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White Servitude and the Growth of Black Slavery in Colonial America

DAVID W. GALENSON

The role of white servitude evolved in a similar way during the American colonial period in those West Indian and southern mainland colonies where slavery became quantitatively important. The change from primary reliance on bound white labor to the use of slaves occurred in two steps, with an initial transition from servants to slaves in unskilled field work, followed some time later by widespread training of blacks and substitution of slaves for servants in skilled occupations. The timing of the two steps can be explained as a function of the changing relative costs of indentured and slave labor in the markets for unskilled and skilled labor.

FUNDAMENTAL changes in the functions of indentured labor occurred in the course of the American colonial period in the regions of British America where slaves came to make up a large share of the labor force. An explanation for the observed evolution will be suggested, and some evidence that supports it will be summarized. The description and analysis apply principally to the West Indies, the Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland, and South Carolina. There were of course major differences among these regions in demographic conditions and economic structure. Thus, for example, differences in rates of natural increase and in labor requirements of particular crops modified the roles of both free and bound labor in a variety of ways that cannot be detailed in this brief discussion. Yet certain important regularities do appear in the colonies considered. Although immigration estimates are poor, together these areas accounted for most of indentured immigration; 93 percent of the 20,000 emigrating British servants with known destinations who were listed in six collections of English registrations made during 1654–1775 had one of these regions given as their destination.

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The argument and evidence summarized in this discussion have been presented more fully in David Walter Galenson, "The Indenture System and the Colonial Labor Market: An Economic History of White Servitude in Colonial British America" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1979), a revised version of which will appear as *White Servitude in Colonial America: An Economic Analysis* (forthcoming). I am grateful to Stanley Engerman, Morgan Kousser, and Russell Menard for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE INDENTURE SYSTEM IN STAPLE-PRODUCING COLONIES

The labor forces of the American colonies that became agricultural staple producers went through a series of identifiable periods based on systematic changes in the relative costs of white and black labor over time. The role of white servitude went through basic alterations in the course of this process. Although the duration of the periods varied across colonies, as did the time at which each occurred, these differences in timing of the evolution of the functions of the indenture system in different places need not obscure the similarity of the basic process.

Initially, before adoption of a staple, the demand for labor was quite low. This was a period of mixed agriculture on a small scale, usually that of the family farm. In some British colonies, notably New England and parts of the Middle Colonies, this regime persisted throughout the colonial period. Demand was chiefly for unskilled agricultural labor, and was met by free hired labor and small numbers of indentured servants. The demand for skilled labor at this stage normally was met by the available supply of free white craftsmen.

Introduction of a profitable staple crop raised the demand for labor and therefore tended to raise the level of immigration to the colony. Initially the annual cost of indentured servants was below that of slaves, and planters continued to rely on indentured laborers. The primary demand was for workers to grow the staple, but there was also a growing demand for skilled labor to build houses and farm sheds, to make hogsheads in which to pack and ship the sugar, tobacco, or rice for export, and to perform a variety of other crafts, many of them associated with the processing of the staple.

The supply of indentured labor to a colony generally was considerably more inelastic than that of slaves. Therefore, as the demand for labor grew, the implicit annual rental cost of servants relative to that of slaves tended to rise. This tendency generally was reinforced by a decline in the supply of white labor, in the West Indies and South Carolina as the result of a desire by whites to avoid the gang labor used in cultivating sugar and rice, and in the Chesapeake perhaps due to the diminishing economic opportunities available to immigrants to the region. At some point, relatively early in the colonial period in the West Indies and somewhat later in the southern mainland colonies, the rising cost of white labor tended to make slaves a less expensive form of unskilled labor than additional servants, and the majority of the bound labor force changed from white to black. By this time, the supply of free white artisans available for hire tended to be small, and skilled wages high, as in some regions skilled craftsmen typically emigrated after obtaining their freedom, whereas in others, as one planter wrote of eighteenth-century Virginia, "we have no merchants, tradesmen, or artificers of any sort here but what become planters in a

short time."¹ Although some skilled workers typically were available for hire, particularly recent freedmen, in many places the operation of these forces meant that in this period white indentured servants were a principal source of skilled labor.

