



HANDOUT 2

What Josiah Didn't Know

What Josiah didn't know was that indentured servitude was more brutal than he could have ever imagined. Fully 1/3 if not more of potential indentured servants died at sea en route to the New World. What's more, the owners of the indentured servants took their ownership seriously. The planters or owners had the servants for a finite period of time and intended to get as much out of them as they could. Twelve to sixteen hour workdays were not uncommon and the accommodations, while a roof over the head and some meals were provided, were sparse and bare. Depending on the year, historians estimate that one indentured servant could be made responsible for between 1,000 and 2,000 tobacco plants. What Josiah also didn't know was that the enclosure movement (the movement of wealthy land owners fencing in all open lands) was forcing families like his to make incredibly difficult choices as the land that once fed and housed them began to slowly and then quickly disappear.

Though Josiah did know that indentured servants were being brought in to grow tobacco he did not realize to what extent. Tobacco was the "cash crop" of the time and was being grown at the expense of other crops, including food crops. Most of the planters who were seeking indentured servants could not afford enough servants or to pay enough workers to do the job adequately. So, in short, many of the indentured servants were being worked to death. Though historians argue over exactly how many lived through indenture and became free farmers themselves (it is hard to tell because by and large indentured servants were not educated enough or lived long enough to record and tell their stories) most agree the number is quite miniscule. If the cruelty of the work itself, the cruelty of the owners, or the cruelty of malaria (which was rampant in the American Colonies at this time) did not get you, by the time the seven year indenture was completed the small amount of money given to the freed men and women was paltry and not nearly enough to purchase land. By the end of indenture the vigor, youth, and vitality that once inhabited their bodies was often gone, worked out of them in the fields, soaked out of them in their substandard lodgings, and drawn slowly out of them through a poor diet. It is estimated that only one out of every ten indentured servants ever became a landowner. It is further estimated that about 10,000 indentured servants were delivered to Virginia between 1607 and 1622. It is further estimated that only 2,000 were still alive by 1622.

This was for the lucky ones. As stated earlier approximately 1/3 of indentured servants died in transit. The following was recorded by a German man traveling with indentured servants on their way to the New World:

"During the journey the ship is full of pitiful signs of distress—smells, fumes, horror, vomiting, various kinds of sea sickness, fever, dysentery, headaches, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and similar afflictions, all of them caused by the age and the highly-salted state of the food, especially the meat, as well as by the very bad and filthy water, which brings about the miserable destruction and death of many. Add to all that shortage of food, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, fear, misery, vexation and lamentation, as well as other troubles. Thus, for example, there are so many lice, especially on the sick people that they have to be scraped off their bodies. All this misery reaches its climax when in addition to everything else one must suffer through two or three days and nights of storm, with everyone convinced that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board...Children between the ages of one and seven seldom survive the sea voyage; and parents must often watch their offspring suffer miserably, die, and be thrown into the ocean, from want, hunger, thirst, and the like. I myself, alas, saw such pitiful fate overtake thirty-two children on board our vessel, all of whom were finally thrown into the sea. (Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania*, ed. And trans. Oscar Handlin and John Clive Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960, pp. 12-15.

For those who survived the Atlantic crossing and survived indenture the only land left to them was on the frontier the land that Josiah described as between civilization and Indian country. The problem was that often times the land was on native land given to them by colonial treaty. Because it was against the law did not stop recently freed indentured servants hungering for the life and freedom that they had been dreaming of for seven years. This led to conflict not only between the ex indentured servants and native populations but with the more landed aristocratic class on the coast. One such uprising in Virginia became known as Bacon's Rebellion.

Most difficult of all to face was the fact that indentured servitude seemed to have set the stage for slavery and the use and abuse of human beings for economic gain. In 1619 John Rolfe, the man responsible for the tobacco boom wrote that there was a wanton "buying of men and boys" and the use of them as betting fair in poker games. Another observer of the time in Virginia wrote that, "servants were sold here up and down like horses." As the eminent historian Edmund Morgan writes, "a system of labor that treated men as things."

SOURCES

Red, White, and Black: The People's of Early North America by Dr. Gary B. Nash
Major Problems in American Colonial History by Dr. Karen Ordahl Kupperman
Give Me Liberty! An American History by Dr. Eric Foner
A People's History of the United States by Dr. Howard Zinn

Answer the following questions:

1. How many indentured servants survive the journey across the Atlantic?

2. According to Gottliebe Mittelberger what was the worst part of the Atlantic crossing? Why?

3. Describe the working conditions of the average indentured servant.

4. What was the average length of indenture? How could it be extended for women?

5. What could indentured servants hope to gain by the end of their indentured time?

6. Once released from indenture what further problems did the recently freed face?

7. Some historians argue that it was indentured servitude that started the American tradition of seeing humans as a commodity to be bought, sold, and abused. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
