

---

*Indented Servants*

---

INDENTED SERVANTS as a factor in the formulation of Colonial America's land policy and material advancement, should not go unnoticed in the study of this subject. Without them development of the seaboard regions, especially Virginia, Maryland and South Carolina, would have been greatly retarded.

The Beards [10] wrote: "It is probable that one-half of the immigrants before the Revolution, certainly outside of New England, were indented servants and Negro slaves," while John R. Commons is quoted as saying it is probable that one-half of all the immigrants during the Colonial Period landed as indented servants.

The name is derived from the practice of tearing in two parts with jagged edges the contract of servitude; the master and servant each keeping one part.

With the beginning of the cultivation of tobacco in Virginia in 1612, a demand soon arose for laborers. The feudal land system of England, as has been traced, caused England to be overrun with idle, able-bodied men and women. Many of them were willing to go to America to escape their deplorable condition but were without means to pay transportation.

The Virginia Company devised the plan of sending such men and women who would agree to work for a planter for a certain number of years. The period of indenture was usually about four years but this often was unduly prolonged. Upon arrival of a servant, a planter would pay the company a sum sufficient

to cover the charge for transportation. Presently shipmasters in general engaged in the business on the same terms.

It was not uncommon for people in London and Bristol to make a business of luring young persons aboard ships for transportation to the colonies. Adults and children were often kidnapped to be sold as indented servants notwithstanding an act of 1670, which made such kidnapping a crime punishable by death.

At that time there were three hundred crimes in the calendar for which capital punishment was inflicted. This was so harsh a penalty for the smallest offense that transportation to America as indented servants was a compromise on the part of humane judges.

However, many who were of good social connections, but without funds, volunteered to go as indented servants. Many captives taken in factional wars in England and Scotland were exported to Virginia and South Carolina and sold as indented servants.

The purchasers of indented servants had a legal property in them during the term for which they were bound. They could be sold or bequeathed for the duration of the unexpired term; and like other chattels, indented servants were liable to seizure for debts of the master. Their status during the period of their servitude was in effect the same as that of Negro slaves, and they were at times subject to as harsh treatment. To desert, was punishable in Maryland by death. In Pennsylvania, when indented servants were levied on for the militia, Benjamin Franklin tells us, "a ferment ensued and the assembly indemnified the owners at a cost of near £3,000."

A common practice of wealthy residents of Britain was to purchase land in Virginia and Maryland and send indented servants to work on land so purchased; the greater the number of servants sent, the greater the area of land the buyer was entitled to receive, upon paying land rent to the overlord.

As years passed and the Atlantic seaboard country became more populous and prosperous, some men of wealth in Virginia and Maryland who were able to acquire more land than they could put to use became ready buyers of indented servants. With

the increase in the number of Negro slaves, towards the time of the Revolutionary War, the demand for indented servants decreased.

It was the cheap labor of these indented servants and Negro slaves that led in Virginia and Maryland to acquisition of large tracts of land on which to produce tobacco cheaply. This was the foundation of large landed and, consequently, aristocratic families.

The masters fed and clothed their servants. At the end of his term a servant was supposed to be given two suits of clothes, a set of tools necessary for his trade, and some money called "freedom dues."

Many servants at the expiration of their terms of service became farmers or artisans, either in the locality where they had been living, or elsewhere. In the Middle Colonies some became substantial citizens, while others, unable to obtain land, became just "poor whites." In the South it was difficult for any of them to rise in the social scale.