Where the size of productive units grew, skilled labor assumed an additional function. Both in the West Indies and to a lesser extent the southern mainland colonies a demand arose for white workers not only to perform skilled artisanal jobs, but also to work as estate managers and overseers of the slaves. This demand was increased in the West Indies both by the large size of plantations and by the high rate of absentee ownership.

Thus, as the demand for labor grew in the staple-producing colonies of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, their unskilled labor forces tended increasingly to be made up of black slaves, while white workers performed the skilled trades. With the exception of the tendency noted above for white servants to act as managers and overseers in regions of large plantations, the basic tendency for change in the role of servants described here occurred regardless of the size of the typical unit of cultivation. The result was perhaps more readily apparent where large numbers of skilled servants and unskilled slaves worked on a single plantation, but the same racial division of labor could be effected in regions of small farms where a skilled servant might be owned by one planter and rented out to others.

This was not the final phase of development, however. The price of skilled servants tended to rise over time, due both to the effects of increasing demand under conditions of inelastic supply and to increases over time in the cost of servants as English wages for skilled workers rose. In contrast, the cost of skilled slaves may have declined over time. The supply price of skilled slaves was equal to the sum of the cost of the unskilled slave and the full cost of training a slave in a skilled craft—both the direct cost of instruction and the indirect cost of output foregone during the period of instruction. The direct training costs were apparently lower, perhaps substantially, for American-born slaves than for Africans, due to their greater familiarity with English and perhaps also to their generally greater acculturation, and the cost of skilled slaves therefore normally would have tended to fall, over time as the share of creole slaves in a colony's population increased.

The result of the rising price of skilled indentured labor, as well as of the declining cost of skilled slave labor, was the widespread investment in the training of slaves to replace servants in the skilled jobs and even in some of the supervisory work of the plantations. Although the dates at which labor supply conditions and the level of demand for skilled labor combined to produce this result differed across colonies, the tendency was present in all the staple colonies. The final result of this process was

¹ Peter Fontaine to Moses Fontaine, March 30, 1757, quoted in Gerald W. Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (London, 1972), p. 9.

clearly visible by the end of the mainland's colonial period, as in many colonies significant numbers of plantations were based almost exclusively on slave labor, with considerable numbers of skilled slave craftsmen as well as unskilled slave field hands.

PLANTERS' REQUESTS FOR SERVANTS

Some evidence indicative of the evolution of the role of the indenture system has survived as a by-product of the process by which prospective servants were located and acquired by planters. Appeals by individual planters for servants survive from as early as 1645, when a Barbados planter wrote to a relative in Scotland that "want of servants is my greatest bane and will hinder my designe. . . . In January next god willing I shall begin to make sugar. So pray if you come neare to any port where shipping comes hither indenture procure and send me [servants] . . . lett them be of any sort men women or boys . . . what I shall not make use off and are not serviceable for mee I can exchange with others especially any sort of tradesmen. . . ."²

Many more such requests from the remainder of the colonial period can be found among the correspondence of planters and merchants. Because little can be known about the representativeness of these surviving appeals of the overall demand for servants, this evidence can be no more than suggestive of the changes that occurred in the use of servants over time. Yet two generalizations about some of these appeals can be made. One is that over time planters increasingly requested servants with specific skills. Construction and wood craftsmen were virtually always mentioned, but orders for skilled men with a wide variety of other skills also appear. The second is that later in the colonial period these appeals for skilled servants tended to become exclusive of the unskilled, as in these requests of 1732–1733 by a Glasgow merchant concerning servants to be sent to Jamaica: "Indent for us any Wrights, Masons, Coopers, Smiths, Carpenters, or Millwrights . . . we do not want any other than Tradesmen at this time . . . minde to Send none but tradesmen for they are not worth sending any other."³

This recruiting evidence therefore points to an increasing relative interest over time of planters in skilled servants, a shift consistent both with a rising colonial demand for skilled labor and with the changing relative cost conditions that caused the substitution of slaves for servants in unskilled field work.

