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LESSON 5

INDENTURED SERVITUDE: WHY SELL YOURSELF INTO BONDAGE?

LESSON DESCRIPTION

Many workers in colonial North America were indentured servants — people who signed contracts stating they would work for up to seven years in exchange for passage to North America, plus room and board in their new workplaces. In this lesson the students analyze case studies of indentured servitude and identify its costs and benefits for people of limited means.

MYSTERY

Indentured servants often worked hard. They cut trees, moved boulders, built barns, plowed fields, planted tobacco, baled hay, milked cows, sheared sheep, cooked, cleaned, did laundry and cared for children. Their indentures — labor contracts specifying terms of service — had the force of law. Terms of service could be increased, for example, if a worker violated the indenture by trying to run away. Indentured servants could even be sold to other owners. Thus some historians have likened indentured servitude to slavery. But for a period of time from about 1650 to 1780, many young men and women from England eagerly committed themselves to terms of indentured servitude for work to be performed in the North American colonies. Why would people accept difficult jobs that they could not quit at times of their own choosing? Why would they sell themselves into bondage?

ECONOMIC HISTORY

While some historians have likened indentured servitude to slavery, economic historians view it as a market response that enabled poor and unemployed people to exchange their labor for new opportunities that they could not otherwise have grasped.

In England, many people late in the seventeenth century and later faced hard choices. Some decided that the opportunity offered by indentured service was the best choice among the alternatives available to them, even though

these alternatives seem, by today's standards, to be very undesirable. But contracts for indentured servants provided opportunities for voluntary exchange as a result of which both sides hoped to be better off. Employers wanted a source of labor — a relatively scarce resource in North America. People in England without financial means wanted a way to pay for passage to North America, where they believed they could find better opportunities for land and wages than those available in England or Europe. This system of reciprocal interests created a market that attracted a large number of English settlers — mostly young men — as indentured servants.

CONCEPTS

- Benefits
- Choice
- Costs
- Incentives

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Explain how the market for indentured servants functioned.
2. Analyze the costs and benefits to individuals who were considering signing contracts to become indentured servants.

CONTENT STANDARDS

Economics

- Effective decision making requires comparing the additional costs of alternatives with the additional benefits. Most choices involve doing a little more or a little less of something; few choices are all-or-nothing decisions. (NCEE Content Standard 2)
- People respond predictably to positive and negative incentives. (NCEE Content Standard 4)

- Voluntary exchange occurs only when all participating parties expect to gain. This is true for trade among individuals or organizations within a nation, and among individuals or organizations in different nations. (NCEE Content Standard 5)

History

- Why the Americas attracted Europeans, why they brought enslaved African Americans to their colonies, and how Europeans struggled for control of North America and the Caribbean. (Era 2, Standard 1, National Standards for History)
- How political, religious and social institutions emerged in the English colonies. (Era 2, Standard 2, National Standards for History)
- How the values and institutions of European economic life took root in the colonies, and how slavery reshaped European and African life in the Americas. (Era 2, Standard 3, National Standards for History)

TIME REQUIRED

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- A transparency of Visuals 5.1 and 5.2
- A copy for each student of Activity 5.1 and 5.2

PROCEDURE

1. Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to examine indentured servitude, an important source of labor for the British colonies of North America. The examination will focus on a mystery: Why would people sell themselves into indentured servitude?
2. Display Visual 5.1. Explain how the contract system for indentured servants worked.
3. Distribute Activity 5.1. Ask the students to analyze the contract for an indentured servant and discuss the questions it raises:

- A. What was the benefit to the servant who signed the contract? (*Passage to America, plus food and lodging.*)
- B. What was the benefit to the master who signed the contract? (*A promise of work to be performed by the indentured servant.*)

4. Display Visual 5.2. Invite the students to speculate on reasons why people would be willing to accept a job that might be very difficult — and one that they could not quit on their own terms.
5. Explain that the relative scarcity of workers in North America encouraged development of this market for indentured servants. Then examine more closely why the servants came. Divide the class into groups and distribute Activity 5.2. Assign one case to each group. After the groups have identified the costs and benefits as indicated in Activity 5.2, ask a recorder from each group to provide a brief sketch of their indentured servant and describe the costs and the benefits involved in his or her decision.

