

“White Servitude” from America at 1750. A Social Portrait.

by Richard Hofstadter, Publisher: NY, Knopf, 1971.

Introduction: Land and labor are indispensable ingredients in the development of all new societies. In North America it was the land of Native Americans and the unfree labor performed by indentured servants and slaves upon which most colonial wealth was built. As many as half of the Europeans who arrived in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may have come as indentured servants. As such, they were not free to move where they wanted, marry, or work for themselves. They had "bound out" their labor and their lives for four to seven years to somebody in the colonies whom they had never seen before.

In this essay, Richard Hofstadter paints a portrait of the life of indentured servants who came to the English colonies in the eighteenth century. Primarily they were Scotch-Irish, Irish, and Germans. Because they were so numerous and important to the developing economy, we cannot ignore them in any consideration of everyday life in America.

One of the most important comparisons the student may wish to make while reading this and the following selection is between the quality of life for the white indentured servant and that for the black slave. Both servant and slave endured a debilitating and disorienting Atlantic passage; both faced not only physical acclimatization in North America but psychological adjustment to a new condition; and both were locked into an intimate and oppressive contact with a hitherto unknown master. Of course there were major differences between servitude and slavery. The slave was bound for life and the servant for a limited period of time. The children of slaves inherited their parents' status, whereas children of servants were born free. And the slave, if freed, faced many more obstacles than the indentured servant who had served his or her time. But the large number of servants who ran away or committed suicide suggests that the conditions of life during the period of bondage may not have been so different for the servant and the slave.

Because so much of our history is centered on the idea that the settlement of America by Europeans was an epic exercise in the enlargement of individual rights and the pursuit of opportunity, we tend to pay little attention to the ordinary experiences and feelings of the people who made the settlement possible - especially those who did not achieve success. Richard Hofstadter attempts to correct this distortion by giving the reader a feeling for what life was like for most indentured servants. Also, rather than focusing on the fact that all servants attained their freedom, assuming they survived the years of servitude, he directs our attention to the prospects that lay before servants at the moment of freedom. The great goal of every servant was to obtain a place on the ladder of opportunity - or what, from villages in Scotland, Ireland, and Germany, seemed to be such a ladder.

But as Hofstadter notes, the chief beneficiaries of the system of servitude were not the laborers themselves but those for whom they labored. Although the survival rate among servants was undoubtedly higher in the eighteenth century than it had been earlier in Virginia's history, the opportunities for the recently freed servant to attain a secure niche in society as a landowner or Independent artisan were considerably less, according to the recent studies. The likelihood of physical survival for indentured servants in the eighteenth century increased, but among survivors the probability of economic success decreased.

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The transportation to the English colonies of human labor, a very profitable but also a very perishable form of merchandise, was one of the big business of the eighteenth century. Most of this labor was unfree. There was, of course, a sizable corps of free hired laborers in the colonies, often enjoying wages two or three times those prevalent in the mother country. But never at any time in the colonial period was there a sufficient supply of voluntary labor, paying its own transportation and arriving masterless and free of debt, to meet the insatiable demands of the colonial economy. The solution, found long before the massive influx of black slaves, was a combined force of merchants, ship captains, immigrant brokers, and a variety of hard-boiled recruiting agents who joined in bringing substantial cargoes of whites who voluntarily or involuntarily paid for their passage by undergoing a terminable period of bondage. This quest for labor, touched off early in the seventeenth century by the circulars of the London Company of Virginia, continued by William Penn in the 1680's and after, and climaxed by the blandishments of various English and continental recruiting agents of the eighteenth century,

marked one of the first concerted and sustained advertising campaigns in the history of the modern world.

If we leave out of account the substantial Puritan migration of 1630-40, not less than half, and perhaps considerably more, of all the white immigrants to the colonies were indentured servants, redemptioners, or convicts. Certainly a good many more than half of all persons who went to the colonies south of New England were servants in bondage to planters, farmers, speculators, and proprietors. The tobacco economy of Virginia and Maryland was founded upon the labor of gangs of indentured servants, who were substantially replaced by slaves only during the course of the eighteenth century. "The planters' fortunes here," wrote the governor of Maryland in 1755, "consist in the number of their servants (who are purchased at high rates) much as the estates of an English farmer do in the multitude of cattle." Everywhere indentured servants were used, and almost everywhere outside New England they were vital to the economy. The labor of the colonies, said Benjamin Franklin in 1759, "is performed chiefly by indentured servants brought from Great Britain, Ireland, and Germany, because the high price it bears cannot be performed in any other way."

Indentured servitude had its roots in the widespread poverty and human dislocation of seventeenth-century England. Still a largely backward economy with a great part of its population permanently unemployed, England was moving toward more modern methods in industry and agriculture; yet in the short run some of the improvements greatly added to the unemployed. Drifting men and women gathered in the cities, notably London, where they constituted a large mass of casual workers, lumpenproletarians, and criminals. The mass of the poverty-stricken was so large that Gregory King, the pioneer statistician, estimated in 1696 that more than half the population - cottagers and paupers, laborers and out-servants - were earning less than they spent. They diminished the wealth of the realm, he argued, since their annual expenses exceeded income and had to be made up by the poor rates, which ate up one-half of the revenue of the Crown. In the early seventeenth century, this situation made people believe the country was overpopulated and emigration to the colonies was welcomed; but in the latter part of the century, and in the next, the overpopulation theory gave way to the desire to hoard a satisfactory labor surplus. Yet the strong outflow of population did not by any means cease. From the large body of poor drifters, many of them diseased, feckless, or given to crime, came a great part of the labor supply of the rich sugar islands and the American mainland. From the London of Pepys and then of Hogarth, as well as from many lesser ports and inland towns, the English poor, lured, seduced, or forced into the emigrant stream, kept coming to America for the better part of two centuries. It is safe to guess that few of them, and indeed few persons from the other sources of emigration, knew very much about what they were doing when they committed themselves to life in America.

