

# The Education of Indentured Servants in Colonial America

By Mark R. Snyder

## Abstract

This article serves as a foundation for understanding the earliest form of technical instruction in colonial America. It is a synthesis of historical studies that have addresses the education of indentured servants and apprentices in colonial America. It defines indentured servitude and contrasts it with apprenticeship—a form of indentured service. The paper addresses how indentured servitude in colonial America became established and how those who were employed through such means fared. Primary emphasis is on the education that indentured servants and apprentices would have received and how that varied by time periods and regions. This manuscript reveals that three general changes occurred: 1) from the adaptation of traditional practices from England to support agricultural labor in the early colonial period, 2) through a transition period caused by slavery (primarily in the south) and an increased need for apprentices in skilled trades (primarily in the north), and 3) until the late colonial period when education was emerging as a value that would help America succeed in its independence.

## Preface

Technology is a topic that should be addressed in educating the youth of the United States. Historically, there have been differing views regarding the need for instruction of technical processes. Yet, throughout the past, numerous systems and methods have been devised to achieve this goal. More recently, various disciplines have recognized technology as an integral part of their fields. Specifically, the broader study of technology has been accepted as the primary motive for the profession of technology education.

This article can help students who are preparing for careers in technology education to establish a historical background for better understanding the field in which they aspire to become teachers. The primary purpose of this study is to provide a historical account of one of the earliest forms of technical learning in America. It also describes the practice of indentured technical instruction as a system utilized by the colonists and how it helped shape educa-

tion even as it exists in modern society. It presents a general overview of circumstances that have influenced the instruction of “technics” throughout the past and provides a foundation for understanding how technology education has evolved. This is accomplished by identifying numerous resources and providing a synthesis of prior historiographical efforts. Since this review cites period sources, in unedited form, some words appear in their original spelling.

## Introduction

Indentured servitude was a critical institution in the development of the American colonies primarily because a large number of people were needed to occupy colonial America. There were many changes made in the system of indentured servitude and many differences in the regional application of indentured servitude within the American colonies throughout the period. There were also distinct changes in the relationship between education and indentured servitude. Initially, there was little interest in the education or training of indentured servants. When native-born children began entering the system as apprentices, the master became the primary source for a basic education. Finally, as schools developed, the role of master as an educator as decreased to its vocational aspect.

When researching the topic of indentured servitude in colonial America, it is easy to develop a skewed impression of this practice. Many historians who mention the indenture system typically paint a simple picture of an individual who happily worked for another man until his term was served and he would become self-reliant. Specific studies that focus exclusively on the lives of indentured servants in colonial America will describe a variety of situations in which a person might have become an indentured servant, served their indenture, been treated during that period of indenture, and fared after the indenture was completed. Thus, it would not be accurate to stereotype indentured servants into one simple image.

It is also important to point out that the terms *indentured servant* and *apprentice* are closely related but, in fact, have slightly

different meanings—particularly when referred to in the history of colonial America. An indenture is a contract that binds a person to work for another for a given length of time. An apprentice is a person under such a legal agreement that works for a master craftsman in return for instruction in a specific trade and, formally, support. Many of those who came to the American colonies already knew a trade, such as farming, but could not afford the cost of the journey across the Atlantic. Thus, they would agree to an indenture that bound them to a wealthy planter for a few years and then be released to make a living themselves. In this example, the indentured servant was not an apprentice, *per se*, because he already knew his trade. In contrast, an apprentice also usually was bound by a contract and thus considered indentured. Only the institution of apprenticeship combined technical education and labor with the promise of eventual self-employment.

### **The Early Arrival of Indentured Servants**

Indentured servants probably arrived in America not long after the first English colony, Jamestown was established in 1607. “That a man should become a bond servant by legal contract was not strange, for the ancient institution of apprenticeship was known to all” (Smith, 1947, p. 13). Galenson (1981) reported that the Virginia Company had put this system to use by 1620. Alderman (1976) wrote, “around 1624 the servants began to sign formal indenture” (p. 57). The practice of indentured servitude made it possible for emigrants from many European nations to journey to the New World and was, indeed, a common practice that was vital to the economy and social development of colonial America.

Those who could not afford passage to the New World often pledged service to a colony in exchange for the cost of the trip and the boarding fees accrued through the duration of the indenture. In fact, the large majority of immigrants to the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia prior to 1700 were British indentured servants who served British colonial planters. Wesley F. Craven (1971) approximated the population of white indentured servants in seventeenth-century Virginia to be perhaps three-fourths of the total population and John Pory, a resident of Virginia in 1619, stated, “Our principall wealth . . . consisteth in servants” (Craven, 1971, p. 13). As farms and plantations

grew larger, and trade increased, so did the need for labor. This need was met through indentured servitude and was greatest in the colonies from Pennsylvania south. The New England colonies were more likely to use the labor of freemen and apprentices rather than indentured servants until later in the colonial period.

