



Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority



Indentured Servitude: Was it Slavery? by Steve Kimbell

Indentured Servitude: Was It Slavery?

It should come as a surprise to many docents at the Carlyle House that at least half and perhaps as many as two out of three of the earliest immigrants to the British Colonies of North America were indentured servants.

Abbot Emerson Smith in his seminal work on the subject; “Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America, 1607-1776”, published by the University of South Carolina in 1947, explains that the practice was encouraged by colonial real estate speculators who needed a steady influx of new colonists to legitimize their claim to the land.

Most of these indentured immigrants lived in colonies south of New England. In the agricultural colonies of the south the founders of the Planter Class depended upon indentured laborers who supplied the bulk of the manpower needed to clear the forests and plant the crops, principally tobacco. This contrasted with the New England colonies where individual agricultural holdings were small farmsteads and the proprietors were mainly members of religiously inspired communities who shunned strangers and held the value of their own labor far above that of any person held in bondage.

Very early on it is evident just how desperate the speculators were to populate the colonies. Smith finds evidence in the pages of a British broadside where The Virginia Company advertises in 1609 for “smiths, carpenters, coopers, shipwrights, turners, and such as plant vineyards” promising each emigrant a house in which to live plus 500 reales and “a share in the division of the land for themselves and their heirs forever more.” But those who took the Virginia Company up on its promises were not

considered indentured servants.

Strictly speaking indentured servitude only came into being after the Virginia Legislature legalized it in 1619. Smith cites the first documented example occurring the

next year when the Virginia Company ships over “100 servants to be disposed of amongst the old Planters.” This is not to say earlier programs to attract settlers to the new lands were not attempted.

Smith gives several examples such as what occurred when speculators in “The City,” as London’s financial district is known to this day, raised L500 to ship 200 poor boys to the colonies that were snatched off the streets of London. In the colonies planters paid 200 pounds of tobacco for each young girl shipped over to become their wives.



A 1738 Indentured Certificate for Henry Meyer

CARLYLE HOUSE

Jim Bartlinski, Director
Sarah Coster, Curator/Educator
Mary Ruth Coleman, Director Emeritus



Under what Smith calls “the old system” used to attract new settlers this was the deal: for 3 acres of land you paid The Virginia Company two and a half barrels of corn and worked one month a year for the company. These “old system” settlers sometimes became

semi-independent farmers who rented even newer settlers for two and a half barrels of corn a year. However, whether new settler or old-timer, all the tobacco they grew belonged to The Virginia Company and was stored in the Company’s “magazine.”

When “the old system” failed to attract sufficient settlers The Virginia Company granted some of its proprietors in the colony of Virginia the privilege of transporting settlers to semi-independent plantations called “hundreds,” such as Flowerdew Hundred Plantation, a 100,000 acre (400 km²) land patent on the south side of the James River settled in 1618. The proprietors of these “Hundreds” traded independently of The Virginia Company’s “magazine.”

Beginning in 1618 the Virginia Company granted land to private individuals who agreed to transport indentured servants to the colonies under a system called “head right”. Headrights were land grants of 1 to 100 acres given to anyone willing to settle in the colonies. This system proved successful in every colony where it was put into practice.

Once an effective system was established indentured servants “formed the principle labor supply of the earlier settlements. Not until the 18th century were they superceded in this respect by Negroes, and not until the 19th century did an influx of free white workers wholly remove the need for indentured labor,” according to Smith.

Although indentured servitude continues to operate in various forms and with varying importance to colonial economies its popularity among British

mercantilists wanes considerable after 1660 with the Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II ends a series Civil Wars and Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate.

Mercantilists had viewed indentured servitude as a necessary way to reduce the strains that overpopulation put on the British economy. But following the return of the monarchy they discouraged emigration because they saw, as Smith puts it, “swarming masses of poor as forming an indispensable reservoir of labor at home.” Some even thought emigration to the colonies was “depopulating the mother country.”

