

The Development of Labor in Early Colonial America

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In the early seventeenth century, Europe was entering into a period of economic mercantilism and expansion. With the close of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, the populations of Europe were increasingly mobile and migratory because of religious persecution and financial troubles. As a result, America became settled in various colonies by individuals as well as joint stock companies. In these settlements, there was an infinite potential of wealth, but an immense shortage of labor. This necessity and shortage of labor led to the indentured servant system, the extreme of slavery, and a changing cultural attitude towards the position of labor.

In the first decade of the 1600's, many people were eager to come to America as a land of opportunity. However, the journey was priced exorbitantly and only the wealthy could afford such an expenditure. Therefore, regions and states such as the Chesapeake and Southern colonies began to institute indentured servant programs in order to make the journey feasible and to attract settlers. In actuality, the indentured servants program was bait for the solicitation and enforcement of labor contracts which would later be taken advantage of and abused by masters or well established property owners.

Furthermore, if these labor contracts were not enough, European citizens, or servants in the minds of colonizers, would be offered parcels of land. This seemed enticing to many newcomers, who later found out that this land was little more than a shrubbery or the leftover land of the original settlers. All of the fertile, productive land had been taken by the master. (This conflict later led to Bacon's Rebellion).

In this system, it was the newcomer or the idealistic settler in search of new riches who was ridiculed and exploited. Often, these people were tricked into signing contracts that would require five, seven or even fourteen years of labor and the false promise of a profitable piece of land (Carnes 53). Indentured servants were looked at not as equitable human beings, but similar to slaves, in that they held very few rights and were “subject to strict control by the master...” “Servants lacked full political and civil rights, and masters could administer physical punishment and otherwise abuse them” (53). This measure taken to supply a large workforce was an example of the extreme necessity of labor.

This was also a significant change for working class members of societal England, as they were transformed into subhuman indentured servants. They were merely eager to “complete their period of service, work a few years for wages and then obtain land, [and] acquire their own servants... (Wright 62). Very few were able to achieve this goal. Contrasting what they had expected, large scale tobacco and cotton farmers exploited their labor in order to yield larger profits. Servitude was strenuous, unforgiving, and as far as the economy indicated a lucrative practice.

In the Chesapeake, indentured servants were the favored type of labor. This is shown that in the arrival of African slaves, planters were still most willing to acquire “young Englishmen, young Englishwomen, and then young Irishmen” at higher prices than black slaves. This was only because black slaves were an unfamiliar, new, daunting task. They were not looked at, originally, as a supplement to the workforce, but a challenge. Life would be changed with the advent of slavery, but as for now, indentured servants were suitable and conditioned towards the grueling tasks of demanded labor. Planters were not yet aware that slavery would soon become the most productive and efficient labor source

for the next two centuries. When, “by 1700 white servant immigration had almost completely ceased”, the road had been paved for slavery (64).

The indentured servant system had worked prosperously, but only as a finite system of labor. Slavery may have never been introduced had it not been for improving economic conditions in Europe. In the decade from 1610 to 1620, financial circumstances and religious tolerance improved across Europe. This lessened the urgency of emigration, especially to distant colonies such as the Chesapeake in America. With the influx of indentured servants waning, colonists began to search for new methods of labor.

The first hope in this drastic search turned to the native populations. Native Americans had lived in the Northeastern United States for centuries before European colonists arrived. In an imperialistic sense, colonizers attempted to control Native Americans, forcing them to cultivate the land and perform menial tasks. This, however, failed as Native Americans were unaccustomed to a rigorous work schedule that was typical within European societies. Rather, Native Americans preferred communal, less intensive labor. As a result, many Native Americans fled, as they were more familiar with the landscape, or perished. The answer to the labor problem was soon found on the “Dark Continent” (Palmer 633).

From the foundation of the Jamestown colony in 1607 to the arrival of Dutch traders in 1619, indentured servitude had worked successfully. However, in 1619, an auspicious opportunity presented itself to American farmers (Wright 59). Dutch traders, who had recently arrived from the slave coast of Africa, offered young black men and women as servants and slaves. Slavery, at the time, was a preexisting social structure in many parts of the world and had “appeared as close as Spanish Florida,” but never in the British held

colonies (55). To farmers, slavery presented a new concept, labor without compensation. The quick fix had just inadvertently fallen into their laps. Within the indentured servants program, workers were given land at the end of their term. With slavery, no such agreement occurred as enslavement was branded for life.

As slavery took hold in the British colonies, farmers and joint stock companies became aware of potential profits. “Planters could work Africans harder and control them more thoroughly than they could European servants, and because Africans were inexpensive by comparison with other laborers, they brought owners greater profits” (56). In 1672, the Royal African Company was founded and the inundation of slaves was accelerated. To people of European descent, Africans seemed foreign and unaccustomed to a civilized life. “Filed teeth” and “ritual fashion scars” seemed peculiar and unnecessary (64). This was the attitude that became promoted in the mistreatment of other races. To American settlers, the necessity of labor brought urges and needs that were to be fulfilled to any extent. In the case of the Africans, this meant being subjected to brutal treatment and an inhumane degradation of the individual.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Atlantic slave trade precipitated the arrival of slaves from Africa on an almost monthly basis. The slave population held very high mortality rates and a stable self sustaining population would not be reached for several decades. The number of slaves imported into the American colonies rose drastically until it peaked in the 1740’s. In these years, slavery was able to move away from a process of importation and sustenance to one of the principle foundations of labor in America (60-65).

This transition from indentured servitude to the impressments of Native Americans to the institution of slavery was painstaking. Slavery occurred at a discontinuous rate across

the United States. Northern areas were reluctant to purchase slaves, while southern areas divulged on the latest tool to their economic gain. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Maryland and Virginia held almost 13,000 slaves and the margin between free and slave labor was diminishing rapidly (65).

As slavery was established throughout the American colonies, the perceptions and attitudes of Americans began to change. This change was precipitated by the outgrowth of classicism in the indentured servants program which undoubtedly led to racism in slavery. Once looked upon as hard working and sympathetic, Americans became stoic and firm towards slavery. As indentured servants had been looked upon as objects of labor, slaves were devalued even further to the point of them being cheap and inexhaustible. This degradation and devaluation of slaves was shown by the thousands of slaves that died on the Middle Passage to the United States. “Legislators had not bothered to codify slavery” nor was it a pressing concern (65).

The advent of slavery in the 1600’s inevitably altered the system of labor and the social structure of society for the next two and a half centuries. The program of indentured servitude and the unsuccessful attempt to extract forced labor from Native Americans all served as building blocks to the permanent enslavement of Africans. As these values and impressions towards labor changed, it became reflected in American values. This is evident in Post World War societies and in the value of the individual.

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