Patrick McHugh

- Costs:* Income lost from temporary farm work.
- Benefits:* Opportunity for improved income in North America. Opportunity to own land.

William Heaton

- Costs:* Income from whatever work he could have found in London.
- Benefits:* Opportunity for improved income in Philadelphia.

Mary Morgan

- Costs:* Income from whatever work she could have found in Norwich.
- Benefits:* A chance to learn domestic skills in America.

Tom Holyfield

Costs: The opportunity to participate in his own hanging ceremony.

Benefits: A chance to save himself from being hanged.

Christian Mueller

Costs: Income from his work as a teacher and organist.

Benefits: A chance to improve his income in America.

- Taking account of the costs and benefits, what choice would you make in this case? Why? *(Accept a variety of responses, but encourage students to recognize the trade-offs involved in every decision.)*

CLOSURE

Review the key points of the lesson. Ask:

- Who were the indentured servants? *(People who chose to sign contracts that bound them to perform work for an employer in North America.)*
- What were some of the benefits of signing such contracts? *(Most people who signed them hoped to gain financial opportunities in North America; some hoped to save their lives.)*
- What were the costs? *(People sacrificed opportunities they might otherwise have had in England or Europe. Moreover, they were taking risks that things might not turn out as they hoped.)*

ASSESSMENT

Multiple-Choice Questions

1. Becoming an indentured servant meant
 - A. being treated like a slave.
 - B. signing a legally binding contract.**
 - C. agreeing to do work without compensation.
 - D. serving a master for an indefinite period of time.
2. Why did many English citizens agree to be indentured servants?
 - A. Many hoped to gain financial rewards.**
 - B. Most did not understand English.
 - C. Many did not understand the terms of the contract.
 - D. Most were criminals with not much choice.

6. Explain that the practice of indentured servitude gradually ended. By the early nineteenth century, the market for indentured servants had ended. In their *History of the American Economy*, Gary Walton and Hugh Rockhoff point out that the market for indentures disappeared as the incentive structure changed. “It did so by economic forces rather than legislation. The costs of passage slowly fell over time, and the earnings of workers in Europe rose. In addition, slavery was a viable cost-cutting labor source compared to indentures” (p. 30). Before it ended, however, indentured servitude contributed to the rapid population growth of North America; it also contributed to an English heritage of law, language and custom.
7. Ask: Are there situations today in which you might consider signing a contract for your labor in exchange for some future benefit?
 - For example, would you agree to perform two years of community-service volunteer work in inner-city schools in return for a significant reduction in the price you would pay for four years of college tuition?
 - What costs might go along with that choice? *(Income from the job you would otherwise have taken following graduation.)*
 - What benefits might go along with that choice? *(Reduced college tuition and satisfaction gained from community service.)*

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Many history books imply that indentured servitude differed little from slavery. Explain how the two systems were different.

(Possible answer: Slavery was not a market system. Choices were not freely made by the people who were enslaved. Slavery depended on labor theft. The system of indentured servitude was created by market forces. Contracts for indentured servants provided opportunities for voluntary exchange in which both sides hoped to be better off. Employers wanted a source of labor. People without financial means wanted a way to pay for their passage to North America, where they could find economic opportunities better than those available in England or Europe.)

2. The French, Spanish, and Portuguese all preceded the English as important colonial powers in the Americas. But the United States was much more influenced by England than by the other European powers. Its primary language, laws and system of governance were all shaped by England. How might indentured servitude have played a role in this outcome?

