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Conditions of Labor in Colonial America

The development of the American colonies depended upon human labor. That labor came in a variety of forms – free, slave, bonded, skilled, unskilled, agricultural, and artisanal. In the first two and a half centuries of colonization, the area of the New World now known as the eastern United States was an overwhelmingly rural society. Especially during the colonial period (1619 to 1776), and for some time afterward, upwards of 90 percent of the people lived in the countryside. The vast majority of free people were also self-employed, either as independent farmers, artisans, or in a host of urban retail trades and professions.

From the onset, the American colonies included a number of bustling seaport cities. In the cities a real need existed for casual day laborers and hired craftsmen, both of whom were paid wages. Moreover, as the southern colonies shifted their agricultural base from the production of food crops for local consumption to cash crops (first tobacco and rice, then cotton) for sale in the world market, the need for laborers mounted.

To satisfy the rising demand for labor in a new land, potential employers turned mostly to indentured servants and enslaved Africans. For the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth century, free independent wage laborers formed a small part of the colonial labor force. At first, indentured servants – those who signed contracts of indenture in Britain or on the Continent, and those “redemptioners” whose cost of passage to the New World was paid by their indenture (sale) at auction in their port of arrival – formed the bulk of a labor force in which waged work proved the exception. Indentured laborers worked the tobacco farms of the Chesapeake region, provided household labor on farms and in city homes in all the colonies, and engaged in all sorts of other labor for their masters and mistresses. As the southern colonies found an increasing demand for their agricultural products abroad, whether in the English metropolis, the Caribbean sugar islands, or on the European continent, indentures failed to satisfy the planters’ demand for labor. The African slave trade held out a remedy. Not only did the slave trade seem to offer an endless supply of bound labor, but African slaves, unlike indentured Europeans, were bound in perpetuity and defined as chattel (property), while their children

inherited their parents' bound status. The advantages that slave labor provided in comparison to indentured labor led more prosperous landowners and merchants in the northern colonies to turn to slave labor as well. Over the course of the next two centuries, as indentured labor decreased, slave labor increased.

Free workers, a minority of the total colonial labor force, included such skilled craftsmen as carpenters and masons, shipwrights and sailmakers, as well as tanners, weavers, shoemakers, tailors, smiths, coopers (barrel makers), glaziers (glass makers), and printers. A number of less skilled but also putatively free laborers found employment as carters, waterfront workers, and in other irregular forms of work. The skilled craftsmen among these workers at first plied their trades independently, but as the centers of population grew, master workmen set up small retail shops and employed journeymen who worked for wages and apprentices who offered their services in return for learning the craft. The journeymen may have earned a wage but they were not entirely free laborers; instead, they were ordinarily bound by contracts that determined their length of employment and forbade them to leave their position until full satisfaction of the contract.

By the close of the eighteenth century, these journeymen had begun to form local trade societies – the genesis of the first unions and of what was to become, in time, the organized labor movement. They did so because their interests began to clash with the goals of their masters, who had become increasingly interested in increasing their profits at the expense of their journeymen and apprentices. Masters who had once toiled alongside their apprentices and journeymen often evolved into merchant-capitalists who marketed the goods produced by their waged employees.

The simple economic pattern of those distant days bears no resemblance to the complex economy of the twenty-first century. The status of a small handful of independent artisans and mechanics has little relationship to that of the many millions of waged and salaried workers in twenty-first-century society. Certain underlying conditions, however, were operative in colonial days that would strongly influence the whole course of American labor.

From the first, the history of labor in America was affected by the availability of arable land. As long as land was abundant and European settlers could seize it from indigenous tribes of native Americans who occupied it – which was the case from the seventeenth century to the close of the nineteenth century – life for the majority tended to be salutary. Regardless of class, most New World residents enjoyed more material comforts, better health, and greater life expectancies than their Old World counterparts. That at least is the evidence as compiled by scholars who have studied and accumulated statistical data about morbidity, mortality, and body types. The abundance of land also made it more difficult for the colonial upper class to transport English feudal patterns, which required common people to defer to their social betters, to the new environment. This reality encouraged farmers, artisans, and ordinary workers

to assert their own independence and equality, and to become active participants in a vigorous movement for broader democracy. No matter how much America changed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, white workers maintained their belief that they should be free and equal citizens in a democratic republic. Such beliefs endowed American workers and their institutions with a distinctive character.

The early settlers had no more than landed in Virginia and Massachusetts than they realized the imperative need for workers in the forest wilderness that was America. In the first voyage to Jamestown and three succeeding expeditions, the Virginia Company had sent over to the New World a motley band of adventurers, soldiers, and gentlemen. In growing despair of establishing a stable colony out of such unsatisfactory material, Captain John Smith finally entered a violent protest. "When you send again," he wrote home emphatically, "I entreat you rather send but thirty carpenters, husbandmen, gardeners, fishermen, masons, and diggers of trees' roots, well provided, than a thousand such as we have."

