

# **Indentured Servitude**

## **by Donald E. Leisey, Ed.D**

**In 1768, Joseph Leisey age 14 and his sister, Catherine, 10 years of age left Basel, Switzerland and traveled by boat on the Rhine River to Rotterdam for passage to the Colonies.**

**Wikipedia defines an indentured Servant as an unfree laborer under contract to work for a specified amount of time for another person, often without pay, but in exchange for accommodation, food, other essentials, and/or free passage to a new country.** Indentured servitude was a labor system, not a system of apprenticeship. It was a long-term extension of the old English one-year agricultural servitude because of labor shortages.

As you read about the plight of individuals from throughout Europe who willingly agreed to become indentured servants in order to emigrate to Colonial America, think of Joseph Leisey, who is believed to be the first Leisey to come to the colonies in 1768 as an indentured servant, at only 14 years of age with his ten year old sister, Catherine. Can you imagine the trauma that he and his sister must have experienced leaving family and friends at a young age to go to a land many thousand miles from home called the Colonies on the North American Continent?

Many of the "German" migrants to the colonies arrived before the formation of a German nation state under Prussian leadership in 1871, leading to a degree of confusion and statistical uncertainty through the overlap of conflicting linguistic, political, and ethnic definitions. In the nineteenth century and later, significant quantities of German-speakers arrived from Switzerland, Austria, and from German communities in Russia, and even Italy. This statistical confusion had its earlier counterpart on the ground with the popular misidentification of Colonial German immigrants as Dutch that arose from hearing the new arrivals describe themselves as "Deutsch: (that is, German), together with a then standard use of the term to describe anyone from the whole length of the river Rhine.

When large-scale immigration began in the nineteenth century relations between the established Germans in Pennsylvania and the new arrivals were one of the problems - of white servants under contracts proved more

profitable as a short-term labor source than enslaving Indians or using free labor.

The difference between indentured servants and slaves, on a day-to-day basis, was hard to define. Both slaves and indentured servants were a commodity that could be sold, traded or inherited on the discretion of his owner. An individual would sell himself to an agent or ship captain. In turn, the contract would be sold to a buyer in the colonies to recover the cost of the passage. In theory, the indentured servant was only selling his or her labor, but in practice he/she was basically a slave. Courts enforced the laws that made it so. The treatment of the servant was sometimes harsh and brutal. Bodily punishment could take place for not heeding the commands of the master. Runaways were frequent.

After receiving the land that is now Pennsylvania (meaning Penn's Woods), William Penn, a Quaker dissenter, who had experienced his share of persecution in England, planned his "holy experiment" and established a colony in which religious toleration would be the order of the day. Penn advertised in the Rhine Valley for immigrants to settle in the province that became one of the New World's great havens. A large group of the Rhinelanders, already under pressure from increasing overpopulation and the impact of an unusually severe winter, sailed to Britain, from where some 600 were sent to North Carolina and almost 3,000 to New York to make naval stores. Weakened by their ordeal, many died on the journey and the planned settlement in New York rapidly collapsed, but the majority of survivors reached the Colony successfully.

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 years, 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 until 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.

It is believed that Joseph Leisey was one of the many immigrants who came to the colonies in the 1600s and 1700s. One-half to two-thirds of all immigrants to Colonial America were indentured servants. They were fleeing their homes in Germany and other areas of Europe to escape poverty and oppression and seeking a safe place to live and practice their religion. They were Lutherans, Presbyterians, Reformed (Calvinists), Moravians, Amish, Schwenkfelders, Brethen, Mennonites and others looking to remove themselves from the religious persecution occurring in Germany and Switzerland. In the days before slaves in the colonies, indentured servants were relied on to do much of the menial work of the colonists.

Indentured servants were too poor to pay the passage across the Atlantic so they would contract with a ship's owner. The contract would bind them for - usually - between three and seven years in return for their passage 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. Most of these people abandoned everything they had in the middle of the night because of strict laws against leaving and taking anything out of Germany. One half to two thirds of all immigrants to Colonial America arrived as indentured servants. They paid their ways by signing an indenture of servitude with either the owner of the ship or broker in Europe and then were sold to individuals in the Colony.

Once they arrived in this country, the indentures were redeemed with hard work. Some immigrants spent as long as seven years working to pay the price of their passage. Some men and women came alone, others with their fathers and brothers to prepare a place for their mothers, wives and sisters. Others came in groups. At times, as many as 75% of the population of some Colonies were under terms of indenture. It is estimated that well over half of the new European labor arriving in America before the outbreak of the Revolution came in as indentured servants. In most cases the work of the indentured servant would be household or agricultural unskilled labor. There was a great demand for skilled craftsmen.

