Indentured Servitude

Large numbers of workers were needed to clear new tobacco fields and others were required to tend and harvest the crop. Fortuitously, the American labor shortage existed at the same time that widespread unemployment gripped England.

A worker seeking a new start in America signed an indenture agreement,\* which said that he was borrowing money for his transportation and would repay the lender by performing labor for a set period. Skilled laborers were often indentured for four or five years, while unskilled workers often had to remain under the master’s control for seven or more years.

In addition to receiving passage to America, the servant would be provided with food, shelter, and clothing. Perhaps as many as 300,000 workers migrated under the terms of these agreements. Most were males, generally in their late teens and early twenties, but thousands of women also entered into these agreements and often worked off their debts as domestic servants.

Treatment of indentured servants differed greatly from one master to another. In some areas, slaves were treated more humanely because they were regarded as lifetime investments, while the servant would be gone in a few years. The length of servitude could legally be lengthened in cases of bad behavior, especially for those workers who ran away or became pregnant.

Servants fared better than slaves in other respects; they had access to the courts and were entitled to own land. Masters retained their right to prohibit their servants from marrying and had the authority to sell them to other masters at any time.

At the end of the service period, many workers were provided with their “freedom dues” often consisting of new clothes, farm tools and seed; on rare occasions the worker would receive a small plot of land.

There were success stories of people who had started as indentured servants and later became prominent citizens, but the number was probably very small. The lingering dark side to the practice was of those who completed their service, but could not afford to buy land and were unable to find employment. The result was hundreds of rootless men in many frontier areas.

During the 1670s, the flood of servants coming to America slowed. Economic conditions in England had improved and fewer people were willing to take the risk of starting from scratch in a faraway land. The plantation owners in the Chesapeake region, still badly in need of workers, turned increasingly to slavery to keep their operations functioning.

\*The word *indenture* referred to marks or indentations made on the contract between master and servant. When the document was drawn, two copies were made. As a lasting means of authentication, one copy was placed over the other and the edges of the pages were defaced or marked. The servants of this era were often uneducated and could be cheated by unscrupulous masters, who could forge new contracts with terms more favorable to themselves.

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1. One of the reasons Indentured Servitude attracted so many people from England was.......
2. Skilled laborers often signed on for a period of \_\_ years
3. Unskilled laborers often had contracts which lasted \_\_\_ years
4. The majority of the Indentured Servants were:
5. Most indentured servants signed on in their \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
6. Describe the treatment of Indentured servants
7. For women, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ could add additional years to your service
8. At the end of service, an indentured servant could possibly receive.........
9. During the 1670s, the number of people willing to become indentured servants dropped because........

10.  The word indenture actually comes from: