

Name _____



Indentured Servants

By Sharon Fabian

Some of these young men worked at low paying jobs in the city of London. Some wanted to work in English seaport towns but couldn't find jobs. Others were sons of farm families from the English countryside. Some had been convicted of a crime. Some owed money. Who were these men?



They were young Englishmen who wanted a better life and were willing to gamble to get their chance. They would become the indentured servants in the New World.

Passage by ship to America was a long and expensive undertaking. Many ordinary people would never have been able to save up enough money. So, when young men in English towns heard the message being spread by recruiters from the Virginia Company, they stopped to listen. So did some young women. The Virginia Company was offering to pay their passage to America. It also offered free room and board upon arrival in America. It even offered "freedom dues" to help new immigrants get started on their own once their indenture was completed.

To take advantage of the offer, the young men and women had to offer their labor in return. Some agreed to work for 4 to 7 years, some even longer. Often, they signed a contract, called an indenture, that specified how long they would have to work for their master once they arrived in America.

Their passage across the Atlantic was often grim. They traveled in steerage, below deck. Many survived on dry biscuits and water during the 8 to 12 week passage.

Some of the indentured servants had a master waiting for them in

America. Others would be "sold" by the ship's captain when they arrived. Their life in America would be at the mercy of their new master.

Many of the early indentured servants went to work on large plantations, such as the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake Bay region which depended on a large labor force to stay in operation.

The work was hard, and the days were long for an indentured servant. Many were not used to the intense heat and the blistering sun that they faced in the fields each day.

The indentured servants were often treated harshly. Physical punishments such as whippings were common, and in fact, many of the indentured servants died before their term of service was completed. Others ran away.

Servants who ran away and were caught had their term of service extended. Indentured servants did have some legal rights, but many aspects of their lives were controlled by their masters. For example, a young woman indentured servant was often not allowed to have a baby until her term of service ended.

Depending on the labor of indentured servants presented some difficulties for the plantation owners too. Every time a servant finished his or her indenture, or ran away, a new servant had to be found and trained.

Over time, plantation owners began to depend more on servants from Africa and less on those from England. They also began to pass laws that took away the rights of servants. The laws said that servants from Africa would be servants for life. This is how the system of indentured servitude, that had once provided hope for poor young English men, gradually changed into the institution of slavery.

The system of indentured servitude had begun in the early 1600's. All together, it had brought 200,000 to 300,000 settlers to America. By the early 1800's, indentured servitude was on its way out.



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Indentured Servants

Questions

- _____ 1. An indentured servant agreed to work for _____.
 - A. life
 - B. seven years
 - C. a certain number of years
 - D. four years

- _____ 2. The first indentured servants usually worked _____ in America.
 - A. in factories
 - B. in seaports
 - C. on plantations
 - D. in towns

- _____ 3. Indentured servitude _____ the same as slavery.
 - A. was not
 - B. was

- _____ 4. Which of the following was not a reason why an indentured servant might have come to America?
 - A. chance for a better life
 - B. room and board
 - C. freedom to choose a job
 - D. free passage

- _____ 5. The system of indentured servitude lasted for about _____ years.
 - A. 1,000
 - B. 400
 - C. 20
 - D. 200

- _____ 6. Indentured servants were recruited by _____.
 - A. the London Company
 - B. the United States government
 - C. the Virginia Company
 - D. Plantation owners

- _____ 7. Indentured servants traveled to America _____.
 - A. in steerage
 - B. by train
 - C. first class
 - D. by purchasing a ticket

- _____ 8. In the 1600's, indentured servitude was an important part of the _____ economy.
 - A. English
 - B. plantation
 - C. industrial
 - D. New England

Suppose that you were a young indentured servant in colonial America and that you were keeping a journal. Write several entries for your journal telling about your life and about your hopes for the future.