Plymouth fared better. Artisans, craftsmen, and other laborers largely made up the little band of Pilgrims, and the Bishop of London rudely characterized even their leaders as "guides fit for them, cobblers, tailors, feltmakers, and such-like trash." Among the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay in 1630 there was also a majority of artisans and tillers of the soil. In spite of this advantage, the founders of New England soon felt, as had those of Virginia, the scarcity of persons content with performing the humble tasks of society. Governor Winthrop of Massachusetts wrote despairingly in 1640 of the difficulty of keeping wage earners on the job. They were constantly moving on to frontier communities where pay was higher, or else were taking up land to become independent farmers. Cotton Mather made it "an Article of special Supplication before the Lord, that he would send a good servant."

While tillers of the soil and "diggers of trees' roots" were a primary consideration in these early days of settlement, the demand for skilled workers rapidly mounted. The colonists were compelled to become carpenters and masons, weavers and shoemakers, whatever their background, but both on southern plantations and in New England towns, trained artisans and mechanics were always needed. In time, on southern plantations masters tutored some of their slaves in the skills of such necessary trades as carpentry, masonry, blacksmithing, and even cordwaining (shoemaking). Learning went both ways, as slaves taught masters in the South Carolina Low Country how to adopt rice-growing practices they had used on West Africa's Grain Coast. Rice production was so labor intensive that the Low Country became home to the colonies' largest plantations.

The ways in which the labor problem was met varied greatly in different parts of America. The circumstances of early settlement and natural environment led New England to rely more on free workers than indentures, while the South was ultimately to depend almost wholly on slaves from Africa. In the majority of colonies during the seventeenth century, and continuing on through the

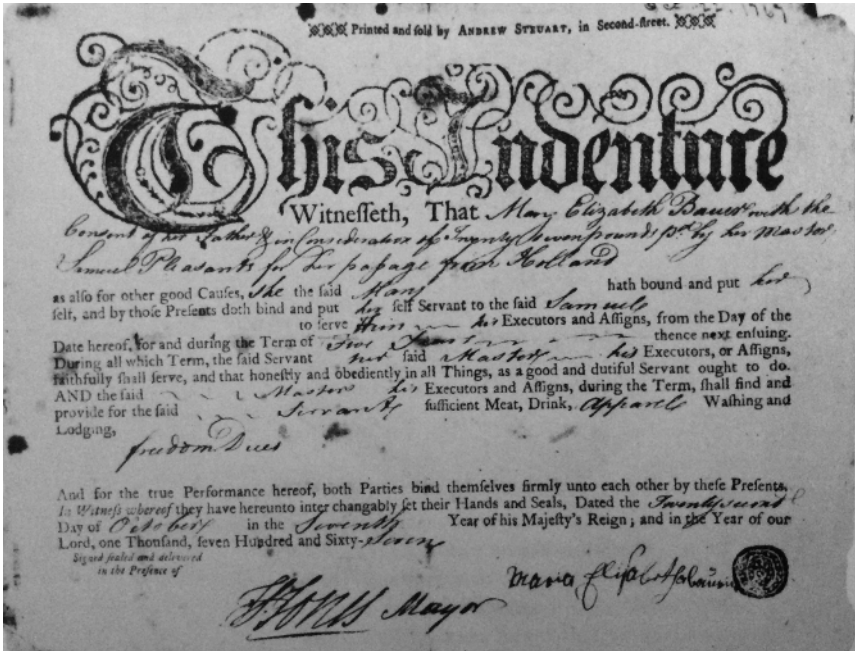


Figure 1.1 Certificate of indenture, 1767. This certificate bound one Mary Elizabeth Bauer to Samuel Pleasants for five years of labor in return for his payment of her passage to the American colonies. (Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

eighteenth century in the middle colonies, the bulk of the labor force was recruited from indentured servants. It is probable that at least half of all the colonists who came to the New World arrived under some form of indenture and took their place as free citizens only after working out their terms of contract.

There were three sources for such bound labor: men, women, and children whose articles of indenture were signed before leaving the Old World; the redemptioners, or so-called free-willers, who agreed to reimburse their passage money by selling their labor after landing in the colonies; and convicts sentenced to transportation to America. Once in the colonies, these various groups coalesced into the general class of bound servants, working without wages and wholly under their masters' control for a set number of years.

So great was the demand for labor that a brisk trade developed in recruiting workers. Agents of the colonial planters and of British merchants scoured the countryside and towns of England, and somewhat later made their way to Europe, especially the war-devastated areas of the Rhineland, to advertise the advantages of emigrating to America. At country fairs they distributed handbills extravagantly describing the wonders of this new land, where food was said to drop into the mouths of the fortunate inhabitants and every man had the

opportunity to own land. The promises held forth by the agents were often so glowing and enthusiastic that the poor and aspiring gladly signed articles of indenture with little realization of the possible hardships of the life upon which they were embarking. The “crimps,” agents who worked the English countryside, and the so-called “newlanders” operating on the Continent, did not hesitate at fraud and chicanery.

Thousands of persons were “spirited” out of England under these circumstances, and far from trying to prevent such practices, the local authorities often encouraged them. The common belief that England was overpopulated led them to approve heartily of the overseas transportation of paupers and vagabonds, the generally shiftless who might otherwise become a burden upon the community. Indeed, magistrates sometimes had such persons rounded up and given the choice between emigration and imprisonment. It was also found to be an easy way to take care of orphans and other minors who had no means of support; the term “kidnapping” had its origin in this harsh mode of peopling the colonies.

