, but they were often much shorter than those of true indentured servants.[11] Historian Abbott Emerson Smith sums up the differences between indentured servants and redemptioners this way:

> At some expense of overstatement the point may be made this way: indentured servants came essentially as cargoes of merchandize representing a supply of labor; redemptioners came essentially as emigrants hopefully transplanting

> themselves to a new home in America. This statement does not do justice to the aspirations of many servants, but it helps to indicate why the redemptionist system flourished in the eighteenth century, after the colonies had achieved a stable existence such as would be inviting to newcomers, while indentured servants played a greater proportional part during the years of perilous beginnings.[12]

While these legal methods of transporting servants were the most widely used, it was by no means the only way that people were transported. As the demand for labor increased in the colonies, kidnapping and deception became more and more common. A group, known as "Spirits," arose and attempted to fill ships through means of deception and enticement. Many of these Spirits would target those unable to make an informed decision about being transported to America. These included children, drunks, and the mentally infirm. A Spirit might entice children with promises of sweets, or they might try to ply a person with alcohol. If these methods did not work, they might try to kidnap the person outright. The Spirits became so organized they even established depots in which they could hide their purloined persons until a ship could be found to transport them.[13] Another group that sought to entice people to board ships for America was the "Newlanders," or "soul-sellers" of Germany. These men posed as wealthy merchants from Pennsylvania who had returned to help with the transportation of new immigrants. They often portrayed the American colonies as utopias while convincing farmers to sell their land and belongings and to travel to America. The Newlanders would often charge exorbitant rates for the travel to ports, leaving many to sign on as indentured servants so they could pay for the journey across the Atlantic.[14]

Many accounts of the voyage from England or Europe have compared it to the "Middle Passage" that slaves would experience. Labor historian Marcus Wilson Jernegan gives a stirring description:

> An average cargo was three hundred, but the shipmaster, for greater profit, would sometimes crowd as many as six hundred into a small vessel. Picture to yourself several hundred people of all ages with only six feet by two feet allotted between decks for one adult person, with no privacy whatever, wearing the same clothing for the whole voyage--from four weeks to four months or even more—and often lying flat for whole days at a time when the ship was tossed by terrific storms. Imagine the vile atmosphere in an unventilated space containing hundreds of people, many ill with all manner of contagious diseases, living and dead side by side, without medical attendance, moaning and shrieking, praying and crying, and perhaps crazed by famine and thirst.[15]

Foster Rhea Dulles gives us a contemporary account of the voyage by a German Palatinate: During the voyage there is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, and many kinds of seasickness, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth rot, and the like, all of which come from old and sharply-salted food and meat, also from the very bad and foul water, so that many die miserable…Add to this want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want, afflictions, and lamentations,

together with other troubles, as e.g., the lice abound so frightfully, especially on the sick people, that they can be scraped off the body. The misery reaches a climax when a gale rages for two or three nights so that everyone believes that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. In such a visitation the people cry and pray most piteously.[16]

Food on these voyages was scarce and poor. Many times the travelers would be forced to eat spoiled and worm- or spider-infested bread.[17] Food was also heavily rationed. Many of these journeys had no fixed travel time, and navigation of the seas during this era relied heavily on the weather and ocean conditions. It could take four or five weeks on the short end and five months on the long end. In his memoir, The Infortunate, William Moraley describes his rations during the Atlantic voyage: "Three Biscuits were given to each Man for the Day, and a small Piece of Salt Beef, no bigger than a Penny Chop of Mutton. Some Days we had Stockfish, when every Man was obliged to beat his Share with a Maul to make it tender, with a little stinking Butter for Sauce."[18]

With conditions as poor as this, it was not uncommon for mortality rates to top 50 percent. Children between the ages of one and seven very rarely survived.[19] After all of this hardship on the seas, the newly arrived still had years of labor to look forward to.