In Britain’s North American colonies where new sources of low cost labor remained essential to continued economic growth the search for new recruits shifted the trade in indentured immigrants to Germany, Scotland and Ireland.

“(I’m) only afraid of getting fatt.”

One of the classic sources of information about the life style of indentured servants is “The Journal of John Harrower.” He was an unemployed Scottish merchant who was forced to indenture himself when he found himself unemployed at the age of 40 with a wife and two boys at home. He sailed from Whitehaven for the American colonies aboard “The Planter” in 1774.

Ever since they were edited by Edward Miles Riley and published by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 1963, Harrower’s nearly daily journal entries and copies he made of letters to his wife in Scotland have provided students and scholars with a lively account of happenings on an eighteenth-century plantation and timely allusions to some of the political events taking place in the colonies. But his account is not typical of the lives lead by most indentured servants.

To meet the demand for laborers merchants stuffed indentured servants aboard empty outbound ships deadheading to the colonies. This living cargo made these passages profitable for the merchants since



they could sell their indentures to planters at a profit and the planters benefited because with the additional cheap labor they could go from a subsistence existence to prosperity in relatively quick order.

Unfortunately, a newly arrived immigrant quite often died of "colonial fever" within a few days of disembarking. Their deaths were a direct result of the rigors of the voyage. Harrower's story of "The Planter's" voyage gives one a vivid picture of conditions aboard ship and why such a passage might lead to considerable loss of life. There were periods when one in ten emigrants did not survive the Atlantic passage. The impact of the trip on Harrower is reflected in the fact that he recorded the precise time at which "The Planter" arrives at Fredericksburg. It was 6 p.m. on Tuesday, May 10th. His stormy crossing took 38 days from March 10 to April 27, 1774

Harrower was a hero during his crossing. He nursed sick passengers and assisted the Captain during a near mutiny. Because of his actions Captain David Bowers of "The Planter" recommended Harrower to the man who held his indenture, a local merchant, William Anderson.

After he recognized that Harrower was obviously a fairly well educated man, Anderson represented him as a qualified teacher and his four-year contract was purchased promptly at 4 p.m. on Monday, May 23, 1774 by one of Virginia's wealthiest planters, Colonel William Daingerfield of Belvidera Plantation.

Harrower's precise recording of his sale to Col. Dangerfield must reflect his joy at his own very good fortune. In less than a fortnight after arriving in Virginia he has obtained a prestigious position as private tutor to the three sons of a very wealthy landowner.

His good fortune assures his life will differ substantially from those indentured to labor in the

For freight or passage apply to Scot and Brown, merchants in Glasgow, or Captain William M'Cunn, in Greenock.

W A N T E D,

To go to Virginia, under indentures for a few years; A Young Man, who understands L A T I N G R E E K, and M A T H E M A T I C S, to serve as a Tutor in a gentleman's family.

A lad who has served an apprenticeship as a surgeon, to live with one of his own profession.

Two Gardeners, who understand their business well, particularly the work in a garden.

These, properly recommended, will meet with suitable encouragement, on applying to Buchanan and Simson, merchants in Glasgow.

T H A T the FOGGAGE of the Laigh Park of Boogs, consisting of sixty four acres, or thereabouts, is to be set till December next, and entered to

1760 Glasgow Courant Advertisement for indentured servants to go to Virginia.

tobacco fields of Belvidera Plantation. On December 6, 1774 he writes from his schoolroom in a lodge overlooking the Rappahannock River only 500 yards from Belvidera's mansion house: "I want for nothing that I cou'd desire, and am only afraid of getting fatt."

Reality Could Be Much Harsher

In contrast to John Harrower's experience, the grizzly discovery made by archaeologist near Annapolis, Maryland in 2003 provides a more realistic and representative picture of the fate awaiting many indentured servants who labored bitterly until the day their servitude would end. In the introduction to their study of indentured servitude, "White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America" authors Don Jordan, Michael Walsh open with a scene of discovery.

