

How Immigration Shaped America Today

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Indentured servitude is not what typically comes to mind when we think of the Colonial period in America, more commonly we think of racialized chattel slavery. Indentured servants signed a contract which required them to work for free and usually lasted four to seven years. In exchange, the fare to be shipped to New World from England was paid by their master, who were typically plantation owners from Virginia and other colonies. The people who found themselves in indentured servitude were poor, often petty criminals. Sometimes indentured servitude was often an exchange for serving time in jail. People were trying to escape their current lives which were been filled with starvation and even death. The main reason that indentured servants decided to come to America was because after their contract was finished they were given a small amount of money and land. However, only forty percent of indentured servants survived to the end of their contract. Often before the contract ended, the indentured servants were starved and beaten to death so that their master could avoid giving them their payment. There were some laws protecting their rights but not many, and very little to none were enforced due to the lack of empathy for their lives and representation in the government.

Indentured servitude was a form of immigration because the main reason people signed contracts was to get to America to try to build a better life for themselves. Of course, becoming an indentured servant could have been just as dangerous as staying home, but at least there was a chance of improving their lives. England was still recovering from a war; money was spent on supplies rather than the needs and well being of the English people. The population was also growing rapidly which was another factor which contributed to the lack of food during

the time. In England there was also a lack of natural resources which lead to starvation for people who were poor and could not afford food. To escape from starvation people came to the the New World; and because they were poor they could not afford to get here so they became indentured servants to pay for the cost of their journey.

Another reason that I think indentured servitude is a form of immigration is because they came hoping to create a better life for themselves; even if they often didn't receive their payment at the end of their contract. Often it was the only way that they could have a second chance, and all they had to do was sign a contract and they would be sent off to the New World.

In contrast, racialized chattel slavery was clearly not immigration. Racialized chattel slavery started in America in 1619 in Jamestown, Virginia. The landowners turned to slavery because the demand for workers kept growing and indentured servitude was getting too expensive. In the 18th Century alone, 6-7 million people were kidnapped from their homes in Africa and brought to America to become slaves. When the African people arrived in America they were separated from their families, sold and brought to work mainly on tobacco, rice, and indigo farms. The slaves were not allowed to speak their native language or learn how to read or write. Unlike indentured servants, the chattel slaves had no basic rights. Their conditions were terrible, they were beaten, raped and even hanged.

Racialized chattel slavery was not immigration because the slaves did not have a choice of whether they wanted to come to America or not. They were taken from their homeland by force. The Dutch and English had guns and Africans did not, the Africans were overwhelmed and had no way of fighting back. The definition of immigration according to Merriam Webster is "travel into a country for the purpose of permanent residence there." The slaves brought to the New World were not traveling there for the purpose of staying for the rest of their lives, they were forced and came against their will.

The second reason racialized chattel slavery is not a form of immigration is because an immigrant has the option of going back to their home. Immigration can be where people travel back and forth. However, for a slave it is generational; you were born into being a slave and you and your children and grandchildren were slaves.

Finally, the last reason slavery isn't immigration is because slaves were not considered to be people, they were considered property. They were tools to make a profit off of, they weren't thought of as people, they were seen as the equivalent of an animal.

Indentured servitude and chattel slavery were two very different things. For example, indentured servants had laws protecting their rights, however, the slaves did not. The second way that they are different is that slavery was based around racism and using them as free labor, while indentured service was created for cheap labor. Lastly, indentured servitude was a choice and lasted for 4-7 years and slavery was for life.

Indentured servitude and chattel slavery do have some similarities. First, if indentured servants broke certain rules they would get physically punished, however slaves punishment tended to be much harsher. The second thing they had in common was they were both owned by someone and their master had control over their lives. The last thing they had in common is they both worked for no pay. While at the end of an indentured servant's contract they were supposed to be given money and land, but they were often cheated out of it. Of course, slaves were not paid for their labor.

The people who settled in the Northern states were people seeking religious freedom. Economically, they were what we now call middle class. They were tied together as a community because they were escaping religious persecution.

In the Southern states many large landowners were members of the aristocratic class. They were the people who originally introduced the idea of indentured servitude in order to

provide cheap labor. In contrast, people who were indentured servants were poor, therefore there was inequality built into the system in the South, with wealthy landowners and a poor under class of laborers.

Opposition to slavery started early, for example, in 1651, Rhode Island made the first law protecting slaves, which stated someone could only be a slave for a maximum of ten years. The Quakers, a religious society, were the main leaders in the protests against slavery. The Quakers started opposition to slavery in the 1670s because it was against their religion. They were later joined by the Mennonites, another religious group, who were also opposed to slavery. There were also freed blacks that lived in the North who were opposed to slavery.

Early opposition to slavery was done in a number of ways; such as printing pamphlets in opposition to slavery, writing to newspapers, and speaking out at religious services. The early abolitionists also sent group petitions to the government. The Quakers took action against members of the church who still owned slaves. By the late 1750's the Quakers were formally opposed to slavery. As the struggle for independence from England grew, so did the awareness of the mistreatment and oppression of slaves. Some Colonists who were seeking freedom and independence from England, saw the contradiction of denying freedom to slaves. Slavery was gradually ended in the Northern states, but it took the South one hundred more years to do so.

Recent events may remind us of these times in US history. This summer more than three thousand children have been separated from their families at the US and Mexico border when they were trying to cross with their families, escaping from violence and poverty. But as terrible as this is, it is not the first time we have separated families in US history. For example when slaves were brought to the US they were separated from their families, and many never saw each other again. Once they were here, children were often sold away from their parents. The second example is, the US government took Native American children and sent them to

boarding schools against their parents will; in hopes for them to lose their Native American culture and act as if they were white and Christian. Another example was Japanese internment camps during World War II. About thirty thousand Japanese-American children were held in military camps similar to those at the US border. Every time children have been separated from their families, it has been intended to break the spirits of children and their parents, making them easier to control.