Virginia, Maryland, and the Tobacco Colonies

During the first part of the seventeenth century the colonization of North America had become a priority for the British. Spain and France, longtime rivals of England, had begun to establish their colonies in the southern and northern areas of the East Coast of America, respectively. After several unsuccessful attempts at establishing a colony, the British were able to gain a foothold at Jamestown. With this new venture came a need for labor. As described above, the contemporary English found that they had a wealth of labor within their own work houses and prisons. These prisons became a huge source for indentured servants in the beginning stages of the Colonial period, particularly for Maryland and Virginia. Historian Joseph G. Rayback places the figure of transported convicts at 35,000, while Marcus Wilson Jernegan places the figure closer to 50,000.[20] Rayback adds that the largest numbers of these were sent to Maryland and Virginia. As well, he describes the convicts as "a sorry lot; most of them where outright criminals, and probably one-fifth were guilty of serious crimes."[21] This would eventually create a stir in the New World and a petition was sent to England requesting that after the twentieth of January 1671, they send no more convicts to the colonies. This order was confirmed and the colonists had a respite from the importation of such rogues. That was, until 1717 when Parliament found that their new method of transporting felons to the West Indies was ineffectual and they began to ship convicts and felons to Virginia again[22]; in the words of historian James Curtis Ballagh, the practice "…[made] the American colonies practically a reformatory and a dumping-ground for the felons of England." [23]

The transportation of convicts had a dual benefit for Great Britain. First, many in England were anxious to get rid of this class of the population. Criminals were unproductive and their incarceration entailed a great expense to the country. Many contemporary economists championed the transportation of these felons, while others hoped that the transportation to the

New World would encourage the felons to leave behind their old lives and become upstanding citizens.[24] Due in large part to these advantages, the transportation of convicts to the large and wealthy tobacco colonies would continue right up to the Revolutionary War.[25] Perhaps it was in remembering this fact that a Dr. Johnson stated in 1769: "Sir they are a race of convicts, and ought to be content with anything we may allow them short of hanging."[26]

Many of the servants arriving in Virginia and Maryland found that conditions could vary a great deal. They could run the gamut from leisurely and easier than at home in England, to brutal and torturous. Much was reliant on the nature of the servant and the master. Corporal punishment was allowed to the master as a means of punishing servants for offenses such as insubordination and those punishments could range from whipping, branding, and being forced to work in shackles, to the addition of time to an indenture. The more severe punishments tended to be reserved for those offenses involving desertion or for those planning to desert as a group. We find instances of this type of crime and punishment more typically in the southern colonies. Joseph G. Rayback states: "In the 'tobacco colonies,' where many of the masters led drunken and dissolute lives, treatment was often brutal and sadistic,"[27] while Marcus Wilson Jernegan makes the point: "Harrowing tales of cruelty and abuse of white servants are common, but the same kind of treatment was meted out to servants in England during this period."[28] Indentured servants had limited rights while working off their fare for passage. While working under an indenture, servants were generally forbidden to marry. This was to the advantage of the planter. Female servants who become pregnant were not able to work, at least during the period just before and directly after childbirth. Because of this, relations between male and female servants were looked upon very harshly, and for those who had a child, additional time could be added to the indenture, or heavy fines levied against both mother and father. In fact, Richard B. Morris states that the fines and penalties were severe enough that the master was, in many cases, "enriched far beyond his actual losses."[29]

Regardless of these numerous shortcomings in terms of the rights of servants, they did enjoy one very important right: the right to the courts. There were many instances within court records of servants suing their masters for all manner of grievances. These grievances range from excessive punishment, to suing for freedom due to mistreatment, and in some cases, even that the master had failed to provide clothing required by the indenture. The retribution awarded ranged from freedom from the indenture to money to pounds of tobacco paid to the servant. Access to courts was very important in that it was unique to indentured servants. African slaves did not have access to the courts, nor did they have any other means of redress of their grievances. While an indentured servant's labor was dealt with as a commodity, and could be sold or traded, servants themselves were never regarded as chattel property as African slaves were in later years.

