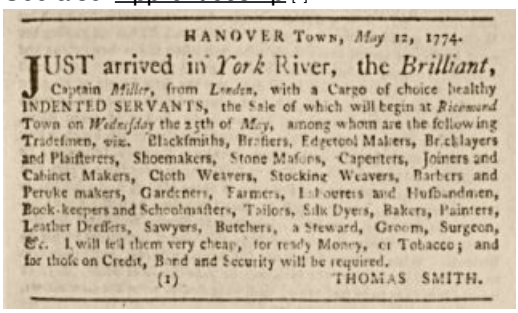
Published on *NCpedia* (https://ncpedia.org)

Indentured Servants [1]

Indentured Servants

by Donna J. Spindel, 2006

See also: Apprenticeship [2]



HANOVER Town, *May* 12, 1774.

JUST arrived in *York* River, the *Brilliant*, Captain *Miller*, from *London*, with a Cargo of choice healthy INDENTED SERVANTS, the Sale of which will begin at *Richmond* Town on *Wednesday* the 25th of *May*, among whom are the following Tradefmen, viz. Blackfmiths, Brafiers, Edgetool Makers, Bricklayers and Plafterers, Shoemakers, Stone Mafons, Carpenters, Joiners and Cabinet Makers, Cloth Weavers, Stocking Weavers, Barbers and Peruke makers, Gardeners, Farmers, Labourers and Husbandmen, Book-keepers and Schoolmafters, Tailors, Silk Dyers, Bakers, Painters, Leather Dreffers, Sawyers, Butchers, a Steward, Groom, Surgeon, &c. I will fell them very cheap, for ready Money, or Tobacco; and for thofe on Credit, Bond and Security will be required.

(1) THOMAS SMITH.

Virginia Gazette, May 19, 1774. Click to see larger view. Courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Available online from the Smithsonian Institute. [3]

Indentured servants were white Europeans of modest means who for various reasons wanted to go to the British colonies but could not pay the cost of their passage. During the colonial period [4], a thriving business developed in Europe in which young men and women agreed to work for a specific time in the New World for a master who paid their way across the Atlantic Ocean. The indenture was the contract they signed and carried with them for the length of their service. A typical servant's contract noted the length (usually four to seven years) and place of service, the master's name, and the minimal food, clothing, and shelter that he or she was to provide.

In the eighteenth century, as the servant population grew (although it never became very large in North Carolina), the North Carolina Assembly found it necessary to enact regulatory laws, particularly since the system lent itself to abuse on the part of both servant and master. According to printer James Davis [5]'s legal guide, published in New Bern in 1774, runaway servants who were caught would serve double time after the expiration of their contracted term. Servants who resisted their masters could "suffer corporal Punishment, at the Discretion of a Justice, not exceeding Twenty One Lashes."

For their part, masters had to provide their servants with a "Competent Dyet, Clothing & Lodging," and they could "not exceed the Bounds of moderation in correcting them." By all accounts, life for indentured servants was difficult. Many died of disease before the end of their contracts, and most who survived were poor.

References:

A. Roger Ekirch, *Bound for America: The Transportation of British Convicts to the Colonies, 1718-1775*(1986).

Ekirch, *"Poor Carolina": Politics and Society in North Carolina, 1729-1776*(1981).

Abbot Emerson Smith, *Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America, 1607-1776*(1947).

Additional Resources:

Watson, Alan D. “A Consideration of European Indentured Servitude in Colonial North Carolina.”*The North Carolina Historical Review* 91, no. 4 (2014): 381–406. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44113224 [6].

Image Credit:

Virginia Gazette, May 19, 1774. Click to see larger view. Courtesy of The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Available online from the Smithsonian Institute. Available from http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/1_3.html [7] (accessed September 7, 2012)

Subjects:
Colonial period (1600-1763) [8]
Immigration [9]
Precolonial period (pre-1600) [10]
Authors:
Spindel, Donna J. [11]

From:
Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.[12]

1 January 2006 | Spindel, Donna J.

Source URL:https://ncpedia.org/indentured-servants?page=0

Links
[1] https://ncpedia.org/indentured-servants [2] https://ncpedia.org/apprenticeship [3] https://ncpedia.org/sites/default/files/indentured_servant.jpg [4] https://ncpedia.org/colonial-period-overview [5] https://ncpedia.org/biography/davis-james [6] http://www.jstor.org/stable/44113224 [7] http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/exhibition/1_3.html [8] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/colonial-period [9] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/immigration [10] https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/prehistory [11] https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/spindel-donna-j [12] https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia-