

Case Studies in Indentured Servitude in Colonial America
Jackie Hill

*While Europe groans, distress'd by hostile War,
No fears disturb the industrious Planters Care:
No unjust Sentence we have cause to fear;
No arbitrary Monarch rules us here.
Our Laws, our Liberties, and all are ours¹*

The image of America as a land of freedom and opportunity emerged long before its establishment as an independent nation. After Columbus and other early explorers discovered the rich and vast territories of North America, it was only a matter of time before a frenzied and hopeful mass of European peoples would follow them across the Atlantic. In the early stages of development, the institution of indentured servitude provided substantial numbers of Europeans with both a means of living as well as the possibility of future prosperity. Emigrants would enter contracts of servitude that required labor for a designated period of time, after which the individual received freedom and usually a small tract of land. The nature of indentured servitude as well as the experiences of several individual emigrants encourage a re-examination of the “land-of-opportunity” paradigm. In particular, the auto-biographical accounts of John Harrower and William Moraley provide great insight into early American life, a rollercoaster of devastating hardships made tolerable by periods of prosperity and improvement. Harrower and Moraley’s accounts indicate that indentured servitude did offer an instrument for self-betterment but also reveal that the idealistic view of America fell far short of reality.

¹ William Moraley, *The Infortunate* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1992), 30.

In order to understand the context of the Harrower and Moraley documents, one needs to thoroughly examine the characteristics of 17th and 18th century indentured servitude. British colonial planters in the early 17th century needed a steady supply of labor to manage their crops, and indentured servants offered an ideal and accessible source. Many young men, in England especially, were accustomed to the system of apprenticeship to a master in trade, and the concept of indentured servitude provided a very similar and enticing organization. Europeans signed contracts ensuring that their “ship passage would be paid by the captain in return for the sale of their labour for periods between three and seven years after they reached their destination.”² Servants that arrived without indentures were admitted according to the “custom of the country,” meaning that they were subject to local laws and practices.³ The servants received no wages from their masters, but usually were granted food, clothing, and shelter during their terms. Many servants were promised “freedom dues,” which usually “consisted of goods and sometimes land” and enabled them to become independent settlers.⁴ However, these dues ended relatively early, and most indentured servants who arrived after the early 17th century fared much worse than their predecessors.

The characteristics of indentured servitude reflect the opportunities and limitations of early life in America. Europeans first had to survive the arduous and unsanitary journey across the ocean, during which “hardship was generally caused not so much by scarcity of provisions as their poor quality.”⁵ Serious diseases affected many

² Kenneth Morgan, *Slavery and Servitude in Colonial North America* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 8.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Peter Smith, *Colonists in Bondage: White Servitude and Convict Labor in America* (Massachusetts: University of North Carolina, 1965), 215.

cargoes due to overcrowded conditions and the lack of ventilation between decks. Those who endured the voyage realized quickly that life in America was less than ideal. Upon arrival, the servants “were produced from their quarters, the prospective purchasers walked them up and down, felt of their muscles...and finally, if satisfied, bought them and carried them off home.”⁶ Servants could be bought or sold without their consent and lacked the right to vote, marry, or engage in trade. Moreover, master-servant relations were often less than pleasant; although servants possessed the right to bring issues to court and thus regulate their masters’ behavior, the “fines given to masters were usually less severe than those handed down to servants when cases were decided.”⁷ Nonetheless, the testimonial capacity was a benefit denied back in Europe, and for many destitute and desperate young individuals indentured servitude afforded an enticing escape from poverty.

John Harrower, an indentured servant in the late 18th century, documented his extremely unique and for the most part enjoyable experiences in a three-year journal. Harrower, originally from Scotland, struggled to get by supporting his wife and children as a petty trader. Eventually he became so destitute that he left Scotland to find work in England, but he arrived in London “like a blind man without a guide...and having no more money but fifteen shillings & eight pence.”⁸ Finally, he decided to test his luck in Virginia and set sail on the 26th of January, 1774 with the intent of working as a schoolmaster. Harrower endured a long voyage troubled by poor rations and disease, but when he arrived a merchant named Mr. Anderson promised to settle him as a clerk,

⁶ Ibid., 221.

⁷ Morgan, *Slavery and Servitude in Colonial North America*, 21.

⁸ John Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower* (Virginia: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1963),

bookkeeper, or schoolmaster. William Daingerfield bought him to tutor his three sons, and Harrower's skill and determination elevated his social status and improved his conditions. For the next three years, until his death from a disease of unknown causes, Harrower enjoyed a life of much higher economic and social standing than he could have found back in Europe.

Many aspects of Harrower's life suggest that for some indentured servants, the dream of thriving in the "land of opportunity" could be realized. Michael Zuckerman, in his analysis of early American life, states that Harrower "found that the enhancement of his worldly circumstances brought him a new view of himself...and he was well on his way to being an affluent [provincial] on the Rappahannock River."⁹ Harrower's own description of his daily activities and progress as a tutor does reflect a mostly optimistic and positive experience. In addition to sleeping in a "fine leather bed" and donning very affluent attire with his hair in a wig-like style, he ate "smoack'd bacon or what we call pork ham," and "warm roast pigg, lamb, ducks, or chickens" at the table along with the Daingerfields.¹⁰ Also, in his letters to his wife he praises the pleasant weather conditions as well as his continued good health in an effort to convince her to make the journey as well. "I yet hope," he tells her in December of 1774, "some time to make you a Virginian lady among the woods of America which is by far more pleasant than...the Zetland, And yet to make you eat more wheat Bread in your old age than what you have done in your Youth"¹¹ Harrower had few complaints after his arrival in Virginia and he witnessed remarkable benefits from the institution of indentured servitude.