Indentured servants throughout the colonies were either voluntary or coerced by legal authority. Those who became indentured servants of their own accord were reasonably well treated and had similar rights to the freemen before the law. However, their indentures could be bought or sold without their consent. Otherwise, they could trade, own property, provide testimony in court and were provided special laws to protect them from abuse (Ballagh, 1895, p. 44). The length of time that voluntary servants were bound was typically dependent on the amount owed for the transportation to the colonies, “usually for from three to five years” (Talpalal, 1960, p. 198). Whatever the length of their servitude, once their indenture was completed the liberated servants expected to receive the “freedom dues” that they had earned through very hard work. For the indentured farmer this might have included tools, livestock, corn, tobacco, and other necessities for them to start anew.

### **Assisted Emigration and Runaways**

The system of indentured servitude was ideal for the “assisted emigration” of undesirables. “Of the Scotch prisoners taken at the battle of Worcester, sixteen hundred and ten were sent to Virginia in 1651 . . . Many of the Scotch prisoners of Dunbar and the rebels of 1666 were sent to New England and the other plantations.” Also, the social climate in England at this time was rather volatile due to overpopulation; therefore “in 1661 . . . power was given to Justices of the Peace to transport felons, beggars and disorderly persons” (Talpalal, 1960, pp. 299-300). Even the trade companies got into the act by negotiating with other countries for the trade of their undesirables. Subagents, or recruiters, would also stoop to persuading, or even kidnapping, young or intoxicated victims in order to turn a profit by selling them into indentures once in the colonies. This practice was known as “spiriting” and those who had been “spirited” were indentured according to the “custom of the country” which was a method of expediency in these matters. Others who became indentured

involuntarily included felons and debtors already within the American colonies. Rather than imprisoning potential laborers, the Pennsylvania Council declared it “highly reasonable that people fitt for Labour, or performing any Service by which they can earn Money, should by the same Method make Satisfaction for their just Debts” (Morris, 1946, p. 14).

In many cases, the outlook for indentured servants was bleak. Morgan (2001) reported that during the mid seventeenth-century, “in both Chesapeake colonies servants were forbidden to leave their homes without a license or pass” (p. 20). Involuntary servants had fewer rights than the voluntary indentured servants and many of them were prone to running away, for which there were a variety of punishments prescribed by the different colonies. The harshest punishment was in Maryland where a 1639 law stated that runaway servants were to be executed. Other penalties included extended indentures, payment for lost time extracted from the freedom dues, and literally being branded with the letter “R” (Morgan, 2001, p. 20-21).

Many lawmen arrested suspicious characters who could not prove that they were free. In 1773, a “gaoler” in New Jersey posted this advertisement:

TAKEN UP and committed to the gaol of the City of Perth, Amboy, in the county of Middlesex, in New-Jersey, the 1st of July, 1773, an Irish servant man named JOHN RUTLEGE, who confesses he is the servant of one JOHN PATTERSON, of Tincum township, Bucks county, and left his master last month, as mentioned in the paper of the 7th of June inst. His master may have him again by applying to the subscriber, and paying the reward for taking him up, and charges. OBADIAH KING, Gaoler (Heavner, 1978, pp. 118-119).

In Pennsylvania, and most other colonies, the laws aided the master of a runaway servant but recapture was more often the result of offering a reward—a financial burden usually transferred to the unsuccessful runaway servant. Despite offered rewards, a very large number of runaway servants were never recovered (Heavner, 1978, p. 116).

Overall, the experience of servitude in the colonies was dismal. According to Wood (1992), in the colonies, servitude was a much harsher,

more brutal, and more humiliating status than it was in England (p. 53). Although some success stories exist, the majority of indentured servants lived difficult lives even if they served out their indentures and became free.

### Poor Provisions for Education

The practice of indentured servitude prior to colonization had been primarily utilized for the training of youths in specific trades. However, the British colonizers of America molded the traditional form of the indenture system to meet their needs. The most obvious difference was the decreased interest in skilled craftsmen in the system—and the large demand for farmers. To estimate the occupation of male indentured servants in the colonies, Galenson (1981) used the records of indentured servants registered in Bristol, England between 1654-1660, just before their journey to the American colonies. What he found was that of the indentured servants registered in Bristol, roughly 30 percent were previously farmers, 10 percent were textile workers, 9 percent were laborers, and the rest were a variety of other occupations (41 percent did not specify an occupation). These records are indeed valuable, although little is known of the actual registration process or the accuracy of the records. These records also indicated facts such as the deterioration of agricultural conditions in England during this period and the destination of these particular Bristol registrants within the American colonies—more than half of them were sent to the colony of Virginia (Craven, 1971, p. 17).

