

Name _____ Date _____
I&S 8, Slavery

“Work and labor in this new and wild land are very hard”: A German Migrant in Philadelphia, 1750

Source: Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750*, trans. Carl Theo Eben (Philadelphia, John Jos McVey, 1898), 25–31. *History Matters*. accessed 17 July 2006. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5712>

A German organist and schoolmaster, Gottlieb Mittelberger, observed poor German emigrants to Philadelphia in 1750. These people could only finance their journey by indenturing their work for a specified number of years. But unlike earlier arrivals, who had signed contracts, these workers were auctioned off to the highest bidder upon arrival.

“When the ships have landed at Philadelphia after their long voyage, no one is permitted to leave them except those who pay for their passage or can give good security; the others, who cannot pay, must remain on board the ships till they are purchased, and are released from the ships ... The sick always fare the worst, for the healthy are naturally preferred and purchased first; and so the sick and wretched must often remain on board in front of the city for 2 or 3 weeks, and frequently die, whereas many a one, if he could pay his debt and were permitted to leave the ship immediately, might recover and remain alive. ...

“The sale of human beings in the market on board the ship is carried on thus: Every day Englishmen, Dutchmen and High-German people come from the city of Philadelphia and other places... and go on board the newly arrived ship that has brought and offers for sale passengers from Europe, and select among the healthy persons such as they deem suitable for their business, and bargain with them how long they will serve for their passage-money, which most of them are still in debt for. When they have come to an agreement, it happens that adult persons bind themselves in writing to serve 3, 4, 5 or 6 years for the amount due by them, according to their age and strength. But very young people, from 10 to 15 years, must serve till they are 21 years old.

“Many parents must sell and trade away their children like so many head of cattle; for if their children take the debt upon themselves, the parents can leave the ship free and unrestrained; but as the parents often do not know where and to what people their children are going, it often happens that such parents and children, after leaving the ship, do not see each other again for many years, perhaps no more in all their lives.

“When people arrive who cannot make themselves free, but have children under 5 years... such children must be given to somebody without compensation to be brought up, and they must serve for their bringing up till they are 21 years old... A woman must stand for her husband if he arrives sick, and in like manner a man for his sick wife, and take the debt upon herself or himself, and thus serve 5 to 6 years not alone for his or her

own debt, but also for that of the sick husband or wife. But if both are sick, such persons are sent from the ship to the sick-house [hospital], but not until it appears probable that they will find no purchasers. As soon as they are well again they must serve for their passage, or pay if they have means.

“It often happens that whole families, husband, wife, and children, are separated by being sold to different purchasers, especially when they have not paid any part of their passage money.

“When a husband or wife has died at sea, when the ship has made more than half of her trip, the survivor must pay or serve not only for himself or herself, but also for the deceased.

“When both parents have died over half-way at sea, their children, especially when they are young and have nothing to pawn or to pay, must stand for their own and their parents' passage, and serve till they are 21 years old. When one has served his or her term, he or she is entitled to a new suit of clothes at parting; and if it has been so stipulated, a man gets in addition a horse, a woman, a cow.

“...If some one in this country runs away from his master, who has treated him harshly, he cannot get far. Good provision has been made for such cases, so that a runaway is soon recovered. He who detains or returns a deserter receives a good reward.

“If such a runaway has been away from his master one day, he must serve for it as a punishment a week, for a week a month, and for a month half a year. But if the master will not keep the runaway after he has got him back, he may sell him for so many years as he would have to serve him yet.

“Work and labor in this new and wild land are very hard and manifold, and many a one who came there in his old age must work very hard to his end for his bread... Work mostly consists in cutting wood, felling oak-trees, rooting out, or as they say there, clearing large tracts of forest... Our Europeans, who are purchased, must always work hard, for new fields are constantly laid out; and so they learn that stumps of oak-trees are in America certainly as hard as in Germany. ...”