In 1619, the Common Council of London “appointed one hundred Children out of the swarms that swarme in the place, to be sent to Virginia to be bound as apprentices for certain yeares.” The Privy Council initially endorsed the move and authorized the Virginia Company to “imprison, punish and dispose of any of those children upon any disorder by them committed, as cause shall require; and so to Shipp them out for Virginia, with as much expedition as may stand for convenience.” Some 40 years later, the Privy Council appears to have become aroused over the abuse of this practice by the Virginia Company. Two ships lying off Gravesend were discovered to have aboard both children and other servants “deceived and inticed away Cryinge and Mourning for Redemption from their Slavery.” It was ordered that all those detained against their will should be released at once. Most often, however, the line between voluntary and involuntary transportation – especially when it involved young children and the poor – was very hard to draw.

As time went on, prisons contributed an increasing number of emigrants who crossed the Atlantic as “His Majesty’s Seven-Year Passengers.” They were at first largely made up of “rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars” who had proved “incorrigible.” However, during the eighteenth century more serious offenses were added to the list for which transportation overseas was meted out. The prerevolutionary roster of such immigrants in one Maryland county, adding up to 655 persons and including 111 women, embraced a wide range of crimes – murder, rape, highway robbery, horse-stealing, and grand larceny. Contemporary accounts succinctly described many of the women as “lewd.”

The colonies came to resent bitterly this influx of inmates from English prisons – “abundance of them do great Mischiefs . . . and spoil servants, that were before very good” – and they found it increasingly difficult to control them. But in spite of these protests, the practice was continued, and in all some 50,000 convicts are believed to have been transported, largely to the middle colonies. In

Maryland, a favored dumping ground, they made up the bulk of indentured servants throughout the eighteenth century.

“Our Mother knows what is best for us,” a contributor to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* grouched in 1751. “What is a little Housebreaking, Shoplifting, or Highway-robbing; what is a son now and then corrupted and hanged, a Daughter debauched, or Pox’d, a wife stabbed, a Husband’s throat cut, or a child’s brains beat out with an Axe, compared with this Improvement and Well peopling of the Colonies?” Benjamin Franklin bitterly declared that the policy of “emptying their jails into our settlements is an insult and contempt the cruellest, that ever one people offered another.”

Although contemporaries and subsequent scholars emphasized the involuntary aspects of colonial immigration and the role played in the migration stream by paupers and criminals, the most recent research discloses a different reality. First, in the New World, indentured servitude largely replicated English patterns of rural employment with variations to adapt it to colonial conditions. Second, the immigration of indentured servants proved a rational response to the realities of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century markets for skilled and unskilled labor; it effectively redistributed labor from a sated English market to a hungry colonial one. Third, the indentured servants were a cross-section of the English laboring classes. As the economist David Galenson observes in his book, *White Servitude in Colonial America* (1981), “the indentured servants probably came in significant numbers from all levels of the broad segment of English society bounded at one end by the gentry, and at the other by the paupers.”

The first African slaves arrived in Virginia not long after the founding of the colony. At first little distinguished the status of slaves from that of indentured laborers, and the two groups often worked together, especially on the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake and Virginia, socialized together, and even mated. While slaves lacked contracts that specified the terms and duration of their service, their future paths seemed partly open. Some slaves took advantage of the demand for labor to negotiate arrangements with their masters that allowed them to hire themselves out and accumulate savings, eventually purchasing their freedom. In the 1660s, in some areas of Virginia nearly one-third of African Americans were free people.

Over time, however, at first slowly and then more rapidly in one colony after another, lawmakers began to distinguish more clearly between the statuses of indentured servants and slaves. A turning point came in Virginia in 1676 when landless whites and aggrieved indentured servants under the leadership of Nathaniel Bacon stormed into Jamestown attempting to depose the colonial government. Thereafter, landowners replaced white servants with black slaves. By the end of the seventeenth century, a series of newly enacted laws (consolidated in the Virginia slave codes of 1705) defined slaves (early on colonists enslaved a number of native Americans as well as Africans) as chattel property bound in perpetuity, as were their offspring. Slaves, unlike indentured servants, could be sold, rented out, or used as collateral by their masters and mistresses.

As their permanently unfree status became defined and enforced in law, the difference between black slaves and white laborers, whether indentured or free, crystallized with the latter receiving a higher status on the basis of their skin color. Whether racism caused Africans to be enslaved or their status and condition as slaves made them seem inferior (and therefore encouraged racism), white racism assumed a dynamism and life of its own.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the future growth and profitability of southern staple agriculture – at first primarily tobacco but then rice, indigo, sugar, and most importantly cotton – depended on slave labor. In time, the staple crops produced by enslaved people would become the engine that drove the national economy, as cotton most especially became a good in great demand in the international market, and the generator of enormous earnings that enriched those who marketed the crop and financed the planters. Accordingly, the number of slaves in the colonies grew from 7,000 in 1680 to 250,000 by 1750. Although slavery became the predominant labor system in much of the South, it existed across the colonies in the mid-eighteenth century. In the 1740s, slightly less than a third of workers in New York City were slaves.