Since the majority of indentured servants at this time were laborers and primarily young adults, the education of these early indentured servants was not considered a high priority. Labor was, in fact, the highest priority. Training, usually in husbandry, was the most education that one was likely to gain through indenture. Most training was considered unnecessary, if we reconsider the example of the English farmer who agreed to indentured servitude in order to pay for his transportation to America. Any education that an indentured servant received was likely the result of self-motivation or some special arrangement. “German servants often entered into indentures providing that they be taught to read the Bible in English” (Smith, 1947, p. 17). Also, the few children that were in the colonies as indentured servants prior to 1650 were probably given the benefits of a very minimal education. The rate of literacy for the

indentured servant population that emigrated from England was characteristically low as was evidenced by the large number of men and women who could not sign their names, but rather left their “mark” on their indentures (Galenson, 1981).

### **Change in the Southern and Chesapeake Bay/Colonies**

Mary Newton Stanard, in her book *Colonial Virginia: Its People and Customs (1917)*, found that of the indentured servants in Virginia for whom records exist (from the year 1625), there were a few that became quite successful. A few of her examples follow:

For instance, Richard Townshend had come to Virginia when a boy of fifteen, but we know that before long he was apprenticed to Doctor Pott to be taught to be a physician and apothecary . . . Abraham Wood was brought to Virginia . . . and in later years became a Major General of Militia, the greatest Indian trader of his time, and a leader in promoting Western exploration . . . John Upton . . . who became a burgess, commander of Isle of Wight and mintmaster general. (Stanard, 1917, pp. 46-48)

The population of the colonies was increasing, as was the need for skilled laborers. The New England colonies began to compete for the labor of indentured servants and after about 1700, the Chesapeake Bay colonies could not obtain, through traditional methods, the labor force required to maintain the growth of the plantation economy. The arrival of the *Cavaliers* in Virginia had brought about a change in the societal hierarchy of the colony (Stanard, 1917, p. 40).

The Cavaliers were formerly known as the Royalists, a political party that left England around 1650, following England’s Civil War and the execution of Charles I. As they settled into Virginia, it was evident that their ideas differed from the traditional Puritan views on land and labor. Things started to change as this incredibly wealthy minority gained more and more power. According to Pulliam, (1999 p. 86) “The persons lowest in social rank were entirely dependent upon the wealthy and powerful for what little education they received.” But because education was carefully reserved for those favored by birth, non-privileged southerners largely remained uneducated. “Rigid Southern social class distinctions allowed few opportunities for

the indentured servants, the slaves, and the poverty-stricken freedmen to engage in cultural pursuits or to improve their minds.”

At about the turn of the eighteenth century, “indentured servitude was retained: but labor ceased to be a value (Talpalar, 1960, p. 322). Due to the advent of Feudalism in the Southern colonies, the supply of white indentured servants to the tobacco planters had virtually come to a standstill. “By 1710, one-fifth of the region’s population was black (Norton, 1986, p. 104). As black slave trade increased, and slave labor grew in the south, the role of the indentured servant began to change from primarily agricultural occupations to a wider variety of trade-oriented jobs.

“The apprenticeship program inherited from England had the two-fold objective of supplying the labor market and providing training in a trade” (Morris, 1946, p. 14). Eventually, a wider variety of trades emerged in which youngsters could become apprenticed. Most of the trades that existed during the later colonial era fell under general occupational headings. The textile processing industry included feltmaking and wool spinning as well as tailoring and hatmaking. Dealing or retailing was also considered a trade that an apprentice might learn. Food processing vocations such as butchering, baking or brewing were also plentiful during this time. Leather processing included the skills of tanning, currying, and saddlemaking. Metal trades included smithing of all sorts, while the wood and construction trades such as carpentry, joinery, masonry, plastering, wheelwrighting, and shipbuilding were also quite common (Davies, 1956, pp. 64-77). These are only a few examples of the many specialized trades for an apprentice.

### **Growth of Apprenticeship in the Middle and New England Colonies**

While indentured servitude through migration decreased gradually, the number of children born to the colonists in America increased. It became common practice in the Middle and New England colonies for all but the rich, and perhaps the very poor, to have children learn to make a living either from their parents or through a traditional apprenticeship to a master craftsman. The primarily Protestant parents would try to have their children apprenticed to a trade that was stable, and would provide them with a reasonable living.

Because of this, highly skilled trades were very competitive and might come very dearly. “Doctor Benjamin Rush of colonial Philadelphia charged 100 pounds to take on an apprentice” (Heavner, 1978, p. 45). Oftentimes, local officials decided the fate of children by involuntarily binding them into an indenture. Many children would become apprentices at around the age of fourteen and serve a master craftsman for up to seven years. During this time, the apprentice would learn the trade secrets that his master used, often referred to as the “mysteries” of the trade.

As mentioned previously, the apprentice system was adopted from the English system, however, as shown in studies by Morris (1946), existing indentures revealed that the arrangements for apprentices in colonial America often held the masters responsible for different obligations than those in England.

In particular, the education and clothing of the apprentice became very important bargaining aspects of the indenture in colonial America. The majority of indentures that exist from this time period were printed documents that provided blank spaces for filling in the price, term, and any special provisions that were a part of the agreement. Most of the special provisions included mention of clothing—the master of one Daniel Hibler, indented October 13, 1773 in Philadelphia, promised “at the Expiration of the Term to give him two Compt. Suits of Apparel one of which to be new” (Heavner, 1978, pp. 106-107).

The colonists of the Middle and New England colonies were primarily Protestants who valued education and would bargain shrewdly so that their children might learn reading, writing, and cyphering along with gaining vocational skills. According to Quimby (1985), in his study of *Apprenticeship in Colonial Philadelphia*, approximately two-thirds of the indentures that he discovered, dated from 1745-1746 and 1771-1773, indicated provisions for education.

### The Education of Apprentices

An apprenticeship is a process of learning by doing and, in essence, the combination of education and industry. Beyond vocational training, however, the master would be required to teach apprentices morality and practical studies such as simple bookkeeping, reading,

and writing (Seybolt, 1917, p. 104). These obligations were carefully regulated by law, as was evident in the Massachusetts Bay General Court Order of 1642. Selectmen were employed to serve districts by visiting masters and determining whether they were following the law.

The education of apprentices enforced by law was a unique approach. “The Massachusetts Bay colonists had originated a brand-new idea; there was nothing in English law or custom that could serve as a determining precedent for this scheme” (Seybolt, 1917, p. 104). Other New England colonies quickly followed this pattern. The Connecticut code of 1650 and the Duke of York’s Laws of 1655 were directly related to the Laws of Massachusetts. The New York law postulated that children be instructed in “matters of Religion and the Lawes of the Country . . . and in some honest and Lawful Calling” (Seybolt, 1917, p. 106).

The master, regarded in *loco parentis*, was usually required to provide such education for at least the first three years of a child’s indenture. If the master and his family could not provide the necessary instruction themselves, the child was probably sent to a school during the winter, or whatever period the selected trade was not particularly busy. If it was available, evening schools provided a means for educating the working classes. “The indentures of Apprenticeship reveal the fact that there was an evening school in the Royal Colony of New York as early as 1690, and that by 1705 several had been opened” (Seybolt, 1917, p. 107). The demand for schools that taught technical subjects for apprentices can be seen in the following advertisement from Philadelphia’s *American Weekly Mercury*, dated January 14-21, 1729 that stated:

At the Free-School in Strawberry-Lane, near the Market House, Philadelphia, are taught Writing, Arithmetick in all the Parts, both vulgar, Decimal and Duadecimal; Merchants Accounts after the Italian manner through all the Part of Commerce; Measuring all Artificers Work, Gauging, Dialling, with some other practical Parts of the Mathematicks: Also English and Latin. N.B. He also teaches a Night School at the Place aforesaid. By John Walby. (Quimby, 1985, p. 68)

Several successive Poor-Laws were also enacted in the Massachusetts Bay colonies

between 1703 and 1771. The intention of these laws was to ascertain that poor apprentices had the opportunity to learn reading and writing. These Poor-Laws essentially required that all children should benefit from an elementary education and in their final form specified that males should learn “reading, writing, and cyphering; females, reading and writing” (Seybolt, 1917, p. 105).

