

Example of research paper on the labor problem in colonial settlements

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Introduction

The history of colonialism in America commences with the arrival of English settlers in America. The English settlers decided to immigrate to America for a variety of reasons. Some of them wanted to start fresh lives and get away from oppressive rule in their homeland.. Others were in search of religious and political freedoms. Still, others immigrated to America looking forward to acquiring their own land, which they could not obtain back at home. Many others went to America looking for fresh opportunities for themselves as well as their families and future generations. Other just craved for adventure and were simply looking forward to the unknowing potential held by the American land. Stories of this new place where everyone had an opportunity to start afresh and make it spread like wild fire. Consequently, many left their homeland in search of new opportunities. Most of the settlers during the colonial period practiced agriculture, the main economic activity. However, life for the settlers was not as easy as they thought it would be. Epidemics were very common and consequently, death rates were very high. In addition, in America, the colonialist encountered the native Indians and there was general hostility between the two. The settlers adopted an immediate dislike for the Indians. Such facts are evident in Mary Rowlandson’s narrative “ The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson”; a Puritan woman kidnapped and kept in captivity by the Indians. Her narrative shows the violent confrontations that mainly existed between the native Indian and the early colonial settlers. It talks about enormous suspicion and animosity that existed between the two communities and the implications of such factors.

Colonial America was also plagued by labor problems from the onset.

Until the late 18th Century, there was a vast scarcity of labor in the colonial settlements. As mentioned earlier, the major economic activity during this period was agriculture, and two of the colonial crops grown were tobacco and cotton. These crops were very labor intensive and for the settlers to obtain any form of gain or revenue from their growth, they needed to have adequate labor at their disposal. However, this was not the case and in many occasions, they found themselves without enough workers. Shortage of labor was not just restricted to the agricultural areas. There were also prominent complaints from artisans in the Eastern port cities like New York. It was, however, in the agricultural areas that the pinch of labor shortage was felt much.

The shortage in labor was a consequence of several things. The first cause of labor shortage was the availability of land. One of the immigration into America main drivers was the promise of free land. The wealthy people from Britain who arrived acquired large tracts of land with the aim of practicing agriculture on a large scale. The colonialists who owned land did not need to work themselves, with the excuse being that they owned land. What they failed to realize that for these lands to be of any economic value, they needed a vast supply of labor. This was obviously not forthcoming and the wealthy who owned land could not “degrade” themselves or stoop as low as working on the land personally. Such aspects of pride essentially led to a shortage of labor in the American colonies.

The colonial era was also characterized by disease and pandemics. There were constant outbreaks of diseases and pandemics that often resulted in

the death of many. The individuals affected the most were laborers. Unlike their masters who enjoyed the comfort of huge villas, mansions, bungalows, the laborers lived in extremely dire conditions and disease outbreaks were, therefore, very common. In addition, diseases were likely to spread very fast between the laborers as they spent most of their times together.

Gaining passage into America was not as easy as it would sound. Many people were indeed too poor to pay the amount required to gain passage into the American colony. It was through this loophole that early colonialists found a way of obtaining cheap labor and closing the enormous demand vs., supply of labor gap that had come into being. This was through the indenture system. An indenture system was where people (usually young men and sometimes women), signed documents agreeing to work for colonialist masters for a given time to repay their debt of transportation into the American colony. Most indentured servants worked for a period of four to seven years before being set free. The indentured workers were paid no salary or wage and in most occasions, their masters treated them very brutally. Apart from the system of indentures whereby a worker was paying the debt of transportation, other people often subscribed to indentures with the hope of securing their own land and moving up the social ladder. Unlike officials, clergymen and other wealth people who could pay for their transportation and their upkeep once they arrived into the colonies, these indentured workers signed up the indentures essentially giving away their liberties for a contracted time. This was not only for passage into America, sometimes referenced to as the "New World" or "Newfoundland," but also for other benefits referred to as "freedom dues." These "freedom dues"

which the workers received after their indenture contract expired included clothes, right to claim of land, basic tools for survival, farming seeds amongst others. The lure of such items made thousands of young men and women sign indentures and make their way to America.

