

American Life in the Seventeenth Century, 1607–1692

Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness, but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversity.

William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation

Prologue: The unhealthy environment of the Chesapeake region killed off the first would-be settlers in droves. Mostly single men, the earliest Virginia and Maryland colonists struggled to put their raw colonies on a sound economic footing by cultivating tobacco. At first, indentured servants provided much of the labor supply for tobacco culture, but after discontented former servants erupted in Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, the dominant merchant-planters shifted to importing African slaves. By the end of the seventeenth century, both white and black populations in the Chesapeake were growing through natural reproduction as well as through continued immigration. Meanwhile, slavery took on a different character in the sugar-growing regions of the Caribbean and Brazil. New England, in contrast to the Chesapeake, was settled from the start by colonists in family units, who thrived almost from the outset. As their numbers grew, they built a prosperous, diversified economy, founded schools and tidy towns, and established a tradition of self-government. The Puritan faith pervaded all aspects of New England life, encouraging, in one extreme instance, the persecution of a number of women for witchcraft at Salem in 1692.

A. Indentured Servants in the Chesapeake Region _____

I. A Contract for Indentured Service (1635)

Indentured servitude took many forms, and many different types of contracts survive from the colonial era. In this blank contract from 1635, what are the principal obligations undertaken by the two contracting parties? What areas of discretion or choice

¹Blank indenture form in Anon. [Father Andrew Whitel], *A Relation of Maryland* (London: 1635, 1966), pp. 53–54.

did either servant or master have? How might that discretion have been abused—by either party?

The forme of binding a servant.

This indenture made _____ day of _____
 _____ in the
 yeere of our Sovereigne Lord King Charles, &c.
 betweene _____ of the one
 party, and _____ on the
 other party, Witnesseth, that the said
 _____ doth hereby covenant promise, and
 grant, to and with the said
 his Executors and Assignes, to serve him from
 the day of the date hereof, untill his first and
 next arrivall in Maryland; and after for and
 during the tearme of _____ yeeres, in such
 service and employment, as he the said
 _____ or his assignes shall there
 employ him, according to the custome of the Countrey
 in the like kind. In consideration whereof, the said
 _____ doth promise
 and grant, to and with the said
 _____ to pay for his passing, and to
 find him with Meat, Drinke, Apparell and Lodging,
 with other necessaries during the said terme;
 and at the end of the said terme, to give him one
 whole yeeres provision of Corne, and fifty acres of
 Land, according to the order of the countrey. In
 witnesse whereof, the said
 hath hereunto put his hand and seale, the day and
 yeere above written.

Sealed and delivered in
 the presence of _____ H

2. A Londoner Agrees to Provide a Servant (1654)

The earliest Virginia settlers hungered for more workers so that they could plant more land in tobacco, the colony's richly profitable cash crop. Agents in England served as "brokers" who found laborers, arranged for their transportation to the New World, and drew up contracts specifying the terms of labor and the duration of the period of service. In the following contract, what sort of worker does Thomas Workman of

²From *The Old Dominion in the Seventeenth Century: A Documentary History of Virginia, 1606-1686*, edited by Warren M. Billings, pp. 134-135, 144, 146-147. Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia. Copyright © 1975 by The University of North Carolina Press. Used by permission of the publisher.

Virginia want? What might be the implications of the contract's conspicuous failure to mention the terms of the servant's termination of service in four years' time?

Recorded this 20th Day of June 1654

Be it known unto all men by these presents that I Richard Garford of London Inhoulder doe Confess and acknowledge my selfe to owe and stand indebted unto Thomas Workman of the Little Creeke in the County of Lower Norffolk in Virginia, planter, his Executors Administrators or assignes the full and Just some of Tenn pounds of good and lawfull money of England to be paid uppon demand of the abovesaid Thomas Workman or his true and lawfull Atterny or Attornyes at the now dwelling house of Mr. Willyam Garford Innkeeper at the Red Lyon in fleet streete without either Equevocation fraud or delay, and to the true performance of the same well and truly to bee made and done I bind my selfe my Executors Administrators and Assignes, firmly by these presents in witnesse heereof I have hereunto sett my hand and seale this 4th day of Aprill 1653

*Richard Garfford**

The Condition of this obligation is such that the within bounden Richard Garford or his Assignes shall well and truly deliver or cause to be delivered unto the above mentioned Thomas Workman, his Executors Administrators or assignes here in Virginia a sound and able man servant betweene Eighteene and 25 yeres of age that shall have fower yeres to serve at the least, and that in the first second or third shipp that shall arrive in the Port of James River in Virginia from London, that then the bond above to be voyd and of noe effect or else to stand in full force and vertue

Richard Garfford

Sealed and delivered in the presence of
Thomas Ward

3. A Servant Describes His Fate (c. 1680)

Mostly impoverished and unemployed in England, the great mass of indentured servants possessed neither the learning nor the leisure to reflect in writing on their experience in Virginia. A notable exception was James Revel, a criminal with some education who was "transported" to Virginia as punishment for his offenses. He eventually returned to England and wrote the following remarkable poem. What did he find most difficult about life in Virginia? What was his attitude toward the blacks he encountered?

*The inconsistent spelling of Garford/Garfford's name reflects the frequently irregular orthography of the seventeenth century. William Shakespeare's name, for example, was rendered in at least a dozen different ways, including Shakespear, Shakespeare, Shackspeare, Shaksper, Shackespeare, Shackspere, and Shackespere.

³James Revel, "The Poor Unhappy Transported Felon's Sorrowful Account of His Fourteen Years Transportation at Virginia in America," ed. John Melville Jennings, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 56 (1948): 189–194. Reprinted by permission.

Part I

My loving Countrymen pray lend an Ear,
To this Relation which I bring you here,
My sufferings at large I will unfold,
Which tho' 'tis strange, 'tis true as e'er was told,
Of honest parents I did come (tho' poor,)
Who besides me had never Children more;
Near Temple Bar was born their darling son,
And for some years in virtue's path did run.

My parents in me took great delight,
And brought me up-at School to read and write,
And cast accompts likewise, as it appears,
Until that I was aged thirteen years.

Then to a Tin-man I was Prentice bound,
My master and mistress good I found,
They lik'd me well, my business I did mind,
From me my parents comfort hop'd to find.

My master near unto Moorfields did dwell,
Where into wicked company I fell;
To wickedness I quickly was inclin'd
Thus soon is tainted any youthful mind.

I from my master then did run away,
And rov'd about the streets both night and day:
Did with a gang of rogues a thieving go,
Which filled my parents heart with grief and woe. . . .
One night was taken up one of our gang,
Who five impeach'd and three of these were hang'd.

I was one of the five was try'd and cast,
Yet transportation I did get at last; . . .

In vain I griev'd, in vain my parents weep,
For I was quickly sent on board the Ship:
With melting kisses and a heavy heart,
I from my dearest parents then did part.

Part II

In a few Days we left the river quite,
And in short time of land we lost the sight,
The Captain and the sailors us'd us well,
But kept us under lest we should rebel. . . .

Five of our number in our passage died,
Which were thrown into the Ocean wide:
And after sailing seven Weeks and more,
We at Virginia all were put on shore. . . .

Our faces shav'd, comb'd out our wigs and hair,
That we in decent order might appear,
Against the planters did come down to view,
How well they lik'd this fresh transported crew.
The Women s[e]parated from us stand,

As well as we, by them for to be view'd;
 And in short time some men up to us came,
 Some ask'd our trades, and others ask'd our names.

Some view'd our limbs, and other's turn'd us round
 Examening like Horses, if we're sound,
 What trade are you, my Lad, says one to me,
 A Tin-man, Sir, that will not do, says he[.]

Some felt our hands and view'd our legs and feet,
 And made us walk, to see we were compleat;

Some view'd our teeth, to see if they were good,
 Or fit to chew our hard and homely Food.

If any like our look, our limbs, our trade,
 The Captain then a good advantage made:
 For they a difference made it did appear.
 'Twixt those for seven and for fourteen year. . . .

At length a grim old Man unto me came,
 He ask'd my trade, and likewise ask'd my Name:
 I told him I a Tin-man was by trade,
 And not quite eighteen years of age I said.

Likewise the cause I told that brought me there,
 That I for fourteen years transported were,
 And when he this from me did understand,
 He bought me of the Captain out of hand.

Part III

Down to the harbour I was took again,
 On board of a sloop, and loaded with a chain;
 Which I was forc'd to wear both night and day,
 For fear I from the Sloop should get away. . . .

At last to my new master's house I came,
 At the town of Wicoc[c]moco call'd by name,
 Where my European clothes were took from me,
 Which never after I again could see.

A canvas shirt and trowsers then they gave,
 With a hop-sack frock in which I was to slave:
 No shoes nor stockings had I for to wear,
 Nor hat, nor cap, both head and feet were bare.

Thus dress'd into the Field I nex[t] must go,
 Amongst tobacco plants all day to hoe,
 At day break in the morn our work began,
 And so held to the setting of the Sun.

My fellow slaves were just five Transports more,
 With eighteen Negroes, which is twenty four:
 Besides four transport women in the house,
 To wait upon his daughter and his Spouse,

We and the Negroes both alike did fare,
 Of work and food we had an equal share;

A. Indentured Servants in the Chesapeake Region

But in a piece of ground we call our own,
The food we eat first by ourselves were sown,
 No other time to us they would allow,
But on a Sunday we the same must do:
Six days we slave for our master's good,
The seventh day is to produce our food.

Sometimes when that a hard days work we've done,
Away unto the mill we must be gone;
Till twelve or one o'clock a grinding corn,
And must be up by daylight in the morn. . . .

 And if we offer for to run away,
For every hour we must serve a day;
For every day a Week, They're so severe,
For every week a month, for every month a year
But if they murder, rob or steal when there,
Then straightway hang'd, the Laws are so severe;
For by the Rigour of that very law
They're much kept under and to stand in awe.

Part IV

At length, it pleased God I sick did fall
But I no favour could receive at all,
For I was Forced to work while I could stand,
Or hold the hoe within my feeble hands.