### **The Growth of Schools**

Traditionally, the master was responsible for the actual education of the apprentice. However, the increasing growth of schools, and demands for educational requirements for all children, began to affect the apprenticeship system. Increasingly, masters began to accept the cost of having the apprentice taught in a school. Benjamin Franklin, who signed an indenture form that his business had printed, accepted his 10-year-old nephew James as his apprentice on the fifth of November 1740. For the first few years of his seven-year indenture, James was sent to school by his uncle before actually working in the printing office (Quimby, 1985, pp. iv & 70). Toward the end of the colonial period there is evidence that masters were relieved of even that obligation, as the parents of the apprentice often paid tuition expenses. Quimby (1985) cited records of indentures from the American Philosophical Society Library to reveal that in 1773 “Edward Bartholomew’s mother paid for four quarters of night school while his master . . . paid for four quarters also” (p. 69). In another example from the same source: the “father of Michael Coats, apprentice to Samuel Loftis, chaisemaker, paid for all his son’s evening school expenses” (p. 70) in the same year. Indentures also revealed that his master expected the apprentice, to learn certain skills or useful subjects by attending school. Yet another example from 1773 documented that “Conrad Gabehard, apprentice to a painter and glazier, was to be given three quarters of instruction in a drawing school” (Quimby, 1985, pp. 71-72).

### **Education the Key to Success**

The fact that apprentices were gaining education from sources beyond what their master provided indicated that the relationship between the master and his apprentice was becoming less personal. It also indicated that apprentices were becoming more interested in getting an education that could help them advance themselves within their vocation,

and sometimes beyond. Of course, when the apprentices completed their indenture they hoped to make their way as best they could with the trade that they had learned. It is known that the majority of apprentices were never so successful as to become master craftsmen and proprietors of their own business establishments. To a large extent, the success of apprentices who completed their indentures was dependent on the education they were motivated enough to pursue on their own (Kaestle, 1983, p. 31). Beyond the rudimentary skills that they were required to receive through their apprenticeship, the apprentices often read books. In Boston, and in some other cities, there was an Apprentices’ Library with books that might be beneficial for apprentices. However, the reading that they did was usually not for pleasure, and rather toward some goal.

Some of those who served as apprentices were known to improve themselves beyond the realm of their trade and become quite important people in colonial history. Benjamin Franklin himself was once apprenticed to his brother who was a printer by trade. He became quite successful through hard work and grew to feel very strongly about industriousness. He eventually contributed a great deal to the vocational preparation and education of youth in colonial Philadelphia (Rorabaugh, 1986). Other such people included Paul Revere, who was apprenticed as a silversmith, Henry Knox, and Nathaniel Greene, both American generals during the Revolutionary War.

### **Conclusion**

There were basically three general changes in the attitude toward the education of indentured servants and apprentices in colonial America. These changes were largely due mainly to the diversity of the groups that settled the colonies, the regional differences between the colonies, and the rapidly changing environment within the colonies at this time.

The practice of indentured servitude in colonial America originated from the English system of apprenticeship. The traditional methods used by the English were molded to the needs of the early colonists in order to populate the New World. Early indentured servants were primarily laborers and particularly farm workers. Most of them were not apprentices, since they already knew their trades and needed little training. They either entered their indentured

servitude voluntarily to pay for the expense of their travel to the colonies or were coerced by officials or trade companies and became indentured against their wishes. The education of the early indentured servants was not of great concern because they were mostly young adult laborers and the literacy rate for these servants was usually quite low.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, slave labor had developed in the Southern colonies, cities were growing in the North, and the need for indentured servants as farm laborers began to decline. The American system of indentured servitude began to change back to a role similar to the traditional English system of apprenticeship established to train youth in vocational skills. The major change was the desire to educate the indentured apprentices since they were the native-born children of the primarily Protestant colonists. The Americans did add a few unique ideas to their system such as including basic educational skills as an integral part of the training that young apprentices received. In this scheme, the master was the primary source of the information and education received.

In colonial America, apprenticeship eventually became the primary method of technical instruction. In many colonies, the master became required by law to provide basic educational skills for their apprentices. These laws created for the education of apprentices had important implications for the education of all children. The philosophy of Naturalism,

expounded by Rousseau, encouraged Democratic ideals and influenced the future of many nations, including America. In his book *Emile*, Rousseau described his philosophy of education, which would include the experience of learning a purely mechanical art. Often, Rousseau 's writing reflected the fact of the forthcoming Industrial Revolution, which was marked by the factory system of producing goods.

Soon schools began to develop for the benefit of all. Night schools were also offered for apprentices. Thus, as the American colonies neared their independence, the attitude and approach toward the education of apprentices had undergone yet another change. By the mid-eighteenth century the master was no longer the primary supplier of basic educational skills and was reduced to teaching vocational skills. The education that apprentices received became more centralized under the growing influence of schools. Considerable debate has surrounded the importance of the early laws related to the education of apprentices in laying the foundation for the American public school system. Perhaps the most important outcome was that various forms of local government took a position that the delivery of education for all was something to be valued.

*Dr. Mark R. Snyder is a faculty member in the Department of Industry and Technology at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. He is a member of Beta Chi chapter of Epsilon Pi Tau.*

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