Indentured Servants

Many people could not afford the cost of the passage to America. Young men, widows, orphaned children and people who committed minor crimes, indentured themselves. This meant they sold themselves to the ship captain or merchants for a period of at least seven years. In the case of young children they were indentured till they reached the age of twenty-one. Servants entered into their labor contracts voluntarily, and they retained some legal rights: they could bring suit and testify, own property, and turn to colonial courts for protection against abusive masters. On the other hand, they could not marry without their master's consent, and they had little control over the terms or conditions of their labor and living standards, although custom and local law did set limits and provide for certain minimums. Terms varied substantially, from four years for skilled adults to a decade or more for unskilled minors. And all could find their terms extended if they ran away or became pregnant. Servants could be sold without their consent, a necessity given the distance and terms involved. To sell an English youth "like a damn'd slave" at first shocked some contemporaries, but it was essential to the success of the indenture system. One half to two thirds of all immigrants to colonial America arrived as indentured servants. At times, as many as 75% of the population of some colonies were under terms of indenture.

A few facts regarding indentured servitude and slavery...
- 1710– Africans begin to outnumber Europeans in colonies. Colonial legislatures pass laws restricting blacks
- 1750 – Slavery exists in all colonies
- 1750 – Virginia passes laws defining the distinction between a slave and a servant, relegating all slaves to the status of property
- Middle Passage of the Triangle Trade (Africa to the Caribbean) takes 60-90 days

Gottlieb Mittelberger's Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750...

When the ships have for the last time weighed their anchors ... in Old England, the real misery begins ... During the voyage there is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, many kinds of seasickness, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and the like, all of which come from old and sharply salted food and meat, also from very bad and foul water, so that many die miserably.

Add to this want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want, afflictions and lamentations, together with other trouble, as c.v. the lice abound so frightfully, especially on sick people, that they can be scraped off the body. The misery reaches the climax when a gale rages for 2 or 3 nights and days, so that everyone believes that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. In such a visitation the people cry and pray most piteously....

Many sigh and cry: "Oh, that I were at home again, and if I had to lie in my pig-sty!" Or they say: "O God, if I only had a piece of good bread, or a good fresh drop of water." Many people whimper, sigh and cry piteously for their homes; most of them get home-sick. Many hundred people necessarily die and perish in such misery and must be cast into the sea, which drives their relatives or those who persuaded them to undertake the journey, to such despair that it is almost impossible to pacify and console them. In a word, the sighing and crying and lamenting on board the ship continues night and day so as to cause the hearts even of the most hardened to bleed when they hear it....

At length, when, after a long and tedious voyage, the ships come in sight of land, so that the promontories can be seen, which the people were so eager and anxious to see, all creep from below on deck to see the land from afar, and they weep for joy, and pray and sing,
thanking and praising God. … But alas! When the ships have landed at Philadelphia after their long voyage, no one is permitted to leave them except those who pay for their passage or can give good security; the others, who cannot pay, must remain on board the ships till they are purchased, and are released from the ships by their purchasers. The sick always fare the worst, for the healthy are naturally preferred and purchased first; and so the sick and wretched must often remain on board in front of the city for 2 or 3 weeks, and frequently die, whereas many a one, if he could pay his debt and were permitted to leave the ship immediately, might recover and remain alive....

The sale of human beings in the market on board the ship is carried on thus: Every day Englishmen, Dutchmen and High-German people come from the city of Philadelphia and other places, in part from a great distance, say 20, 30, or 40 hours away, and go on board the newly arrived ship that has brought and offers for sale passengers from Europe, and select among the healthy persons such as they deem suitable for their business, and bargain with them how long they will serve for their passage money, which most of them are still in debt for. When they have come to an agreement, it happens that adult persons bind themselves in writing to serve 3, 4, 5 or 6 years for the amount due by them, according to their age and strength. But very young people, from 10 to 15 years, must serve till they are 21 years old.

Many parents must sell and trade away their children like so many head of cattle; for if their children take the debt upon themselves, the parents can leave the ship free and unrestrained; but as the parents often do not know where and to what people their children are going, it often happens that such parents and children, after leaving the ship, do not see each other again for many years, perhaps no more in all their lives. … It often happens that whole families, husband, wife, and children, are separated by being sold to different purchasers, especially when they have not paid any part of their passage money.