(Possible answer: France, Spain and Portugal never developed effective means to encourage widespread settlement of their people. The English allowed the system of indentured servitude to develop in response to market forces. This system of reciprocal interests created a market that attracted a large number of English settlers. Of the approximately 500,000 English settlers in the colonies, about 350,000 came as indentured servants. Other European nations could not match this level of settlement on the part of people who actually wanted to come to earn a better living.)

VISUAL 5.1

BACKGROUND ON INDENTURED SERVANTS

CONTRACTS

- Indentured servants' contracts bound them to perform work for an employer in North America.
- These contracts had the force of law, and they were enforced.
- Contracts typically called for three-to-seven years of service. The average period of service was four years.
- Early in the colonial period, women were offered somewhat shorter contracts than men.
- Contracts for harder work, such as growing tobacco, were often for shorter terms than contracts for easier work, such as performing household duties.

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKED

- Ordinarily a person would sign with a shipowner or a recruiting agent in England.
- As soon as the servant was delivered alive to an American port, the contract would be sold to a planter or merchant.

VISUAL 5.2

WHY WOULD FREE PEOPLE SELL THEMSELVES INTO BONDAGE?

Many workers in colonial North America were indentured servants — people who signed contracts stating they would work for an agreed number of years in exchange for passage to North America. The work they performed was often difficult — clearing land, planting tobacco, performing household services. The contracts signed by indentured servants had the force of law. Terms of service could be increased, for example, if a worker violated the indenture by trying to run away. Servants could even be sold to other owners.

Why would people accept difficult jobs that they could not quit on their own terms? Why would they sell themselves into bondage?

ACTIVITY 5.1

A CONTRACT FOR AN INDENTURED SERVANT

Here is a copy of an indentured servant contract used in 1684. In copying the contract, we have retained most of the original orthography — spelling, punctuation and other details of form. Some of these details may surprise you. In deciding whether to use upper- or lower-case letters, for example, the typesetters here seem to have followed no rules at all. Seventeenth-century readers would not have been surprised, however. Orthography at this time was not standardized by dictionaries, grammars or any widespread system of formal schooling. Literate people, therefore, had considerable leeway to follow their own rules of practice.

The indenture: According to the method made and provided; And by the Order and Directions of His Sacred Majestic King CHARLES the Second of England. And his most Honourable Privy council, the Thirteenth day of December Anno 1682. In the Thirty Fourth year of his said Majesties Reign (then Printed and Published), declaring, That what Persons at anytime, as are Voluntary, free and willing at their own Liberties, to be retained to serve in any of His Majesties Foreign Plantations in AMERICA, are to be duely Examined and bound only before any of his Majesties Justices of the Peace, and the same to bear Record in the Court of Sessions, in that county or City where such Servants shall be so bound.

Now Witnesseth that (name) doth freely without delution, persuasion, or any other sinistry means, Covenant, promise, consent, grant and agree, To and with (name), from the day of the date hereof, until his first arrival in his Majesties Plantation of (name of place in America) and after, for and During the term of (number) years, therein shall and will as a faithful covenant-Servant serve in such Employment of A as he the said (name), his Executors or Assigns shall therein Employ him accordingly. In Confideration whereto of the said (name) for himself, his Executors and Assigns, doth Covenant, promise, grant and agree to and with the said (name) to pay for his passage in the good Ship the (name of the ship) Captain (name) Commander, or in any other Ship thither directly bound by the Order and directions of the said (name) his Executors of Assigns; And to find and allow him sussient meat, Drink, Apparel, Lodging, Washing and other necessaries during the said term. And in the end thereof such other Allowances, as to others are given and granted in like kind. In witness whereof the said Parties to these present indentures have interchangeably set their Hands and Seals the (number) day of (number) In the (number) year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord the King, that now is, of England, Anno Domini 1684

(signature)

Signed, Sealed, and Delivered in the Presence of

(signature)

(signature)

(Name)

Examined and bound before (name) of his Majesties Justices for the (date) the day and year afore

written (signature)

ACTIVITY 5.1, CONTINUED
A CONTRACT FOR AN INDENTURED SERVANT

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

A. What was gained by the servant who signed this contract?

B. What was gained by the master who signed this contract?

ACTIVITY 5.2

INDENTURED SERVITUDE IN NORTH AMERICA

Directions: Read **Why Did They Come?** and the case studies. After reading the case studies, identify some potential costs and benefits associated with the decision to become an indentured servant.