Yet the poor were well aware that they lived in a heartless world. One of the horrendous figures in the folklore of lower-class London in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the "spirit" - the recruiting agent who waylaid, kidnapped, or induced adults to get aboard ship for America. The spirits, who worked for respectable merchants, were known to lure children with sweets, to seize upon the weak or the gin-sodden and take them aboard ship, and to bedazzle the credulous or weak-minded by fabulous promises of an easy life in the New World. Often their victims were taken roughly in hand and, pending departure, held in imprisonment either on shipboard or in low-grade hostels or brothels. To escaped criminals and other fugitives who wanted help in getting out of the country, the spirits could appear as ministering angels. Although efforts were made to regulate or check their activities, and they diminished in importance in the eighteenth century, it remains true that a certain small part of the white colonial population of America was brought by force, and a much larger portion came in response to deceit and misrepresentation on the part of the spirits.

With the beginnings of substantial emigration from the Continent in the eighteenth century the same sort of concerted business of recruitment arose in Holland, the Rhenish provinces of Germany, and Switzerland. In Rotterdam and Amsterdam the lucrative business of gathering and trans-shipping emigrants was soon concentrated in the hands of a dozen prominent English and Dutch firms. As competition mounted, the shippers began to employ agents to greet the prospective emigrants at the harbor and vie in talking up the comforts of their ships. Hence the recruiting agents known as Neulander-newlanders-emerged. These newlanders, who were paid by the head for the passengers they recruited, soon branched out of the Dutch ports and the surrounding countryside and moved up the Rhine and the Neckar, traveling from one province to another, from town to town and tavern to tavern, all the way to the Swiss cantons, often passing themselves off as rich men returned from the easy and prosperous life of America in order to persuade others to try to repeat their good fortune. These confidence men - "soul sellers" as they were sometimes called - became the

continental counterparts of the English spirits, profiteers in the fate of the peasantry and townspeople

of the Rhineland. Many of the potential emigrants stirred up by the promises of the newlanders were people of small property who expected, by selling some part of their land or stock or furnishings, to be able to pay in full for their passage to America and to arrive as freemen. What the passage would take out of them in blood and tears, not to speak of cash, was carefully hidden from them. They gathered in patient numbers at Amsterdam and Rotterdam often quite innocent of the reality of what had already become for thousands of Englishmen one of the terrors of the age - the Atlantic crossing.

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In 1750 Gottlieb Mittelberger, a simple organist and music master in the Duchy of Wurttemberg, was commissioned to bring an organ to a German congregation in New Providence, Pennsylvania, and his journey inspired him to write a memorable account of an Atlantic crossing. From Heilbronn, where he picked up his organ, Mittelberger went the well-traveled route along the Neckar and the Rhine to Rotterdam where he sailed to a stopover at Cowes in England, and then to Philadelphia. About four hundred passengers were crowded onto the ship, mainly German and Swiss redemptioners, men pledged to work off their passage charges. The trip from his home district to Rotterdam took seven weeks, the voyage from Rotterdam to Philadelphia fifteen weeks, the entire

journey from May to October. What moved Mittelberger, no literary man, to write of his experiences was first his indignation against the lies and misrepresentations used by the newlanders to lure his fellow Germans to America, and then the hideous shock of the crossing. The voyage proved excruciating and there is no reason to think it particularly unusual. The long trip down the Rhine, with constant stops at the three dozen customs houses between Heilbronn and Holland, began to consume the limited funds of the travelers, and it was followed by an expensive stop of several weeks in Holland. Then there was the voyage at sea, with the passengers packed like herring and cramped in the standard bedsteads measuring two feet by six. "During the journey," wrote Mittelberger, "the ship is full of pitiful signs of distress - smells, fumes, horrors, vomiting, various kinds of sea sickness, fever, dysentery, headaches, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and similar afflictions, all of them caused by the age and the highly-salted state of the food, especially of the meat, as well as by the very bad and filthy water, which brings about the miserable destruction and death of many. Add to all that shortage of food, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, fear, misery, vexation, and lamentation as well as other troubles. Thus, for example, there are so many lice, especially on the sick people, that they have to be scraped off the bodies. All this misery reached its climax when in addition to everything else one must suffer through two or three days and nights of storm, with everyone convinced that the ship with all aboard is bound to sink. In such misery all the people on board pray and cry pitifully together."

Even those who endured the voyage in good health, Mittelberger reported, fell out of temper and turned on each other with reproaches. They cheated and stole. "But most of all they cry out against the thieves of human beings! Many groan and exclaim: 'Oh! If only I were back at home, even lying in my pig-sty!' Or they call out: 'Ah, dear God, if I only once again had a piece of good bread or a good fresh drop of water.'" It went hardest with women in childbirth and their offspring: "Very few escape with their lives; and mother and child, as soon as they have died, are thrown into the water. On board our ship, on a day on which we had a great storm, a woman about to give birth and unable to deliver under the circumstances, was pushed through one of the portholes into the sea because her corpse was far back in the stern and could not be brought forward to the deck." Children under seven, he thought (though the port records show him wrong here), seldom survived, especially those who had not already had measles and smallpox, and their parents were condemned to watch them die and be tossed overboard. The sick members of families infected the healthy, and in the end all might be lying moribund. He believed disease was so prevalent because warm food was served only three times a week, and of that very little, very bad, very dirty, and supplemented by water that was often "very black, thick with dirt, and full of worms...towards the end of the voyage we had to eat the ship's biscuit, which had already been spoiled for a long time, even though no single piece was there more than the size of a thaler that was not full of red worms and spiders' nests."

