

Richard Frethorne

[d. 1623 or 1624]

Very little is known about Richard Frethorne. He was taught the rudiments of reading and writing, probably in one of the grammar schools that were increasingly common in towns and cities in early seventeenth-century England. At a young age, probably when he was fourteen or fifteen, he sailed to Virginia as an indentured servant. He most likely embarked from Bristol, England, from which approximately 75 percent of the estimated 5,000 men and women came to work in the lucrative tobacco plantations of Virginia. Advertisements promised riches and a new life of freedom, but the reality was far different. These men and women signed labor contracts with ship captains and merchants, "indentures" that usually required a period of work of four to five years in exchange for an individual's passage overseas. When the servants arrived in the colonies, landowners bought their contracts, which were sometimes resold several times. Life on the plantations was difficult, and the servants often labored under harsh taskmasters. Since there were few women in the colony, female servants sometimes improved their situation by marrying their masters, and all servants were free to work for themselves or others once the terms of their indentures were fulfilled. But only about a quarter of the male servants became landowners, since more than half of them are estimated to have died from disease or other causes before their contracts expired, and another quarter remained impoverished or continued to work as servants.

Although it is not known exactly when Frethorne arrived in Virginia, by 1623 he was working as an indentured servant at Martin's Hundred, a plantation on the James River. Established by a London investment company in 1618, the plantation had been devastated during an attack by the Powhatan in 1622, when more than half its 140 inhabitants had been killed and the survivors had been taken captive or fled to safety in Jamestown. Frethorne was among fifty people sent late that year to reoccupy the plantation, where he worked for its unpopular leader or "governor," William Harwood. Frethorne frequently traveled on Harwood's business to Jamestown, where he stayed with a gunsmith, John Jackson. Jackson and his wife were kind to Frethorne, providing him with food and shelter and even giving him additional provisions to take back to Martin's Hundred. By 1625, roughly half of the fifty people who had reoccupied the plantation, including Frethorne, had died, either during another Indian attack in 1624 or of disease.

Reading Frethorne's Letter to His Father and Mother. This remarkable letter, which Frethorne wrote on March 20, 1623, offers a rare first-hand account of the experiences of an indentured servant in the colonies. Penniless, sick, starving, and terrified of an attack by the neighboring Powhatan on

Tobacco Plantation

This early print of a seventeenth-century plantation illustrates the intense labor involved in processing tobacco, from the cutting, stacking, and hanging of the leaves in the drying barn to the packing of seasoned leaves in casks for shipping. Twenty men are depicted at work on the crop, while the man and woman walking hand-in-hand in the left foreground are evidently overseeing the labor of their employees and indentured servants.



the vulnerable plantation, he implores his parents either to buy out his indenture, so that he can come home to England, or to send food to help him survive in Virginia. In a brief addendum to the letter dated April 3rd, Frethorne noted that the starving colonists were desperately awaiting the arrival of fresh supplies aboard the *Seaflower*, unaware that the ship had exploded during a stop in Bermuda two weeks earlier, on March 18, 1623. Frethorne's appeal to his parents was probably never received. Instead, his letter became part of the records of the Virginia Company and stands as an eloquent commentary on the harsh reality of life in the early colony—as he poignantly declares, “there is nothing to be gotten here but sicknes [sic], and death.” Written under great stress by a young man who had only a modest education, the original letter is challenging for modern readers. To aid understanding, we have made some modifications of Frethorne's punctuation, spelling, and orthography, but we have otherwise not altered the original text of the letter, as published in *The Records of the Virginia Company in London*, edited by Susan Myra Kingsbury (1935).

LETTER TO HIS FATHER AND MOTHER

March 20, 1623

Loveing and kind father and mother my most humble duty remembred to you hopeing in God of your good health, as I my selfe am at the making hereof. This is to let you understand that I your Child am in a most heavie Case by reason of the nature of the Country, which is such that it Causeth much sicknes, as the scurvie and the bloody flux, and divers other diseases,¹ which maketh the bodie very poore, and Weake. And when wee are sick there is nothing to Comfort us; for since I came out of the ship, I never ate anie thing but peas, and loblollie² (that is water gruell). As for deare or venison I never saw anie since I came into this land, there is indeed some fowle, but Wee are not allowed to goe, and get it, but must Worke hard both earelie, and late for a messe of water gruell, and a mouthfull of bread, and beiffe. A mouthfull of bread for a pennie loafe³ must serve for 4 men which is most pitifull if you did knowe as much as I, when people crie out day, and night, Oh that they were in England without their lymbes and would not care to loose anie lymbe to bee in England againe, yea though they beg from doore to doore, for wee live in feare of the Enemy every hour, yet wee have had a Combate with them on the Sunday before Shrovetide,⁴ and wee tooke two alive, and make slaves of them, but it was by pollicie, for wee are in great danger, for our Plantation is very weake, by reason of the dearth, and sicknes, of our Companie, for wee came but Twentie for the merchants, and they are halfe dead Just; and wee looke every hour When two more should goe, yet there came some for other men yet to live with us, of which there is but one alive, and our Lieutenant is dead, and his ffather and his brother, and there was some 5 or 6 of the last yeares 20 of which there is but 3 left, so that wee are faine to get other men to plant with us, and yet wee are but 32 to fight against 3000 if they should come, and the nighest helpe that Wee have is ten miles of us, and when the rogues overcame this place last, they slew 80 Persons.⁵ How then shall wee doe for wee lye even in their teeth. They may easilie take us but that God is mercifull, and can save with few as well as with many; as he showed to Gilead⁶ and like Gilead's Souldiers if

1. scurvie . . . diseases: Scurvy, an often fatal disease that results from a deficiency of vitamin C, was especially common among sailors who spent long periods at sea without access to fresh fruits and vegetables. *Bloody flux* was an early term for dysentery, an inflammation of the colon that causes severe diarrhea and sometimes fatal dehydration.

2. loblollie: An English slang term for gruel, a thin preparation of cereal and water.

3. pennie loafe: A law passed in 1266 in England determined the standard size of a common loaf of bread, which sold for a penny.

4. Shrovetide: In the Anglican calendar, the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, the last days of festivity before the forty days of Lent.

5. they slew 80 Persons: A reference to what the English called the "Great Massacre" of March 22, 1622, when the Indians of the Powhatan Confederacy killed 347 colonists, including 78 of the 140 inhabitants of Martin's Hundred.

6. Gilead: Before a battle with the Midianites near Mount Gilead, God instructs the Israelite commander Gideon to reduce the size of his army by telling the men to drink from a stream and retaining only those who scoop up and lap the water rather than kneel down to drink. With God's aid, Gideon's small band of 300 men then crushes the huge army of the Midianites. See Judges, chapter 7.