Why Did They Come?

Workers were scarce in both England and North America. Workers were more scarce in the colonies, however. How could people sell their labor where it would have the greatest value? The indentured servant market arose to solve this problem.

Immigrants to the North American colonies were often people who could not afford passage. Many came as indentured servants. They signed contracts that provided them passage in exchange for their promise to work for an employer in North America.

The risks were great. Conditions on the voyage were often difficult. Sickness and death were common. Sometimes, people lacked complete information about what life was really like in North America. Yet many people chose to go. Why?

In order to discover why people chose to become indentured servants, you will examine some information about the people themselves.

Case Studies

- Patrick McHugh believed there was little for him to do in Ormskirk, England. He had lost his farm. His only work was intermittent farm work lasting a few weeks at one time. He had no money. His parents were aged and poor. One market day in the village, he heard men talking about opportunities to work in a tobacco-growing colony. The work was difficult — clearing land. The indenture would last for four years.

What were the costs?

What were the benefits?

- William Heaton felt he had been cheated out of his share of the family estate. His father had been a merchant of moderate means living in Southport, England. William's father had died. His mother, who remarried a man of less wealth, moved to Liverpool. Having little money left, William's mother gave him 12 shillings and told him that was all she could do for him. He set out for London and soon spent nearly all his money. In the spring of 1725, he stood outside the Royal Exchange and read the notices about opportunities in America. In a few minutes he was approached by a man who offered to buy him a mug of beer while they discussed signing a contract to go to work in Philadelphia. The agent thought that a man of William's background should be able to sign on with an artisan — perhaps a watchmaker.

What were the costs?

What were the benefits?

ACTIVITY 5.2, CONTINUED

INDENTURED SERVITUDE IN NORTH AMERICA

- Mary Morgan lived in a small village outside of Norwich, a town east of London. Not much is known about her. She was an orphan. Her uncle, a farmer, took care of her until she reached age 14. She knew she had always been a burden for the family of eight children. There were few young men in the village, and she had no prospects for marriage. One day, while walking in Norwich's town center, she was told by an agent of a shipowner about a Puritan family in Massachusetts that wanted an indentured servant to sew, spin, knit and do other household chores. Room and board were to be provided for five years, at which point she would be released from the contract.

What were the costs?

What were the benefits?

- Tom Holyfield was a thief. His life began well enough. He grew up on a farm outside Blackpool, England. As the youngest male in the family, Tom stood no chance to inherit the farm. He was apprenticed at age 13 to a cooper — a maker of barrels. He worked for room and board on the promise that he would be trained as a cooper. But Tom grew impatient and fell in with a gang of thieves. It wasn't long before he and his friends were caught. Found guilty of a felony, Tom could be hanged — or he could accept a contract to work in the tobacco-growing colonies.

What were the costs?

What were the benefits?

- In 1750, Christian Mueller was a teacher and an organist by trade. He had read pamphlets about America. Pennsylvania was described as a land of opportunity: "He who goes there as a servant, becomes a lord; as a maid becomes a gracious lady; as a peasant, a nobleman; as a commoner, as a craftsman, a baron." Christian left his wife and child, traveled down the Rhine River, and signed on board a ship headed for America. The agent agreed to pay for his passage and promised that his skills would be welcomed in North America. Christian planned to send for his family after his four-year indenture.

What were the costs?

What were the benefits?



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