Figure 1.2 An African American servant at work tending to a white master. Slavery operated in Northern cities as well as on Southern plantations during the colonial era. (New York Public Library).

Life and Labor in the Colonies

Whatever their Old World circumstances, the emigrants to the New World, whether white or black, experienced great discomfort and suffering on their voyage across the Atlantic. Often as many as three hundred passengers sailed on small vessels – overcrowded, unsanitary, and with insufficient provisions. Typhus and other diseases invariably took a terrible toll of lives. The mortality rate was sometimes as high as 50 percent, and young children seldom survived the horrors of a voyage that lasted anywhere from 7 to 12 weeks. The infamous Middle Passage that carried enslaved Africans to the Americas packed even more souls in the most cramped of circumstances, and in which they were shackled. The mortality and morbidity rates among African slaves far exceeded those of white indentures. Magnify the descriptions of the Atlantic passage written by white passengers as recorded below and you scarcely comprehend the horrors of the Middle Passage.

“During the voyage,” reads one account of the experiences of redemptioners recruited from the German Palatinate, “there is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, many kinds of seasickness, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth rot, and the like, all of which come from old and sharply-salted food and meat, also from the very bad and foul water, so that many die miserable. . . . Add to this want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want, afflictions, and lamentations, together with other trouble, as e.g., the lice abound so frightfully, especially on sick people, that they can be scraped off the body. The misery reaches a climax when a gale rages for two or three nights so that everyone believes that the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. In such a visitation the people cry and pray most piteously.”

Nor did the hardships of the voyagers necessarily end when port was finally reached. Those for whom contracts had already been arranged were handed over to their unknown masters. If the redemptioners did not immediately find employment themselves, they were put up for sale by the ship captains or merchants to whom they owed their passage money. Families were often separated when spouses and offspring were auctioned off to the highest bidder. The terms of servitude varied with age and might run from one to seven years. More generally, those over the age of 20 without specific articles of indenture were bound out for four years “according to the custom of the country.”

The colonial newspapers often carried notices of prospective sales. On March 28, 1771, this one appeared in the *Virginia Gazette*:

Just arrived at Leedstown, the Ship *Justitia*,
with about one Hundred Healthy Servants.
Men, Women and Boys, among which are many
Tradespeople – viz. Blacksmiths, Shoemakers,
Tailors, House Carpenters and Joiners, a

Cooper, several Silversmiths, Weavers,
A Jeweler, and many others. The Sale will
commence on Tuesday, the 2nd. of April, at
Leeds Town on Rappahannock River. A
reasonable Credit will be allowed, giving
Bond with Approved Security to

Thomas Hodge

If the sales were not concluded at the port of entry, “soul drivers” took groups of redemptioners to the backcountry, herding them along the way “like cattle to a Smithfield market.” The “soul drivers” then put the redemptioners up for auction at public fairs.

The importation of servants was highly profitable. Fifty acres of land was granted as a headright in some of the colonies for each immigrant, and there was always the sale of the indenture. In the case of sturdy farm hands and particularly skilled artisans, prices might run high. William Byrd reported to his agent in Rotterdam, in 1739, that he was in a good position to handle heavy shipments. “I know not how long the Palatines are sold for who do not pay passage to Philadelphia,” he wrote, “but here they are sold for Four years and fetch from 6 to 9 pounds and perhaps good Tradesmen may go for Ten. If these prices would answer, I am pretty Confident I could Dispose of two Shiploads every year.”

The auction market for slaves proved even more brutal, as prospective purchasers examined the bodies and probed for signs of weakness or disease. Kinship and community among the slaves dissolved under the auction hammer as planters made their choices solely on the basis of the cash value of their purchases. Some cultural practices survived the diaspora of slaves across the American colonies. Over half of the slaves imported into South Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century came from Senegambia and Sierra Leone on the Grain Coast. Their concentration in the region helped them perpetuate and adapt aspects of African cultures, including some spiritual rituals and work habits. Low Country slaves developed a Creole language called Gullah that drew on both English and West African languages.

The treatment accorded to slaves and slaves’ ability to negotiate aspects of their oppression differed across regions as well as across time. In the northern colonies, slaves often were able to hire themselves out and accumulate enough to buy their freedom. In the Chesapeake tobacco region, where slavery first grew in the colonies, some small farmers worked side by side with their slaves, while larger planters created an oppressive system of gang labor in which white overseers drove slaves from morning to evening. In the densely concentrated rice plantations of the South Carolina Low Country, enslaved Africans enjoyed a level of autonomy uncommon in the Chesapeake region. They worked according to a task labor system in which they could define the pace of their work, as long as they completed the customary one-quarter acre of hoeing or one-half

acre of ditch digging in a day. Slave families there tended their own garden plots, traded goods and services, and hunted and fished to supplement their diets.

Although levels of oppression could vary, the system of slavery as a whole rested on violence. Owners were free to impose the most stringent punishments, including whipping and maiming, with impunity. Slave owners frequently raped black women, broke up slave families whenever it suited them, and prevented slaves from learning to read or write.

