

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON INDENTURED SERVANTS With Some Questions to Think About

In June 1635 Captain William Peirce transported 40 people to the colony of Virginia, for which he was granted 2,000 acres of land across the river from Jamestown on Lawnes Creek. According to the law William Peirce had to “seat” his new property by erecting buildings and settling people on it. This had to be done within two years or he would lose the property.

Presumably he did this and settled some of his 40 new indentured servants on his land. James Harrison and Elizabeth Adams were the names of two of the 40 servants. We do not know anything more about them, but let’s assume that they lived and worked on the Lawnes Creek property for Captain William Peirce. And let us also assume that they had signed indentures or contracts with Captain Peirce’s representative in England before they came to Virginia. (Two indenture contracts typical for this time period are included at the end of this section.) **What would life have been like for them and the other servants in the colony?**

The Indenture:

- Most indentured servants who came to Virginia in the early 17th century signed an indenture or contract with a particular person or their representative in England before coming to the colony.
- Most contracts required that future masters: pay for transporting the servants to Virginia, provide them with food, clothing and shelter during the length of their service and pay them freedom dues at the end of it.
- Sometimes servants were able to negotiate the terms of their contract. Look at the indentures for James and Elizabeth. **What kind of work has James agreed to do? What kind of job has Captain Peirce promised Elizabeth? How long have they each agreed to work? What were they promised when their terms of service were over?** These were all items that were negotiable before the indenture or contract was signed.
- Some servants came to the colony without a contract and were sold by the ship’s captain to planters in Virginia after their arrival. Unscrupulous captains sometimes kidnapped unsuspecting men and women and brought them to Virginia against their will. There was always a market for labor in Virginia and little risk that a ship’s captain with a cargo of potential servants would not find buyers for them.
- Masters who did not keep the promises they made in their contracts could be sued in court by their servants. (Remember Mistress Peirce’s story about John Harvey’s servant who had to sue Harvey in court to get his freedom dues.)
- Some lawsuits were dismissed because they were frivolous, but in other cases masters were found guilty and ordered by the court to fulfill their obligations.
- Captain Peirce was rarely sued by his servants or his peers, which seems to indicate that he was fair in his dealings with other people.
- **However, all planters, no matter how fair and decent they were, expected to get as much work**

from their servants as possible and to spend only what was absolutely necessary to feed, clothe and house them.

Shelter, Clothing and Food:

- Indentured servants were housed in the outbuildings on the master's plantation or in quarters specially built for them near the tobacco fields. The buildings were made of wood and generally had only a dirt floor and perhaps one or two windows with no glass.
- In the 1630's servants whether African or English were all housed together.
- Clothing for indentured servants was often ill fitting, especially the shoes, and was seldom warm enough for the winter.
- Hominy – a dish made of dried, cracked corn soaked overnight and cooked for several hours the next day – was the basic food for indentured servants. It was described as a “watery gruel”. Perhaps there would be a small piece of salted beef or pork to go with it, along with a small piece of bread. Corn was not grown or eaten in England; it took time for new settlers to get used to eating it.
- Planters provided their servants with cider, small beer or ale to drink. If the quarters for the servants happened to be near a source of fresh water, the servants would also have water to drink. In general planters would not take the time nor take on the expense of digging wells to provide water for their servants.
- Indentured servants were not allowed to hunt or fish to supplement the monotony of their daily ration of hominy, salt pork and beef.
- Elizabeth Adams was in charge of poultry, but the chickens she raised were not for the use of the indentured servants. They were sold at the market in Jamestown for the profit of her master.
- Stealing of food by indentured servants was not uncommon. Sometimes food was taken directly from the master's storehouse, but at other times a stray hog or sheep found foraging in the woods was killed and eaten on the spot.
- If a servant were caught stealing, he or she would have an extra year or two added to their term of service.

The Work:

- Most men and women servants were recruited to work in the tobacco fields. The work required little skill, but was physically hard.
- Timing was important in growing tobacco. Tasks had to be performed at the right time or the tobacco crop would be lost, which would mean economic disaster for the planter. Therefore, servants were pushed hard, often toiling long hours in the fields.
- It was a monotonous life with very little chance for recreation or amusement. A welcome break would be an occasional trip to Jamestown.

- It was not unusual for servants to runaway from their masters. Some left because they were physically abused by masters or their overseers.
- However, some left because they could not tolerate the hard, physical labor, the meager food allowance and the boring sameness of the days. Then there were those who never intended to fulfill their contracts and ran away soon after their arrival.
- Servants who ran away and were caught had time added to their term of servitude.
- The death rate for servants was very high their first year in Virginia. Servants who survived for two or three years were very valuable because they had become “seasoned” to the climate of Virginia.
- Masters often sold the indentures of these “seasoned” men and women to other planters in the colony for a high price. Even though there might be only one or two years left on their contracts, planters in Virginia would rather have seasoned servants for a short time than new arrivals with four or five years on their indentures.

