Notes on Indentured Servitude

A History of The Amish by Steven M. Nolt, Good Books, 1992

p.64 "Some Amish families did purchase redemptioners, however. Redemptioners were skilled European immigrants who could not afford their own way to America, and so traveled to the New World in the hope that someone would pay their passage for them in return for a certain number of years of work. Amish farmers bought redemptioners because their labor, unlike that of slaves, was not a sign of unnecessary expense."

United States History: 1500 – 1788 from Colony to Republic, Steven E. Woodworth, Ph.D., Research & Education Association, 2000

p.36 "William Penn, a member of a prominent British family, converted to Quakerism as a young man. Desiring to found a colony as a refuge for Quakers, in 1681 he sought and received from Charles II a grant of land in America as a payment of a large debt the king had owed Penn's late father.

Penn advertised his colony widely in Europe, offered generous terms on land, and guaranteed a representative assembly and full religious freedom."

<u>A NEW WORLD: the history of immigration into the United States,</u> by Duncan Clarke, Thunder Bay Press, 2000

p. 9 "In the days before slaves, the early colonists relied on indentured servants to do much of the menial work. These were people who wanted to escape poverty and oppression in Europe but were too poor to pay the passage across the Atlantic. The contract would bind them for – usually – between three and seven years in return for their passage and board and eventually on the expiry of the contract, a small plot of land. A few were taught a trade but the majority were agricultural laborers. Masters worked them ruthlessly to extract the maximum possible labor before the contracted term expired.

Needless to say, many did not live to receive their final payment as the mortality rates due to dangerous and hard work as well as new diseases took their toll. Furthermore, when slaves started to arrive in North America, the latter were more valuable even though they cost more to buy, but then they became property and could be traded or kept indefinitely. Indentured servants had greater legal rights and, of course, the guarantee of freedom if they survived their term, but they could be beaten, humiliated and traded by their owners with little hope of relief.

Once free, the shortage of women allowed most female servants to marry, but men usually remained impoverished dependants of their former master. At the end of their term many were reduced to squatting on frontier land; relatively few achieved genuine prosperity. In the seventeenth century most indentured servants had been poor Englishmen, but in

the eighteenth century the Irish increasingly took their place. It has been estimated that well over half of the new European labor arriving in America before the outbreak of the Revolution came in as indentured servants."

p. 76 Within a few years of the arrival of these Rhinelanders or Palatines (as they were called in America) European migrant agents and letters home had spread word of the welcoming conditions in Pennsylvania, prompting a growing flow of immigrants. Some three ships carrying Germans were recorded in 1717, a number that doubled to six annually before 1740, and around ten thereafter. Most of these sailed from Rotterdam carrying Germans who had indentured themselves to pay their passage. They were known as free-willers or redemptioners acknowledging the fact that most had bound themselves voluntarily (although of course after a long journey down the Rhine starvation in a foreign port was the only other alternative on offer.) Two contracts were signed. The first committed the migrant either to pay his or her fare on arrival or to agree to be sold as an indentured servant to cover the debt. Once in America, the majority who lacked friends or relatives able to repay their fare signed contracts of indenture with one of the farmers and merchants looking for additional laborers who met each ship on arrival. Contracts usually lasted three to six year, although children under fifteen had to serve until they reached twenty-one. The system was open to abuses: families were separated and extra servitude was often required of those whose partners, parents, or relatives had died at sea to pay for their passage also. Nevertheless the system seems to have been broadly acceptable to most, and the majority survived their contracts to prosper as free farmers and laborers. Significant reforms which brought about the end of the indenture system did not occur the early decades of the nineteenth century when, under pressure from increasingly established local German communities repelled by the

worsening conditions as the numbers of migrants rose, several key states introduced legislation restricting the terms of contracts sufficiently to make the enterprise no longer viable."

p. 79 "Historians have divided this influx into several phases related to the progress of industrialization in Germany in the nineteenth century. As with other nations background conditions which made possible migrations on such a vast scale were also important factors, including improvements in communications and literacy that spread news of the opportunities to be found in America and the advances in transportation that made the journey increasingly accessible at a relatively low cost."

Mayflower, by Nathaniel Philbrick, Penguin Group, New York, New York, 2006.

P.3 – "For sixty-five days, the Mayflower had blundered her way through storms and headwinds, her bottom a shaggy pelt of seaweed and barnacles, her leaky decks spewing salt water onto passengers' devoted head. There were 102 of them. Most of their provisions and equipment were beneath them in the hold, the primary storage area of the vessel. The passengers were in the between or 'tween, decks – a dank, airless space about seventy-five feet long and not even five feet high that separated the hold from the upper deck. The 'tween decks was more of a crawlspace than a place to live, made even more claustrophobic by the passengers' attempts to provide themselves with some privacy. A series of thin-walled cabins had been built, creating a crowded warren of rooms that overflowed with people and there possessions: chests of clothing, casks of food, chairs, pillows, rugs, and omnipresent chamber pots."

“with the rationing of their beer came the unmistakable signs of scurvy: bleeding gums, loosening teeth, and foul-smelling breath.”

P.4 – “it had been a miserable passage. In mid ocean, a fierce wave had exploded against the old ship’s topsides, straining a structural timber until it cracked like a chicken bone.

They had suffered agonizing delays, seasickness, cold, and the scorn and ridiule of the sailors.

They came from Leiden, Holland.

P.6 – They were weavers, wool carders, tailors, shoemakers, and printers.

P.19 – “They were packed together like herrings,” They had amongst them the flux, and also want of fresh water.

P.23 –The Speedweell Vessel was less than fifty feet in length

P.24 – The Mayflower was a typical merchant vessel of her day; square rigged and beak bowed, with high, castlelike superstructures fore and aft that protected her cargo and crew in the worst weather. Rated at 180 tons (meaning that her hold was capable of accommodating 180 casks or tuns of wine) about 100 feet in length.

P.30 – “Soon after departing …, the passengers began to suffer the effects of seasickness. As often happens at sea, the sailors took great delight in mocking the sufferings of their charges.

P.31 – “A succession of westerly gales required …to work his ship as best he could, against the wind and waves.

P.32 – "After more than a month as a passenger ship, the _____ was no longer a sweet ship and _____wanted some air. So he climbed a ladder to one of the hatches and stepped onto the deck.

<u>The Oxford Companion to United States History</u>, Edited by Paul S. Boyer, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001.

p. 93 – "Most white immigrants to America during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came as indentured servants. In this business transaction, the would-be immigrant exchanged three to seven years of service for passage to a land of enhanced opportunity. Mostly self-selected risk takers, indentured servants embraced an entrepreneurial culture once their terms of servitude ended."

p. 144 – "Virginians pioneered "indentured servitude, by which persons deeded their labor in return for passage to America. Because servants contracted for only a limited number of years, however, masters had constantly to replace them, and when competition from English and other colonial labor markets cut the available supply, Virginians turned to importing African slaves, who could be held in perpetuity."

p.368-369 – "Indentured servitude, which had appeared in colonial America by 1620, was developed by the Virginia Company as a means to connect the English labor supply to colonial demand. Most hired labor in preindustrial England was performed by servants in husbandry – youths who lived and worked in the households of their masters on annual contracts. Since passage fares to America were high relative to the earnings of these servants, few could afford the voyage. The Virginia company's solution was to pay the passage of prospective laborers who contracted to repay this debt from their earnings in America.

This arrangement was soon adopted by merchants in England's ports, as migrants signed indentures that the merchants sold to colonial planters upon the servants' arrival in America. Servitude became a central labor institution in early English America: Between one-half and two-thirds of all white immigrants to the British colonies arrived under indenture. Indentured servitude therefore enabled between 300,000 and 400,000 Europeans to migrate to the New World. Unmarried men predominated among the servants throughout the Colonial Era. Most were in their late teens or early twenties – the same ages that were prevalent among servants in husbandry in England.

