

Richard Frethrone's Letter to his Father and Mother (1623)

Richard Frethrone

Introduction (Secondary Source)¹

Servitude had a long history in England, dating back to medieval serfdom. *The Ordinance of Labourers*, passed in June 1349, declared that all men and women under the age of sixty who did not practice a craft must serve anyone requiring their labor. Parliament updated the law in 1495 and 1563, with the latter version, the *Statute of Artificers*, still being in effect when the English founded Jamestown. Between 1520 and 1630, England's population more than doubled, from 2.3 million to 4.8 million, and Parliament hoped its 1563 statute might "banishe Idleness[,] advance Husbandrye," and so deal with the near-overwhelming number of poor and unemployed citizens. In fact, the founding of Virginia itself was partially in response to this problem. In his *Discourse on Western Planting* (1584), *Richard Hakluyt (the younger)* argued to *Queen Elizabeth* that new American colonies would energize England's "decayed trades" and provide work for the country's "multitudes of loyterers and idle vagabondes."

In England, an indenture, or contract for labor, was known as a "covenant merely personal," and could apply either to farm laborers or apprentices learning a trade. Contracts generally lasted a year, after which terms were renegotiated. As the merchant and adventurer Sir George Peckham noted in 1583, many English men and women willingly became servants "in hope thereby to amend theyr estates," and young children were sometimes bound to service by parents who might not otherwise be able to afford their upbringing.

The Virginia Company of London always had more land than labor to work it. At first, the company attempted to entice investors by offering them shares in the company that were redeemable for land. But when profits failed to materialize and the colony became infamous for its high mortality rate, the company began shipping servants to Virginia at its own expense and placing them on company-owned land. (An Englishman willing to risk his life in order to work someone else's acreage was not usually someone who could afford transatlantic passage.) Once the servants arrived, the company could rent them out to planters for a year at a time, requiring the planters to take responsibility for the workers' food, shelter, and health.

With the introduction of marketable tobacco, however, demand for labor skyrocketed. Private investors who, alongside the company, had shipped servants at their own expense continued to do so while the company rid itself of its role as rental agent. Instead, it sold servants directly to planters at a price based on the cost of passage. Planters, mariners, and merchants then fixed the servants' years of service based on the labor required to recoup their purchase price and subsequent care.

Servants, who ranged from convicted criminals to skilled workers, in time came to occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder in Virginia. While tenants kept half of what they earned, servants kept nothing and were

¹ "[Indentured Servants in Colonial Virginia](#)" by Encyclopedia Virginia, Brendan Wolfe, and Martha McCartney is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#).

almost entirely at the mercy of their masters for the terms of their indentures. Movement up the ladder was limited, even once a term of service had been completed, although servants with marketable skills had a greater chance of success. Few servants were like Robert Townshend, who arrived as an apprentice in 1620 and eventually served in the House of Burgesses.

Headrights, first described in the so-called *Great Charter of 1618*, awarded 100 acres of land each to planters who had been in the colony since May 1616, and 50 acres each to anyone who covered the cost of transporting a new immigrant to Virginia. These newcomers, more often than not, were indentured servants, allowing successful planters simultaneous access to land and labor, with no upfront cost to the company. Merchants and mariners reaped a benefit, too, for they recruited prospective servants, bargained their indenture terms with them, and then sold the contracts to planters in Virginia. Merchants also accumulated headrights that could be used to acquire land.

Sometimes groups of investors collectively absorbed the cost of outfitting and transporting workers to the colony. Virginia Company of London stockholders were entitled to 100 acres per share, and high-ranking officials were furnished with indentured servants as part of their stipend. In some instances groups of investors promised to give land to their indentured servants after they fulfilled their contracts. The Society of Berkeley Hundred's investors offered their skilled servants parcels that ranged from 25 to 50 acres, to be claimed once they had fulfilled their contracts.

Various factors fueled the need for new servants. One was demographics. Approximately 50,000 servants—or three-quarters of all new arrivals—immigrated to the Chesapeake Bay colonies between 1630 and 1680. The ratio of men to women among servants in the 1630s was six-to-one. Between 1640 and 1680, the ratio dropped to four-to-one, but even then, many men could not find wives to marry and therefore could not establish families. As a result of this and the high mortality rate among new servants, company officials and English merchants were forced to constantly replenish the Virginia colony's servant population.

Another factor creating a need for new servants was the rapidly expanding tobacco market. It created substantial opportunities for would-be planters, but because tobacco was a demanding, labor-intensive crop, it also required a large number of laborers. At the same time, tobacco's acceptance as a medium of exchange prompted planters to enhance their productivity. Between the 1620s and the 1670s, the annual output of tobacco per hand rose from approximately 710 pounds to around 1,600 pounds; during the same period, shipping costs decreased. Although tobacco prices had begun to decline sharply by late in the 1620s and continued to fall, production remained profitable because planters were able to produce larger crops with fewer hands. Yet even as they technically required fewer servants, planters demanded more. That's because tobacco consumption rose in response to lower prices, and planters, eager to meet that demand, increased their production.

As indentured servants poured into Virginia, they came to account for fully half of Virginia's population. Such rapid change caused problems, however, and the General Assembly passed numerous statutes designed to address them. These laws served several broad purposes, including regulation of servants' contract terms, behavior, and treatment.

Contract terms were important for several reasons. The assembly wished to protect masters from terms that did not fully recoup their cost of transporting servants from England to Virginia, in addition to their subsequent care. The assembly also faced the problem of servants who arrived without any contracts; the English custom of requiring a single year's service absent any other arrangement would not suffice in America, where the labor market was less stable than in England. Finally, the masters—who included most

men who sat in the assembly—had an interest in prolonging terms of indenture because briefer service led to disruptive turnover, labor shortages, and an unstable workforce.