If an individual had a skill that was in demand, like weaving, smithing, or carpentry, he/she was in demand. In theory, the person was only selling his or her labor, however, indentured servants were basically slaves and the courts enforced the laws that made it so. Indentured servants had greater legal rights than slaves. The greatest difference between indentured servants and slaves was that indentured servants had the guarantee of freedom if they survived their term, but they could be beaten, humiliated and mistreated. The treatment of the indentured servant was harsh and often brutal. Many did not live to receive their final payment as the mortality rates were high.

Once free, the shortage of women allowed most female servants to marry, but men usually remained impoverished dependents of their former master. At the end of their term many were reduced to squatting on frontier land; relatively few achieved freedom. They came aboard crude ships built mostly to carry cargo. The ships carried as many as 600 people plus cargo. It took up to 3 months, depending on the winds, to cross the Atlantic and arrive in the colonies. They were packed closely together in the ships. They were given minimal rations of three biscuits and a half pint of water per day. Each person was given a berth of approximately 2 feet wide. Gottlieb Mittelberg\* gave this first hand description of the journey across the Atlantic Ocean, "During the voyage there is on board these ships, terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, sea-sickness, fever, dysentery, heartache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvey, cancer, mouth-rot, and the like, all of which comes from old and sharply salted food and meat, also from very bad and foul water." Add this want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want, afflictions, and lamentations, together with other trouble, as lice abound so frightfully, especially on sick people that they can be scraped off their bodies. The misery reaches the climax when a gale

rages for 2 or 3 nights and days, so that every one believes that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. When the ship is constantly tossed from side to side by the storm and waves, so that no one can walk, sit, or lie, and the closely packed people in the berths are thereby tumbled over each other.

Another testimonial to the difficulties of the trip across the Atlantic Ocean is mentioned by S. Duane Kauffman from documents entitled "Miscellaneous Amish Mennonite Document," in his book Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage July 2, 1979 – "The passage to America was a frightening experience. Storms could delay arrival by weeks, while disease and death could make even a relatively quick voyage seem to take forever. One eighteenth-century traveler noted that children under age seven often perished in the crossing.

In 1737 the ship Charming Nancy brought a number of Amish families to America. A journal probably kept by one of the ship's Amish passengers, "The 28th of June while in Rotterdam (in the Netherlands) getting ready to start my Zernbli died and was buried in Rotterdam. The 29th we got under sail and enjoyed one and a half days of favorable wind. We landed in England the 8th of July, remaining 9 days in port during which 5 children died. Went under sail the 17th of July. The 21 of July my own Lisbetli died. On the 29th of July three children died. On the first of August my Hansli died and the Tuesday previous 5 children died. On the 3rd of August contrary winds beset the vessel and from the first to the 7th of the month three more children died. On the 8th of August, Shambien's Lizzie died and on the 9th Hans Zimmerman's Jacobli died. On the 19th, Christian Burgli's child died. Passed a ship on the 21st. A favorable wind sprang up. On the 28th Hans Gasi's wife died. Landed in Philadelphia on the 18th and my wife and I left the ship on the 19th. A child was born to us on the 20th - died - wife recovered." A voyage of 83 days. As the ship gets closer to Philadelphia, it is boarded by Englishmen, Dutchmen and High-Germans who come from Philadelphia to attend the sale of human beings. When the ship arrives in Philadelphia the indentured servants, after their long voyage, must remain on-board the ship until they are purchased and released.

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It is believed that the Leisey name has many different spellings because of the education level (maybe illiterates especially in English) and regional differences. When I was in Edinburgh, Scotland in the early 90's, I met a physician from Switzerland who was in Scotland for a curling tournament. Apparently both Scotland and Switzerland claim to have invented curling, so every other year they have a curling competition in their respective countries. After a long discussion about the history of curling according to the Swiss, the physician asked me, "What is your name?" I told him Leisey and spelled it L-e-i-s-e-y. He said L-e-i-s-i is a very common name in Switzerland especially in the Basel area along the Rhine River. I informed him that according to my father, I am German because my father said our family was from the Rhine River area. My sense of geography was flawed because the physician promptly informed me that the Rhine River originates outside of Basel, Switzerland in Lake Constance. Pat and I visited the Basel area the following year and we went through the phone books and Leisi is like Smith in U.S. phone books, very common. It makes sense that the "father land" or Deutch Land prior to the Prussians in 1871 probably included some of what we know today as Switzerland, especially the portion known as the Palatinate at that time. I think it is safe to say that the Leiseys are Swiss Germans.