

## WORDSCAPE: APPRENTICESHIPS AND INDENTURES

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### INDENTURES

Originally, an *indenture* was a document that is copied verbatim two or three times on the same sheet of paper or parchment. The copies were then cut apart with a curvy or jagged line to prevent forgery and to assure that all parties knew and could prove the exact wording of the agreement. This type of instrument, usually a contract, was used when both parties continued to have an interest in the terms of the agreement. (Eventually it came to be used to refer to many land records, even if there were no indented copies.)

As you can see, this is the perfect mechanism when one individual is contracting with another to work for a specified period of time in exchange for something of value. Most people today misunderstand the term *indentured servant*, giving it meaning beyond what it really had, simply that someone was agreeing to work for someone else under an indenture.

It is clear that many men and women were indentured to pay for their passage to America or elsewhere, whether that passage was voluntary or not. However, there were others who voluntarily indentured to earn money or acquire assets while they were becoming familiar with the new country, learning English, or honing their skills at a trade.

The colonial period saw many individuals come as indentured servants, also called *redemptioners*. There were well-organized systems, with agents in England and on the continent and ship owners and captains who held the indenture during passage and sold it upon arrival to those seeking labor. Because an indenture was a document, it could be sold or *assigned* to someone else. This was done when the owner of that piece described the transfer on it and signed it. If you've ever sold a car through want ads to another individual, you are familiar with this process.

Typical indentures were four to seven years. Skilled craftsmen often received better terms, perhaps even a stipend or tools of their own. In the colonial period, indenture was regulated by England beginning in 1661, which specified that most indentured men and women received clothes and money upon completion of their term.

### APPRENTICESHIPS

Apprenticeships were agreements between a *master* and a responsible party outlining the terms under which a child would work for someone in order to learn a skill. The responsible party might be the father, a probate court (when the father had died), or any other court. We have seen a very few apprenticeships for adults, apparently as a career-change tool.

An interesting aspect of apprenticeships is the language. They often say that the child is to learn *art and mystery* of a trade or skill. Girls might be apprenticed to learn general housekeeping or a specific skill such as spinning. It was expected that the master was to provide the basics of food, clothing, and housing. The master might be expected to provide some basic education to assure that the apprentice be taught "to read, write, and common arithmatick, including the rule of three." At the end of the term, the apprentice might receive a new suit of clothes, tools of the trade, and (occasionally) cash.

The *rule of three*, also called the *golden rule*, was a method for finding a fourth number, given a series of three in which the proportion between the first and second is the same as that between the third and unknown fourth. Basically, it is ratios, if you learned to do those in junior high school. For example, if the three numbers were 1 and 3 and 7, then the fourth number would be 21. (If you don't understand how this works, then you can see why it was considered difficult enough to be specified in an apprenticeship contract.)

Apprenticeships are another class of records that helps us determine the approximate year of birth. In England at about the time the American colonies were being settled, it had been determined that apprenticeships in cities should go through the age of twenty-five. In cities, apprenticeships usually involved a skilled trade, and at the end of the apprenticeships the young man could become a journeyman, but his ultimate goal was to become a member of a guild and a citizen of the town. Thus, in cities the general age of marriage was twenty-five. In country areas, where apprenticeships were more likely to be for less-skilled trades or husbandry, the typical age to complete an apprenticeship was twenty-one (although young men were rarely in a financial position to marry that soon). The latter was more often the case in America.

An apprenticeship agreement usually does not say how old the child is nor how old he or she would be at completion, but it usually gives the duration (year, month, days). Because apprenticeships generally ran until twenty-one, you can use the duration to calculate a likely birth date.

Court-overseen apprenticeships are found in court order books and other court records. Apprenticeships not done by a court were private records, and most do not survive. However, some of them were recorded in deed books (thereby accomplishing the original purpose of a true indenture). We might also learn of such records in courts when there was a disagreement over terms.