THE COMPOSITION OF PLANTATION LABOR FORCES

The description of the evolution of the indenture system offered above suggests that in the period between the initial transition to the use of a

² William Hay to Archibald Hay, Barbados, September 10, 1645, Scottish Record Office, Hay of Haystoun Papers, GD 34/945.

³ William Gordon to Gilbert Gordon, Glasgow, August 4, 1732, and December 7, 1733, Scottish Record Office, Bught Papers, GD 23/6/9, nos. 6, 14.

predominantly slave labor force in unskilled field work and the later transition to the use of slaves in skilled jobs, colonial labor forces were commonly based on a racial division of labor by skill. Although rare, occasional occupational listings of plantation labor forces confirm this suggestion in specific cases. One of these comes from an inventory of the estate of Robert "King" Carter of Virginia, taken after his death in 1733.⁴ Although the 23 male indentured servants listed made up only about 6 percent of the tobacco plantation's total male labor force, the 13 identified as having skilled occupations comprised 29 percent of its listed skilled workers. An occupational listing of the male labor force of an Antigua sugar plantation in 1768, summarized in Table 1, illustrates a more advanced stage in the substitution of slaves for servants. Thus the eight white servants listed were all either plantation managers or supervisors of the estate's slaves. One indentured blacksmith was present the year before this listing, and another the year after, but all other skilled jobs on the plantation were apparently done by slaves, whose ranks included drivers, doctors, carpenters and blacksmiths.

During the intermediate period, skilled white servants often were used to teach their crafts to slaves. References to this occasionally appear in plantation records, as when the manager of a Jamaica plantation wrote to the absentee owner concerning an indentured potter who would train slaves to refine sugar: "I have agreed with Thomas fforde, Potter, to serve you Three yeares . . . teaching two of your negroes to make potts and dripps and burne and Sett as well as himselfe. . . ."⁵

THE SKILL COMPOSITION OF INDENTURED IMMIGRATION: INTERREGIONAL COMPARISONS

The evolution of the role of indentured labor described here implies the existence of a positive relationship across colonies between the proportion of total immigration to a colony made up of slaves and the share of the servants imported into the colony who possessed skills.⁶ This is because the transition to a primary reliance on slave field labor should raise the proportion of slaves in a colony's labor imports while at the same time increasing planters' demands for skilled relative to unskilled servants.

The evidence of servant registrations on the skill composition of indentured emigration from England by colony of destination can be used

⁴ "An Inventory of all the . . . personal Estate of the Honble. Robert Carter, County of Lancaster Esqr. Deceased, taken as directed in his last Will," Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.

⁵ Edward Atcherley to William Helyar, Jamaica, July 23, 1677, quoted in J. Harry Bennett, "William Whaley, Planter of Seventeenth-Century Jamaica," *Agricultural History*, 40 (April 1966), 121.

⁶ There is no necessary implication of rising skill levels of the servant population as a whole over time because of the possibility of shifts in servant supply conditions, either to a particular region or to the colonies in general. Thus, Table 2 shows that a decline in servant supply in the final quarter of the seventeenth century led to lower skill levels of servants bound for all destinations in the 1680s than in the 1650s.

TABLE 1
MALE LABOR FORCE OF PARHAM HILL PLANTATION, ANTIGUA, 1768

Servants			Slaves*								
Old Plantation			New Plantation			Oldwork			Newwork		
Occupation	Number		Occupation	Number		Occupation	Number		Occupation	Number	
Manager	1		Chief overseer	1		Drivers	4		Drivers	3	
Clerk	1		Under overseers	2		Doctors	2		Boiler	1	
Chief overseer	1					Carpenters	4		Cooper	1	
Under overseers	2					Masons	5		No occupation listed	60	
						Coopers	8				
						Blacksmiths	2				
						Boatmen	5				
						No occupation listed	128				
Total	5		Total	3		Total	158		Total	65	

* Ages are not given for slaves in the listings. This tabulation includes all males.

