

PROJECT TITLE: Should I Stay or Should I Go?	
AUTHOR: Rob Dent	SUBJECT & GRADE LEVEL: U.S. History I – 6 th grade

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. Primary Investigative Question(s)

Why did people become indentured servants during the colonial era? Were they more often motivated by “push” or “pull” factors?

2. Contextual Essay

From 1607 to the American Revolution, more Europeans entered Britain’s American colonies in bondage than as free men and women. We often gloss over this fact when we teach that colonists moved to America for religious freedom and economic opportunities—the two most oft-quoted motivations for migration to the New World. What motivated hundreds of thousands of British men and women to give up their social, political, and economic freedoms and become the property of another? Were they driven to migrate to the colonies as indentured servants more often by push or pull factors? Once they arrived, what were the experiences of indentured servants? Did they realize the opportunities for land ownership and civic participation that they had been promised? Were their lives better off than if they had stayed in Great Britain?

While individual men and women entered indentured servitude for a vast range of reasons, the current consensus is that the push factors of poverty and dwindling economic opportunities in Great Britain dominated their decision-making (Dunn, 162; Jordan and Walsh, 21-22; Horn). Upon arrival in America, servants’ fates differed drastically depending on their destination and the date of their arrival. Servants who immigrated to Barbados typically faced death, unimaginably miserable working conditions, and limited opportunity upon freedom. Death rates in the Chesapeake colonies, while very high early on, had lowered significantly by the 1660s. Furthermore, freed servants in the Chesapeake and other mainland American colonies had extensive economic and political opportunities through the 1660s, though these opportunities decreased significantly during the last four decades of the 17th century.

In the beginning of the 17th century, a confluence of circumstances led to the development of a system of indentured servitude in Britain’s American colonies. Living conditions for England’s poor had been declining since the early 16th century. Between 1520 and 1630, England’s population more than doubled, going from 2.3 million to 4.8 million (Horn). In addition, the institution of the Enclosure Acts shifted large amounts of land from publicly held commons to privately held pasture land, removing the source of livelihood for thousands of subsistence farmers (Jordan & Walsh, 22). These factors, along with a series of crop failures in central and southern England, led to a declining standard of living for the majority of England’s population and a drastic increase in poverty. In fact, by 1600, up to half of the population of many growing towns and cities lived in poverty (Horn). Facing these desperate conditions, thousands of free men and women willingly entered what Jordan and Walsh consider to be temporary

slavery (14-15), suggesting that, in the words of Richard Dunn, “seventeenth-century English servant laborers emigrated to America not because they wanted to but because they had to” (162). While individuals from a variety of social classes entered servitude in the colonies, the vast majority of those who became indentured servants came from the ranks of the poor.

At the same time that the number of England’s poor was growing, a new need for labor arose in the American colonies. The colonies of the Chesapeake and the Caribbean offered immense wealth in the form of cash crops—tobacco and sugar, respectively. However, intensive labor was required for each of these crops. This need for labor and opportunity for profit provided England’s elite with the incentive to pay for the expensive transportation of colonists from England to work on their plantations.

While indentured servitude existed within England itself in the 17th century, it was quite different from its colonial counterpart. In England, periods of indenture were typically one year, as opposed to four or more years in the colonies. Most importantly, in England the servant’s *labor* was given to the owner of the indenture, whereas in the colonies, the servant *himself* was considered property of the owner, to be bought, sold, beaten, and used as the owner pleased (Fogleman, 52-53; Jordan & Walsh, 14-15).

