Labor in the Colonial and Early National Periods, to 1828

The colonies established on the North American mainland and the Caribbean islands by rival European empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an age of mercantilism, aimed at enriching the colonial powers. The Spanish, who led the way, wrested silver, gold, and other precious materials from their Western Hemisphere possessions. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and British who followed sought similar riches but failed to find the precious metals dug from the earth by indigenous and imported slave labor under Spanish domination. Instead, the Dutch, French, and British relied on other avenues of trade and exploitation to amass wealth. All three imperial nations, the Dutch and the British most especially and the French less so, turned to private entrepreneurs in the form of joint-stock companies to nourish the streams of trans-Atlantic commerce that would fill the coffers of the home country with bullion, the residue of a positive balance of trade.

These three nations found one source of the wealth that they sought in the furs trapped and traded to them by various Indian nations and tribes. Such commerce required no large body of labor employed by the Europeans, other than their traders in the field, nor a large capital stock, other than the relatively inexpensive European goods that they bartered for pelts. The indigenous peoples could organize trapping on their own terms, maintain their customary cultures and material lives, and barter with the foreigners on mutually acceptable and advantageous terms. The French, British, and Dutch to a lesser extent, found another source of riches in the cultivation of staple crops, especially sugar in the Caribbean and tobacco on the mainland. Forest products and fisheries provided other means of income. Whether staple-crop agricultural production, timber and its by-products, or fish for colonial and European markets, each of those economic ventures required an abundant supply of labor.

Labor, however, proved scarce. In the British, Dutch, and French mainland and island colonies the indigenous peoples were relatively few (even before disease ravaged Indian peoples) in relation to land mass and demand for labor. Most indigenous people, moreover, were content within their traditional societies and loath to make their labor available to Europeans.
Some colonists tried to exploit Indian labor through forms of slavery and harsh indenture but such exploitation failed to solve the demand for a disciplined and productive labor force. Without adequate labor, joint-stock enterprises or individual entrepreneurs and planters could not turn a profit.

Two different streams of labor provided the hands to harvest crops, fell trees, manufacture goods, transport the commodities of commerce, and attend to domestic responsibilities in the homes of the wealthy. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the British Isles and several of the German principalities in the Rhineland experienced a glut in their labor markets. Too many casual laborers, artisans, and domestics chased too few jobs; too many rural folk found their labor no longer desired or the lands that they worked inadequate to support them and their dependents. For them, the colonies offered hope, the prospect for employment, and some economic advance. Few of them, however, could afford to finance their voyage across the ocean. In order for them to pay their way, most of Europe’s surplus laborers signed contracts of indenture with future employers (masters) in the colonies or with ships’ captains who auctioned them to buyers in the port of arrival (redemptioners). According to the historian Bernard Bailyn, the indentured laborers from Britain represented the entire spectrum of the British urban and rural workforce, although the Celtic fringe—Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (Ulster)—was probably overrepresented. The British also transported thousands of convicts and many orphaned or destitute youngsters and adolescents to the colonies. The poorest and sorriest in the stream of indentured laborers ended up at work on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and in the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake. There work was harsh, conditions primitive, and life often nasty, brutish, and short. The more fortunate worked for artisan masters in the handicraft trades, as laborers on mixed crop farms, or as domestics in urban and rural households. Well into the eighteenth century indentured servants remained the primary source of labor in the Middle and New England colonies.

Unlike the British who were scattered from one end to the other of Britain’s American colonies, the Germans tended to concentrate in the Middle Colonies, especially Pennsylvania. They proved themselves diligent and productive laborers, who did well when they completed their terms of indenture and gained their freedom from service. Germans played perhaps the major role in transforming the fields, towns, and villages of southeastern Pennsylvania into what one historian has called “the best poor man’s country.”

Indentured servitude alone failed to solve the colonial labor shortage. Indentures served for specified periods, almost never more than seven years and in many cases even fewer. Nearly all contracts required masters to provide their servants with “freedom dues” at the satisfactory termination of service. The survival of the indenture system required an endless stream of new recruits from overseas, the continuation of which was never a certainty. Furthermore, indentured servitude on the sugar plantations and in the