The most common form of resistance among slaves was to run away. In the southeast, runaways often fled into the interior lands and set up Maroon communities. Occasionally, slaves rebelled. In 1712, a group of slaves killed nine whites in New York City. Seventy slaves were arrested and a dozen executed for the affair. In 1739, in Stono, South Carolina, a literate Angolan slave named Jemmy led an armed band of slaves south toward Spanish Florida, where they hoped to win their freedom, before they were intercepted by the colony's militia. Their leaders were executed and others sent back into slavery. In 1741, New Yorkers uncovered a conspiracy led by the slave Caesar Varick, in which a group planned to set fire to the city and flee to French Canada for their freedom. The authorities ordered Varick and a dozen of his followers burned at the stake.

The treatment accorded bound white servants, while often oppressive, was never as brutal as that endured by slaves. George Alsop, himself an indentured servant, wrote home in 1659 almost glowing accounts of life in Maryland. "The servants of this province, which are stigmatiz'd for Slaves by the clappermouth jaws of the vulgar in England," he declared, "live more like Freemen than the most Mechanical Apprentices in London, wanting for nothing that is convenient and necessary." Other accounts, however, give a harsher picture of general conditions. While colonial laws called upon masters to provide their servants with adequate food, lodging, and clothing, there were many instances where the diet was as meager as the labor was exhausting. Moreover, servants were rigidly confined to the immediate vicinity of the place where they were employed, tavern keepers were not allowed to sell them liquor, their terms of service might be extended for a long list of minor offenses, and they were subject to whippings and other corporal punishment by their masters for disobedience or laziness. Servant girls could be held in longer bondage if they became pregnant, and their masters sometimes conspired to this end. "Late experiments shew," read one report, "that some dissolute masters have gotten their maides with child, and yet claim the benefit of their services."

The indentured servants were recognized as fellow Christians and were entitled to their day in court – in these respects, at least, their status was quite different from that of African slaves. But their masters' quasi-proprietary rights naturally made it extremely difficult for indentured servants to secure redress for any injuries or indignities.

Court records concerned with instances of willful ill treatment are revealing of how vulnerable servants were. A certain Mistress Ward whipped her maidservant on the back so severely, with the added brutality of putting salt

in the wounds, that the girl died. On the finding of a jury that such action was “unreasonable and unchristianlike,” Mistress Ward was fined 300 pounds of tobacco. In another case, Mistress Mourning Bray defiantly told the court that in no circumstances would she allow her servants to “go to play or be Idle,” and the unlucky complainant was stripped and given 30 lashes. A third trial resulted more favorably for another maidservant. She was discharged from the further employ of a master who had climaxed frequent beatings by hitting her over the head with a three-legged stool when he found her reading a book on Sunday morning.

Advertisements often appeared in the colonial newspapers for runaway servants. One such notice referred to an English servantman who had “a pretty long visage of a lightish complexion, and thin-flaxen hair; his eye tooth sticks out over his lower teeth in a remarkable manner,” and another to a shoemaker and fiddler who “loves to be at frolics and taverns and is apt to get in liquor and when so is subject to fits.” Other advertisements offered special rewards for runaway bricklayers, tailors, carpenters, and even schoolmasters.

For the servants who faithfully served out the term of their indenture, there were substantial rewards. Grants of land were the exception rather than the rule, but in some cases, at least, the industrious were given “a competent estate,” and there was universal provision for some form of “freedom’s dues.” In Massachusetts, for example, the law specifically stated that all servants who had served diligently and faithfully for seven years should not be sent away empty-handed. What this meant varied, of course, not only from colony to colony but in terms of individual articles of indenture. The freed person’s dues generally included at least clothing, tools of some sort, and perhaps such livestock as would enable the servant to start farming on their own account. Typical indentures called for “a pigg to be pay’d at every years end” and “double apparell at the end of the term.”

Those indentured servants who survived the rigors of the ocean crossing, the seasoning period in a new environment, and the experiences of enforced servitude in relatively good health could then seek to make a free life of their own. Once they had established their freedom, Hugh Jones wrote in 1724, they might “work Day-Labour, or else rent a small Plantation for a trifle almost; or turn overseers, if they are expert, industrious and careful, or follow their trade . . . especially Smiths, Carpenters, Taylors, Sawyers, Coopers, Bricklayers, etc.”

Some of the indentured servants succeeded as independent farmers or artisans. Others were less successful. They drifted off to the rough frontier where they seldom achieved landowning status. Instead, they formed what rapidly became a large, discontented rural class of poor whites. Still others became the casual day laborers needed in seaport cities. Whatever their ultimate destinies, the indentured servants were vital to the economic development of colonial America.

Free labor in the colonies was made up of immigrant artisans and mechanics who had been able to pay their own passage money and of recruits from the

ranks of bound servants who had served out their terms of indenture. The available supply of such labor at first failed to satisfy the demand for it, which is why all the colonies sought and used both indentured servants and bound slaves. Not till the mid-eighteenth century, when the supply of available land diminished, especially in the New England and middle colonies, did labor scarcity somewhat abate. In the quarter century before the Revolution, the number of urban poor grew apace, and the gap between rich and poor widened in the seaport cities.

