

Indentured Servants

Cross-Curricular Focus: History/Social Sciences



In the 1600s large farms called plantations flourished in the southern colonies of America. The soil there was rich. The warm climate created excellent conditions for successfully growing crops for profit. Two favorite crops of the times were tobacco and rice. They were later joined by indigo, a plant used to make a deep blue dye for coloring ink and cloth.

Traditional family farms were relatively small. Families were large, depending on all members of the family to do the work on the farm. Often, the farm raised only enough to meet the family's needs. This included a small surplus to be used for the next year's seed. In particularly good times, an abundance of any crop would be canned and preserved for the winter. There was less fresh food available in the winter. Additional small amounts might be traded with other farmers for crops of another kind. This would increase the variety of food available. Rarely would any crops be sold for profit.

Running large plantation created a new problem. The members of a single family, or even several together, were not enough people to do all the necessary work on the plantation. Landowners brought workers over from England. Often, working class people who wanted a new start in the Americas would sign a contract and become an **indentured servant**. Their passage on a ship from England to America was paid by the landowner. The indentured servants were given food, clothing and shelter. They would work an agreed-upon number of years in the service of the landowner. At the end of their contracted time, they were free to leave the plantation and pursue their new lives in America.

Some indentured servants were treated quite fairly. Others were treated with the same disregard as slaves. For all intents and purposes, indentured servants could be considered slaves with the hope of freedom in the future. Their time of servitude would eventually end. For the increasing number of slaves who began arriving from African and the Caribbean, there was no such promise.

Name _____

Answer the following questions based on the reading passage. Don't forget to go back to the passage whenever necessary to find or confirm your answers.

1) What distinguished an indentured servant from a slave?

2) Why did plantations need so many workers?

3) What did indentured servants receive for their work?

4) What motivation might working class people in England have had to sign a contract to work as an indentured servant?

5) If you lived in the middle 17th century and wanted to come to America, would you want to be an indentured servant? Why or why not?
