

# Slaves and indentured servants



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During the 17th and 18th centuries throughout the English colonies, indentured servants and slaves made up the main workforce for land-owning colonists. For a long period of time, both indentured servants and slaves seemed to stand on the same status and were treated about the same. However, as time progressed, changes in the colonies also brought changes between these two different groups. The path to the Revolution brought about new ideologies concerning freedom and liberty, causing colonists to question their own ideas of freedom and liberty, as well as the idea of what freedom and liberty should mean to slaves and indentured servants.

Indentured servants and slaves were similar in many ways in both their lifestyles, the way they were treated themselves, and the way their children were treated; however, their differences become very evident when discussing their progression into slavery or servitude, and their progression to freedom. Throughout the majority of time during the 17th and 18th century, indentured servants and slaves were considered to be of the same rank and were treated fairly the same. For a while, most colonists adhered to English common law, which did not acknowledge chattel slavery or the ownership of a human being as property.

While indentured servants had to bind themselves in writing to their owner for about three to seven years, many of the early African slaves worked for their masters for life, although they were not legally enslaved (Henretta and Brody, 49). Because of this, and the fact that many slaves had converted to Christianity, some of the earlier slaves were able to escape their bondage and become freemen, therefore having white colonists look upon them differently than later African slaves.

Similarly, indentured servants and their masters were both aware that after their three to seven year contract was up, they would be released from their bondage and would receive their "freedom dues" ("Complaint of an Indentured Servant", 67). Keeping this in mind, many owners of indentured servants considered these workers to be close to their own social status, just awaiting their payment of land and "freedom dues." For the children of both slaves and indentured servants, their fates were very similar from the start of their parents' bondage and even to their own release out of bondage. Slaves and indentured servants were sold and auctioned off in market aboard a ship as they traveled over to America. For indentured servants, it is said that "many parents must sell and trade away their children like so many head of cattle, for if their children take the debt upon themselves, the parents can leave the ship free and unrestrained; but as the parents often do not know where and to what people their children are going...after leaving the ship, do not see each other again for many years..." ("Gottlieb Mittelberger on the Trade in Indentured Servants," 65).

On the other hand, many times slaves were taken right out of their home villages and ripped away from their families, taken aboard ships to be sold off and sent to America. Others, who were fortunate enough to keep their families together upon boarding the ship, soon became less fortunate as their families were torn apart, being sold to different masters. In addition, when it came to freedom for the children of slaves and indentured servants, some were able to gain their freedom once they reached the age of adulthood.

Both the progression into and out of servitude for slaves and indentured servants was very different. Indentured servants came to America with the prospect of owning land. To pay for their trip over, they were persuaded into signing contracts of indentured servitude, which would keep them working for about three to six years until they were able to receive their “freedom dues.” Although many of the earliest indentured servants died before their release, most indentured servants lived their day-to-day lives looking forward to their release and the time when their labor was over, therefore making them freedmen.

On the contrary, slaves were forced into servitude and “sold like beasts of burden and like them condemned to slavery for life...a life of slavery like that of your petitioners, deprived of every social privilege, of everything requisite to render life tolerable is far worse than nonexistence” (Petition of Slaves to the Massachusetts Legislature, 124). A lot of slaves lived with the thoughts that a life of freedom and liberty would never be a possibility for them.

However, the buildup and start of the Revolution brought new ideas and new possibilities for everyone, including slaves and indentured servants.

Especially for indentured servants, the new view and meaning of liberty seen during the time of the Revolution seemed to help more and more indentured servants gain their own freedom and liberty. Their path to freedom was also helped along due to the fact that indentured servants began living longer lives than in the past, surviving their years of contract, and moving on to collect their land and “freedom dues. Because of this, landowners and wealthy farmers began to see that the system of indentured servitude was not as profitable as it had once been, and their views shifted to slavery as

the main workforce in the colonies. While “ the ‘ contagion of liberty’ unleashed by the Revolution for a time threatened the existence of slavery,” in the end countless attempts of emancipation in the northern states was not strong enough to overcome the overall need for slavery as the driving workforce in the colonies (Pennsylvania Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery, 125).

Although the new ideas and values of freedom and liberty helped indentured servants to find their freedom, the same cannot really be said for African slaves in the colonies. While both indentured servants and slaves were at the center of the 17th and 18th century colonial economy and workforce, despite the new ideologies and changes caused by the Revolution, the process to freedom unfolded very differently for the two groups and in turn shaped how indentured servants and slaves would be viewed throughout the rest of history.