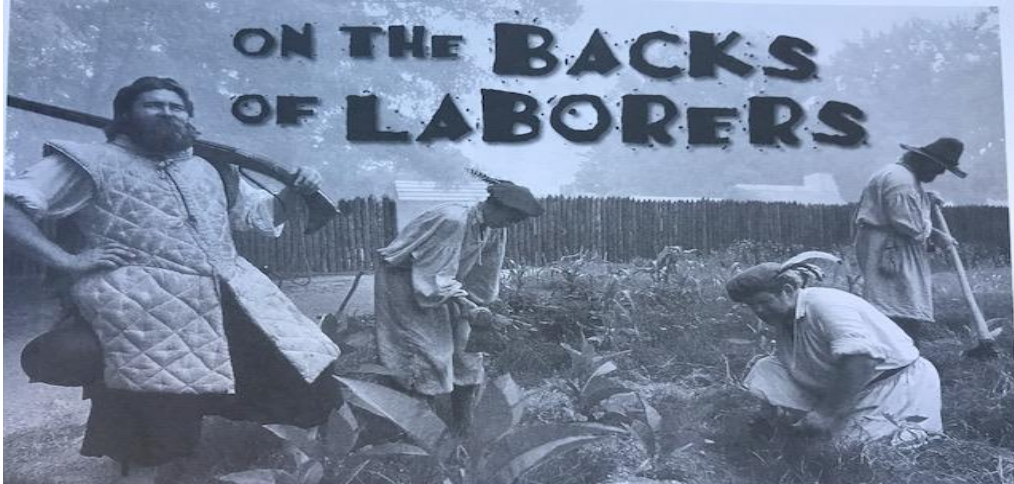


On the Backs of Laborers

Adapted from Catherine Carmody, *Cobblestone*



The success of the new colony at **Jamestown** hinged on many factors, none more important than the need for a large labor force. Adventure and the prospect of opportunity were what originally attracted English men and women to leave home and cross the ocean to Virginia. Later, especially after tobacco took off, a number of young people agreed to work as indentured servants for a specific amount of time in exchange for passage to the New World, food, and clothing.

An indenture was a written contract between a servant and a master. By 1618, servants in Virginia were promising to work for a master for a period of four to seven years, after which they would be free. At the end of the predetermined time, servants were given three barrels of corn and a new suit of clothes. Sometimes they also received land, livestock, tools, and money, depending on how their indenture had been negotiated.

The first servants were employed to clear land, build structures, grow crops, and hunt for food. Servants, like all settlers, lived under strict laws. They could not plant their own crops or return to their homeland. Those who disobeyed could be whipped.



Some servants arrived in the New World already planning not to fulfill their contracts and so immediately ran away from their masters. Others became disenchanted with the hard life and fell into drunkenness, destroyed tools and stores, or threatened their masters. And the truth is that many masters were not easy to work for, nor were they all fair. They abused their servants and made them live under harsh conditions.

In time, land began to be allotted to settlers according to the number of people they brought to Virginia. This system, called headright, encouraged the use of servants, which, in turn, created a whole new industry in England: Merchants and ships' captains were hired to recruit people for service in the colony.

Many young men and women, naive to the harsh life in the New World, chose to become indentured servants. Others were forced into servitude: English officials sometimes sentenced debtors, political prisoners, and criminals to terms as laborers in Virginia.



Above: Building permanent homes at Jamestown required bricks, which had to be molded by hand and baked in ovens.

Then, in August 1619, an English man-of-war arrived in Virginia. Onboard were about 20 Africans from Angola, a Portuguese colony in Africa, who may have been sold as indentured servants upon their arrival in Virginia. Because records are few and incomplete, it is unknown how many of these Africans were released from this servitude. It is known that some free black colonists lived in Virginia during the 17th century.

Over the next several decades, some former African servants acquired property, and at least one owned slaves. Marriage between blacks and whites existed, and free Africans had access to the courts. Although no voting records survive, it is believed that free African males who owned land may have voted in elections for the House of Burgesses.

Most English settlers viewed the Africans as inferior, however, and the rights of black people quickly eroded. By the 1660s, the General Assembly had acknowledged the existence of lifetime slavery. By 1725, laws that stripped enslaved people from Africa of most basic rights had been passed. Enslaved Africans made up a growing part of Virginia's population. And because of their hard forced labor, and the firm footing established by the labor of the first indentured servants, the landowners of the colony prospered.

Question #1: What were the pros and cons of indentured servitude to the servant? What were the pros and cons to the master?