Note:

	Number	Percent
Total servants	8	3.5
Total slaves	223	96.5
Total male labor force	231	100.0

Source: "List of Negroes on Parham Plantation Oldwork, July 21, 1768"; "List of Newwork Negroes, July 21st, 1768"; "List of Servants upon Parham Plantation, July 21, 1768"; Tudway of Wells MSS, Somerset Record Office, DD/TD, Box 14.

TABLE 2
SKILLED SERVANTS BOUND FOR MAJOR COLONIAL DESTINATIONS, 1654-1775

<i>Place of Registration, Date, and Destination</i>	<i>Number Skilled</i>	<i>Skilled as Proportion of Men (percent)</i>	<i>Skilled as Proportion of All Servants (percent)</i>
<i>Bristol, 1654 to June 1661</i>			
Barbados	924	49.7	38.0
Chesapeake	402	50.6	35.7
Nevis	90	40.4	33.7
All West Indies	1,033	48.8	37.6
All mainland	403	50.6	35.7
<i>Bristol, 1684-1686</i>			
Jamaica	76	34.2	29.9
Barbados	10	20.8	17.9
Chesapeake	14	23.3	14.6
All West Indies	88	31.4	27.2
All mainland	23	26.1	18.4
<i>Middlesex, 1683-1684</i>			
Barbados	77	41.8	39.9
Jamaica	28	44.4	34.6
Chesapeake	115	31.4	23.6
All West Indies	111	41.3	37.4
All mainland	118	30.6	23.0
<i>London, 1718-1759</i>			
Jamaica	866	70.2	68.5
Chesapeake	533	47.5	44.3
Pennsylvania	130	46.3	40.9
All West Indies	991	65.2	63.5
All mainland	713	48.2	44.2
<i>London, 1773-1775</i>			
Chesapeake	2,361	89.0	80.5
Pennsylvania	425	68.9	63.3
All West Indies	12	100.0	100.0
All mainland	2,846	85.0	77.2

Sources: Citations to primary sources on which these figures are based are given below. For references to transcriptions and discussion of categorization of occupations, see Galenson, "The Indenture System and the Colonial Labor Market." *Bristol, 1654-1661*: Bristol Record Office, "Servants to forraign plantacons, 1654-1662," B.A.O. 04220(1), and "Servants to forraign plantacons, 1663-1679," B.A.O. 04220 (2). *Bristol, 1684-1686*: Bristol Record Office, "Actions and Apprentices," B.A.O. 04355 (6) and B.A.O. 04356(1). *Middlesex, 1683-1684*: Greater London Record Office (Middlesex Records), "Plantation Indentures," MR/E. *London, 1718-1759*: Corporation of London Records Office, "Memoranda of Agreements to Serve in America and the West Indies." *London, 1773-1775*: Public Record Office, Treasury 47/9-47/11.

to test this prediction.⁷ This evidence is summarized in Table 2. The earliest registrations show no significant difference in the proportions of skilled men among male servants bound for Barbados and for the Chesapeake during 1654-1661, in spite of the fact that blacks made up an esti-

⁷ The sample includes all collections of English servant registrations surviving in significant numbers. Estimates suggest these may cover 5 percent of total servant immigration to the colonies, yet what is more important is an understanding of any biases the sample might contain. It does not include involuntary servants, principally convicts, and underrepresents servants without contracts,

mated 65 percent of net migration to Barbados during the decade 1650–1660, compared to only 7 percent of migration to the Chesapeake. Yet during the 1650s Barbados was just undergoing its initial transition from white to black field workers, and the servant registrations may reflect both the continuing efforts of the colony's planters to recruit a white labor force and a lag in the demand for skilled labor.

