

# Indentured Servants

**Cross-Curricular Focus: History/Social Sciences**



In the 1600's, large farms called plantations flourished in the Southern Colonies. The soil there was rich, and the warm climate created excellent conditions for successfully growing crops for profit. Two of the favorite crops of the times were tobacco and rice, which were joined by indigo, a plant used to make a deep blue dye for coloring ink and cloth, in the late 1700's.

Traditional family farms were relatively small. Families were large, depending on all members of the family to do the work on the farm. Often, the farm raised only enough to meet the family's needs, including a small surplus to be used for the next year's seed. In particularly good times, an abundance of any crop would be canned and preserved for the winter, when less fresh food was available. Small amounts might be traded with other farmers for crops of another kind to increase the variety of food available. Rarely would any crops be sold for profit.

Running large plantation farms created a new problem. The members of a single family, or even several together were insufficient to do all the necessary work on the plantation. Owners brought workers over from England. Often, working class people who wanted a new start in the Americas would sign a contract and become an **indentured servant**. In exchange for the price of their passage on a ship from England to America, and food, clothing, and shelter on the plantation, indentured servants would work an agreed-upon number of years in the service of the plantation owner. At the end of their contracted time, they were free to leave the plantation and pursue their new lives in America.

Some indentured servants were treated quite fairly. Some were employed in service as house maids or ladies in waiting. Others were treated with the same disregard as slaves. For all intents and purposes, indentured servants were slaves with the hope of freedom ever before them. Their time of servitude would eventually end. For the increasing number of slaves who began arriving from African and the Caribbean, there was no such promise.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions based on the reading passage. Don't forget to go back to the passage whenever necessary to find or confirm your answers.

1) What distinguished an indentured servant from a slave?

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2) Why were indentured servants and slaves more likely to be found in the Southern Colonies?

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3) What impact do you think the introduction of slaves to plantations had on indentured servants already working there?

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4) What motivation might working class people in England have had to sign a contract to work as an indentured servant?

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5) Evaluate the use of indentured servants. Was it moral? Why, or why not?

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