The first sight of land gave heart to the passengers, who came crawling out of the hatches to get a glimpse of it. But then for many a final disappointment lay in wait: only those who could complete the payment of their fare

could disembark. The others were kept on board until they were bought, some of them sickening within sight of land and, as they sickened, losing the chance of being bought on good terms. On landing some families were broken, when despairing parents indentured their children to masters other than their own.

Not even passengers of means who paid their way, moved more or less freely about ship, occupied cabins or small dormitories, and had superior rations could take an Atlantic crossing lightly. In addition to the hazards of winds too feeble or too violent, of pirates, shipwrecks, or hostile navies, there were under the best of circumstances the dangers of sickness. Travelers in either direction frequently died of smallpox or other diseases on board or soon after arrival. Anglican colonials often complained of the high mortality rate among their young would-be clergymen crossing to England to be ordained. The Dutch Reformed preacher Theodorus Frelinghuysen lost three of his five sons on their way to be ordained in Amsterdam. The evangelist George Whitefield on his first crossing to the colonies in 1738 saw a majority of the soldiers on board afflicted with fever and spent much of his time "for many days and nights, visiting between twenty and thirty sick persons, crawling between decks upon his knees, administering medicines and cordials" and giving comfort. On this voyage the captain's Negro servant died, was wrapped in a hammock and tossed into the sea. In the end all but a handful of the passengers took the fever, including Whitefield, who survived treatment by bleeding and emetics. The ship on which he returned a few months later was afflicted by a "contrary wind," drifted for over a week to the point at which crew and passengers were uncertain where they were, and took so long to arrive at Ireland that water rations, which had been cut to a pint a day, were just about to run out.

When paying passengers were exposed to such afflictions, how much worse must have been the sufferings of the servants and redemptioners packed into the holds, frequently at a density that violated the laws, and without adequate ventilation. Food provisions were calculated to last fourteen weeks, which was normally sufficient, but the rations deteriorated rapidly, especially in summer.

Water turned stale, butter turned rancid, and beef rotted. If Mittelberger's voyage ranked among the worst, Atlantic crossings were frequently at or near the worst, and many more disastrous ventures were recorded. With bad luck, provisions could give out. The *Love and Unity* left Rotterdam for Philadelphia in May 1731 with more than 150 Palatines and a year later landed with 34, after having put in toward the end at Martha's Vineyard for water and food. On the way rations became so low that water, rats, and mice were being sold, and the storage chests of the dead and dying were broken open and plundered by the captain and crew. A ship called the *Good Intent* - the names of eighteenth-century vessels often reek with irony - arrived off the American coast in the winter of 1751 but found herself unable to make port because of the weather; she was able to put in to harbor in the West Indies only after twenty-four weeks at sea. Nearly all of the passengers had died long before. The *Sea Flower*, which left Belfast with 106 passengers in 1741, was at sea sixteen weeks, and lost 46 passengers from starvation. When help arrived, six of the corpses had been cannibalized.

It is true that given adequate ventilation, a stock of lemon juice and vegetables, and good luck with the winds, decent sanitary arrangements were possible. The philanthropic Georgia Trustees, who were concerned about the health of their colonists, "put on board turnips, carrots, potatoes, and onions, which were given out with the salt meat, and contributed greatly to prevent the scurvy." Out of some fifteen hundred people who had gone to Georgia at the public expense, it was claimed in 1741, not more than six had died in transit. A traveler to Jamaica in 1739 reported that the servants on his ship "had lived so easily and well during the voyage, that they looked healthful, clean and fresh, and for this reason were soon sold," yet he saw another vessel arrive not long afterward with "a multitude of poor starved creatures, that seemed so many skeletons: misery appeared in their looks, and one might read the effects of sea-tyranny by their wild and dejected countenances."

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The situation in which the indentured servant or the redemptioner found himself upon his arrival depended in large measure upon his physical condition. There would be a last-minute effort to clean up and appear presentable, and in some ports the healthy were separated from the sick, once colonial officials adopted quarantine measures. Boston, the most vigilant of the ports, had long kept a pesthouse on an island in the harbor and fined captains who disregarded the regulations. "As Christians and men," the governor of Pennsylvania urged in 1738, "we are obliged to make a charitable provision for the sick stranger, and not by

confining him to a ship, inhumanly expose him to fresh miseries when he hopes that his sufferings are soon to be mitigated." Pennsylvania then designated Province Island for quarantine and built a pesthouse to harbor sick immigrants. In 1750 and again in 1765 it passed laws to bar overcrowding on ships. Laws passed by Virginia and Maryland in the 1760's providing for the quarantine on convict ships were frowned upon in London, and Virginia's law was disallowed.

Buyers came on shipboard to take their pick of the salably healthy immigrants, beginning a long process of examination and inspection with the muscles and the teeth, and ending with a conversational search for the required qualities of intelligence, civility, and docility. At Philadelphia buyers might be trying to find Germans and eschew the Scotch-Irish, who were reputed to be contumacious and work resistant and disposed to run away. Some buyers were "soul drivers" who bought packs of immigrants and brutally herded them on foot into the interior where they were offered along the way to ready purchasers. On the ships and at the docks there were final scenes of despair and frenzy as servants searched for lost articles of indenture, or lamented the disappearance of baggage, unexpected overcharges, the necessity of accepting indentures longer than their debts fairly required, the separation of families.

