

Richard Frethorne Letter Overview

Posted on September 29, 2018

Introduction

In 1623, Richard Frethorne came over to the Jamestown colony as an Englishman and indentured servant. He settled in Virginia afterward. His letter is written to his “loving and kind mother and father,” describing the dark aspects of life there. The Letter paints quite a scary depiction of what life might look like for the average indentured servant in Colonial America (Frethorne 1-4).

Discussion

Richard Frethorne wrote a letter about his life just three months after arriving in the colony. Richard Frethorne described the severe hardships he is facing in the new world by writing to his mother and father. Frethorne’s heart-wrenching letter delivers an enlightening picture of the adversities of settlement, particularly for indentured servants. He told his parents that he was not happy at all, being so miserable, he missed them and his homeland a lot (Frethorne 1-4).

He talks about the brutal challenges he faced in Virginia. Virginia of 1623 was quite a different place from England. It was the first stable English settlement in Jamestown. Planters in Virginia had abundant volumes of land and a lucrative tobacco crop. They required cheap servants to work in the fields. In employing them, They faced huge confrontations from Indians and were incapable of making slaves out of them, so they employed Englishmen as their servants. In his letter, he talks about how he feels about being in colonial Virginia. Life in Virginia was predominantly tough and difficult for him due to the unavailability of medical supplies, and food items, the occurrence of sicknesses and various diseases were so common, and relations with local Americans were also not very good (Frethorne 1-4).

The tone of the author in this letter is one of despair and humility. According to him, “And I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death” (Frethorne 1-4). Richard Frethorne is disillusioned, miserable, and muddled. He is unable to find his peace both emotionally and physically. He has certainly not imagined the daily life of the indentured servant, which is factually a life, just a step above a slave. According to Mr. Frethorne, “I, your child am in a most heavy case by reason of the country, is such that it causeth much sickness, as the scurvy and the bloody flux and diverse other diseases, which maketh the body very poor and weak” (Frethorne 1-4). He is literally at the point of begging, and he is describing his life to his parents as simply the lowest form of existence. He describes death and diseases like scurvy and dysentery all around him. There is such an ache in his belly, and he misses England terribly; he is feeling isolated, his fellow shipmates are dying at such an alarming rate, and these are only some of the things Mr. Frethorne is

fighting against (Frethorne 1-4).

Richard Frethorne was very unhappy as an indentured servant. Indentured servitude was a highly popular way for the British to quickly populate and profit from American Colonies. Indentured servants is nothing short of the harshest form of slavery. In some countries, including England, several poor laborers were brought to the English colonies to work on the farms. These deprived laborers were tempted by the impression of a fresh and improved life in America. By employing the Indentured servants, the planters would have a higher probability of achieving economic growth (Frethorne 1-4).

According to Frethorne, he believes he may not even live to see a response from his parents. He states, "...if I die before it comes..." (Frethorne 1-4). We can clearly see from Frethorne's pleading letter that the life of an indentured servant was very harsh. Basic rights for indentured servants were not written out clearly. These poor servants were kept hungry and crushed brutally, and they made them work overtime more often than not. If a servant made it through the period of indentured service, it was not likely that they would prosper. Even if Frethorne survives his years as a servant, what kind of life will he have afterward? After enduring the horrible treatment, he is bound to be weakened, physically and mentally. From the way he speaks of England, it seems likely that once his years of servitude are over, he will return to England. Which is again, mostly likely, not what the British government would want (Frethorne 1-4).

Conclusions

This letter really paints a painful picture of the initial stages of a nation that will be entirely reliant on forms of brutal and unjust slavery. The life of Frethorne as a servant before the onslaught of the massive influx of African slaves gives us an idea of how those without rights are treated. This heartwrenching letter gives us a trivial look into the start of slavery in America from a first-hand perspective. It shows us that America was not founded with benevolent laws and freedom for all but that it was founded with the extreme efforts of those without rights and by the British government. A government that became highly intoxicated by the profit it was gaining from an unpaid [labor force](#). This system of profit bled into American life in the coming centuries, setting a precedent for how much profit can be gained with minimal effort (Frethorne 1-4).

Works Cited

Richard, Frethorne. "Our Plantation Is Very Weak": The Experiences Of An Indentured Servant In Virginia, 1623." (1935) pp. 1-4