Indentured Servants

Richard Mynatt, Jr. was born 1728 in London, England and died 1824 in Grainger County, TN. He was my 7th great grandfather. He came to America as an indentured servant for Thomas Lee, esquire of Virginia. He had been an indentured servant at the age of twenty for four years as a cook. He earned 8 pounds sterling per year cooking in Thomas Lee's kitchen; this was considered a good wage for a cook. Richard was such a great cook, that when his time was up and he was to be freed from his cooking obligation, the Lee family refused. Richard Mynatt's place in history is secured by being the first indentured servant to sue successfully for release from his master, Philip Ludwell Lee, heir of Thomas Lee, on July 31, 1754. Richard later would serve our country as an Express Rider in the American Revolution for the state of Virginia.

Reading that my ancestor was an indentured servant made me curious as to what that actually was all about. In my research it defined indentured servant as a laborer under contract to work (for a specified amount of time) for another person or a company. Sometimes, this was for no money, but for exchange for accommodations, food, training, or passage to a new country. When the servant's time was up, traditionally seven years, they were freed to farm or start their own business.

Many of these indentured servants became good citizens upon freedom. They worked hard and some served in the wars, such as the American Revolution. Unfortunately, some of these men were poor, maybe escaped, and roamed the frontier, many causing unrest where they went.

Convicts were often sent overseas as indentured servants. These were usually men who were not violent, but wanted for larceny. They were young, unskilled and poor. Some of these men's crime was for religious or political beliefs. These servants were often not trusted and treated poorly.

One half to two-thirds of all immigrants to Colonial America arrived as indentured servants. At times, as many as 75% of the population of some colonies were under the terms of indenture! Children were also indentured servants from the family they traveled with. The conditions of these indentured families were very harsh. The voyage overseas to this new land was filled with misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomit and stomach problems, sea sickness, fever, dysentery, heat and mouth-rot. Most problems arose from the old and sharply salted meat they were given to eat along with the foul drinking water. Most died before even seeing their new country.

Once they reached this new land, conditions were not that much better. Winters were harsh and summers were extremely hot. Instead of working in their accustomed trade, most were forced to work the field under horrible conditions. Their living quarters were small with only the essentials to live on. Food was always scarce. Many of the men were abused and taken advantage of. If they did not perform their duties to their master's wish, their contract time/fee was extended to longer times/fines. Many men would escape for their freedom.

The Virginia Colony courts realize their servants were escaping. They came up with a system using Identification Cards for documenting these servants

and required these ID cards for travel. This made it more difficult for escape as his master would keep his ID card. It also made the indentured servant more like property, so they were traded or sold using this card system.

Gradually, as time went by, the typical indentured servant became scarce. They served their term, bought their freedom or escaped. The farmers had to find a way to ease their labor shortage. Eventually, the final attempt to ease labor shortages was enslavement of Africans. Wherever you find slavery, you first find indentured servants.

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