

## INDENTURED SERVITUDE

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From Immigrants to America 1718-1759. Introduction -

“A Note on the history of Indentured Servitude – Soon after the settling of Jamestown, there was a tremendous demand for labour, skilled and unskilled, in the American colonies. Many ordinary individuals, who for numerous varying reasons wished to emigrate to the colonies, were quite unable to pay for their passage, and so a scheme gradually evolved whereby the emigrant could receive a free passage to the colonies provided that he were willing to be sold into bondage for a few years upon arrival. The agent received an acreage of land for each servant he brought into the colony and the servant, at the end of his time, received a reward in the shape of land, tools, etc.

Like all schemes dealing with humanity, this one suffered many abuses, and many of the indentured servants, as they were called, suffered from great hardships. Unscrupulous dealers occasionally kidnapped persons and sold them abroad, while conditions of servitude in the colonies often left much to be desired. It is the opinion of various scholars, however, that without such scheme, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century settlement of the American colonies could not have taken place. It has been estimated that one half to two thirds of all white immigrants were indentured servants, redemptioners (a similar scheme) or convicts.

When the prospective servant offered his services, he was issued an indenture, which he carried away with him as proof of his terms, and was supposed to register himself as soon as he arrived in the colony. A copy of the indenture was supposed to be kept in the office where he registered in England but it seems that in the majority of cases, this was not done. Very few copies of the hundreds of thousands of indentures issued were kept, and those which are extant are in several different forms. In Bristol, an entry book was used. Middlesex kept an actual copy of the agreement. London used a special printed form whereon the details of the indenture were copied. Certain details were copied into a register book also.

### GENERAL NOTES ON THE RECORDS

The details transcribed in this volume are taken from the records in the Guildhall in London labeled Agreements To Serve in America. They have been arranged in chronological order by the archivists and carefully numbered. From their location in Guildhall and the fact that most of them were witnessed by the mayor of London or an Alderman of the City, it is presumed that they were issued at the Guildhall, possibly under a special arrangement of the City of London, for they

are mostly copied by the same hand and in the same style and signed by successive mayors, while all the participants are young and unmarried. Why they exist for this period only is not known; perhaps they were kept only during the lifetime of a certain official. From a study of other records at the Guildhall, it is clear that the present series are survivals and certainly do not represent the origin of the system.

The printed forms are of two kinds, one intended for person over 21 and the other intended for persons under 21. In the spaces were written in by hand the date of issue, name of servant, parish and county of origin, agent, destination, but not the name of the ship on which the servant was to sail. The forms were signed or marked by the servant and also by the mayor or alderman, usually on the same date on which the indenture was issued but occasionally several days later.

In 1733 Latin was suddenly discarded. "Memorandum" and "Jurat coram me" were crossed out and "be it remembered" and "sworn before me" written in by hand. Later the forms were printed that way.

Occasionally an indenture was copied twice, probably through an error, but on several occasions the same person crops up again, days, months or even years later. One can only conjecture the circumstances which delayed his departure the first time.

The old-fashioned handwriting is often difficult to read. The spelling of personal names varies considerably even on the same form, and towns are frequently spelled phonetically. Occasionally there are outright lapses of memory on the part of the scribe, when he has written such things as "vinter" for destination, when he presumably meant Virginia. One wonders how many undetectable lapses occurred and whether these lapses are also responsible for some of the untraceable places which the servants are said to have come from.

The register book which accompanies the Agreements to Serve does not tally completely with the separate forms. Many of the forms were not entered in the register and there are a number of entries for which there is no form.

*\*Was told that my ancestor – John Denny (Denney)- (no.1) "original" came to America as an indentured servant to the Virginia colony around 1667. It is believed he came from England and not Ireland. The lineage appears to be as follows: John (no.2) b. ca. 1690; Zachariah (no.1) b. ca. 1727; Benjamin (no.1) b. ca. 1755; John (no.3) b. ca. 1772; and then Zachariah (no.2) –told to Audrey J. (Denny) Lambert by Hugh Wayne Denny*