

TOBACCO AND LABOR

Growing tobacco in Virginia was profitable for planters, but it required a large amount of land and a considerable labor force. The tobacco growing process was a year-round occupation. First, land was cleared for fields. Seeds were started in January. Harvesting, curing and packing of the leaves occurred in late summer and fall. With a small population in Virginia, planters sought workers from England, often paying their passage to the colony.

The system of indentured servitude was the answer to the dilemma faced by the Virginia Company and private landowners. It grew out of the two English systems of service. One was apprenticeship, in which a person served a period of time to a master in exchange for food, clothing, housing and learning a skill or trade. The other, “service in husbandry,” was a one-year period of agricultural or domestic service. The two were combined into the indenture system to supply labor for the new colony. The period of service, usually four to seven years, was longer than service in husbandry in England because of the cost of transportation to Virginia.



In 1607 it seems that everyone, including gentlemen, came as a servant to the Virginia Company, since there was no private ownership of land or supplies. After 1609, a seven-year term was placed on service in exchange for a share in the Company profits and some land. Seven years later, in 1616, there were no profits to pay investors. All the Company could give was land, so for every share of stock, a shareholder got 100 acres of land. Those who had invested their labor were promised land too. These former servants of the Company in theory became landowners. When land grants began, servants came to Virginia to serve not only the Virginia Company, but could be servants of private planters. In 1619 the General Assembly clarified the indenture system, stipulating that indentures had to be recorded to enforce the contract and to prevent masters from extending the period of servitude to which the parties had agreed. One colonist wrote that year, “All our riches for the present doe consist in Tobacco” and “our principall wealth . . . consisteth in servants.”

An indentured servant signed a contract agreeing to work for a fixed period—usually four to seven years—in return for meals, clothes, shelter and their passage to the colony. At the end of their term, the master was required to give the workers “freedom dues,” usually three barrels of corn and a suit of clothes. After 1616, most freed servants did not receive land and had to work for someone else, or as a tenant farmer, to acquire enough money to buy land. They progressed through a series of steps from servant to tenant/renter, to landowner.

In 1622, John Upton came to Virginia as an indentured servant bound to Abraham Peirse, the cape merchant or person in charge of procuring supplies for the colony. Upton is an example of a servant who was successful. He worked for Peirse for three years on Peirse’s plantation, “Flowerdew Hundred,” until 1625, when he managed to buy his freedom, paying Peirse for the eight months remaining on his contract. In 1626 Upton rented a small farm on Jamestown Island, agreeing to pay the owner partly in tobacco and partly in improvements to the property. With a partner, Upton also became a part-time peddler or trader, buying items from larger Jamestown merchants for resale to other colonists.

Upton prospered in his enterprises. By 1633 he was financially able to acquire a plantation of his own in Isle of Wight County, across the James River from Jamestown. He continued to acquire land there and by 1637, he owned 2500 acres. Upton became one of Isle of Wight’s most prominent citizens, serving as a justice of the peace, captain of the militia, and as a burgess in the General Assembly. He died in 1652, leaving a widow, Margaret, and a son, John Upton II.

At least half of the European immigrants who came to Virginia between 1620 and 1680 arrived as indentured servants. But the high death rate of new European immigrants kept labor in short supply. As the century progressed, fewer Europeans wanted to come to Virginia, and as the number of European servants could not meet the demand for laborers, planters began to import Africans to work in their tobacco fields. Opportunities for white workers who had formerly been servants then were reduced. The best land had already been taken. Poor free men were forced to move to Virginia’s western frontier, just beyond the fall line, where they clashed with Indian groups who had been forced off of their lands too. This growing class of poor, landless free men now was deprived of the right to vote, or hold government office. Social unrest led to Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676.

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