For these reasons, terms of service did not shorten even as tobacco production became more efficient and profitable. Instead, lengthy terms of service became customary and dictated by law. As early as 1619, the General Assembly required all servants to register with the secretary of state upon arrival and "Certifie him upon what termes or conditions they be come hither." In its 1642–1643 session, the assembly passed a law mandating that any servant arriving without an indenture and who was younger than twelve years old should serve for seven years, servants aged twelve to nineteen should serve for five years, and servants aged twenty and older should serve for four years. Legislation *passed* in the 1657–1658 session adjusted these ages: anyone under the age of fifteen should serve until he or she turned twenty-one, while anyone sixteen or older should serve for four years. By 1705, the law had been simplified, so that all non-indentured Christian servants older than nineteen should serve until they turned twenty-four. ("Christian servants" generally referred to non-blacks and non-Indians.) Lawmakers entrusted the county courts with judging the age of each servant. In the meantime, they required slightly different terms for Irish servants.

Servants whose contracts had expired typically received "freedom dues," loosely described as a quantity of corn and clothing. The 1705 statute was the first to explicitly mention this "good and laudable custom," and required that male servants, "upon their freedom," be supplied with ten bushels of corn, thirty shillings (or the like value in goods), and a musket worth at least twenty shillings. Women were entitled to fifteen bushels of corn and the equivalent of forty shillings.

In 1675, an indentured servant who charged his master with cheating him asked the General Court to free him "and pay him corne & clothes." The judges ruled in his favor, granting him "three Barrels of Corne att the Cropp." Occasionally the owners of indentured servants refused to release them or give them their freedom dues. At Jamestown, when a male indentured servant who had fulfilled his contract insisted on receiving his "corn and clothes," his master exploded in rage and struck him on the head with his truncheon.

Questions to Consider:

1. Context: Who is the author(s) (include a brief bio)? When did s/he write the piece (include some brief context)? Who is the audience? What was the agenda?
2. In what ways did being an indentured servant shape the identity of Frethorne (consider for example type of work, living conditions, food, outlook on life, etc.)? How does this identity/perception compare to life as he remembers it in England?
3. How does he describe their relationship with the Native Americans? Why?
4. What is Frethorne asking for from his parents? How do you think they might have felt about such a request?
5. What insights does this document have to offer about both European and American society? Be Specific! [please be sure to consider author, agenda, bias, etc.]

Primary Source²

LOVING 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 country, [which] is such that it causeth much sickness, [such] as the scurvy and the bloody flux and diverse 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). 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 four men which is most pitiful. [You would be grieved] if you did know as much as I [do], when 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 ... and we took two alive and made 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 merchants, and they are half dead just; and we look every hour when two more should go. Yet there came some four other men yet to live with us, of which there is but one alive; and our Lieutenant is dead, and [also] his father and his brother. And there was some five or six of the last year's twenty, of which there is but three left, so that we are fain to get other men to plant with us; and yet we are but 32 to fight against 3000 if they should come. And the nighest help that we have is ten mile of us, and when the rogues overcame this place [the] last [time] they slew 80 persons. How then shall we do, for we lie even in their teeth? They may easily take us, but [for the fact] that God is merciful and can save with few as well as with many, as he showed to Gilead. And like Gilead's soldiers, if they lapped water, we drink water which is but weak.

And I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death, except [in the event] 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 (2), nor clothes but one poor suit, nor but one pair of shoes, but one pair of stockings, but one cap, [and] but two bands [collars]. My cloak is stolen by one of my fellows, and to his dying hour [he] 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 [not], paid for. So that I have not a penny, nor a penny worth, to help me too 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 these here [and] only keeps [their] life and soul together. But I am not half [of] 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 [one] day at home than I have

² Source: Richard Frethorne, letter to his father and mother, March 20, April 2 & 3, 1623, in Susan Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 4: 58–62.

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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 to Jamestown (that is 10 miles of us) there lie all the ships that come to land, and there they must deliver their goods. And when we went up to town [we would go], as it may be, on Monday at noon, and come there by night, [and] then load the next day by noon, and go home in the afternoon, and unload, and then away again in the night, and [we would] be up about midnight. Then if it rained or blowed never 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 [would] have a loaf allowed to two men, and it is all [we would get] if we stayed there two days, which is hard; and [we] 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 [would] come up, and he would give me some poor jacks [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 marvelled 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 [I] saith that if you love me you will redeem me suddenly, for which I do entreat and beg. And if you cannot get the merchants to redeem me for some little money, then for God's sake get a gathering or entreat some good folks to lay out some little sum of money in meal and cheese and butter and beef. Any eating meat will yield great profit. Oil and vinegar is very good; but, father, there is great loss in leaking. But for God's sake send beef and cheese and butter, or the more of one sort and none of another. But if you send cheese, it must be very old cheese; and at the cheesemonger's you may buy very food cheese for twopence farthing or halfpenny, that will be liked very well. But if you send cheese, you must have a care how you pack it in barrels; and you must put cooper's chips between every cheese, or else the heat of the hold will rot them. And look whatsoever you send me – be in never so much–look, what[ever] I make of it, I will deal truly with you. I will send it over and beg the profit to redeem me; and if I die before it come, I have entreated Goodman Jackson to send you the worth of it, who hath promised he will. If you send, you must direct your letters to Goodman Jackson, at Jamestown, a gunsmith. (You must set down his freight, because there be more of his name there.) 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 [though] 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; and if you send me any thing let this be the mark.

ROT

RICHARD FRETHORNE,

MARTIN'S HUNDRED .