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### **Analytical Essays**

***Question 1: You are an indentured servant living in the Virginia colony in 1650.***

***Describe your background, current conditions, and future prospects.***

I was born a German Lutheran in the winter of 1634 and immigrated across the Atlantic to escape Catholic persecution in my native Frankfurt. I came from a large family that was all but destroyed as a result of the violence in Europe. Having little hope of a better life in the midst of such turmoil, I managed to bribe safe passage to the coast with what little silver I could scrape together. In Bremen, I met the captain of a sea-going vessel that offered me safe passage to the New World in exchange for my remaining valuables. Shortly after my arrival in the colonies, the captain sold me to a tobacco planter. Initially, I did not think this arrangement was entirely bad. The planter seemed fair enough and, for a few years work, he offered me room, board, training as a farmer, and possibly land at the end of my period of service (Murrin, 2011, p. 45).

Now that I have a few months under my belt in the colony of Virginia, I am not entirely convinced I made the wisest choice in coming here. Everyone around me seems to be rich, sick, or dying. That is to say, the wealthy land owners here avoid the fields at all cost while servants such as myself work our fingers to the bone and attempt to fight off horrible diseases that strike most men down before their 30<sup>th</sup> summer. The Africans, by far, have it worse than

myself but seem to last longer in this intolerable heat and display an almost mystical resistance to the diseases that plague us of Anglo dissent (Frethorne, 1623).

I still have yet to complete the first year of my contract but I have high hopes. Perhaps because hope is the only thing that I have that truly belongs to me. According to the planter, if I make it to my 24<sup>th</sup> year, I will be a freeman. Although it seems like an eternity, I believe I can do so. Given the chance, I plan on moving north where I hear the conditions are much more amiable. I think, given the opportunity, I would like to travel to New England where there are greater and brighter opportunities for a man such as myself. I would also like to escape these dreadful conditions and perhaps settle down and create a family of my own (there is an incredible shortage of young available women here in Virginia by the way). Until then, I will keep my head down, do what I am told and survive on what scraps are given to me (Murrin, 2011, pp. 49-51).

***Question 2: Why would a European man or woman sign an indenture? Was it a “choice” or were they compelled by “historical forces”?***

European men and women were often more compelled by external forces (such as poverty and religious persecution) to sign an indenture. Entering into indentured service was not an entirely desirable decision but, at times, may have been the most viable option for a great many people. Specifically, poor people and those suffering from many of the harsh conditions, mostly as a result of religious conflicts in Europe, were more likely to enter into indentured servitude than the wealthy or educated (Murrin, 2011, p. 45).

In some cases, indentured servitude was even considered a form of punishment. This practice was common especially among “disobedient” women. Elizabeth Sprigs’ *Letter to Her Father* is a perfect example of such a practice. Sprigs, a disenfranchised English girl, laments in her letter, “O Dear Father, believe what I am going to relate the words of truth and sincerity, and Balance my former bad Conduct my sufferings here, and then I am sure you’ll pity your Destress Daughter, What we unfortunate English People suffer here is beyond the probability of you in England to Conceive...” (1756).

However, indentured servants were offered the opportunity to become freemen after they had performed their obligated service and many of them went on to become small land owners in their own right. This prospect could only have been alluring in the most limited sense though, as the indentured usually had to serve their masters for a minimum of five years in less than austere conditions (Murrin, 2011, pp. 45-46).

***Question 3: What was the greatest threat to the elite’s control over the colonists – fear that was realized in Bacon’s Rebellion? What tactics did the wealthy elite/rich rulers adopt to prevent Bacon’s Rebellion?***

Bacon’s Rebellion was an uprising of the common people of 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia against the aristocracy and the governor of that colony, William Berkeley. Sir William Berkeley was appointed as a provincial governor by England’s King George I and, among other issues, had a fundamental disagreement with Nathaniel Bacon regarding his handling of the surrounding indigenous Indian populations (Murrin, 2011, pp. 77-78).

This uprising was the first real challenge to British rule within the colonies and brought to light several key issues. According to the PBS series, *Africans in America*, the most troublesome among these was that “Bacon's Rebellion demonstrated that poor whites and poor blacks could be united in a cause. This was a great fear of the ruling class -- what would prevent the poor from uniting to fight them” (1999)?

Sir William Berkeley made a deliberate example of the Baconians by overpowering and executing 23 of his followers during the quelling of the rebellion. Additionally, in order to prevent another similar uprising, the ruling elite and wealthy ruled with an iron fist through the court system of colonial Virginia. In fact, Murrin offers, ““A new assembly repudiated the reforms of 1676 and continue[d] the Baconians for years through confiscations and fines” (2011, p. 78).

***Question 4: Explain the pragmatic as well as the psychological reasons that led white American colonists of the seventeenth century to transform the black servant from a human being to a piece of chattel property.***

Chattel Property, or property traded as a personal commodity or good, has been a staple of free trade and global commerce for centuries. Applied to the slave trade, it is relatively easy (yet still unforgivable) to understand why European colonists transformed black servants into commodities rather than people. Realistically speaking, it was much easier to handle slaves as property because it facilitated the trade and transport of those poor individuals. Reducing seventeenth century African and Indian slaves to a property status, as opposed to living human beings with inalienable rights, also physiologically served as a

defensive coping mechanism for a Christian society that may have had hypocritical misgivings concerning the slave trade. Eventually, however, this act would ultimately place more power in the hands of wealthy slave owners by separating impoverished whites and blacks (Murrin, 2011, pp. 26-29).

The Virginia Slave Codes were a stark example of how white slave owners attempted to dehumanize slaves. In addition to facilitating the business of trading slaves, the Codes also attempted to dissuade any slaves from committing criminal acts, to include rebelling against their masters. Many offenses that, if committed by a white property owner, normally resulted in fines had much harsher punishments for slaves. These punishments included such malevolent acts as beatings, whippings and mutilations (PBS Online, 1999).

What also may have initially started as a subconscious psychological coping mechanism to justify the means to an end, eventually contributed to, and developed into, bigotry and racism. Spurred by many factors, some also argued that this reduction in rights and racism was even motivated by class differences within colonial society. Wanting to prevent a second Bacon's Rebellion, wealthy leaders in the colonies drove a divide between poor whites and poor blacks by implementing legislation such as the Virginia Slave Codes (Zinn, 2003).

***Question 5: What were the causes and long term effects of the Stono Rebellion?***

The Stono Rebellion, so named for the Stono River in Charleston, South Carolina, was an uprising of roughly 50 armed black slaves in the early eighteenth century. Although there is some debate as to the details of why the uprising took roots in the first place, it is fair to say that the members of the revolt were very unhappy with the treatment they were receiving

from their white masters. Many of the slaves were so angry that, over the course of one August afternoon, they seized firearms from a local store and marched south on a rampage. Many slave owners were killed by the angry mob before it was put down by an armed group of whites later that same evening (PBS Online, 1999).

Although the specific details concerning the triggering of the Stono Rebellion are still debated today, many historians believe it was in response to Spanish promises that all slaves escaping to Florida would be given their freedom. Indeed, this was the reaction that Spain was looking for as it was at war with England for the control of North America. Regardless of what the Spanish promised, however, the Stono Rebellion did not end well for African slaves in North America. In addition to the immediate demise of the members of the rebellion, other escaped rebels were later captured and killed by English settlers. Wanting to avoid another such uprising, many subsequent laws were later passed that further limited slave rights. Ironically, the rebellion that was initiated under the pretense of securing greater liberties for enslaved Africans ultimately resulted in the loss of many personal benefits and a reduction in the quality of life for African slaves. (PBS Online, 1999).

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