

Indentured servants and company towns essay sample

[Business](#), [Company](#)



Indentured servants

Historically, indentured servants were a product of the *indentured labor system* in England which provided much needed short-term labor at a time when England was suffering from acute agricultural labor shortage. This practice later became a primary source of labor for the colonies during the early days. The first batch of indentured servants was composed of workers for the tobacco farms in Virginia where large numbers of field laborers were required, tobacco farming being a “labor-intensive” crop. Farm laborers were so in demand that in 1618 tobacco planters were even granted a “headright” grant for every indentured servant that they could import from England. The grant, which goes to the planter, consists of 50 acres of land (Barker, 2004).

The promise of a new life in the colonies attracted an estimated 300, 000 workers (majority of whom were male) because of the high unemployment rate in England at the time. Under an “indenture agreement,” the employer advanced the money for the passage of the worker from England to America to be repaid with the worker’s labor for a stipulated period of time: 4-5 years for skilled laborers and 7 years or more for unskilled workers. While working without pay for the American employer, the indentured servant’s food, clothing, and housing needs were shouldered by the employer. There were many instances, however, where employers would stretch the number of years of servitude by citing bad behavior or any other reason. In the case of female workers, the length of their servitude would be lengthened when they got pregnant. When servants attempted to escape, the masters also

lengthened their services after they were recovered. Not everybody who came to America as indentured servants were, however, unemployed workers from England. The government of England also employed what was called an “ enforced servitude.” The servants under this category were composed of petty criminals, war prisoners and even simple vagrants who were sold as soon as they reached American soil (Travel & History, n. d.).

There were many attempted escapes because the indentured servants were basically considered as slaves and were consequently treated harshly and brutally. As a matter of fact, the government of the colony of Virginia sanctioned “ bodily punishment for not heeding the commands of the masters” (Ballagh, 1895 as cited in Barker, 2004). Because of the almost subhuman treatment by some masters, about fifty percent of the indentured servants were already dead after only two years. To reduce the incidents of escapes, the courts decided that servants should be issued with proper identification papers, including travel papers whenever they were allowed by their masters to travel, to facilitate inspection (Smith, 1947 as cited in Barker, 2004).

After the completion of the indenture agreement, the usual practice was for employers to award their outgoing servants with some new pieces of clothing, seeds, and tools for farming. These things were included in what was called their “ freedom dues.” When an indentured servant would get lucky, his or her “ freedom dues” would sometimes include a small piece of land. Unfortunately, many of the indentured servants did not have any money to purchase their own lands. Those who did not have any skills could

not also find jobs. The result was social unrest. The Bacon's Rebellion which erupted in Virginia in 1676 was sparked by hundreds of indentured servants who, after consummating their indenture agreements, could no longer find any source of livelihood (Travel & History, n. d.).

Company towns

Company towns emerged in the country from the 1880s to the 1930s. These towns, which were owned by single companies, meant cheap labor for their owners and job opportunities for immigrants. In the western part of the country, the companies that operated these company towns were engaged in the mining as well as the lumber industries. Over in the Appalachians in the east, they were in the coal industry. These towns were characterized by paternalism where workers were provided with the basic necessities of food and shelter, including luxuries. However, the most important characteristic of a company town is that it is a place of employment. The workers of the company that owned the town were spending virtually all their time in the town, working ten hours a day and buying everything they need in the company stores, in the process often owing such stores huge amounts in debts. These towns started folding down during the 1930s, leaving the towns deserted and buildings therein uninhabited (Clark, 2006).

Company towns were constructed based on the needs of particular industries but their existence also depended on the viability of the industries which were supporting them. For instance, when the coal industry started in the Appalachians, a company town was an absolute necessity because it would

take workers a full day to travel from the nearest towns to the site of the company operations. Since transportation was yet very difficult, it was not only impractical to let workers commute to and from work – it was also difficult to attract workers, especially skilled workers, to work on the site. So the company was obliged to build houses for the workers and open company stores to provide their basic necessities. In other words, the company constructed a town for its workers (Clark, 2006).

In East Texas, the lumber industry was responsible for constructing and supporting company towns in far-lung areas where they needed to put up their mills. It was because the lumber companies found it easier and cheaper to mill the logs there before delivering the already finished lumber to their customers than haul the logs for milling over long distances before transporting the finished lumber again for delivery to customers. As in the Appalachians in the east, the situation in East Texas, therefore, called for the establishment of company towns in far-flung areas (Clark, 2006).

Basically, a company town would have housing units, a company store, a “cookhouse,” and most often a church. Sometimes several religious denominations would establish their churches there. The more paternalistic the owner, the more amenities were made available to the workers living in such towns. In many towns there would even be libraries and entertainment facilities like dance halls, theaters, bowling lanes, and swimming pools (Clark, 2006). However, while some towns were paternalistic, discrimination were evident in other towns, with white workers being paid and treated better than blacks – a government report which was published in 1909

showed that the salaries of the blacks and the immigrants were 6 cents and 4 cents lower than the salary of white workers (Fishback, 1992 as cited in Clark, 2006). Skilled workers were given more preferential treatment. Lumber companies even told their employment agencies of their “ original preference for workers of Nordic heritage” (Carlson, 2003 as cited in Clark, 2006).

Indentured servants versus company towns

There were numerous similarities and differences between the indentured labor system and the company towns. However, a comparison between the two would readily show that workers in company towns were several notches better than indentured servants. Both the indentured servants and the company towns were borne out of the need for cheap labor. Nevertheless, both the servants and the workers had visions of a better future when they started their new lives with their masters and their employers. Another marked similarity between the two was the fact that both the indentured servants and the workers in company towns were “ stay-in workers.” The indentured servants were living in the farms which they worked and the company towns where the workers lived were also situated very near to or right where the workplaces were.

What set them apart, however, was their relationship with their employers and the treatment they were accorded. The indentured servants were basically slaves, were often treated harshly and brutally, and could be bought and sold. In contrast, the workers in company towns were free men.

While servants were discouraged from starting their own families, skilled married men were recruited to work in company towns for want of qualified workers. In other words, personal happiness was never in the equation in the indentured labor system whereas most owners of company towns saw to it that their workers were satisfied.

Despite some incidents of discrimination in some of the company towns, what set workers apart from indentured servants was the fact that the former retained their humanity while working for their employers. The servants, on the other hand, were practically reduced to the level of slaves.

References

Barker, D. (2004). *Indentured Servitude in Colonial America*. News: National Association

For Interpretation, Cultural Interpretation and Living History Section.

Retrieved

October 24, 2008, from [http://www. geocities. com/nai_cilh/servitude. html](http://www.geocities.com/nai_cilh/servitude.html)

Clark, J. D. (2006). *COMPANY TOWNS IN AMERICA, 1880 TO 1930. A Thesis Presented*

To the Faculty of Humboldt State University. Retrieved October 24, 2008, from

[http://dscholar. humboldt. edu: 8080/dspace/bitstream/2148/59/1/Clark. pdf](http://dscholar.humboldt.edu:8080/dspace/bitstream/2148/59/1/Clark.pdf)

<https://assignbuster.com/indentured-servants-and-company-towns-essay-sample/>

Travel & History. (n. d.). *Colonial America Indentured Servitude* . Retrieved October 24,

2008, from <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1157.html>