“The genius of the People in a Country where every one can have Land to work upon,” a colonial official reported to the Board of Trade in 1767, “leads them so naturally into Agriculture, that it prevails over every other occupation. There can be no stronger instance of this, than in the servants imported from Europe of different trades; as soon as the Time stipulated in their Indentures is expired, they immediately quit their Masters, and get a small tract of land, in settling which for the first three or four years they lead miserable lives, and in the most abject Poverty; but all this is patiently borne and submitted to with the greatest cheerfulness, the Satisfaction of being Land holders smooths over every difficulty, and makes them prefer this manner of living to that comfortable subsistence which they could procure for themselves and their families by working at the Trades in which they were brought up.”

In New England, where relatively few indentured servants were available, this situation led to such high wage rates and such an independent attitude on the part of both skilled and unskilled workers that the colonial authorities felt compelled to act. Colonial rulers looked to the Old World for the proper patterns of social organization. Those who ruled seventeenth-century England believed that a society prospered insofar as its laborers received only a *minimum* subsistence income. Only dire necessity compelled common people to toil hard, and high wages would cause indolence. Colonists carried such beliefs across the ocean. The result was the first labor legislation in America affecting free workers. Maximum wages were established by law, changes in occupation were prohibited, and various class distinctions in dress and deportment were prescribed by “sumptuary laws” to keep the lower classes in a subordinate role.

As early as 1630, the General Court in Massachusetts undertook to enforce a wage ceiling of two shillings a day for carpenters, joiners, bricklayers, and other artisans, and of 18 pence for all day laborers, with the further provision that “all workmen shall worke the whole day, alloweing convenient tyme for food and rest.” To combat what appears to have been a prevailing practice of supplementing such wages with allowances for liquor (“without which it is found, by too sad experience, many refuse to worke”), the Court further decreed that anyone who gave wine or strong liquors to any workmen, except in cases of necessity, would be fined.

Forty years later, another law reaffirmed these general wage rates, stating more specifically that the working day should be “10 houres in the daye besides

repast,” and extended its provisions to additional artisans. Carpenters, masons, stonemasons, coopers, and tailors were to be paid two shillings a day, special piece rates were established for shoemakers, coopers, and smiths, and, finally, the new statute declared “that whereas it appears that Glovers, Sadlers, Hatters, and Several other artificers doe at present greatly exceed the rules of equitie in their prizes, they are all required to moderate the same according to the rules prescribed to others.”

These maximum wages were in part compensated by the regulation of the prices of certain basic commodities to hold down the cost of living, but the clear intent of the General Court was both to help employers and to keep workers in their place. The high wages some workers were able to command were felt to have highly unfortunate consequences in the puritanical eyes of the New England fathers. “The produce thereof,” they sternly declared, “is by many Spent to mayntayne such bravery in Apparell which is altogether un-becomeing their place and ranck, and in Idleness of life, and a great part spent viciously in Tavernes and alehouses and other Sinful practices much to the dishonor of God, Scandall of Religion, and great offence and grieffe to Sober and Godly people amongst us.”

The idea that low wages and long hours were conducive to the workers’ well-being flowed directly from the reality of work in preindustrial times. Both in the city and the country, workers set their rhythms by nature, not the machine. Custom, not the clock, determined the pace of work and its daily length. Bouts of intense toil alternated with long periods of idleness. It was not uncommon for toilers to break their workday for a period of hard drinking or heavy eating or to observe “St. Monday,” a day off after a long weekend of drinking or feasting. Such customs were obstacles for those who planned to use the labor of others to enrich themselves. Hence long hours and low wages were necessary to reduce idleness and protect workers from the temptations of tavern, cockpit, and playing field.

An even more direct restriction on what might be called conspicuous consumption by workers was laid down in another law regulating just what they should wear. “We declare our utter detestation and dislike,” this edict read, “that men and women of mean condition should take upon themselves the garb of gentlemen.” The ban included “wearing gold or silver lace or buttons, or points at their knees, or to walk in boots, or women of the same rank to wear silk or tiffany scarfs, which though allowable to persons of greater estates, or more liberal education, yet we cannot but judge it intolerable in persons in such like conditions.”

These laws could not be enforced. Although the authorities continued to link the demand for higher wages with intemperance, Sabbath breaking, gaming, and mixed dancing, they could not control the situation. The General Court ultimately relegated the task to local town governments, but even then material realities proved to be a more decisive factor than arbitrary legislation in determining wage rates and social customs.

Although the bulk of settlers tilled their own land and provided through home manufactures most of their immediate needs, craftsmen and artisans played an increasingly important economic role as the eighteenth century advanced. Many of them were itinerants, going from town to town to work at whatever job was offered. One man sometimes plied several trades. A blacksmith would be also a toolmaker, a tanner, a shoemaker, a soap boiler, or a tallow chandler (candle maker). How far a craftsman might be prepared to extend his services is suggested by an advertisement in the *New York Gazette* in June 1775. John Julius Sorge announced that he could make artificial fruit; do japan (varnishing) work; manufacture cleaning fluid, toilet water, soap, candles, insecticides, and wine; and remove hair from ladies' foreheads and arms.