⁹ Michael Zuckermann, "Tocqueville, Turner, and Turds: Four Stories of Manners in Early America," *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 1 (1998): 31.

¹⁰ Harrower, *The Journal of John Harrower*, 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

Despite Harrower's success in 18th century America, several factors and details regarding his experiences contest the paradigm of American freedom and endless opportunity. Firstly, one must note that Harrower's life was extremely exceptional and atypical of indentured servants, not in the least because he was granted the amicable position as a schoolmaster. Many other indentured servants, for example, endured gruesome plantation labor. Those who were denied the fortune of working under a generous and kind master like Daingerfield were less fond of America and their lives in the new world. Also, Harrower's letters to his wife hint that although he enjoyed economic prosperity, his life was incomplete without the joys and characteristics of family life. On an entry from the 20th of December 1774, Harrower wrote that "last night I dreamt that my wife came to me here," and in several other entries he mentions staying "at home all day," reflecting his feelings of loneliness and longing.¹² To a degree, Harrower did excel in America, but his life was taken by disease after a short three years in Virginia and he never fulfilled his dream of a reunion with his family.

William Moraley was another indentured servant in the 18th century who captured his story to share with his contemporaries. Moraley was born in London, 1698, to a well-off family in the upper reaches of English society. However, he "squandered the residuum of advantages by which he might have retrieved his situation" and gave up a clerkship which would have led to a career as an attorney.¹³ After his father disinherited him and he served prison time for unpaid debts, Moraley sold himself as an indentured servant for a term in the American plantations. Once he arrived, Moraley spent three years as a clockmaker in Burlington, New Jersey, worked for watchmakers in

¹² *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³ Zuckermann, "Tocqueville, Turner, and Turds: Four Stories of Manners in Early America," 28.

Philadelphia, and labored for a blacksmith in Burlington. His experiences were much rougher than those of Harrower; he served prison time, worked for himself as an itinerant, and ruined an opportunity of marrying into wealth. Zuckerman states that “Moraley’s transiency, irresponsibility, and readiness to quit his commitments...were evident” and that he had a “roving temper,” all of which contributed to his failure to succeed.¹⁴ At the end of his tale, Moraley finally gave up on life in early America and returned to England not much better off than he had been at his departure.

Although Moraley did not succeed in the same way as Harrower, he tells his story with a defiant attitude and nonetheless maintains a very positive view toward America. Zuckerman declares that “his memoir discloses nothing of deference in America. No one cowed him.”¹⁵ Moraley bounced from one incomplete job to another, but he assures the reader that he did so voluntarily and out of a personal sense of dissatisfaction. When describing his departure from New Jersey, he claims that “I declared...I would stay no longer, and desired [my master] to dispose me to some other Master, and insisted upon it.”¹⁶ Later, when Moraley’s luck runs out completely, he defiantly states that “I being of a Temper not easily cast down by Adversity, continue, though down, and wait for a Trump Card.”¹⁷ Also, he devotes a large portion of his memoir to a thorough and appreciative description of both the people and the countryside of America. At one point, he notes that in Pennsylvania, “the hospitable Inhabitants dispence their Favours to the Traveller, the Poor and Needy,” reflecting the idea of America as a land where anyone can succeed. Moraley was particularly fascinated by the city of Philadelphia, which he

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶ Moraley, *The Infortunate*, 46.

characterizes as “the Athens of Mankind” with which “no earthly City may compare.”¹⁸ Moraley’s adventurous and entertaining tale almost serves as propaganda encouraging Europeans to explore life in America.

Historians and modern readers nevertheless can detect the exaggerations in Moraley’s *The Infortunate* that weaken both the validity of his tales as well as the potency of America as a land of opportunity. In the afterword of the memoir, the editors Susan E. Klepp and Billy G. Smith state that “a few of Moraley’s assertions are of doubtful veracity” and that he “consistently overstates physical distance and population size.”¹⁹ He omits not only small details but also certain events such as his imprisonment as an insolvent debtor and another encounter with the law for stealing a bushel and a half of flour. Also, one questions why Moraley describes America in such a picturesque manner when he ultimately fails to keep a steady profession and is forced to return to England. Regardless of his commemorative accounts of the people and places in early America, Moraley did not complete his indentured servitude, did not therefore receive freedom dues, and never settled on a place of his own. The reality for Moraley was that America did not provide him with the tools and prospects for economic achievement; the America he depicts in his memoir seems to be the fabrication of an individual who refuses to admit his failures.

John Harrower’s journal and William Moraley’s *The Infortunate* provide a great deal of insight not only into the characteristics of indentured servitude but also into the realities of early American life. Harrower’s experiences, although atypical of most indentured servants in the 18th century, reinforce the idea that some Europeans were able

¹⁷ Ibid., 72.

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

to achieve economic success and live far better than they could have back across the Atlantic. At the same time, his constant longing to be with his family again indicates that even prosperity might not have brought happiness to early emigrants. William Moraley never succeeded from an economic standpoint, but his memoir nonetheless praises America and some of its inhabitants. His exaggerations and fabrications aside, Moraley clearly still saw America in a positive light. Two accounts of indentured servants can hardly give modern Americans a complete or thorough understanding of the institution of indentured servitude, but they remain important especially in relation to the paradigm of America as a land of freedom and opportunity. Moraley and Harrower's stories confirm that whether or not America truly provided European emigrants with the opportunities for a new and lucrative life, the paradigm was a powerful force that the early Americans recognized and put to the test.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.