

Article: Conditions in the Early Colonies

Summary

During the 17th century, most colonial Marylanders lived in difficult conditions on small family farms. Death rates from disease were high and heavy labor was a fact of life. Malaria, typhoid, and dysentery weakened or killed immigrants, and pregnancy put women's health at risk. Indeed, bouts of illness were so common following an immigrant's arrival that the early months on American soil were known as the "seasoning period." During the seasoning period, immigrants not only had to recover from a long and grueling voyage, but they were exposed to diseases they had not encountered previously, which they had to overcome if they were to survive.

Details

Life was centered around the production of cash crops, such as tobacco. Tobacco created an export economy that required land and labor.



17th century tobacco growers in the Chesapeake called themselves planters, and even the humblest of homesteads was considered a plantation. Tobacco was a very labor-intensive crop. Farmers required a constant supply of young laborers to cultivate their crops and provide useful skills on the plantation. Although slavery was sanctioned by law in 1664, in early colonial times, the hard work of tobacco planting and harvesting was performed more by indentured servants than enslaved Africans.

Figure 1: Tobacco Field Worker
(Source: Historic Saint Mary's City)

Indentured servants were mostly young men between the ages of 15 and 25 years, who signed contracts in England to work in the colonies without wages. Up to 75 percent of all the individuals who came off the transatlantic ships in the 17th century were indentured servants. During Jamestown's first 20 years, the majority of the women who arrived, and they were few, were indentured servants. Once a servant arrived, a colonist would reimburse the contracting company for the individual's voyage expenses and would then put the man or woman to work without pay for four to seven years. The servant's master provided food and lodging, as stipulated in the indented contract. After they had completed their service, the servants were provided with three barrels of corn, some tools for the land, a new set of clothes, and 50 acres. For many, signing on as an indentured servant was the only way to emigrate and improve their position in life. Others, such as "vagrant children and idle fellows [or criminals] . . . for suspicion of stealing two wastcoats [sent] to Virginia 6 May 1635," (Samuel Ives, Bridewell Records, 1635) did not choose for themselves life in the colony.



Figure 2: Contracts of Indenture

The life of an indentured servant was difficult and filled with heavy physical labor. In the Chesapeake Colonies, this was usually field work. It has been estimated that an indentured servant working four acres of corn and tending 1,000 tobacco plants would bend over at least 50,000 times during servitude.

In addition to the hard labor, indentured servants were often subject to violence at the hands of their masters, occasionally even resulting in death. Although laws existed that entitled servants to go to court if they felt that they were being mistreated, in the remote areas of the Colonies these laws were seldom enforced, and prosecution of masters was uncommon. An example is found in Virginia County court records documenting the harsh treatment endured by two Chesapeake servants at the hands of their masters. The servants were reportedly abused and beaten, one to the death, at the hands of their masters. Despite testimonies to the harsh treatment these servants suffered, no evidence has been found of the masters receiving punishment for their actions, with many witnesses claiming the servants deserved the brutal beatings.

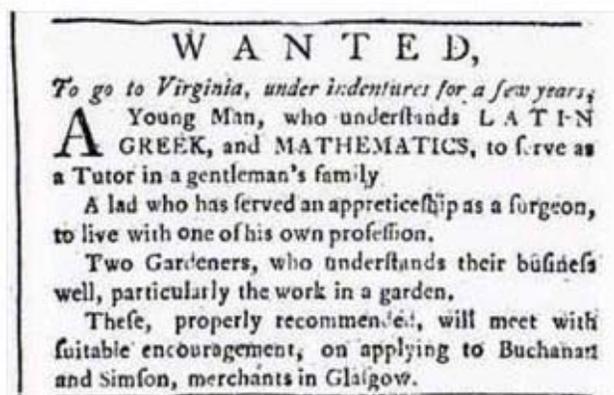


Figure 3: An advertisement from the newspaper *Glasgow Courant*, 4 September 1760, for indentured servants to go to Virginia.

Although this court case of servant abuse may not be the norm, but rather reflect an extreme situation suffered by only a few unfortunate indentured servants, punishments for servant "misconduct" were harsh. For example, in 1638, several lashes was the punishment for running away. In 1639, the punishment was extended to hanging. The law was changed again in 1641 to a punishment of death, unless the servant requested his or her service be extended.

A high mortality rate, harsh treatment and suffering, and a low status in society, caused multiple problems for the colonial government from this system.

As a result, the government and tobacco field owners looked to a new labor force to exploit during the latter part of the 17th century: African slaves.

Sources:

Figure 1: Historic St. Mary's City; used with permission

Figure 2: <http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/jamestownwomen/10.htm>

Figure 3: <http://www.theglasgowstory.com/image.php?inum=TGSE00606>

Resources:

[The Lure of Sotweed: Tobacco and Maryland History](#), by Dr. Henry Miller, HSMC Director of Research
[Servants and Slaves](#), by Dr. Martin Sullivan, Executive Director, HSMC



This page is part of the [Smithsonian's The Secret in the Cellar Webcomic](#), an educational resource from the *Written in Bone* exhibition, February 2009 - 2014.