Though more English servants went to Barbados than to mainland North America (Horn), the conditions they faced in the West Indies were so bad that the early sugar islands were considered “white workers’ graves” (Richard Dunn, quoted in Beckles, 118). Hilary Beckles quotes British colonist Richard Ligon, who observed that the white population of Barbados had completely turned over during the two decades prior to 1647 (120). Yellow fever was so common in Barbados that the colonists called it “Barbados fever.” Ligon stated that during the yellow fever epidemic of 1647, “the living were barely able to bury the dead,” and so many corpses were thrown into a nearby swamp that the water supply was contaminated (Beckles, 119). While many in the wealthy planting class fell victim to yellow fever and other tropical diseases, servants died in far higher proportion from these diseases. The servants also died in large numbers from dysentery, nutritional deficiency, and horrendous working conditions. Facing this loss of labor, masters typically strove to get as much out of their servants before they died, sometimes literally working them to death. Even the minority of servants who completed their terms of indenture faced a grim future for themselves on the island. As the good land was claimed by relatively few planters early in the colony’s history, freed servants could not expect to own land as they did in mainland North America. Once freed, many freemen opted to reindenture themselves to avoid starvation (Beckles, 121).

Servants in Virginia and Maryland faced far better prospects than those who went to the Caribbean. While the mortality rate in the early years of Virginia was not much better than that of Barbados, life expectancy in the Chesapeake began to rise in the 1640s (Morgan, 180). Furthermore, the prospects for indentured servants who lived out their periods of indenture looked very bright for most of the 17th century. The “freedom dues” given by a master to his freed servant in North America included clothes, a small amount of money and capital (such as tools, seed corn, and food), and often the rights to 50 acres of land (Fogleman, 47; Menard, 49).

In his analysis of a cohort of servants who immigrated to Maryland before 1642, Russell Menard finds that while a considerable number of these men died before they realized freedom, the opportunities for land ownership and social status for the survivors were “abundant” (40). The majority of these men became small landowners, something they could never have done in England. A few even entered the ranks of the colony’s economic and social elite, amassing plantations of thousands of acres. While the servants in the Chesapeake colonies earned the rights to 50 acres of land upon freedom, they were rarely able to afford the surveyor’s and clerk’s fees, nor did they have the capacity to clear the land and provision themselves, until they had worked for a few years after servitude. The typical experience of a freed servant in the Chesapeake, therefore, was to work as a wage laborer until he had saved enough wealth to pay for the start-up costs mentioned above (Menard, 50).

In the latter part of the 17th century, opportunities for freed servants in the Chesapeake colonies declined. At the same time, fewer indentured servants were coming to the colonies each year, while the numbers of slaves imported annually increased rapidly from 1680 onward (Fogleman, 48). This shifting

immigration and labor pattern can be attributed to a number of factors. The increased life expectancy made the higher upfront cost of slaves more economically viable. Also, the decreased opportunities for indentured servants combined with improving living conditions in England itself made this key source of labor less readily available to colonial planters. After this decline in indentured servant immigration, the period from 1720 to the revolution would see another increase in indentured servants, though these came primarily from Germany and Ireland rather than Britain (Fogleman, 49).

The analysis of indentured servant immigration gives the student of American history a glimpse into the character and experience of a large proportion of America's first European residents. A look at the economic and social conditions in 17th century Britain helps to explain why so many thousands of individuals made the daring and often deadly venture to the New World. Finally, understanding how indentured servitude took shape in the British colonies helps one to see how the foundation was laid for the slave-labor economy that dominated the 18th and early 19th century American South.

3. Annotated Bibliography

Secondary Sources

Beckles, H. (1989). *White servitude and black slavery in Barbados, 1627-1715*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee.

Beckles examines West Indian indentured servitude in the 17th century, analyzing its role in the development of Barbados' sugar plantation economy and the socio-economic experience of the servants during their periods of indenture and afterward. Beckles' descriptions of the conditions indentured servants faced in the West Indies bring to light the contrasting experiences of indentured servants in Britain's Caribbean colonies and those on mainland North America.

Dunn, R. (1984). Servants and slaves: the recruitment and employment of labor. In J. Greene (Ed.), *Colonial British America: essays in the new history of the early modern era* (pp. 157-194). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

This is a survey of the major scholarship on colonial labor. Among other things, Dunn asks why so many thousands of Britons signed up to be indentured servants in North America and Barbados in the 17th century, when conditions appeared so disadvantageous to them. He concludes that the push factors of economic hardship and limited or nonexistent opportunities were stronger than the pull factors in most of the migrants' decisions to go.