The final crisis of arrival was the process we would call acclimatization, in the eighteenth century known as "seasoning." Particularly difficult in the tropical islands, seasoning also took a heavy toll in the Southern colonies of the mainland. People from cities and from the mild English climate found the summer hard going in any colony from Maryland southward, especially on plantations where indentured servants were put to arduous field labor by owners whose goal it was to get a maximum yield of labor in the four or five years contracted for. Fevers, malaria, and dysentery carried many off, especially in their first years of service. Seasoning was thought to be more or less at an end after one year in the new climate, and servants who had been wholly or partly seasoned were at a premium.

During the voyage, thoughtful servants might have recalled, quite a number of persons had battered on their needs - the spirit or the newlander, the toll collectors and the parasites of the seaports, the ship captain or merchant; now there was the master. Any traffic that gave sustenance to so many profiteers might well rest on a rather intense system of exploitation. A merchant who would spend from six to ten pounds to transport and provision an indentured servant might sell him on arrival - the price varied with age, skill, and physical condition - for fifteen to twenty pounds, although the profits also had to cover losses from sickness and death en route. The typical servant had, in effect, sold his total working powers for four or five years or more in return for his passage plus a promise of minimal maintenance. After the initially small capital outlay, the master simply had to support him from day to day as his services were rendered, support which was reckoned to cost about thirteen or fourteen pounds a year. In Maryland, where exploitation was as intense as anywhere, the annual net yield, even from unskilled labor, was reckoned at around fifty pounds sterling. The chief temptation to the master was to drive the servant beyond his powers in the effort to get as much as possible out of him during limited years of service. The chief risk was that the servant might die early in service before his purchase price had been redeemed by his work. That he might run away was a secondary risk, though one against which the master had considerable protection. Still, hard as white servitude bore on servants, it was nevertheless not always a happy arrangement for owners, especially for those with little capital and little margin for error: shiftless and disagreeable servants, as well as successful runaways, were common enough to introduce a significant element of risk into this form of labor.

Indentured servants lived under a wide variety of conditions, which appear to have softened somewhat during the eighteenth century. Good or bad luck, the disposition of the master, the length of the term of work, the size of the plantation or farm, the robustness or frailty of the worker - all these had a part in determining the fate of each individual. Servants in households or on small farms might be in the not uncomfortable situation of familiar domestic laborers. Tradesmen who were trying to teach special skills to their workers, or householders who wanted satisfactory domestic service, might be tolerable masters. The most unenviable situation was that of servants on Southern plantations, living alongside - but never with - Negro slaves, both groups doing much the same work, often under the supervision of a relentless overseer. One has to imagine the situation of a member of the English urban pauper class, unaccustomed to rural or to any sustained labor, thrust into a hot climate in which heavy field labor - including, worst of all, the backbreaking task of clearing new land of rocks, trees, and shrubs - was his daily lot. Even as late as 1770 William Eddis, the English surveyor of customs at Annapolis, though that the Maryland Negroes were better off than "the Europeans, over whom the rigid planter

exercises an inflexible severity." The Negroes, Eddis thought, were a lifelong property so were treated with a certain care, but the whites were "strained to the utmost to perform their allotted labor; and, from a prepossession in many cases too justly founded, they were supposed to be receiving only the just reward which is due to repeated offenses.

There are doubtless many exceptions to this observation, yet, generally speaking, they groan beneath a worse than Egyptian bondage." Yet in Virginia, as the blacks arrived in greater numbers, white laborers seemed to have become a privileged stratum, assigned to lighter work and more skilled tasks. The status and reputation of Southern indentured laborers were no doubt kept lower than elsewhere because there were a considerable number of transported convicts among them. Colonies to the north were not completely free of convict transportees, but the plantation system regularly put honest unfortunates alongside hardened criminals and lumped all together as rogues who deserved no better than what was meted out to them. Among the by-products of English social change of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was a very substantial pool of criminal talents. The laws devised to suppress[[the criminal population were so harsh-scores of crimes were defined as felonies and hanging was a standard punishment for many trivial offenses- that England would have been launched upon mass hangings far beyond the point of acceptability had it not been for two devices that let many accused off the penalties prescribed for felons. One was the benefit of clergy-a practice inherited from the Middle Ages and continued until the early nineteenth century-which permitted a convicted felon to "call for the book" and prove his literacy. On the ancient assumption that those who could read were clerics and thus exempt from severe punishments by the secular state, the relatively privileged class of literate felons could be permitted to escape with the conventional branding of the thumb.

A second practice, the predecessor of convict transportation, was to secure royal pardons for ordinary offenders deemed by the judges to be worthy of some indulgence. Until the end of the French wars in 1713 it was customary to send them into the army, but in peacetime England did not know what to do with felons and drifters. In 1717 Parliament passed an act which in effect made royal clemency contingent upon transportation to the colonies for a term of labor; in consequence the large-scale shipping of convicts began which continued to the time of the American Revolution. To America at large, including the island colonies, around thirty thousand felons were transported in the eighteenth century, of whom probably more than two-thirds reached Virginia and Maryland, where they were readily snapped up by the poorer planters.

The whole procedure, though clearly intended to be a humane and useful alternative to wholesale hangings, was dreadfully feared by convicts, who may have guessed, quite rightly, that whoever bought their services would try to get the most out of them during their seven-year terms

(fourteen years in the case of transmuted death penalties) of hard labor. In transit felons probably were fed somewhat better than they were used to, but usually they were kept below deck and in chains during the entire voyage, and on the average perhaps one in six or seven would die on the way.

