

Topic Page: [Indentured servants](#)

Definition: **indentured servant** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

(1723) : a person who signs and is bound by indentures to work for another for a specified time esp. in return for payment of travel expenses and maintenance



Image from:

[Indentured Servants and Tenants - extract from an Indenture dated 1742 of a tenant on the Livingston manor, New York, 1742 \(ink on paper\) in Bridgeman Images: Peter Newark American Pictures](#)

Summary Article: **SERVITUDE, INDENTURED**

From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

Indentured servitude was a system of bound labor in which individuals contracted to provide their master with a given number of years of labor in exchange for the payment of their transportation to the New World and their living expenses during the period of indenture. Critical to the survival of the British colonies in America, indentured servants had a profound impact on early American political development. Between one-half and two-thirds of all the immigrants to North America during the colonial period were brought over as indentured servants. In stark opposition to the firmly entrenched aristocracy in Europe, their presence helped prevent the creation of a hereditary nobility in the colonies by laying the foundations for a more fluid social mobility in colonial society. Perhaps most significant, however, indentured servitude established bound labor, including black slavery, as the foundation of colonization and therefore of much subsequent American political, social, and economic development.

The Creation of Colonial Servitude

Several factors facilitated the introduction of indentured servitude to the North American colonies. First and foremost was the English drive for colonial expansion, which in areas such as the colonies in the American South and the West Indies resulted in the creation of large plantations dependent on labor-intensive agriculture. The labor supply required was available because of changes in the structure of English society during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Throughout this period, England had undergone rapid population destabilization as the breakdown of feudalism displaced large numbers of people. By the time plans were being formulated for establishing permanent settlements in the New World, English society had a large population of poor that was viewed as a potential supply of labor to the colonies. Imperial policy initially viewed the removal of such "rabble" to the colonial frontier in positive terms; consequently, powerful members of the upper classes and government enabled their transportation to North America through the support and financing of capitalist colonization ventures. This positive outlook began to change after the 1650s as mercantilist economic concepts started to be applied to human populations—members of the English upper class began to resist the idea of allowing a significant portion of what could be a domestic labor supply to be moved to the colonies.

The vast majority of the first waves of white indentured servants, both men and women, were English; most, however, were young men aged 15 to 25. Some criminals were given reprieves and sent to North America instead of to the gallows. Later, Scots, Irish, French, and German immigrants joined the influx. Most prospective indentured servants, with essentially no place in European society, went willingly. All that was required was a finite period of bound labor, with the promise of land and social

mobility as incentives. Not all indentured servants, however, were totally without social standing; indeed, some were of moderate social rank but could not afford passage to the colonies any other way. Some were artisans who had fulfilled apprenticeships in Europe and possessed trade skills; others, such as schoolteachers, were relatively well-educated. Not all indentured servants, however, went willingly. A black market emerged in servants who had been kidnapped or otherwise forcibly impressed into servitude—many of these were children.

Characteristics of Indentured Servitude

Following initial settlement in 1607, the Virginia Company implemented the first experiments with colonial servitude. The company drew on well-established English traditions of bound labor but in the process created a uniquely colonial institution. English indentures were quite short, usually no longer than a year and agreed upon through verbal contract. In contrast, colonial servants' indentures were more formal and for longer duration. These servants signed written contracts for periods up to seven years or, in rare cases, decades or even a lifetime. Furthermore, colonial masters could choose to sell their servants' contracts before their term of indenture had been completed, an act of purely economic function unheard of in England. The specific requirements of the colonial labor market, for the most part, had indentured servants performing unskilled agricultural labor, although masters would sometimes agree to teach indentured children a trade.

Prospective indentured servants entered into a contract in three main ways. Initially, the contracts were agreed upon in Europe as a prerequisite for passage to the colonies. The impossibility, however, of prospective servants contracting directly with colonial masters before leaving Europe led to the practice of the actual contracts being made in Europe with merchants, ship captains, or emigrant agents. In later years, it was not uncommon for servants to arrive in the colonies without a preexisting indenture. Once their ship entered port, they were sold directly to waiting masters. The third way in which prospective servants entered into an indenture agreement evolved as the redemptioner system. Redemptioners usually traveled in families, whereas other indentured servants almost always traveled individually. Redemptioners were granted the option of paying only a part, or perhaps even no part, of the cost of their passage, but were instead given a short time after arrival to acquire the necessary money by making their labor available to whomever would hire them. If they were unable to earn sufficient funds, the captain of the ship on which they had sailed could sell the redemptioner for a term of indenture to acquire the remaining balance.