With the further growth of colonial towns, the demand for artisans increased. There were more and more of the small retail shops in which a master workman employed a number of journeymen workers – that is, artisans or mechanics who worked for wages – and also trained boys as apprentices to whatever trade was being practiced. Printing shops, tailoring and shoemaking shops, hat shops, cabinetmaking shops, and bakeries were among such establishments. The work was generally done to order – “bespoke work” – and the shop might often be the master's home, where the journeymen and apprentices could board as well as work. At the same time, the expansion of the building trades led master carpenters and master masons to employ journeymen and train apprentices.

In both New England and the middle colonies, there were also all manner of little mills needing both skilled and unskilled wage earners; in need of labor also were shipyards, ropewalks (rope factories), distilleries, breweries, and paper and gunpowder factories. On the large plantations of the South, home manufactures created a need for skilled labor. Robert Carter had a smithy, a fulling mill, a grain mill, salt works, and both spinning and weaving establishments on his plantation, where he employed free white workers as well as African slaves.

There was at least a beginning of manufacture on a larger scale. By the middle of the eighteenth century, ironworks had been established in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey, which employed a considerable number of men. One set up by Peter Hasenclever, the best known colonial ironmaster, included six blast furnaces, seven forges, and a stamping mill, and he is said to have brought 500 workers over from Germany for their operation. Linen factories with as many as 14 looms foreshadowed mounting employment in textile mills. In 1769, a “manufacturing house” in Boston had 400 spinning wheels, and six years later the United Company of Philadelphia for Promoting American Manufacture employed 400 women in the production of cotton goods. Some of these latter enterprises provided work for the indigent and for orphans – without wages – as a service to the community.

Besides those in manufacturing establishments, other groups of wage earners were of growing importance. The most numerous were sailors, fishermen, and day laborers. Household servants were never available in sufficient numbers to meet the needs of the more wealthy members of the community. “Help is scarce

and hard to gett, difficult to please, uncertaine,” remained a familiar complaint in colonial society. This is why in all the colonies, including Puritan New England, the urban upper class turned to African slaves for domestic help.

As the Revolution approached, there were increasing opportunities for wage earners and a diminishing labor supply as men were drafted for military service, which drove up wages. The earlier attempts to fix maximum rates and control prices were consequently renewed. The Articles of Association adopted by the Continental Congress stressed the importance of such regulations, and several of the new state governments undertook to enforce them. At a convention held in Providence in 1776, attended by delegates from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, agreement was reached on a general program of price and wage control. Farm labor was not to be paid more than three shillings and four pence a day (almost three times the rate of a century earlier), and the wages of artisans and mechanics were to be so fixed as to maintain their normal relationship to farm wages at this new rate. The states concerned acted promptly on this resolution – an early example of an interstate compact – and, when the matter was brought before the Continental Congress, it referred to the remaining states “the propriety of adopting similar Measures.”

Other conventions, however, were not as successful as the one held at Providence in reaching mutual agreement upon prices and wage scales. The Continental Congress finally decided that the whole program was not only impractical “but likewise productive of very evil Consequences to the great Detriment of the public Service and grievous Oppression of Individuals.” It advised the states to repeal existing laws, and this first attempt at a controlled economy made no further headway.

Still, it is well to remember that on the eve of the Revolution no truly free working class existed. A clear majority of those who did not own their own land and who toiled for others were either African slaves or indentured laborers, the former lacking essential human rights and the latter enjoying such rights only in a most limited manner. Even free workers, those not bound or indentured, found their liberty restricted to some degree by statute and contract. It would require decades of political and legal struggle for non-slave workers to achieve real freedom and a bloody civil war to emancipate slaves.

Workers, Politics, and Revolution

Although the material conditions of colonial life made for greater comfort and health for common people than prevailed generally in the Old World, free workers still lacked basic political rights. The right to vote was restricted to property owners, and skilled artisans and mechanics were as helpless in asserting their rights as day laborers. Thus it was no surprise that many such workers sought to turn the struggle for independence from the British Empire into a battle for liberty in the colonies. During the Revolution, artisans

and day laborers protested not only against oppression by a distant England, but also against the controls exercised by the ruling class at home.

The role of small tradesmen, artisans, and mechanics in promoting the revolutionary cause was particularly important in Massachusetts. Again and again, when the ardor of merchants and farmers appeared to be subsiding, the “rage of patriotism” was stimulated by the zeal of those whom the colonial Tories derisively called the “Rabble.” The popular party in Boston, so astutely led by Sam Adams, was in large part made up of wharfingers (wharf operators), shipwrights, bricklayers, weavers, and tanners who were equally opposed to rule by British officials and colonial aristocrats. The Sons of Liberty, and later the local Committees of Correspondence, were generally recruited from workers from the docks, shipyards, and ropewalks. The famous “Loyall Nine,” which was to instigate the mob action that led to the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party, included two distillers, two brass workers, a printer, a jeweler, a painter, and a ship captain.

Such an alignment of forces was also true of other colonies. The Ancient and Honorable Mechanical Company of Baltimore, the Firemen’s Association of Charleston, and the Heart-in-Hand Fire Company of Philadelphia were the nuclei for the Sons of Liberty in those cities. In each instance, their muster rolls show that their membership was primarily made up of small tradesmen and artisans.