When a husband or wife has died at sea, when the ship has made more than half of her trip, the survivor must pay or serve not only for himself or herself, but also for the deceased. When both parents have died over half-way at sea, their children, especially when they are young and have nothing to pawn or to pay, must stand for their own and their parents' passage, and serve till they are 21 years old. When one has served his or her term, he or she is entitled to a new suit of clothes at parting; and if it has been so stipulated, a man gets in addition a horse, a woman, a cow. …

If someone in this country runs away from his master, who has treated him harshly, he cannot get far. Good provision has been made for such cases, so that a runaway is soon recovered. He who detains or returns a deserter receives a good reward. If such a runaway has been away from his master one day, he must serve for it as a punishment a week, for a week a month, and for a month half a year. But if the master will not keep the runaway after he has got him back, he may sell him for so many years as he would have to serve him yet....

However hard he may be compelled to work in his fatherland, he will surely find it quite as hard, if not harder, in the new country. … Therefore let everyone stay in his own country and support himself and his family honestly. Besides, I say that those who suffer themselves to be persuaded and enticed away by the man-thieves, are very foolish if they believe that roasted pigeons will fly into their mouths in America or Pennsylvania without their working for them.
Slavery in the American Colonies

The first Africans arrived in 1619 to Jamestown, Virginia. Historians disagree on whether they were sold as slaves or indentured servants, but regardless, this date marks the beginning of forced African emigration to the present-day United States. The economy of Jamestown was based on the cultivation of tobacco, a labor-intensive crop requiring a significant amount of workers. Originally, white indentured servants were used, however, there is a marked shift to the use of African labor instead of white indentured male servants toward the end of the 17th century.

“Bacon’s Rebellion” (1676) is a significant event in that it revealed a perceived weakness in the use of white labor in Jamestown by the leaders of that colony. Nathaniel Bacon, discontent with the Governor Berkeley’s management of Native American affairs, led a campaign from the outskirts of Jamestown culminating in the burning of the colony. Governor Berkeley labeled Bacon a “rebel”, Bacon was concerned with protecting his plantation rather than class struggle. The rebellion, fueled by a faltering economy, unusual weather challenges, and residual religious contention, spread to include slaves, current and former indentured servants, and poor farmers. The colony’s leaders (including Bacon) realized that a large population of landless men might pose a threat to the stability of the growing colony. Thus, instead of hiring white indentured servants to work the tobacco fields, African slaves become the labor pool of choice. While indentured servants from Europe continued to play a role in Virginia, African slave imports grew rapidly and new laws made slavery lifelong and passed on to one’s children, creating a racially-based class system with Africans at the bottom and even the poorest European indentured servants above. This broke the common interest between the poor English and the Africans of Virginia which had existed during Bacon’s Rebellion. The number of slaves grew rapidly, from only a few thousand in 1670 to tens of thousands in the early 18th century. By 1750, half of Virginia’s population and two-thirds of South Carolina’s population were slaves.

To understand how African slavery gained acceptance in the American colonies, it is important to examine the class structure in England in the 17th century. At the top of the social structure was of course, the Crown (King or Queen), and from there descended a multitude of social classes (i.e.: Duke, Marquess, etc.). Sumptuary laws prevented the wearing of fake furs and jewels, for example, to ensure that people remained in their social class. One’s position in society dictated everything from occupation, land ownership, to accent, and these class divisions were rigidly enforced and clearly apparent throughout society. For example the egalitarian Quakers were persecuted because they would not take their hat off to upper classes as they did not recognize class distinctions.

The Southern colonies were the most similar to England out of all the colonies in terms of maintaining distinct social classes. Thus, the idea of having a slave class was much easier for the Southern mind to accept, as this meant that there was always someone “lower” than even the poorest farmer. Furthermore, the fertile soil provided excellent conditions for large crops which necessitated a large labor source. In contrast, the colonies of New England did not have good agricultural conditions (rocky soil, harsh winters) and combined with Puritan influence, slavery did not take hold. As the number of slaves increased, white colonists adopted laws to ensure that slaves would be held in bondage for life and that their slave status would be inherited by their children.

By 1775, the African-American population (slave and free) comprised 20% of the colonial population. Roughly 90% lived in the southern colonies as slaves. Every colony had laws that discriminated against African-Americans, regardless of status, and placed limits on their rights and opportunities.