REVIEW ESSAY

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COLONIAL AMERICA: LAND OF OPPORTUNITY FOR WHITE BONDED LABOR?


As Edmund S. Morgan noted in American Slavery, American Freedom (New York: Norton, 1975), economic and political opportunity for white Americans developed along with and in consequence of new and harsher forms of bondage for blacks. These two largely quantitative studies demonstrate that Morgan’s thesis can be modified and extended: freedom for some whites (upper- and middle-class) depended upon harsher forms of bondage for the majority of eighteenth century white immigrants to British North America, if the experiences of Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania are typical in this respect. A. Roger Ekirch details how Britain only institutionalized penal transportation in 1718 and sent some 50,000 convicts—80 percent to Maryland and Virginia—by the Revolution. Sharon V. Salinger demonstrates the changing nature of indentured servitude. In late seventeenth century Pennsylvania, predominantly English servants worked about four years for masters in a paternalistic setting and had a good chance to obtain at least a moderate freehold. By the mid-eighteenth century German and
Scotch-Irish servants worked for four to seven years for English masters and once freed frequently became "objects of charity" or were forced to reindenture themselves. Servitude shifted from a mostly rural to an urban institution as Philadelphia merchants and artisans increased their wealth using bound labor and as the gap between the classes widened. Ekirch and Salinger thus criticize the notion of provincial America as a land of opportunity, a land-rich, labor-poor society where servants commanded premium wages and, after their initial bondage, could join society as equals. Instead, they confirm the image stressed in recent work by James Henretta and Gary Nash of a land of increasing inequality as the Revolution approached.

Both Ekirch and Salinger have undertaken prodigious research. If Ekirch has ranged wider—in British as well as Maryland and Virginia sources—Salinger has probed deeper—into the tax, poor relief, and other records of Pennsylvania. Both have combed newspapers for descriptions of runaways and quantified wherever possible. Ekirch’s book is somewhat better written: there are fewer lengthy footnotes and several personal vignettes of convicts which grace his text. But both authors do all that could be reasonably expected with the data, given the obvious limitations of human energy.

Ekirch uses both his own research and the superb recent and voluminous literature on crime and society in eighteenth century England to demolish some long-held stereotypes about convict transports. They were not petty thieves but serious larcenists, for the most part. British justice in fact functioned fairly reasonably, notwithstanding the barbaric statutes, to make the punishment fit the crime. Persons sentenced to transportation rather than death tended to be non-violent, non-repeat offenders. Judges took into account community opinion and the likelihood someone would continue to be a nuisance. Ekirch also nicely shows the ideology behind transportation: Englishmen institutionalized convict servitude abroad because they did not wish to experience visible signs of servitude such as prisons and convict labor at home.

Once the prisoners were out of England, however, concern with justice vanished. The crown contracted with merchants to transport them overseas for a price: some ten percent died on the voyage in the early eighteenth century, in addition to those who perished awaiting shipment. By the 1770s, however, colonial laws against landing diseased convicts and some tolerably humane contractors reduced this rate to two percent. (In the weakest section of her book, Salinger relies on outdated sources and exceptional instances of mortality to argue that about a
quarter of indentured servants, who were generally treated better than convicts, died en route to Pennsylvania.)

Even with large numbers of slaves in the tobacco colonies, Maryland and Virginia proved the best markets for the convicts. They worked as both artisans and field hands. Despite frequent complaints that they were disorderly and rebellious—as were the predominantly young, male servants during the seventeenth century—Ekirch finds little evidence of crime among them. This was neither because work was easy nor because opportunity to rise after servitude was good. Ekirch speculates that small, well-controlled rural communities, absence of tangible goals to steal, and lack of cities to escape to and fence goods accounted for the low crime rate. Convicts did run away in large numbers: many returned to England, where chances of being rediscovered were slim.

Salinger develops a three-stage model to explain the history of indentured servitude in Pennsylvania. The paternal, familial indenture closely linked with apprenticeship developed into a more impersonal, lengthier, cash-for-labor connection over the first century of Pennsylvania's history. Salinger's model of the first two stages is interesting yet not thoroughly convincing. She only has a small group of 196 servants for 1681-1687 to serve as a data base for her first stage. Further, an astonishing number of this group died young—over sixty percent before age forty. Does this statistic argue for paternalism or perhaps an unstructured system given the colony's infancy?

Salinger's description of the decline of indentured servitude is the most interesting and provocative part of her book, which could (and should) be expanded into an account of labor unrest in early national Philadelphia. Indentured servitude decreased because it became more profitable to hire workers temporarily at low wages instead of indenturing them for long periods. In consequence, autonomous protests by journeymen and laborers occurred with increasing frequency after the Revolution. Salinger is alert to the irony: the freeing of labor left it free to be exploited. She points out another irony: the anti-slavery movement in Pennsylvania led to a temporary increase in the number of indentures—freedom for blacks could mean servitude for whites.

Given the limitations of their data, however, I am basically persuaded by Ekirch's and Salinger's argument. But to make a totally convincing case that America was not a land of opportunity for indentured whites someone, sometime, is going to have to discuss the frontier. Ekirch alludes briefly to hordes of former servants migrating to the backcountry and Carolinas; Salinger does not discuss migration out of Pennsylvania or utilize western Pennsylvania sources. In short, they have shown there
was limited opportunity for former servants in the areas in which they were indentured. It would be unreasonable to ask them to perform for North or South Carolina frontier counties the feats of name-tracing and wealth analysis they have done for the seaboard—assuming the data exist. Nevertheless, until the presence or absence of these people in the west is confirmed, historians will continue to debate the problem of economic mobility in early America.