

From *Letter to his father and mother, March 20, April 2 and 3, 1623* by Richard Frethorne, in *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, edited by Susan M. Kingsbury.

# An Indentured Servant Writes Home (1623)

By 1618 the struggling Jamestown colony of the London Company had discovered a cash crop. Tobacco grew well in Virginia and found a ready market back home. To encourage the production of tobacco the Company offered a liberal headright system to new settlers. Persons who relocated to Virginia received 50 acres of land for each "head" transported, and this included their indentured servants as well as themselves. In return for free passage to Virginia, indentured servants contracted to serve their master for seven years. Only at the end of the seven years were they free to pursue their own fortunes in the New World.

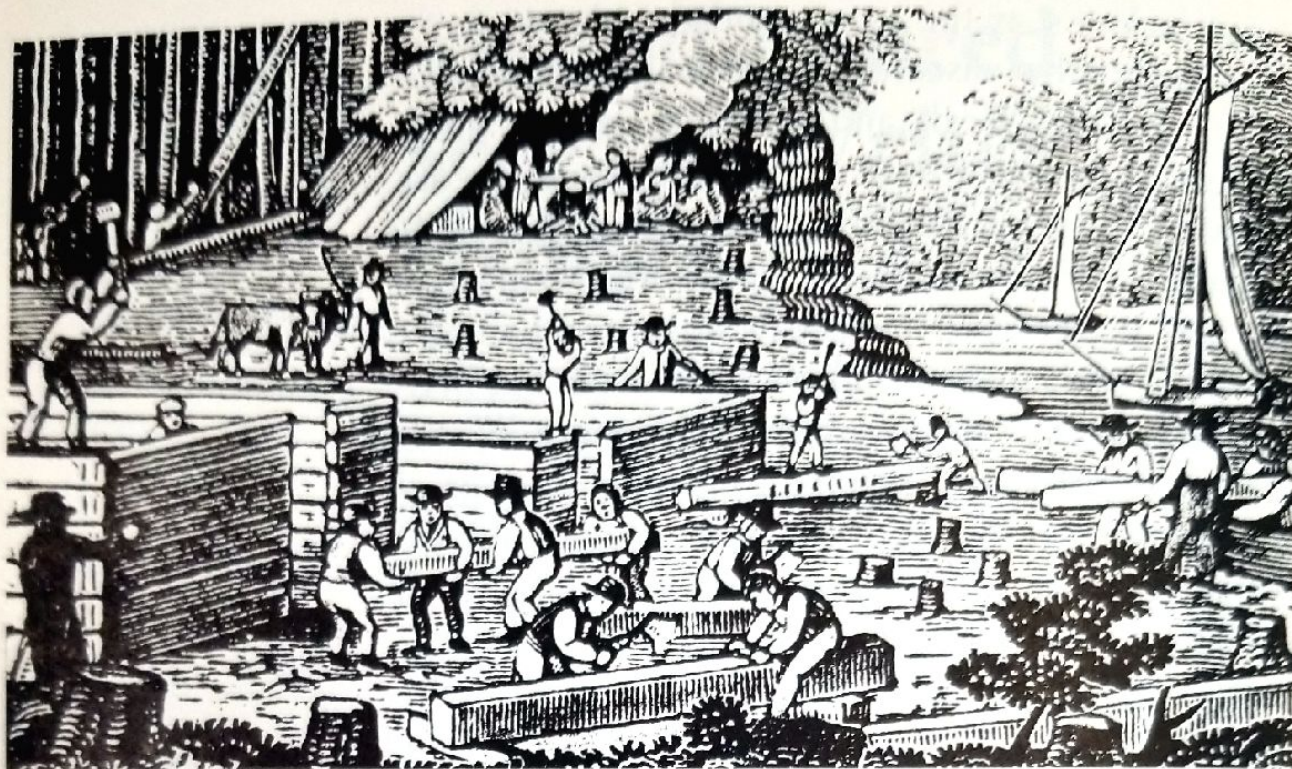
Even in the 1620s conditions were harsh and dangerous in Virginia, and the death rate from disease and malnutrition was very high. In 1623 indentured servant Richard Frethorne wrote his mother and father complaining of the bitter hardships he was enduring in Jamestown. Frethorne's woeful letter survives in the records of the London Company, but nothing more is known of the young man or of what ultimately happened to him. The chances are high that he too perished in Virginia in 1623. As you read this excerpt, consider what Richard Frethorne was trying to accomplish with his letter home.