Questions

1. Mittelberger offers many risks in this indenture system. Highlight them.
2. Rank the items highlighted, with 1 being the worst. (Write them in the margins)
3. Mittelberger warned that the emigrant without money “must work his debt off as a slave.” Using a Venn diagram, compare the experiences of slaves and these German workers. Do you agree with Mittelberger’s assessment?
4. Why might these emigrants have chosen to come to Pennsylvania even if they knew the risks? Consider push and pull factors.

“They That Are Born There Talk Good English”: Hugh Jones Describes Virginia’s Slave Society, 1724

Source: Hugh Jones. *The Present State of Virginia* (London, 1724), 75–6, 130. *History Matters*. accessed 17 July 2006. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6521>

Hugh Jones came from England to Jamestown, Virginia, where he served as a minister and a professor of mathematics at the College of William and Mary. By 1727, when Jones wrote this text a century after the first slaves were brought to Jamestown, 27,000 slaves were living in the colony.

“The Negroes live in small cottages called quarters, in about six in a gang, under the direction of an overseer or bailiff; who takes care that they tend such land as the owner allots and orders, upon which they raise hogs and cattle, and plant Indian corn (or maize) and tobacco for the use of their master; out of which the overseer has a dividend (or share) in proportion to the number of hands including himself; this with several privileges is his salary, and is an ample recompence for his pains, and encouragement of his industrious care, as to the labour, health, and provision of the Negroes.

“The Negroes are very numerous, some gentlemen having hundreds of them of all sorts, to whom they bring great profit; for the sake of which they are obliged to keep them well, and not overwork, starve, or famish them, besides other inducements to favour them; which is done in a great degree, to such especially that are laborious, careful, and honest; though indeed some masters, careless of their own interest or reputation, are too cruel and negligent.

“The Negroes are not only encreased by fresh supplies from Africa and the West India Islands, but also are very prolific among themselves; and they that are born there talk good English, and affect our language, habits, and customs; and though they be naturally of a barbarous and cruel temper, yet are they kept under by severe discipline upon occasion, and by good laws are prevented from running away, injuring the English, or neglecting their business.

“Their work (or chimerical hard slavery) is not very laborious; their greatest hardship consisting in that they and their posterity are not at their own liberty or disposal, but are the property of their owners; and when they are free, they know not how to provide so well for themselves generally; neither did they live so plentifully nor (many of them) so easily in their own country, where they are made slaves to one another, or taken captive by their enemies.

“The children belong to the master of the woman that bears them; and such as are born of a Negroe and an European are called Molattoes; but such as are born of an Indian and Negroe are called Mustees.

“Their work is to take care of the stock, and plant corn, tobacco, fruits, etc. which is not harder than thrashing, hedging, or ditching; besides, though they are out in the violent heat, wherein they delight, yet in wet or cold weather there is little occasion for their working in the fields, in which few will let them be abroad, lest by this means they might get sick or die, which would prove a great loss to their owners, a good Negroe being sometimes worth three (nay four) score pounds sterling, if he be a tradesman; so that upon this (if upon no other account) they are obliged not to overwork them, but to cloath and feed them sufficiently, and take care of their health.

“Several of them are taught to be sawyers, carpenters, smiths, coopers, etc. and though for the most part they be none of the aptest or nicest; yet they are by nature cut out for hard labour and fatigue, and will perform tolerably well; though they fall much short of an Indian, that has learned and seen the same things; and those Negroes make the best servants, that have been slaves in their own country; for they that have been kings and great men there are generally lazy, haughty, and obstinate; whereas the others are sharper, better humoured, and more laborious....”

Questions

- 1. Overall, what sort of picture did Jones paint of slave life in Virginia in 1724?**
- 2. Make two lists—one of the positive features and one of the negative features Jones noted.**
- 3. How reliable a witness do you find Jones to be? Explain your reasoning.**
- 4. How might an enslaved person have responded to Jones’ characterization of slavery in Virginia?**