"All the states of horror I ever had an idea of," wrote a visitor to a convict ship, "are much short of what I saw this poor man in; chained to a board in a hole not above sixteen feet long, more than fifty with him; a collar and padlock about his neck, and chained to five of the most dreadful creatures I ever looked on." Mortality could run very high: on one ship, the Honour, which arrived in Annapolis in 1720, twenty of the sixty-one convicts had died. Merchants transporting felons on government contracts pleaded for subsidies to cover losses that hit them so hard.

While some planters rushed to the seaports to find convicts for their field labor supply, others were disturbed by the effect they expected criminals would have on the character of the population. These hazardous importations caused most anxiety in the colonies that received masses of transported felons. Pennsylvania subjected the importation of convicts to constant statutory harassment after

1722. Virginia at mid-century seems to have thought herself in the midst of a crime wave. The Virginia Gazette complained in 1751: "When we see our papers filled continually with accounts of the most audacious robberies, the most cruel murders, and infinite other villainies perpetrated by convicts transported from Europe, what melancholy, what terrible reflections it must occasion! What will become of our posterity? These are some of thy favours Britain. Thou art called our Mother Country; but what good mother ever sent thieves and villains

to accompany her children; to corrupt some with their infectious vices and murder the rest? What father ever endeavour'd to spread a plague in his family?... In what can Britain show a more sovereign contempt for us than by emptying their jails into our settlements; unless they would likewise empty their jakes [privies] on our tables!"

The concluding metaphor seems to have come quite naturally to the colonials: Franklin also used it, although he is better remembered for his suggestion that the Americans trade their rattlesnakes for the convicts. But all laws rejecting transported convicts were disallowed in England by the Board of Trade and the Privy Council, while subterfuge measures designed to impede or harass the trade were looked at with suspicion.

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The system of indenture was an adaptation, with some distinctively harsh features, of the old institution of apprenticeship. In fact, a few native-born colonials, usually to discharge a debt or answer for a crime but sometimes to learn a trade, entered into indentures not altogether unlike those undertaken by immigrants. In law an indenture was a contract in which the servant promised faithful service for a specified period of time in return for his housing and keep and, at the end of his term of work, that small sum of things, known as "freedom dues," which his master promised him upon their parting. The typical term was four or five years, although it might run anywhere from one or two years to seven. Longer terms were commonly specified for children, and were calculated to bring them to freedom at or just past the time they reached majority. Most indentures followed a standard pattern: as early as 1636 printed forms were available, needing only a few details to be filled out by the contracting parties. Often an emigrant's original indenture was made out to a merchant or a ship's captain and was sold with its holder to an employer on arrival. Indentures became negotiable instruments in the colonies, servants bound under their terms being used to settle debts, even gambling debts. In theory the contract protected the servant from indefinite exploitation, but in practice it had quite limited powers. It was a document vulnerable to loss, theft, or destruction, and when one considers both the fecklessness and inexperience of most indentured servants and the lack of privacy under which they lived, it is little wonder that their contracts often disappeared.

During the eighteenth century, however, circumstances began to alter the prevailing system of indentures and to lessen its severities, particularly when a special class of bonded servants, the redemptioners, became numerous. The redemptioner appeared at the beginning of the century, coming largely from the Continent, often emigrating with a family and with a supply of tools and furnishings. The passengers who traveled with Mittelberger were mostly redemptioners. Indentured servants were simply a part of a ship's cargo, but redemptioners were low-grade, partially paid-up passengers. The redemptioner embarked without an indenture, sometimes having paid part of the money for his own and his family's passage, and arranged with the shipping merchant to complete payment within a short time after landing. Once here, he might try to find relatives or friends to make up his deficit; failure to pay in full meant he would be sold to the highest bidder to redeem whatever part of his fare was unpaid. The length of his servitude would depend upon the amount to be redeemed. It could be as short as one or two years, although four years seems to have been much more common. Redemptioners would try to go into service as a whole family group. Although redemptioners were often swindled because of their lack of English and were overcharged for interest, insurance, and the transportation of their baggage, it was less profitable to carry them than indentured servants. Still, merchants were eager to fill their ships as full as possible with a ballast of redemptioners.

All bonded servants, indentured and redemptionist, were chattels of their masters, but the terminability of their contracts and the presence of certain legal rights stood between them and slavery. A servant could be freely bought and sold, except in Pennsylvania and New York where laws required the consent of a court before assigning a servant for a year or more. His labor could be rented out; he could be inherited on the terms laid down in his master's will. Yet he could own property, although he was forbidden to engage in trade. He could also sue and be sued, but he could not vote. It was expected that he would be subject to corporal punishment by his master for various offenses, and whipping was common; but a master risked losing his servant on the order of a court for a merciless or disfiguring beating. The right of a servant to petition the courts against abuse was more than a negligible protection. Penniless servants were, of course, at a disadvantage in courts manned by representatives of the master class: in effect they were appealing to the community pride, compassion, or decency of the magistrates, and the sense that there were certain things that ought not be done to a white

Christian. Yet the frequency of complaints by servants makes it clear that the prerogative of appeal was widely used, and the frequency of judgments rendered for servants shows that it was not used in vain. NO colony recognized the validity of agreements between master and servant made during servitude unless both parties appeared before a magistrate and registered their consent. Statutes regulated the terms of servitude in cases in which no papers of indenture existed.