**L**oving and kind father and mother my most humble duty remembered to you hoping in God of your good health, as I myself am . . . at the making hereof, this is to let you understand that I your Child am in a most heavy Case by reason of the nature of the Country . . . is such that it Causeth



much sickness, as the scurvy and the bloody flux, and divers other diseases, which maketh the body very poor, and Weak, and when we are sick there is nothing to Comfort us; for since I came out of the ship, I never ate anything but peas, and loblollie (that is water gruel)[possibly made from oats] as for deer or venison I never saw any since I came into this land; there is indeed some fowl, but We are not allowed to go, and get it, but must Work hard both early, and late for a mess of water gruel, and a mouthful of bread, and beef, a mouthful of bread for a penny loaf must serve for 4 men which is most pitiful . . . people cry out day, and night, Oh that they were in England without their limbs and would not care to lose any limb to be in England again, yea though they beg from door to door, for we live in fear of the Enemy every hour, yet we have had a Combat with them on the Sunday before Shrovetide, and we took two alive, and make slaves of them, but it was by policy, for we are in great danger, for our Plantation is very weak, by reason of the death, and sickness, of our Company, for we came but Twenty for the marchaunte [merchants], and they are half dead Just; and we look every hour When two more should go, yet there came some for other men yet to live with us, of which there is but one alive, and our Lieutenant is dead, and his father, and his brother, I have nothing to Comfort me, nor there is nothing to be gotten here but sickness, and death, except that one had money to lay out in some things for profit; But I have nothing at all, no not a shirt to my back, but two Rags nor no Clothes, but one poor suit, nor but one pair of shoes, but one pair of stockings, but one Cap, but two band, my Cloak is stolen by one of my own fellows, and to his dying hour would not tell me what he did with it but some of my fellows saw him have butter and beef out of a ship, which my Cloak I doubt [fear] paid for, so that I have not a penny, nor a [half] penny Worth to help me to





Some of the labor needed to improve the Jamestown colony was provided by indentured servants. In exchange for their passage to the New World, they agreed to work for their masters for seven years.

either spice, or sugar, or strong Waters, without the which one cannot live here, for as strong beer in England doth fatten and strengthen them so water here doth wash and weaken this here, only keep life and soul together. But I am not half a quarter so strong as I was in England, and all is for want of victuals, for I do protest unto you, that I have eaten more in [a] day at home than I have allowed me here for a Week. You have given more than my day's allowance to a beggar at the door; and if Mr. Jackson had not relieved me, I should be in a poor Case, but he like a father and she like a loving mother doth still help me, for when we go up to James Town that is 10 miles of us, there lie all the ships that Come to the land, and there they must deliver their goods, and when we went up to Town as it may be on Monday, at noon, and come there by night, then load the next day by noon, and go home in the afternoon, and unload, and then away again in the night, and be up about midnight, then if it rained, or blowed ever so hard we must lie in the boat on the water, and have nothing but a little bread, for when we go into the boat we have a loaf allowed to two men, and it is all if we stayed



there 2 days, which is hard, and must lie all that while in the boat, but that Goodman Jackson pitied me and made me a Cabin to lie in always when I come up, and he would give me some poor Jacke [a kind of fish] [to take] home with me which Comforted me more than peas, or water gruel. Oh they be very godly folks, and love me very well, and will do anything for me, and he much marveled that you would send me a servant to the Company, he saith I had been better knocked on the head, and Indeed so I find it now to my great grief and misery, and saith, that if you love me you will redeem me suddenly, good father do not forget me, but have mercy and pity my miserable Case. I know if you did but see me you would weep to see me, for I have but one suit, but it is a strange one, it is very well guarded, wherefore for God's sake pity me, I pray you to remember my love to all my friends, and kindred, I hope all my Brothers and Sisters are in good health, and as for my part I have set down my resolution that certainly Will be, that is, that the Answer of this letter will be life or death to me, therefore good father send as soon as you can.

### REVIEWING THE READING

1. What seems to have been the main purpose of Frethorne's letter home?
2. Of the many hardships of life in Virginia, what do you think bothered him the most?
3. **Using Your Historical Imagination.** What does Richard Frethorne's account suggest about the methods by which indentured servants were recruited to go to Virginia? What does it suggest about the life of the poorer classes in England?