A servant's labor was not the only commodity associated with indentured servitude. During the early part of the seventeenth century, Maryland and Virginia developed a "headright system" as a means to disperse property to those arriving on America's shores. Under this system, new colonists who brought with them, or paid for the transportation of, persons to work as indentured servants were allotted additional land, generally fifty acres, for every person for whom they provided.[30] This had the effect of concentrating some large stretches of property to single individuals or families. One effect of the headright system was to raise the price of land to such a degree that many times servants, who had just completed their service, could not afford to

purchase land; thus, the headright system also had the effect of creating a separation between the more wealthy, those who could pay to transport servants, and the servants themselves.[31]

Because of the headright system and the high price of free labor, the colonists soon found that it was less expensive to continue to import labor from Europe. Many planters needed only to pay for the servants' transportation to America, their clothing and food while under contract, and the "freedom dues" required by their indenture. "Freedom dues" were included in every contract of servitude; they stated what a servant could expect at the completion of his term of service. In almost all cases they included provisions for one year to include tools, clothing, arms, food, and in some cases a land grant; although, in the tobacco colonies, the land grant was not seen as often as in the Puritan colonies of New England, where it was a mandatory allotment in all of their contracts.[32] The Maryland Act of 1639 provided that every servant, at the completion of his indenture, receives the following:

> 3 barrels of corn, a hilling hoe, and a weeding hoe and a felling axe and to a man servant one new cloth suit, one new shirt, one pair of new shoes, one pair of new stockings, and a new Monmouth cap, and to a maid servant, one new petty coat and waistcoat, one new smock, one pair of new shoes, one pair of new stockings and the clothes formerly belonging to the servant.[33]

Because of the omission of a land grant in the indentures of those in the tobacco colonies, many newly freed laborers were required to continue to work as tenant farmers on their previous masters' property, paying rent to raise crops of their own.[34] A freedman continued to do this until he raised enough money to purchase a piece of property of his own, or until he could afford to pay for the transportation of an indentured servant, thereby being able to claim his own fifty acres of property. Joseph G. Rayback describes the situation of recently freed servants:
How many servants took advantage of their opportunities is unknown. In the southern colonies it appears that only about one in ten survived his seasoning, worked out his time, took up land, and became prosperous; probably a like number joined the ranks of the artisans, living comfortably without owning any land. The remainder died by the way, or returned to England, or became "poor whites" owning a little land, living as tenants, or earning a precarious living as hired farm labor.[35]

At this stage in American history, property was of great importance. In colonial America as well as in England, property gave one a measure of status. It also allowed for participation in politics, as only land holders held suffrage rights. Many of those signing up as indentured servants in England and Europe had their eye firmly on becoming landed after their indenture had been fulfilled. Also, as tobacco became a commodity of increasing importance, it became necessary to hold larger and larger tracts of land. Historians Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh state: "Tobacco could be grown in one spot for only four years, followed by a year (or possibly two) of corn. Thereafter, the ground had to lie fallow for twenty years to regain its fertility. In consequence, new land was required nearly every year."[36] Tobacco was also a notoriously labor-intensive crop to grow, thus, perpetuating the institution of indentured servitude right up until the explosion of the African slave trade. This need for new land was unique to the southern tobacco colonies. It also tied planters and plantation owners to their need for labor. As we will see, the

New England colonists had a very different use for indentured servitude and were in no way as dependent on servants and eventually slaves as were those in the southern colonies.

Massachusetts and New England

In contrast to the tobacco colonies, New England had a very different view with regard to the institution of indentured servitude. During the first half of the seventeenth century, many people left England to search out a place to practice their religion in peace. Beginning with the "Pilgrims" of Plymouth, Massachusetts, these folks began to populate the area known as New England. Seeking to be a "beacon on a hill," meaning that they strove to serve as an example of Christian values, these people lived a very strict and religious life, for the most part. This was in stark contrast to Maryland and Virginia, which were meant to be a business and a militaristic venture, and to, effectively, increase the wealth and power of the empire of Great Britain. These new, emerging colonies in places like Boston, Suffolk, and Hartford leaned toward a more egalitarian existence than their southern cousins. Many of these settlers were Puritans, meaning that they felt that they were on a mission to "purify" Christianity; many were also separatists, believing that they should break entirely from their English home to ensure their salvation. Regardless of their Christian values, many of these people were inclined to be suspicious of and unwelcoming to outsiders. Because of their beliefs and the persecution they had experienced at home in England, many of these colonists did not welcome those who did not share their religious beliefs. In some instances, these groups would be unwelcoming to all those who were not family or had not travelled from England with them. This suspicion would have an effect on the institution of indentured servitude in New England.