Although the first protests against British taxation came largely from the merchant class, which provided the original leadership in organizing the Sons of Liberty, the mechanics, artisans, and small tradesmen voiced the more radical demands in support of colonial liberties and kept up their agitation when the merchants were willing to compromise. The workers’ zealous activity, indeed, often aroused conservative fears that the revolutionary movement was getting wholly out of hand. “The heads of the mobility grow dangerous to the gentry,” Gouverneur Morris wrote agitatedly on one occasion, “and how to keep them down is the question.”

They could not be kept down. Their demonstrations, sometimes leading to riot and disorder, both reflected and intensified an increasing hostility toward the British authorities on the part of the common people. The Boston Massacre, for example, grew directly out of a dispute that had arisen between colonial workingmen and British troops. “A particular quarrel happened at a Rope-Walk with a few Soldiers of the 29th. Regiment,” General Gage reported, “the Provocation was given by the Rope-Walkers, tho’ it may be imagined in the course of it, that there were Faults on both Sides. This Quarrel, it is supposed, excited the People to convert a general rising on the Night of the 5th. of March.”

Not surprisingly, a considerable number of African slaves joined the British cause, their decision based on the promise of their emancipation. However much the American Revolution may have been a struggle for human liberty, it promised only continued servitude for colonial slaves. Those slaves who served the British throughout the Revolution maintained their freedom by leaving the

colonies of their enslavement mostly for the British North American possessions to the north, namely the provinces of Canada.

While the role of artisans and mechanics in the Revolution has long since been recognized, it is more difficult to determine their part in the adoption of the Constitution. They had been neither directly nor indirectly represented at the Constitutional Convention, and little consideration was given in its deliberations to either their rights or those of the common people generally. But in granting greater power to the central government, especially in the regulation of foreign trade, the new Constitution promised certain direct benefits to urban artisans. A central government able to levy protective tariffs against the importation of manufactured English goods promised American craftsmen a more secure domestic market. A central government empowered to promote foreign commerce promised maritime workers, onshore and offshore, greater opportunities for employment. Moreover, the Constitution did legitimate the basic republican principles won in the Revolution. Thus workers demonstrated in many cities in favor of ratification, and their support has been held partly responsible for the victory of the pro-Constitution group in New York.

Whatever their contribution to the movement for independence and the establishment of the United States, the workers' political gains were limited. There were everywhere fears of the "levelling spirit" which had seemed so pronounced during the Revolution, and of the threat to national stability in any further concessions to the democratic masses.

Even Thomas Jefferson, who stoutly declared that "the influence over the government must be shared by all the people," had no intention of including propertyless workers within the scope of those to be granted the vote or access to public office. The democracy that he supported was a democracy of small freehold farmers, and he gravely doubted whether artisans, mechanics, and laborers, without the stabilizing influence of being landowners, could ever develop the republican virtues which he felt to be essential to the functioning of a free society.

Jefferson strongly opposed the development of manufactures in the United States because he was afraid of the influence on its institutions of an increasing number of urban workers. "The mobs of great cities," Jefferson wrote in fearful contemplation of what he felt was happening in Europe, "add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body."

Thus, in spite of the high promise of the Declaration of Independence, the political status of the wage-earning class in American society remained restricted. While free laborers lived well by European standards, with advancing prices in the post-revolutionary period, workers in the little towns strung along the Atlantic seaboard seldom enjoyed much of a margin over extreme poverty. While John Jay complained bitterly in 1784 of "the wages of mechanics and labourers, which are very extravagant," the pay for unskilled workers hardly ever exceeded 15 shillings a week – barely subsistence level.

“On such a pittance,” the late nineteenth-century historian John Bach McMaster has written, “it was only by the strictest economy that a mechanic kept his children from starvation and himself from jail. In the low and dingy rooms which he called his home were wanting many articles of adornment and of use now to be found in the dwellings of the poorest of his class. Sand sprinkled on the floor did duty as a carpet. There was no glass on his table, there was no china in his cupboard, there were no prints on his walls . . . [H]is wife cooked up a rude meal and served it in pewter dishes. He rarely tasted fresh meat as often as once in a week.”

Artisans and mechanics were citizens in a “people’s” republic and could use their citizenship to advance their material interests and to seek to build a society of free and equal, independent, self-employed craftsmen. The ideals of that greatest of American revolutionary pamphleteers, Tom Paine, resonated among urban artisans. In a society still based upon agriculture and handicraft industries, moreover, the craftsman had a recognized and respected status. His way of life may have been simple, but it also seemed to the artisan to be customary, sensible, and satisfying.

On the plantations of the South and the seaboard and interior cities of all the new 13 states, a majority of toilers were neither freehold farmers nor respected artisans. In the South, slaves provided the labor for the largest, most productive, and profitable plantations. And in the cities everywhere day laborers loaded and unloaded ships, transported goods to and from the docks, dug wells, latrines, and water courses, and removed night soil, among other necessary services, all with minimal compensation and no security or stability of employment. Neither slaves nor day laborers had bargaining power or political rights. For skilled workers, defined as artisans or mechanics, a gap between master craftsmen, many of whom had become successful merchant-capitalists, and journeymen widened. The latter, because their skills were in real demand and because truly skilled journeymen were often in short supply, enjoyed a measure of bargaining power that they could enhance by organizing themselves into early trade unions.