

On a fall day in 1622, a teenager named Richard Frethorne walked down a dock in London and onto a merchant ship bound for Virginia. He wore the only clothes he owned and his one parcel contained nothing more valuable than a wheel of stale cheese. But as Richard set off to begin a life in America as an indentured servant, he thought only of the wealth and adventure he'd been told awaited him across the ocean.

Five months after Richard's parents waved their son goodbye, a letter came from America. "Loving and kind father and mother," it began, "this is to let you understand that I am in a most heavy case, by reason of the nature of the country, which is such that it causeth me much sickness." He signed off: "There is nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death."

Richard's woes, like those of most indentured servants, began as soon as he set sail. Gottlieb Mittelberger, who came over on a ship full of indentured servants, described the crossing in his journal: "The people are packed densely, like herrings. During the voyage there is terrible misery, vomiting, fever, mouthrot, and the like. The water which is served is often very black, thick, and full of worms. And the lice abound so frighfully that they can be scraped off the body."

Misery

For one indentured servant, life in the promised land was a dead-end street.

But the real horror for indentured servants like Richard was the realization that they had signed away their basic rights. In exchange for the price of their passage, the ship's captain owned them until they could be sold to planters in Virginia. The sick went untreated and the dead were cast into the sea without ceremony. "At length, when the ships come in sight of land," Mittelberger wrote, "the people weep for joy, and pray and sing, thanking and praising God."

AN EARTHLY PARADISE?

If they had known what awaited them, their prayers might have been different. The myth that Virginia was an earthly paradise was cultivated by the Virginia Company, a firm responsible for bringing over workers to harvest tobacco in Virginia. One pamphlet put out by the Company promised indentured servants "houses to live in, vegetable gardens, orchards, food and clothing—and 50 acres of land for themselves and their heirs forevermore." All a servant had to do, supposedly, was work for four to seven years.

But the reality Richard Frethorne faced bore little resem-



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blance to the rosy prose of the pamphlets. He and the other passengers were quickly sold to the highest bidder and put to work on plantations. Each morning, at the sound of a drum, they were marched into the fields. After a long workday, another drum called them to church, then home to sleep on the dirt floors of rat-infested cabins. "Good father," Richard wrote, "you would weep to see me. I am not half a quarter as strong as I was in England. We must work both early and late for a

mess of water gruel, and a mouthful of bread."

The brutal treatment of indentured servants was a secret the Virginia Company went to great lengths to keep. Censors read their letters home, and a law was passed against anyone who "shall dare to detract, slander, or utter unseemly speeches against the Company." Violators were publicly executed.

As for the 50 acres these young men had been promised, few lived long enough to complete their indenture. Thomas Hellier, a contemporary of Richard's, endured all five years of his servitude, only to find that his 50 acres had been sold years earlier. In a fury, Hellier murdered his master and his master's wife with an ax. He was hanged.

There were few happy endings for indentured servants in those days. And the fate of Richard Frethorne was probably no exception. The last time he wrote his parents, he begged them to sell what they had in order to buy his freedom. "Have mercy on my miserable case," he wrote. "The answer of this letter will be life or death to me." Richard was never heard from again.

—David Oliver Relin