The settlers in New England prescribed to a set of beliefs that emphasized the righteousness of one's own labor. The feeling among these people was that idleness was a true sin while hard work and humbleness would serve them well in the hereafter. Richard B. Morris gives us a selection of aphorisms from contemporary sources about the idleness of labor: "By the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat thy bread," from a colonial child's copybook; "The law of nature so ordains, toil and be strong," quoted from the Ameses; and, "Leisure is the time for doing something useful," from Poor Richard's Almanac.[37] Morris also gives us another example that sums up the Puritans' ideals of hard work and honest living, this one a song sung by a burglar as his last words before his execution: "With honest labor earn our bread / While in your youthful prime / Nor come near the Harlot's bed / Nor idly waste your time."[38] With such a deep dedication to toil and hard work, as well as with their inherent distrust of strangers, Puritans and many of those in New England rarely took on indentured servants when compared to their southern counterparts. An unknown Englishman observed with regard to indentured servants in New England and Virginia, "Virginia thrives by keeping many servants and these in strict obedience. New England conceit they and their children can doe [sic] enough, and soe [sic] have rarely one servant."[39]

Social structure in New England had a significant effect on indentured servitude as well. While those in the tobacco colonies were driven by a need to turn a profit from their labor, those living in New England were more concerned about their own sustenance. In this respect, those living in New England were much more like the redemptioners mentioned above, more concerned with

transplanting their families to the New World than with revenue. When establishing themselves in their new lives, many New Englanders relied on a system of "mutual assistance." This meant that the families in one community relied on each other a fair amount for help when it was needed. It was seen as one's Christian responsibility to help a neighbor when they fell ill, or when they needed help building a barn, or in any number of similar situations.

While New Englanders were much more inclined to help a neighbor, it was not always an entirely altruistic gesture. Many of the class divisions came to the New World with the settlers; meaning those of a lower class were expected to do things to help those of a higher status through a system of subjection and authority. As Daniel Vickers states: "In the world of everyday work, subjection meant harking to the commands of others, and freedom from such commands stemmed only from control over land and capital."[40] Through this system of subjection and authority, many of the more wealthy landowners, church officials, and civic leaders could count on assistance from the community at-large. This helped to reduce the need for indentured servants in even this group, the upper echelons of New England's society. Also during this period, all men between the ages of 16 and 60 were required to perform a period of labor, every year, for the benefit of the public.[41] It is not hard to see the importance of this compulsory labor, due in large part by the huge amount of work that needed to be accomplished simply to erect the infrastructure of a society out of a veritable wilderness. However, this form of civic responsibility had the effect of further limiting the need for indentured workers. This compulsory labor was required of all the able-bodied men within the community, regardless of status; although, most of the more wealthy residents may have had a servant complete this labor or hired a neighbor's son to fulfill their responsibility for them. It is important to note that while there were divisions of caste among the wealthy, the folks who worked their family farms, and the laborers, there were not the same class and caste divisions that were experienced in England. Richard B. Morris notes:

> we can safely conclude that the high wages demanded by colonial workmen, the relative independence enjoyed by them, and the wide recognition of the importance of labor accounted in large part for the greater esteem accorded workmen, particularly skilled craftsmen, in the colonies than in the mother country. Hence class attitudes were not as sharply accentuated as in contemporary England, where men of property thought of laborers as a composite class—"the lower orders" and "the meaner sort," who, according to eighteenth-century mercantilists, were more in need of discipline than employment.[42]

Another distinction that the Puritans and those who lived in New England tended to overlook was the differences of race, at least early in the colonization of New England. The largest divisions did not tend to be between those with capital and those without, or between white and black, but, at least in New England, the divisions tended to be over age. The tobacco colonies, however, saw an increasing division over race as the African slave trade gradually replaced indentured servitude as the major source of labor.[43] An interesting illustration of this appears in Richard B. Morris' text Government and Labor in Early America. In the text, Morris makes mention of a Negro servant, named Prince and living in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, having more time added to his indenture because he fathered a child with a maidservant. The striking

thing was that he was not a slave, but an indentured servant. And while Morris concedes that because Prince was a Negro, and thus, he may have had a heavier sentence levied against him, he was not a slave or servant for life.[44] The social distinctions were few enough to even allow Blacks to eat at the table with whites. There were accounts of families in Connecticut sitting at the same table with their black servants, eating from the same dishes, a practice that one would be hard pressed to encounter in the southern colonies.[45]