Fogleman, A. (1998). From slaves, convicts, and servants to free passengers: the transformation of immigration in the era of the American Revolution. *The Journal of American History*, 85(1), 43-76. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>

Fogleman explains how the pool of immigrants to colonial America changed from 1607 to the Revolutionary War. He finds that the majority of the early European immigrants to the Chesapeake and the British West Indies were British men and women who had few opportunities at home and saw indentured servitude as an opportunity for a better life. As many historians have documented, there was a marked shift to the importation of slaves between 1680 and 1720, which coincided with a decrease in the number of indentured servants migrating to America. However, Fogleman points out that the indentured servant trade picked back up again between 1720 and 1776, but the migrants were different from the earlier wave of indentured servants. This second wave of indentured servant migration included more British convicts, Irish, and Germans, and fewer free Britons than the first wave. Finally, Fogleman shows

that after 1776, relatively few indentured servants immigrated into the U.S., slave immigration remained high, and immigration of free individuals drastically increased.

Horn, J. (1999). Leaving England: the social background of indentured servants in the seventeenth century. Retrieved from *Virtual Jamestown* website:
http://www.virtualjamestown.org/essays/horn_essay.html

This short essay provides a good overview of the socio-economic characteristics of British indentured servants in the 17th century. While the servants came from a broad background, from the poor to the lower middle class, the majority of them came because economic pressures in Britain were making life increasingly difficult for those on the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder. In addition, the number of people who resided on this rung was increasing rapidly from the 16th to the 17th century.

Jordan, D., & Walsh, M. (2008). *White cargo: the forgotten history of Britain's white slaves in America*. New York: NYU.

Jordan and Walsh explore the topic of colonial indentured servitude in depth, from the economic and political motivations of its early proponents to the experiences of the servants themselves. The authors describe the main groups who comprised the indentured servants who migrated to the British colonies: the urban poor, convicts, the Irish, and the “free-willers.” They also use many primary sources to describe the harsh conditions faced by indentured servants in the colonies, concluding that these servants were, like slaves, treated as property rather than employees.

Kelly, J. (2003). Becoming Virginians. *The story of Virginia: an American experience*. Retrieved April 22, 2010, from Virginia Historical Society website:
<http://www.vahistorical.org/sva2003/virginians.htm>

This is an excellent introductory essay which compares many different groups of migrants to colonial Virginia: the earliest British settlers, wealthy planters, indentured servants, slaves, Germans, and Scotch-Irish. Kelly also describes the development of Virginia's socio-economic structure from 1607 to the late 18th century and the pattern of settlement from the great rivers to the western frontier.

Morgan, E. (1975). *American slavery, American freedom: the ordeal of colonial Virginia*. New York: Norton.

Morgan's book traces the development of colonial Virginia's society and economy in order to examine the relationship between the institution of slavery and the rhetoric of freedom prevalent in Revolutionary Virginia. Chapter eleven, “The Losers,” is helpful for this lesson, as it outlines the place of the indentured servant in colonial Virginia and the diminishing opportunities available to freed servants in the second half of the 17th century.

Smith, A.E. (1947). *Colonists in bondage: white servitude and convict labor in colonial America, 1607-1776*. New York: Norton.

This was the first major work to survey colonial labor recruitment, and many subsequent works use it as a point of comparison for their analyses. Part three, “The Servant in the Plantations” is particularly informative for this lesson, as it gives good descriptions of the trans-Atlantic voyage, arrival in the colonies, the life of servants on plantations, and the prospects faced by freed servants.

Smith, A. E. (1942). Indentured servants: new light on some of America's 'first families.' *The Journal of Economic History*, 2(1), 40-53. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>

Smith makes two main arguments about the very active indentured servant trade between Britain and her colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Firstly, he describes the active and important role played by recruiting agents in obtaining indentured servants from Britain and Ireland. Secondly, he explains that the existence of widespread kidnapping of indentured servants is a myth that was actively propagated by British anti-emigrant activists in the 17th century. The article compares the actions of two specific recruiting agents in 1636 and 1743 and demonstrates some similarities in the trade in both centuries.