they lapt water, wee drinkee water which is but Weake, and I have nothing to Comfort me, nor there is nothing to be gotten here but sicknes, and death, except that one had money to lay out in some things for profit. But I have nothing at all, no not a shirt to my backe, but two Ragges nor no Clothes, but one poore suite, nor but one paire of shooes, but one paire of stockins, but one Capp, but two bands,⁷ my Cloke is stolen by one of my owne fellowes, and to his dying hour would not tell mee what he did with it but some of my fellowes saw him have butter and beife out of a ship, which my Cloke I doubt paid for, so that I have not a penny, nor a penny Worth to helpe me to either spice, or sugar, or strong Waters, without the which one cannot live here, for as strong beare in England doth fatten and strengthen them so water here doth wash and weaken these here, onelie keepe life and soule together. But I am not halfe a quarter so strong as I was in England, and all is for want of victualls, for I doe protest unto you, that I have eaten more in day at home then I have allowed me here for a Weeke. You have given more then my dayes allowance to a beggar at the doore; and if Mr. Jackson had not releived me, I should bee in a poore Case, but he like a ffather and shee like a loveing mother doth still helpe me, for when wee goe up to James Towne that is 10 miles of us, there lie all the ships that Come to the land, and there they must deliver their goods, and when wee went up to Towne as it may bee on Moonedaye, at noone, and come there by night, then load the next day by noone, and goe home in the afternoone, and unload, and then away againe in the night, and bee up about midnight, then if it rayned, or blowed never so hard wee must lye in the boate on the water, and have nothing but alittle bread, for when wee go into the boate wee have a loafe allowed to two men, and it is all if we staid there 2 dayes, which is hard, and must lye all that while in the boate, but that Goodman Jackson pityed me & made me a Cabbin to lye in alwayes when I come up, and he would give me some poore Jacks⁸ home with me which Comforted mee more then peas, or water gruell. Oh they bee verie godlie folkes, and love me verie well, and will do anie thing for me, and he much marvelled that you would send me a servaunt to the Companie. He saith I had been better knockd on the head, and Indeede so I fynd it now to my greate greife and miserie, and saith, that if you love me you will redeeme me suddenlie,⁹ for which I doe Intreate and begg, and if you cannot get the merchants to redeeme me for some litle money, then for God's sake get a gathering or intreat some good folks to lay out some litle Sum of moneye, in meale, and Cheese and butter, and biefefe, anie eating meate will yeald great profit, oile and vyniger is verie good, but ffa-ther there is greate losse in leakinge,¹⁰ but for God's sake send beife and Cheese and butter or the more of one sort and none of another, but if you send Cheese it must bee very old Cheese, and at the Chesmongers you may buy good Cheese for twopence

7. bands: Collars.

8. Jacks: Fish.

9. redeeme me suddenlie: Immediately pay off his indenture, the contract governing his term of work in Virginia.

10. greate losse in leakinge: Most cargo was carried in barrels made of wood slats bound together with metal hoops. The constant shifting of a ship in rough seas and the changing weather conditions often caused the slats to contract and the barrels to leak.

farthing or halfpenny that will be liked verie well, but if you send Cheese you must have a Care how you packe it in barrells, and you must put Coopers Chips¹¹ between every Cheese, or else the heat of the hold will rott them, and looke whatsoever you send me be it never so much looke what I make of it I will deale trulie with you I will send it over, and begg the profit to redeeme me, and if I die before it Come I have intrreated Goodman Jackson to send you the worth of it, who hath promised he will; If you send you must direct your letters to Goodman Jackson, at James Towne a Gunsmith. (you must set downe his frayt¹²) because there bee more of his name there; good ffather doe not forget me, but have mercy and pittye my miserable Case. I know if you did but see me you would weepe to see me, for I have but one suit, but it is a strange one, it is very well guarded, wherefore for God's sake pittie me, I pray you to remember my love to all my ffriends, and kindred, I hope all my Brothers and Sisters are in good health, and as for my part I have set downe my resolution that certainele will be, that is, that the Answere of this letter will be life or death to me, therefore good ffather send as soone as you can, and if you send me anie thing let this bee the marke. ROT

Richard Ffrethorne
Martyns Hundred.

The names of them that bee dead of the Companie came over with us to serve under our Lieutenants.

John Flower	John Sanderford	Geor: Goulding	a litle Dutchman
John Thomas	Rich: Smith	Jo: Johnson	one woman
Tho: Howes	John Olive	or Lieutenant, His	one maid
John Butcher	Tho: Peirsman	father and brother }	one child
	Willm: Cerrell	Tho: Giblin	
		Geo: Banum	

All these died out of my master's house, since I came, and wee came in but at Christmas and this is the 20th day of March and the sailors say that there is two thirds of the 150 dead already and thus I end prayeing to God to send me good successe that I may be redeemed out of Egypt. So vae in Christo.¹³

[1623, 1935]

11. Coopers Chips: Chips of wood left over from making barrels.
 12. set downe his frayt: That is, give his freight address, as indicated in the preceding sentence.
 13. vae in Christo: Farewell in Christ (Latin).

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