The most prevalent reason for the comparative lack of indentured servants in New England revolved around the price of labor and new developments in the family and inheritance structure in the New World. Because of the high degree of labor required to simply begin to develop a farm or prepare a plot of land for planting, many times whole families, particularly the sons of farmers, were employed in clearing ground, sowing, harvesting, and all manner of husbandry. In most cases, a boy would begin to learn husbandry from his father at the age of 10. By the time he was 14, he may be hired to do casual labor for neighbors or even hired as a servant for a longer term. By the time the boy reached the age of 17, he would most likely be working on the family plot again alongside his father to increase the productivity of the family farm. Many times the boy would begin to establish his own household on the property; he may get married and begin to raise his own family. In almost all cases, though, he was discouraged from striking off on his own. Rather, he would stay and help to cultivate the family land. He may continue to labor under his father until the father died or became unable to work. As Daniel Vickers describes this system:

> In the new colony, where there was work to be done and few alternative sources of labor, parents preferred that their sons spend their young adulthood, even beyond the age of marriage, developing the family estate. These young householders may no longer have been living under daily parental direction, and they surely understood that they were contributing to the improvement of land that could one day be theirs. But, in the degree of their commitment to property that was still under their fathers' authority, at a time in their life when they were beginning to raise children of their own, they were still accepting, albeit hesitantly, limitations on their freedom of action that were foreign to English tradition.[46]

Vickers goes on to say: "Even more than historians have realized, therefore, it must have been the family—not the English household of parents, children, servants, and the occasional hired hand, but the nuclear family alone—that dominated the rural economy of this region."[47] This emphasis on the nuclear family coupled with the high price of free and casual labor are the major reasons that indentured servitude was relatively scarce in New England, when compared to the southern colonies. This new system, centered around the family, would eventually lead us to the system that we now think of as the American family farm.[48] Daniels Vickers explains this system succinctly:

> New England farmers were reluctant to purchase imported servants, not from any preference for free labor, but because the marginal productivity of their lands was not enough to satisfy the cost. They relied on their sons for the task of farm

> development, because offspring provided an inexpensive, efficient, and available version of the bound labor that prevailed everywhere in early America where manpower was scarce.[49]

Conclusions

Indentured servitude was an essential part of the British colonization of America. Without this stream of labor, by those who came of their own volition as well as from those who were enticed or coerced as a means to shorten a prison term, there was no possible way that the huge amount of labor required would have been fulfilled. However, while this institution served people in different ways, it can be viewed as a type of litmus test for the two different societies that were developing in the north, particularly New England, versus the southern tobacco colonies in Maryland and Virginia. In New England, we see a society that revolved around the Protestant faith's Calvinist (Puritan) ideals of the value and righteousness of one's own labor, while in the southern colonies we see an increasing need to bring in servants to satisfy a dramatically growing demand for labor to reinforce their export businesses. Two very different motivations with very different goals in mind, however, with a common thread between them. Marcus Wilson Jernegan poetically describes for us the need for humans to utilize the labor of others: Could we draw the curtain which conceals the life of prehistoric people, we should see that the servant problem is old as the human race. Indeed, if it were possible for extremes to meet, cave-dwellers and denizens of twentieth-century skyscrapers would doubtless converse sympathetically on this never-ending problem. Its existence is due to the universal desire of man to use the strength of others for his own profit and pleasure—an unchangeable trait of human nature.[50]

Even with this commonality between the two societies, there could not be a complete agreement on the use of this type of labor. With Virginia and Maryland clearing more and more land at faster and faster rates, the need for labor increased. As time passed, a demand for cheaper and cheaper labor necessitated the conversion from a system of indentured servitude to a reliance on slaves and the African slave trade. This transfer to slavery was due in part to the inelasticity of indentured servitude with regard to the supply and demand. The cost of skilled white labor began to increase as many plantation owners restructured their use of indentured labor by using indentured servants as overseers. They then turned to slavery for field hands and other unskilled laborers. Also, plantation owners found children born to African slaves a new and less expensive source for unskilled labor. These native-born children spoke English more fluently, they were more knowledgeable of agriculture, and they did not come with the transportation costs associated with their African parents. This served to drive the cost of slave labor down, even as the cost of indentured servants rose.[51] The conversion from indentured servitude to slave labor would place the northern colonies against the southern colonies, within a few generations, in a battle over the ethics of slavery. In the North, the nuclear family system served to create affluence without a reliance on servants and slaves. As the southern colonists invested more of their money into plantation and the expansion of tobacco, and eventually cotton, they tied themselves more closely to slave and bound labor. Over the next several centuries, they eventually found that their wealth was so heavily invested in these types of labor that they could