Indentured servants were most important in the early history of those regions that produced staple crops for export, colonies on the Chesapeake Bay. Over time, as colonial conditions for servants deteriorated and economic conditions improved in England, attracting indentured workers to these colonies became more difficult. Planters increasingly found African slaves a less expensive source of labor and responded by substituting slaves for servants.

Some historians have characterized the indenture system as debased and the servants who participated in it as disreputable. Yet indentured workers were governed by the same basic legal conditions as English farm servants, and studies of emigration lists have shown that the servants were not drawn from England's poorest or least skilled workers, but rather from a broad cross section of English society. Historians have also argued that servants were exploited economically by English merchants. Yet the servants long terms did not imply exploitation, for the large debt for passage meant that repayment would necessarily take longer than the standard single year worked by farm servants in England. Analysis of collections of contracts has furthermore revealed that more productive servants received shorter terms, evidently because they could repay their debts more quickly.

Servants bound for less desirable colonial destinations also received shorter terms. Competition among merchants thus protected servants from economic exploitation."

p. 426 – "In the colonial period, labor moved in three ways: free migration, indentured servitude, and the forced migration of African slaves. Because of the high cost of transatlantic passage, only a small fraction of potential migrants could afford transport to the Americas. The cost barrier was especially problematic for the young, landless laborers who stood to gain the most from such migration.

Under the indenture system, migrants signed contracts with merchants in England committing themselves to work for a specified period of years in exchange for passage to the New World. Once in America, the merchants sold these contracts to planters needing labor. Because land abundance made it hard for planters to hire free labor, the use of unfree workers --- either indentured servants or slaves --- was the onlyh way they could expand cultivation beyond the limits wet by their family's labor. Demand for servants varied geographically, depending on crops and climates. Consis with the existence of a well functioning market, terms of service appear to have varied with individual productivitiy and employment conditions in the specific locality.

Because export opportunities were more limited in northern colonies, they imported few slaves. Yet abundant land created opportunities for small-scale agriculture in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey that enabled employers to attract indentured servants throughout the eighteenth century."

Bennett, William J., <u>AMERICA: The Last Best Hope</u>. Volume I

Nelson Current, Nashville, 2006.

p. 35 Younger men and women from the British Isles and Europe were so eager to get a new start in America they would sign up for a period of five or seven years' labor as indentured servants in the New World, in return for their passage across the ocean. The vast majority of early settlers in Virginia in the 1600s were white indentured servants. But tobacco requires intensive cultivation. Once their indebtedness was over, these indentured servants were eager to escape the intense heat and the backbreaking labor. The turnover would increase the desire for a more permanent sort of labor – slaves from Africa. In 1671, Sir William Berkeley listed the number of indentured servants as about eight thousand, slaves at two thousand, and freemen at forty-five thousand. Within a a few decades, slaves would begin to outnumber the indentured servants from England. This is the heart of the American paradox. Better conditions and greater liberty for indentured servants would come only at the expense of the unoffending Africans.

Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard, Killing England: The Struggle for American Independence, 2017.

p. 125 "Other than merchants and sailors, the transatlantic journey was most frequently undertaken by the poor and hopeful, fleeing the poverty of Europe to make a new life in America. Many paid for the voyage by selling themselves and their children into years of indentured servitude. More than a few died en route, from shipboard diseases, and their bodies were still personally liable for the fare.

It was an act of courage. As one passenger wrote of the transatlantic crossing, during the voyage there is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth rot, and the like, all of which come from old sharply-salted food and meat, also from very bad and foul water, so that many die miserably. Add to this want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want afflictions and lamentations, together with other trouble, e.g., the lice abound so frightfully, especially on sick people, that they can be scraped off the body. The misery reaches a climax when a gale rages for two or three nights and days, so that every one believe that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. In such a visitation the people cry and pray most piteously."

Other Resources:

Abbott Emerson Smith, Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America, 1607-1776, 1947.

David W. Galenson, White Servitude in Colonial America: An Economic Analysis, 1981.