African Servants:

- The first Africans came to Virginia in 1619. Slowly in the years that followed more Africans arrived. They lived and worked on the plantations of men in the colony – most of whom were officials of the London Company.
- By 1638 several of these Africans had become free and were landowners and had African and English indentured servants working for them.
- In 1638 Menefie, a resident of Jamestown, brought 50 people into the colony. Twenty-three of the people were listed as being African.
- Did Menefie use the Africans as indentured servants and give them their freedom after a certain number of years?
- We know that there were some people in the colony who were classified as servants for life. **Who were they? Could they have been the Africans brought into Virginia by Menefie? What do you think?**

Opportunities:

- Indentured servants received their freedom when their term of service was over, although African indentured servants who broke the law could be made servants for life.
- Freed servants were paid freedom dues to help them as they started on a new life.
- There was no stigma attached to having been an indentured servant once the person was free.
- Freed indentured servants, whether they were English or African, could own land, have their own servants and the males could vote.

Use your imagination and the above information to answer the questions in your interview. **Here are some things to think about:**

- Why did James and Elizabeth come to Virginia?
- What were their hopes for the future?
- Did they think their future in Virginia would be worth all the hardships they had to endure?
- Would they have encouraged others to come to Virginia as indentured servants?



Indentured servants worked long hours in the tobacco fields



There was plenty of food in Virginia, but it was not generally available to indentured servants.

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT (For Prospective “Reporters” Interviewing Indentured Servants)

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Interview James and/or Elizabeth in the year 1638. They would have been in Virginia for three years by that time. Try to find out about their lives as indentured servants, their hopes for the future and if they believe others should come to Virginia as indentured servants. **To help you with your questions here are some things to think about:**

Look at the two sample indentures included at the end of this section.

- What kind of work has James Harrison agreed to do?
- What kind of job has Captain Peirce promised Elizabeth Adams?
- How long have they each agreed to work?
- What were they promised when their terms of service were over?
- Why were the terms of the contract different for James and Elizabeth?
- Do you think all masters lived up to the terms of the contract they made with their indentured servants? (Remember Mistress Peirce’s story about John Harvey’s servant who had to sue Harvey in court to get his freedom dues.)

Mistress Peirce spoke about all the food that was available in Virginia.

- But was it available to everyone in the colony?
- Would indentured servants be supplied with imported wines, olive oil, raisins, sugar and fruits from the West Indies?
- She said there was wild game in the forests and fish, crabs, oysters and turtles in the rivers. Were indentured servants allowed to hunt and fish to supplement their diets?
- Were the chickens Elizabeth took care of for the use of the servants?

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- Did Menefie use the Africans as indentured servants and give them their freedom after a certain number of years?
- We know that there were some people in the colony who were classified as servants for life.
- Who were they? Could they have been the Africans brought into Virginia by Menefie?

After you have gathered information from James and Elizabeth here are **some more things to think about:**

- Were indentured servants the best kind of labor to use in Virginia?
- Planters constantly had to replace workers either because they died, ran away or became free. It took time and money to find new indentured servants.
- There was always the fear that the supply of people willing to immigrate to Virginia would dwindle and planters would not have enough labor to work the tobacco fields.
- What were the planters to do? How could they find enough steady workers to satisfy their needs?

This Indenture made the fourteenth day of April 1635 in the tenth yeere of the raigne of our soveraigne Lord King Charles I, etc. between Elizabeth Adams of the one party and Captain William Peirce on the other party. Witnesseth, that the said Elizabeth Adams doth hereby promise the said Captain William Peirce to serve him from the day of her first arrival in Virginia for and during the terme of sevene yeeres. The said Captain William Peirce hereby promises to imploy the said Elizabeth Adams as a poultriss and not to imploy her in the Common workeing in the Grounde. In consideration whereof, the said Captain William Peirce doth promise the said Elizabeth Adams to pay for her passage from England to Virginia, and to find her with Meat, Drinke, Apparell and Lodging, with other necessaries during the said terme; and at the end of the said terme, to give her one whole yeeres provision of Corne and one cast irone pott. In witness whereof the said Captain William Peirce hath put his hand and seale, the day and yeere above written.

This Indenture made the fourteenth day of April 1635 in the tenth yeare of the reign of our soveraigne Lord King Charles I, etc. betweene James Harrison of the one party and Captain William Peirce on the other part. Witnesseth, that the said James Harrison doth hereby promise fayfully to serve the said Captain William Peirce for a terme of five yeares from the date of his landing in Virginia, there to be imployed in the lawfull and reasonable workes and labors of said Captain William Peirce. In consideration whereof, the said Captain William Peirce doth promise the said James Harrison to pay for his passage from England to Virginia, and to find him with Meat, Drinke, Apparell and Lodging, with other necessaries during the said terme; and at the end of the said terme, to give him one whole yeares provision of Corne, and fifty acres of Land according to the order of the country. In witness whereof the said Captain William Peirce hath put his hand and seale, the day and yeare above written.