not do without them. This eventually caused a rift between the southern and northern colonies that will lead, in the end, to the American Civil War.

However, even with these terrible and unintentional consequences, the United States of America—especially the southern, tobacco colonies—could not have been built as strong and in as short a period of time without the institution of indentured servitude and the economic and social consequences that came with it. Indentured servitude is an essential part of our history as Americans, one that we would be remiss to continue to overlook.

Footnotes

1. Stephen Innes, *John Smith's Vision* in *Work and Labor in Early America* ed. Stephen Innes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 19.
2. Lois Green Carr, "Emigration and the Standard of Living: The Seventeenth Century Chesapeake," *The Journal of Economic History* 52, no. 2 (1992): 272.
3. Ushistory.org, *U.S. History Online Textbook,* 2010, http://www.ushistory.org/us/2b.asp.
4. Abbot Emerson Smith, *Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America* (Baltimore: Clearfield Company, 1998), 44.
5. Marjie Bloy, "The 1601 Elizabethan Poor Law" *The Victorian Web,* http://www.victorianweb.org/history/poorlaw/elizpl.html
6. Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 4.
7. Ibid., 4.
8. Smith, 46.
9. David W. Galenson, "The Rise and Fall of Indentured Servitude in the Americas: An Economic Analysis," *The Journal of Economic History* 44, no. 1 (1984): 4. These "Adventurers" were considered investors in the venture. This can almost be compared to today's "Venture Capitalists;\"; although, the Adventurer's only capitol was their own labor.
10. Ibid., 7-8.
11. Smith, 21-22.
12. Ibid., 22.
13. Ibid., 69.
14. Marcus Wilson Jernegan, Laboring *and Dependant Classes in Colonial America 1607-1783* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1965), 50.
15. Ibid., 50-51.
16. Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History,* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1966), 6.
17. Jernegan, 51.
18. William Moraley, *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley, an Indentured Servant,* ed. Susan E. Klepp & Billy G. Smith (University Park: The

Pennsylvania State University Press: 1992), 59-60. Stock fish is described as a very hard, salted, cod.

19. Jernegan, 51.
20. Ibid., 48.
21. Joseph G. Rayback, A History of American Labor (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 8.
22. Curtis Ballagh, *White Servitude in the Colony of Virginia: A Study of the System of Indentured Labor in the American Colonies,* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1895), 36-37.
23. Ballagh, 37.
24. Jernegan, 49.
25. Ibid., 37.
26. Jernegan, 48.
27. Rayback, 9.
28. Jernegan, 54.
29. Morris, 349-352.
30. Ibid., 397.
31. Ibid., 398.
32. Ibid., 393-394.
33. Ibid., 393.
34. Ballagh, 84.
35. Rayback, 11.
36. Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "Economic Diversification and Labor Organization in the Chesapeake, 1650-1820," in Work and Labor in Early America, ed. Stephen Innes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 151.
37. Morris, 5.
38. Ibid., 5.
39. Daniel Vickers, "*Working the Fields in a Developing Economy: Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1675,"* in *Work and Labor in Early America,* ed. Stephen Innes (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 49.
40. Ibid., 51.
41. Morris, 7.
42. Morris, 50-51.
43. Innes, 19.
44. Morris, 347.
45. David Freeman Hawke, *Everyday Life in Early America* (New York: Perrenial, 2003), 169.
46. Vickers, 62.
47. Ibid., 60.
48. Ibid., 62.

49. Ibid., 69.
50. Jernegan, 45.
51. David W. Galenson, "White Servitude and the Growth of Black Slavery in Colonial America," *The Journal of Economic History* 41, no. 1 (1981): 40.

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