 Much hardships then in deed I did endure,
No dog was ever nursed so I'm sure,
More pity the poor Negroe slaves bestowed
Than my inhuman brutal master showed . . .

Part VI

. . . At length my fourteen years expired quite,
Which fill'd my very soul with fine delight;
To think I shoud no longer there remain,
But to old England once return again. . . .

 My Father and my Mother wel I found,
Who to see me, with Joy did much abound:
My Mother over me did weep for Joy,
My Father cry'd once more to see my Boy;
 Whom I thought dead, but does alive remain,
And is returned to me once again;
I hope God has so wrought upon your mind,
No more wickedness you'll be inclined. . . .

 I begg'd them from all grief to refrain,
Since God had brought me to them home again,
The Lord unto me so much grace will give,
For to work for you both While I live,

My country men take warning e'er too late,
 Lest you should share my hard unhappy fate;
 Altho' but little crimes you here have done,
 Consider seven or fourteen years to come,
 Forc'd from your friends and country for to go,
 Among the Negroes to work at the hoe;
 In distant countries void of all relief,
 Sold for a slave because you prov'd a thief.
 Now young men with speed your lives amend,
 Take my advice as one that is your friend:
 For tho' so slight you make of it while here,
 Hard is your lot when once the[y] get you there.

4. A Servant Girl Pays the Wages of Sin (1656)

Single, lonely, and hard-used, indentured servants enjoyed few liberties. Those who went astray could be severely punished. In the following record from Charles City County Court, Virginia, what are the consequences of the servant girl's having borne an illegitimate child?

Whereas Ann Parke servant to Elizabeth Hatcher widdow is Complained of and proved to have Comitted Fornication and borne a Child in the time of her service: It is therefore ordered that the said Ann shall double the time of service due to be performed by her to her mistress or her assigns, from the time of her departure, according to act in that Case made and provided.

5. An Unruly Servant Is Punished (1679)

The planter-employers and masters struggled constantly to keep their hard-drinking, fractious servants in line. Sometimes matters got seriously out of hand, as in the following account from Virginia's Accomack County Court records in 1679. What were the terms of the offender's punishment? Were they justified?

The Examination of Elizabeth Bowen Widdow—saith—That on Sunday evening being the eighteenth day of May 1679 Thomas Jones her servant did come into her Roome and with a naked Rapier in his hand did tell her he would kill her and said shee had sent Will Waight to her Mothers and that shee had got a master for them, but hee would bee her Master and allso said that he would not kill her if shee would let him lye with her all night and bade her goe to bed and she answered she would

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not and Runn in with his Rapier and bent it, then he said he woald cutt her throat but she getting [to] the dore did run out of dores and he after her and ketched [her] in the yard and as she was standing did endeavor to cutt her throat with a knife but could not and then he threw her down and did there also indeavour to cutt her throat but she prevented it by defending her throat with her hands and bending the knife hee took her [petti]coats and threw [them] over her head and gave her two or three blows in the face with his fist and bade her get her gun and did in this act with the Knife scurrify her throat and brest and cut her right hand with six or seven cuts very much and that she with bending the Rapier and knife cut her hands and fingers very much

Elizabeth Bowen

Whereas Elizabeth Bowin Widdow did by her examination upon oath in open Court declare that Thomas Jones her servant in a most barbarous and villanous nature sett upon and most desparately attempted to murder the said Bowin with a naked Rapier and Knife to cut her throat which had been perpatrared and committed had it not bee[n] Providentially and strongly prevented by the said Bowins resistance recieving severall wounds in her endeavours to prevent the sam[e] which was also confessed by the said Jones: The Court takeing the same into their serious Considerations do order as a just reward for his said horrid offense and crime that the sherriff Forthwith take him into Custody and that he forthwith receive thirty nine lashes on the bare back well laid on: and to have his haire cutt off and an Iron Coller forthwith put about his neck dureing the Courts pleasure and after the time for which he was to serve his said mistriss is expired to serve his said mistriss or assignes one whole yeare according to Act for laying violent hands on his said mistriss and also two yeares for his wounding her as aforesaid and after due punishment inflicted accordingly The Court do further order that the sherriff deliver the said Jones to the said Elizabeth Bowin or order (it being by her request) and the said Bownig [sic] to Pay Court Charges the said Jones making satisfaction for the same after his time of service is expired—

B. Bacon's Rebellion and Its Aftermath

I. Nathaniel Bacon Proclaims His Principles (1676)

Angry former indentured servants, impoverished and resentful, crowded into the untamed Virginia backcountry as the seventeenth century wore on. Governor William Berkeley's unwillingness to protect the hardscrabble planters on the frontier against Indian attacks gave rise to ugly rumors of graft and helped spark a rebellion led by the well-born planter Nathaniel Bacon. Chiefly concerned with eradicating the Indian threat along the frontier, Bacon sought from Berkeley a commission to establish a militia. Following a dramatic showdown in Jamestown, Berkeley acquiesced, granting Bacon the commission he desired. As Bacon and his men marched off

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