For many thousands of servants their term of indentured servitude was a period of enforced celibacy. Marriage without the consent of the master was illegal, and the crimes of fornication and bastardy figure importantly in the records of bound servitude- not surprisingly, when we realize how many of the servant population were between the ages of eighteen and thirty. The sexuality of redemptioners, since they commonly came in families, was a much less serious problem for them and their masters. Among indentured servants as a whole, however, there were many more men than women. The situation of maidservants was full of both opportunities and hazards. Their services were considerably prized, and a clever or comely woman, as mistress or wife, might escape from the dreariest exactions of servitude. Still, women were also vulnerable to sexual abuse, and the penalties for simply following their own inclinations were high. Masters were unwilling to undergo the loss of time, the expense of rearing a child, or the impairment of health or risk of death in childbirth, and thus were unlikely to give consent to marriage. But the laws contrived to give masters the chance to turn such events to their own account. For fornication and bastardy there were ceremonial whippings, usually of twenty-one lashes; more to the point, sentences of from one to two or three years of extra service were exacted, an overgenerous compensation for the loss of perhaps no more than a few weeks of work. From Pennsylvania southward, Richard B. Morris has concluded, the master was often enriched far beyond his actual losses. Where a manservant fathered a child, he could be required to do whatever extra service was necessary to provide for its maintenance. Merely for contracting unsanctioned marriages, servants could be put to a year's extra service. If a maidservant identified her master as the father of her child, he could be punished for adultery, and she removed from him and resold. A keen disrelish for miscegenation provided an additional term of punishment: for bearing a mulatto bastard a woman might get heavy whipping and seven years of extra service. Despite such restraints, there were a substantial number of illegitimate births, mulatto and otherwise.

However, the commonest crime committed by servants, not surprisingly, was running away - not an easy thing to get away with, since in the colonies everyone had to carry a pass, in effect an identity card, and stiff penalties ranging from fines and personal damages to corporal punishment were imposed upon persons harboring fugitives. Runaways were regularly advertised in the newspapers, rewards were offered, and both sheriffs and the general public were enlisted to secure their return. Returned they often were, and subjected to what were regarded as suitable penalties; captured servants who were unclaimed were resold at public auction. On the whole, and especially in Pennsylvania and colonies to the south, the laws turned the punishment of the recovered runaway into an advantage for the master. The standard penalty in the North, not always rigorously enforced, was extra service of twice the time the master had lost, though whipping was also common. In Pennsylvania, a five-to-one penalty was fixed and commonly enforced, while in Maryland, the harshest of all the colonies, a ten-to-one penalty was authorized by a law of 1661 and very often enforced to the letter. A habitual runaway, or one who succeeded in getting away for weeks, could win himself a dreary extension of servitude. There was one horrendous case of a maidservant in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, who ran off habitually for short terms, and whose master quietly kept a record, true or false, of her absences. Finally taking her to court, the master rendered an account of 133 accumulated days of absence. Since it was impossible for her to deny her frequent absences, she had no shadow of an answer, and was booked for 1,330 days of extra service. Hers was an unusual but not a singular case: there are recorded penalties of 1,530 days, 2,000 days, and even one of 12,130 days, which the master handsomely commuted to an even five years. Virginia assessed double time, or more if "proportionable to the damages" which could be high in tobacco-harvesting time, plus an additional punishment, more commonly inflicted in the seventeenth than the eighteenth century, of corporal punishment. On the eve of the Revolution, Negro slavery had largely replaced indentures in the tidewater plantations but indentures were still important on the accessible and inviting edges of settlement, and there runaways became a critical problem. In South Carolina, where fear of insurrection had been a dominant motive, a law of 1691 had authorized a week's extra service for a day of absence, and for absences that ran as long as a week, a year for a week - a fifty-two-to-one ratio that made Maryland seem relaxed. In 1744 the week-for-a-day ratio was still kept, but the maximum penalty was set at a year's service. Whipping was also routine.

The problem of preventing and punishing runaways was complicated by what was held to be the "pirating" of labor by competing employers - and it became necessary to establish a whole series of penalties for enticing or distracting indentured labor. Plainly, if neighbors could entice bound laborers from their owners for occasional or even permanent service by offering money or promising better treatment, a rudimentary subterranean labor market would begin to replace servitude, and property in servants would become increasingly hazardous. Pirating was not taken lightly in the law, and enticers of labor were subject to personal damage suits as well as to criminal prosecution, with sentences ranging from whipping or sitting in the stocks to fines. The penalties were so heavy in the tobacco colonies that law-abiding planters might even hesitate to feed or shelter a servant who had apparently been deserted by his master. Indeed, inn-keepers in these colonies were often fined simply for entertaining or selling liquor to servants. Suits for damages for brief enticements were hardly worth the trouble in the case of servants whose work was valued at a few pence a day. But in New York a skilled cabinetmaker and chair carver indentured in 1761 was lured away by a competitor at frequent intervals, and a few years later his master won a smashing judgment of £128.

Plots hatched by several servants to run away together occurred mostly in the plantation colonies, and the few recorded servant uprisings were entirely limited to those colonies. Virginia had been forced from its very earliest years to take stringent steps against mutinous plots, and severe punishments for such behavior were recorded. Most servant plots occurred in the seventeenth century: a contemplated uprising was nipped in the bud in York County in 1661; apparently led by some left-wing offshoots of the Great Rebellion, servants plotted an insurrection in Gloucester County in 1663, and four leaders were condemned and executed; some discontented servants apparently joined Bacon's Rebellion in the 1670's. In the 1680's the planters became newly apprehensive of discontent among the servants "owing to their great necessities and want of clothes," and it was feared they would rise up and plunder the storehouses and ships; in 1682 there were plant-cutting riots in which servants and laborers, as well as some planters, took part.