It is plausible to hold the opinion that the system of indentures would help to alleviate the problem of labor shortage in the colonies, but this was not the case. Despite the high number of immigrants who were making their way into America, after having signed the indentures, labor shortage in the colonies started getting worse. This was after disturbing reports began reaching Europe from the freemen and the still indentured servants who had made their way into America with the hope of acquiring riches. These were not sweet stories but were rather sad ones that started to make people think twice about signing indentures. The letters and reports from America outlined the mistreatment, and the poor conditions that the indentured workers lived through. Some begged their people back at home for money and goods and even pleaded for their owed indentures to be paid that they could go back home from the colonies where life was seemingly becoming unbearable. They spoke of the un-kept promises of their employers, dangerous sickness amongst other horrible happenings. The indentured workers were constantly terrorized by aghast sicknesses and since they did rank much in the society, no one cared about their medical conditions and many passed way. In addition, many indentured servants talked about the harsh climate of the “ New World” which many could not still adapt to. An example of a letter written by an indentured servant is that of Richard Frethorne, an indentured servant who lived and worked in Jamestown

Colony, Virginia. James letter is a sad narrative of the harsh conditions that indentured workers in colonial American lived through during the 17th Century. Frethorne writes of the diseases, homesickness isolation and discomfort that characterized his indentured period. He writes of the tension between the early colonialist and the native Indians and how conflict between the two led to overcrowding in some settlements as a result of colonialists trying to move away from the Indians as much as possible. Such factors led to increased incidences of disease and death that led to frequent labor shortage. Frethorne writes, " For we live in fear of the enemy every hour, yet we have had a combat with them and we took two alive and made slaves of them. However, it was by policy, for we are in great danger; for our plantation is very weak due to the death and sickness of our company. For we came but twenty for the merchants, and they are half dead just; and we look every hour when two more should go." He then goes ahead to talk about the sickness and death that accompanied the lives of indentured workers in the colony's plantations " And I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there is nothing to be gotten here, but sickness and death, except [in the event] that one had money to lay out in some things for profit. But I have nothing at all no, not a shirt to my back but two rags , nor clothes but one poor suit, nor but one pair of shoes, but one pair of stockings, but one cap, and but two bands collar". The shortage of labor meant that the available workers were often overworked. This is particularly exhibited in James Revel's " The Poor Unhappy Transported Felon's Sorrowful Account." The poem describes Revel's 14-year experience as an indentured worker in the colony of Virginia. Revel became an indentured servant after he was caught

stealing. He talks about the sufferings he endured as an indentured servant especially during a period characterized by shortage of labor, which consequently meant that the laborers available were continuously overworked. Revel became an indentured servant after he was caught stealing and his parents signed him for an indenture. Several phrases in his poem show the nature of suffering that the indentured workers often faced including overworking. For instance, he mentions that " No other time to us they will allow, But on a Sunday we the same must do, Six days we slave for our master's good, the seventh is to produce our food." He goes on to describe the sadness in his life by stating that " Helpless and sick, and left alone, and think upon my former wicked ways, that brought me to this wretched case." Such statements depict the consequences of the labor shortage that characterized the early colonial settlements in America. The indenture system had come into effect as the settlers tried to curb the problems of labor but as observed in the discussion above, the objective was not entirely met. This was because the indentured workers were often devastated by disease and death as well poor working conditions. The other system of labor that sought to alleviate the shortage being experienced was that of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship was a combination of education and labor. The apprentices were contracted to a certain master for given number of years. In exchange for work and obedience, they were provided with clothing, food, lodging, as well as training in the arts of a particular trade. This system of labor originated from England where it was intended as a method of supplying the society with sufficiently skilled labor as well as reducing the humongous burden of supporting poor and orphaned children.

However, just like the indentured servitude, apprenticeship did little to alleviate the labor shortage in the early colonial settlements, in America. Eventually, the institution of slavery slowly replaced the system of indentures. Slaves captured from far way lands like the West coast of Africa were forced to work in the settler's farms and households indefinitely and without pay. Slaves were shipped in large numbers and colonial planters slowly developed slave laws and practices. Slavery was a lucrative business for both slave traders as well as those who bought slaves. Having an adequate number of slaves meant that one could get work done in the farms and plantations with relatively little effort as slaves were taught to work without question, failure to which would result in both physical and emotional abuse. The seemingly natural immunity of the Africans towards some of the Old World diseases also made slavery even more desirable than the indentured servitude system. In addition, unlike the indentured servitude system that dictated the release of a worker after the expiry of the contracted period, slaves were owned indefinitely and there was no stipulation or provision for their release. Essentially, slaves worked until they died.

The shortage of labor in the colonial settlements without a doubt derailed the development process of the land and the society in general. The lack of enough and credible laborers as well as the unwillingness of the upper class settlers to “ stoop down to manual labor” brought the process of development to a halt. It also brought about an impossibility of farming land productivity. The colonialists and settlers had little hope of defending themselves against the hostile Indians as well as Spanish troops if they

deemed it fit to invade the land, which they occupied. The shortage of labor not only prevented the colonies from being sufficiently profitable but also took away the feeling of security that allowed colonialist to work freely in the colony's open fields. However, the most negative consequence for shortage of labor in the early colonial settlements was that it facilitated and indeed paved way for one of mankind's greatest tragedy; the institution of slavery.

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