By the 1680s, however, both Barbados and Jamaica had converted almost entirely to black field labor, whereas the Chesapeake was in the process of converting to slavery for a substantial share of its unskilled labor. Blacks accounted for an estimated 44 percent of net migration to the Chesapeake in the decade, but they made up more than 80 percent of migration to both of the servants' principal West Indian destinations. Pooling the two sets of registrations from the decade, those from Bristol during 1684–1686 and Middlesex during 1683–1684, indicates that skilled men made up significantly larger shares of the total men bound for both Barbados (37.5 percent) and Jamaica (36.5 percent) than of those bound for the Chesapeake (30.3 percent).⁸

The difference that had therefore been established by the 1680s grew over time. A number of West Indian colonies imported small numbers of servants in the eighteenth century, but the major servant importer in the region was Jamaica. During the time of the London servant registrations of 1718–1759, the share of blacks in Jamaica's estimated net migration was consistently over 90 percent, compared to proportions generally under 50 percent for the Chesapeake. The share of skilled workers among male servants bound for Jamaica was 70.2 percent, more than 22 percentage points higher than the 47.5 percent share of skilled workers among the Chesapeake's male registrants.⁹ Thus, whereas the dominance of black field labor in the West Indies resulted in a demand primarily for skilled whites, the less complete conversion to slave labor in the Chesapeake left a considerably larger relative demand for unskilled servants.

Tests of the prediction based on comparisons between the Chesapeake and Pennsylvania may be biased by the great quantitative importance of German relative to English indentured immigration to Pennsylvania. If the bound German immigrants typically were less skilled than the English in this period, as appears to have been the case, the skilled proportion of English servants bound for Pennsylvania would overestimate the true skilled share of all indentured immigrants to the colony. This bias may be

bound by the custom of the country. Both of the latter groups probably were less skilled on average than those registered. In the eighteenth century, convicts were bound chiefly for the Chesapeake, and their inclusion would probably increase the differentials of Table 2 between the Chesapeake and the West Indies. Information on the distribution of destinations of servants bound by the custom is insufficient to suggest the effects of their inclusion.

⁸ The differences in proportions of skilled workers between Barbados and the Chesapeake and between Jamaica and the Chesapeake are significantly greater than zero for two-tailed t-tests at the .10 level.

⁹ The difference in proportions is significant at the .001 level.

responsible for the fact that in the earlier eighteenth-century registrations the share of the skilled among English servants was virtually the same for both regions. However, by the 1770s, as blacks continued to make up a considerably larger proportion of the Chesapeake's than of Pennsylvania's immigration, 89 percent of the Chesapeake's indentured male immigrants were skilled, 20 percentage points greater than the 69 percent of those bound for Pennsylvania.¹⁰

To this point female servants have not been considered in this discussion of the distribution of servants. Women servants were almost always registered in England without occupational descriptions. What evidence is available on the jobs female servants performed in the colonies suggests that some worked in household occupations, but some also worked in the fields; the typical relative proportions of female workers in the two types of work are not known. Slaves ultimately came to perform all kinds of household jobs, but it is not known how much training was necessary before slaves could be substituted for servants in these jobs. Table 2 shows the maximum changes that could appear in the analysis of the shares of skilled servants bound across colonies due to the inclusion of women, obtained by including all women in occupations called unskilled. Because larger shares of female than of male servants were bound for the mainland colonies, the differences in the proportions of skilled workers between the major West Indian destinations and the Chesapeake tend to grow; in some cases the magnitude of this effect is considerable. Yet, while the direction of the adjustment due to the inclusion of women is probably correct, these upper-bound estimates may overstate its true magnitude.

CONCLUSION

The transition from servants to slaves in the labor forces of the staple-producing colonies of British America occurred in two distinct steps, as blacks were first substituted for whites in field work, and were only later trained to replace servants as craftsmen and plantation supervisors. The timing of both parts of the process can apparently be explained primarily with reference to the increasing relative costs first of unskilled, and later of skilled, indentured white labor. It might be added that differences in the timing of these changes across colonies can similarly be attributed to regional differences in relative labor costs, but the brevity of this discussion did not permit consideration of these. This analysis reinforces the belief that although the growth of slavery in colonial America may have been due to a decision by planters that was unthinking with regard to the social consequences of their actions, the decisions of individuals in substituting black for white workers can be understood as economic reactions to changing relative costs of the available types of labor.

¹⁰ The difference in proportions is significant at the .001 level.