Although white indentured servants had greater access to legal recourse than did black slaves, they did not enjoy the full spectrum of English rights their masters possessed and could not enter into marriage, engage in transactions involving property, vote, or even travel freely. Because of their indentured status, they were viewed as property; white servants could often be treated with the same degree of contempt and even physical abuse as black slaves. Furthermore, the colonies provided harsh living conditions for servants. Mortality rates were excessive, especially during the earliest years of colonization. Some estimate that perhaps only one-tenth of all servants actually ultimately achieved successful, property-owning lives; the vast majority either returned to Europe, succumbed to disease, fell into poverty, or died while in service. Nevertheless, indentured servitude did not pose insurmountable obstacles for social mobility in the American colonies, and many impressive success stories were recounted. The system therefore provided a mechanism for establishing a fluidity of social mobility in colonial society that was absent in European societies, a fluidity that profoundly influenced the subsequent development of American society and government. Although every aspect

of colonial life could be harsh and brutal, indentured servitude provided perhaps the only realistic opportunity available for Europeans seeking a new beginning and social advancement. Indeed, the concrete prospect of success is what beckoned so many to the New World during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Impact of Indentured Servitude and Its Decline

Indentured servitude played a central role in populating the colonies and fueling their economies. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, a mere 250,000 Europeans lived along the entire Eastern seaboard, whereas by 1775 approximately 2.5 million colonists were present; this tenfold increase was fueled almost entirely by the system of indentured servitude. Between 1718 and 1775, nearly fifty thousand "convicts and vagabonds" from Britain and Ireland alone entered the colonies as servants. Indentured servitude did not, however, assume the same degree of economic importance for the colonies in the North as it did for the colonies of the South. The Puritan North, reluctant to accept many strangers into its midst and lacking extensive plantations, never received as massive an influx of servants as did the South. The Southern colonies' dependence on agricultural labor from the first years of colonization established a pattern and precedent that would eventually allow black slavery to become a critical feature of the region's economy even as white servitude declined.

Indeed, the economic centrality of white servitude was not destined to last. Servants were often viewed as lazy, rebellious, and inefficient, while freed servants were regarded as downright dangerous, as they no longer had the moralizing effects of labor to keep them docile. Although Bacon's Rebellion (1675) in Virginia was superficially an uprising by servants and small farmers on the frontier against the Indians and Gov. William Berkeley, its consequences were much more far-reaching. It dramatically exacerbated the perception among planters that white indentured servants were too dangerous to be relied on as a dependable source of labor. The rebellion not only highlighted the independent and anti-authoritarian willfulness of white servants on the Virginia frontier, but also, in conjunction with shifting economic advantages, helped lead Southern planters to the conviction that the continued enslavement of blacks would provide an economically sound and more easily managed supply of labor. Servitude, defined by limited duration of labor and greater access to political rights than slavery, therefore assumed a racial identity based on whiteness, whereas the institution of slavery coalesced around lifelong, hereditary bondage based on blackness.

Other factors also contributed to the decline of indentured servitude. As the eighteenth century progressed, an increasingly powerful ideology of republicanism began to pervade the colonies. This sentiment eroded the traditional base of deference and social hierarchy upon which white servitude inevitably relied; consequently, servants became increasingly unwilling to accept the boundaries of their status and grant their social superiors deference. This, in conjunction with the increasing centrality of black slavery, led to the decline of indentured servitude as a significant sector of the colonial economy. By the time of the American Revolution, it had ceased to retain any real economic weight. Having served its initial and primary function of populating the early colonial outposts and fueling their economies, white servitude was further undermined by the Revolution itself. In the fiercely egalitarian environment of republican ideology that characterized the newly formed United States, the numbers of indentured servants continued to decline, and, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, the institution had effectively ceased to exist.

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Perhaps the most significant impact of indentured servitude during the period up to 1783 is that it enabled the survival of the British colonies in North America by providing a constant labor supply. Furthermore, it established the precedent of bound labor as being central to the colonial economy, an assumption on which black slavery would eventually come to rest. The discrepancy between the Northern and Southern colonies' demand for agricultural labor created a set of circumstances that would later be magnified as black slavery became established and supplanted white servitude. In the broadest perspective, therefore, indentured servitude can be viewed as one of the factors that influenced the geographically unbalanced development of American political, social, and economic institutions, and therefore set the stage for civil war less than a century after the Revolution.

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