Historic archaeologists are excavating the ruins of a 17th-century house near the colonial capital of Maryland when they unearth human remains in the basement. Forensic anthropologists examine the bones and determine that the skeleton most likely belonged to a 16-year-old boy.

The boy was infected with tuberculosis, but it was probably blood poisoning caused by his decaying teeth that caused his death. Also, the heavy loads he carried constantly for years crushed the discs cushioning his vertebrae. His bones were discovered at the bottom of pit filled with refuse and trash.

The authors of "White Cargo" place the number of people brought to the British colonies of North America between 1620 and 1775 at 300,000 or two out of three immigrants from the British Isles.



It is clear that during colonial times tens of thousands of free British men, women, and children were effectively turned into common chattel by the system of indentured servitude. These reluctant immigrants included the homeless, the unemployed, criminals and political and religious dissidents. Half of them died before they worked off their passage to colonies.



“White Cargo” discusses indentured servitude as the model for what followed: the wholesale enslavement of millions of African Americans.

Jordan and Walsh divide indentured immigrants into three groups. The first is the hundreds of poor, orphaned, street urchins, some less than three years old forcibly removed to Virginia and Maryland where most die within a year.

Second are the pickpockets and other petty criminals. The authors estimate their numbers at 50,000 to 70,000 during the period.

Third are the Irish. Deporting of Irishmen starts with the Norman Conquest but intensifies tremendously with Cromwell, who the authors accuse of practicing a form of ethnic cleansing between 1649 and 1653 during and following his conquest of Ireland.

Fourth are the kidnapped. Our young man found in the trash pit may be one of thousands kidnapped by gangs, called “spirits”, who earned two pounds sterling for every able bodied young man they could kidnap for shipment to the colonies.

Conclusion

Was indentured servitude slavery?

Sir Thomas Smythe was an organizer of the Virginia Company and reputedly the richest man in

Elizabethan England. The Encyclopedia Britannica credits his wealth with making the whole Virginia venture possible. But as the advocate and author of the policies and laws that allowed the legal kidnapping and forced export of children to the colonies, but was he also a slaver?

No one should try to draw an equal comparison between white slavery as describe here and black slavery. African Americans never volunteered their labor in exchange for eventual freedom. Their slavery was meant to be perpetual from first to last and from generation to generation.

But, although indentured servitude and slavery differ in duration and intent, in reality the conditions for both groups were frighteningly similar. As long as they were indentured the white Europeans who agreed to trade their labor for their freedom were legally the chattels, the personal property, of the person who owned their indenture. In it’s mildest form, indentured servitude persisted into the 20th-century.

It is possible that some of the docents at The Carlyle House may count among their immigrant ancestors a man or woman who agreed to work off the price of their passage to America by selling their labor and therefore their freedom for a while.

Even today, one only has to turn on their computer and search for “Day Labor Centers Northern Virginia” to see that the labor needs of the enterprising businessman and a person ready to sell some of their freedom for a day’s labor still intersect on the streets of Alexandria, Virginia.

Works Cited

Abbot Emerson Smith; *Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America, 1607-1776*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1947.

Don Jordan, Michael Walsh; *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America*. NYU Press, 2008.

John Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower*, ed. Edward Miles Riley. Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1963.



March Docent Field Trip and Lecture at Dumbarton House



There is still time left to sign up for our March Docent Field Trip. Join fellow docents and staff for a tour of the 1803 federal style mansion followed by an optional

lecture and brown bag lunch.

Dumbarton House, which emphasizes Federal Period decorative arts, is currently displaying eighteenth and early nineteenth century gowns and suits.

Following the tour, docents have the option of staying for a lecture entitled “The Early History of Washington” by Dr. Edward J. Marolda, Senior Historian (Retired) of the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command and author of: *The Washington Navy Yard: An Illustrated History*.

WHEN: Monday, March 9th. Tour begins at 11:00am. A carpooling e-mail will be sent out to connect those people who would like to carpool.

WHERE: Dumbarton House is located at 2715 Que Street, in Georgetown. There is a small parking lot off of 27th street for those carpooling.

STUMP THE STAFF

*What was the mortality rate for children?
~Jim Williams*

Looking at church and court records in Virginia, as well as personal papers from the period of 1750-1775, researchers have pieced together some statistics on infant and childhood mortality. In white families, an average of six to eight children were born alive from about ten pregnancies.

There aren't specific figures on the mortality rates of infants in the eighteenth-century. (Infancy is defined as the earliest period of childhood, especially before the ability to walk has been acquired). We can, however, piece together what happens to those children who survive infancy. Of white children who lived through infancy, approximately two-thirds to three-fourths reached their twenty-first birthday.



The chance of dying young was even greater for the enslaved African-American population. Enslaved children who lived past infancy had about a 50 percent chance of reaching their fifteenth birthdays. Poor nutrition and inadequate childcare were serious concerns. Parents, forced to make their work for their master their main priority, were often left unable to adequately care for infants and young

Sewn Together Exhibit Opening:



Docents and their guests are invited to attend the official opening of *Sewn Together: The Eighteenth-Century Women of Carlyle House* on Thursday, April 16th from 6 to 7:30 pm. Remarks will be given at 6:45 pm. There will be light refreshment and music.

Both the 1747 and 1795 dresses will be on display and consultants Newbie Richardson and Colleen Callahan will be on hand to discuss the process of recreating these magnificent dresses. For the first time since Sarah Herbert, this beautiful fabric will come alive at the Carlyle House.



“Alexandria: From Farm, to Port, to Town, and the Importance of the West Family”

A Lecture by Jim Bish, co-sponsored by the Alexandria Historical Society and Carlyle House Historic Park



Wednesday, March 25th
7:30 pm at the Lyceum. 201
S. Washington St. Alexandria VA

For the period 1730 through 1755, the talk will concentrate on Hugh West and his eldest son, John West, Jr., and their importance to the founding and early development of Alexandria. Hugh West was the father of John Carlyle’s second wife, Sybil.

The Wests were in Alexandria before there was an Alexandria, operating a tobacco inspection station and warehouses, a ferry, and a tavern on the river at the foot of what today is Oronoco Street.

- ◆ A West did the first survey of Alexandria – not George Washington.
- ◆ Wests represented Alexandria in the House of Burgesses during the important 22 years from 1752 to 1774.

Thus, the Wests were of great importance in the founding and early development of Alexandria, but they seem to be overlooked in most histories of Alexandria. Jim Bish will try to change that on March 25.

This is a great opportunity for docents to learn more about Sybil’s family. We hope you will come and show Carlyle House’s support for AHS.

C A L E N D A R

March 25, Wednesday

“Alexandria: From Farm, to Port, to Town, and the Importance of the West Family”

A Lecture by Jim Bish
7:30 pm at the Lyceum

April 4, Saturday

Braddock Day– *Docents Needed*
12:00 pm to 4:00 pm

April 16, Saturday

Sewn Together Exhibit Opening
5:00 pm to 8:00 pm

April 18, Saturday

Friends of Carlyle House Herb and Wildflower Sale
8:00 am to 4:00 pm

May 9, Saturday

The Wedding of Sarah Carlyle and William Herbert– A Reenactment and Reception
Docents Needed
5:00 pm to 8:00 pm

New Docent Training– Please help!

Have a friend you think would make a great Carlyle House docent? Then, please, invite them to our spring new docent training. New docents are required to attend three two-hour training sessions. These sessions have been scheduled for March 18, April 1 and April 8. Each session will begin at 6pm.

As you know, Carlyle House is the first rate museum it is because of docents like you. Please help us continue being a quality museum by encouraging a friend, colleague or loved one to become a docent.

Current docents looking for a refresher are also invited to attend. Please contact Sarah Coster, scoster@nvpra.org, for more information.