By the eighteenth century, either because of the relaxed security of the indenture system or the increasing effectiveness of the authorities, disturbances were infrequent, although in 1707 a gang of runaways planned to seize military stores, burn Annapolis, steal a ship, and set up as pirates, but were stopped. Again in 1721 a band of convict servants conspired unsuccessfully to seize military stores at Annapolis. An insurrection of some consequence did actually break out among white servants under the British regime in East Florida during the summer of 1768, when three hundred Italians and Greeks in that very heterogeneous colony revolted against hard work and stern treatment, seized the arms and ammunition in the storehouse, and prepared to set sail from a ship at anchor in the river at New Smyrna. They were intercepted by a government vessel and promptly surrendered. Three leaders were convicted of piracy, one of whom was pardoned on condition that he execute his two comrades. Discontent and dissension, reaching into the local elite, were still rife in Florida at the time of the Revolution.

A serious threat to the interests of masters, one which gives testimony to the onerousness of servitude, was the possibility of military enlistment. In New England, where there were not many servants, military service was obligatory and seems to have posed no major temptation to escape servitude, but in Pennsylvania and the tobacco colonies, where servants were numerous and essential, the competing demand by the army for manpower in the intercolonial war of the 1740's, and, even more, in the French and Indian War of the 1750's, aroused great anxiety among the master. In the 1740's, more than a third of the Pennsylvania enlistments were from men in the servant class whose masters were compensated at the colony's expense; in Maryland, during the French and Indian War, Governor Horatio Sharpe reported not only that "servants immediately flocked in to enlist, convicts not excepted," but also that recruits among freemen were extremely scarce, and in Virginia volunteers lest they seize the alternative and join the regular army. The resistance of the Pennsylvania Assembly to enlistments during the 1750's became provocatively stubborn and in Maryland there was armed resistance and rioting against recruitment. Parliament, whose interest it was to increase the army, passed a measure in 1756 authorizing officers to enlist indentured servants regardless of restraining colonial laws or practices. The best that masters could hope for was compensation from their colony's legislature, a practice that was repeated in Pennsylvania in 1763, or suing the recruiting officer for civil damages. During the Revolution, the Continental Congress and some of the states encouraged the enlistment of servants, but Pennsylvania and Maryland exempted them from military service. When despite this recruiting officers in Pennsylvania continued to enlist servants, a group of Cumberland County masters complained with magnificent gall that apprentices and servants "are the property of their masters and mistresses, and every

mode of depriving such masters and mistresses of their property is a violation of the rights of mankind..." A good number of servants ran off to the British forces, especially in Virginia, but neither the wars nor the Revolution ended the practice of servitude, which declined but did not die until the nineteenth century.

5

Numerous as are the court records of penalties which lengthened service, most servants did not run afoul of the law; their periods of servitude did at last come to an end, entitling them to collect

"freedom dues" if they could, and to start in life for themselves. Freedom dues were usually specified by law, but little seems to be known about their payment. Virginia and North Carolina laws of the 1740's required L3 in money, and North Carolina added an adequate suit of clothes. The Crown provided 50 acres of land, free of quitrent for ten years, in South Carolina. A Pennsylvania law of 1700 specified two complete suites of clothes, one of which was to be new, one new ax, one grubbing hoe, and one weeding hoe. Massachusetts long before in the seventeenth century had provided in biblical fashion that servants after seven years' labor should "not be sent away empty." but what this maxim was actually worth to servants is difficult to say. Like the dues of ordinary apprentices, freedom dues may have functioned most importantly as a kind of inducement to servants to carry out in good faith the concluding months and weeks of servitude. Where the labor of a servant was particularly valuable, his master might strengthen that inducement by a cash payment considerably beyond what had been promised.

What was the economic situation of the servant after completing his servitude? It varied, no doubt, from colony to colony, and with the availability of lands. In the mainland colonies, it appears to have been assumed that an ex-servant was to be equipped for work as a free hired man with enough clothes and tools or many to give him a small start. It was assumed that wages for a freeman were high enough to enable him to earn an adequate competence or to provide himself with a plot of land within a fairly short time. Some ex-servants no doubt went westward and took up new lands. "The inhabitants of our frontiers," wrote Governor Alexander Spotswood of Virginia in 1717, "are composed generally of such as have been transported hither as servants, and being out of their time, settle themselves where land is to be taken up that will produce the necessaries of life with little labor." But it is quite likely that Spotswood erred considerably on the side of optimism. For example, in Maryland, where a freed servant in the seventeenth century was entitled to 50 acres of land upon showing his certificate of freedom at the office of the land office secretary, the records show that relatively few became farmers, though many assumed their land rights and sold them for cash. Abbot E. Smith, in one of the most authoritative studies of colonial servitude, estimates that only one out of ten indentured servants (not including redemptioners) became a substantial farmer and another became an artisan or an overseer in reasonably comfortable circumstances. The other eight, he suggests, either died during servitude, returned to England when it was over, or drifted off to become the "poor whites" of the villages and rural areas. There is reason to think that in most places servants who had completed a term of bondage and had a history of local residence met the prevailing parochial, almost tribal qualifications for poor relief, and were accepted as public charges. Redemptioners, Smith remarks, did a good deal better, but the scrappy evidence that has thus far been found does not yet allow much precision. Sir Henry Moore, governor of New York, thought them so anxious to own land that they made great sacrifices to do so: "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 miserable lives, and in the most abject poverty; but all this is patiently borne and submitted to with the greatest cheerfulness, the satisfaction of being land holders smooths every difficulty, and makes them prefer this manner of living to that comfortable subsistence which they could procure for themselves and their families by working at the trades in which they were brought up." An Englishman who traveled in America in the opening years of the nineteenth century noticed "many families, particularly in Pennsylvania, of great respectability both in our society and amongst others, who had themselves come over to this country as redemptioners; or were children of such."

As for the indentured servants, the dismal estimate that only two out of ten may have reached positions of moderate comfort is an attempt to generalize the whole two centuries of the experience of English servitude, taking the seventeenth century when the system was brutal and opportunities were few with the eighteenth, when it became less severe. In the early years more servants returned to England, and mortality was also higher. But it will not do simply to assume that freed servants, especially those from the tobacco fields, were in

any mental or physical condition to start vigorous new lives, or that long and ripe years of productivity lay ahead for them. If we consider the whole span of time over which English indentured servitude prevailed, its heavy toll in work and death is the reality that stands out.

The Horatio Alger mythology has long since been torn to bits by students of American social mobility, and it will surprise no one to learn that the chance of emergence from indentured servitude to a position of wealth or renown was statistically negligible. A few cases to the contrary are treasured by historians, handed down from one to another like heirlooms - but most of them deal with Northern servants who came with education or skills. The two most illustrious colonial names with servitude in their family histories are Benjamin Franklin and the eminent Maryland lawyer Daniel Dulany. Franklin's maternal grandfather, Peter Folger of Nantucket, a man of many trades from teacher and surveyor to town and court clerk and interpreter between whites and Indians, had bought a maidservant for £20 and later married her. Dulany, who came from a substantial Irish family, arrived in 1703 with two older brothers; the brothers melted into the anonymity that usually awaited indentured arrivals, but Daniel was picked up by a lawyer who was pleased to buy a literate servant with some university training to act as his clerk and help with his plantation accounts. The closest thing to a modest, American-scale family dynasty to come out of servitude was that of the New England Sullivans. John Sullivan and Margery Browne both came to Maine as indentured servants in the 1720's. After Sullivan earned his freedom he became a teacher, bought Margery out of servitude, and married her. Their son John became a lawyer, a Revolutionary patriot, one of Washington's leading generals, and governor of New Hampshire. His younger brother, James, also a lawyer, became a congressman from Massachusetts and in time governor of the state. In the third generation, John's son, George, became a Federalist congressman and the attorney general of New Hampshire; James's son, William, pursued a successful legal career in Boston, played a prominent role in state politics, and was chosen to be one of the three delegates to take the manifesto of the Hartford Convention to Washington. John Lamb, a leader of the Sons of Liberty and later an officer in the Revolution, was the son of Anthony Lamb who had followed an improbable career: an apprentice instrument maker in London, Anthony became involved with a notorious burglar who ended on the gallows at Tyburn; as a first offender, Lamb was sentenced to be transported, served out an indenture in Virginia, moved to New York, and became a reputable instrument maker and a teacher of mathematics, surveying, and navigation. Charles Thomson, one of six children orphaned by the death of their father on shipboard in 1739, began life under indenture, became a teacher in Philadelphia, a merchant, a Revolutionary patriot, and Secretary of the Continental Congress. Matthew Thornton, whose parents came to Maine in the Scotch Irish emigration of 1718, began life under indenture, became a physician, a patriot leader in New Hampshire, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Matthew Lyon, who won notoriety as a peppery Republican congressman from Vermont and as a victim of the Sedition Act, emigrated from Ireland in 1765 and paid off his passage by three years of indentured service on farms in Connecticut before he bought his own farm in Vermont. And there were others, brands snatched from the burning, triumphs of good fortune or strong character over the probabilities.

6

Thoreau, brooding over the human condition in the relatively idyllic precincts of Concord and Walden Pond, was convinced that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. His conviction quickens to life again when we contemplate the human costs of what historians sometimes lightly refer to as the American experiment. It is true that thousands came to the colonies in search of freedom or plenty and with a reasonably good chance of finding them, and that the colonies harbored a force of free white workers whose wages and conditions might well have been the envy of their European counterparts. Yet these fortunate men were considerably outnumbered by persons, white or black, who came to America in one kind of servitude or another. It is also true that for some servants, especially for those who already had a skill, a little cash, or some intelligence or education or gentility, servitude in America might prove not a great deal worse than an ordinary apprenticeship, despite the special tribulations and hazards it inflicted. But when one thinks of the great majority of those who came during the long span of time between the first settlements and the disappearance of white servitude in the early nineteenth century - bearing in mind the poverty and the ravaged lives which they left in Europe, the cruel filter of the Atlantic crossing, the high mortality of the crossing and the seasoning, and the many years of arduous toil that lay between the beginning of servitude and the final realization of tolerable comfort - one is deeply impressed by the measure to which the sadness that is natural to life was overwhelmed in the condition of servitude by the stark miseries that seem all too natural to the history of the poor. For a great many the journey across the Atlantic proved in the end to have been only an epitome of their journey through life. And

yet there must have seemed to be little at risk because there was so little at stake. They had so often left a scene of turbulence, crime, exploitation, and misery that there could not have been much hope in most of them; and as they lay in their narrow bedsteads listening to the wash of the rank bilge water below them, sometimes racked with fever or lying in their own vomit, few could have expected very much from American life, and those who did were too often disappointed, But with white servants we have only begun to taste the anguish of the early American experience.