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Immigration and Ethnic Diversity

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Annotation:

During the eighteenth century, the colonial population grew at an astounding rate, doubling every twenty-five years. A significant part of this growth was the result of natural increase. At a time when the average English family had just three or four children survive to adulthood, the figure in the colonies was around seven. But the increase in population also reflected rapid immigration.

Immigration had a variety of sources. During the eighteenth century between 500,000 and 600,000 slaves were forcibly imported into the North American colonies. Another source of newcomers was the Scotch-Irish, descendants of sixteenth-century Scottish Presbyterians who had settled in northern Ireland. Fleeing rising rents imposed by absentee English landlords as well as a tax system that required them to pay tithes to support the Anglican church, about 100,000 people from Ireland came to the American colonies between 1720 and 1755.

During this same period, some 65,000 Protestants left an area in Germany's Rhine valley known as the Rhenish Palatinate for the American colonies, fleeing religious persecution and crop failures. By 1775, the Pennsylvania Dutch (actually "Deutsch" for Germans) made up a third of the colony's population.

South of New England, half of all immigrants arrived in various forms of unfreedom: as indentured servants, apprentices, tenants, convicts, or slaves. George Washington's namesake--a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses named George Erskine, who served as Washington's mother's legal guardian--had been kidnapped as a boy in Wales and sold as a servant in Virginia. Thomas Paine (1737-1809) arrived in Philadelphia in 1774 on a vessel carrying 122 indentured servants.

About a third of eighteenth-century Germans came as "redemptioners," who sold themselves or their children for a term of years in return for transportation to the American colonies. By 1750, when Gottlieb Mittelberger, a schoolteacher from the Duchy of Wurttemberg left his wife and children to travel to America, recruitment and transportation of German settlers was controlled by Dutch shippers, who charged the emigrants by the day. Upon arrival in Philadelphia, the emigrants were kept on shipboard until someone agreed to pay the costs of their transportation. To obtain payment, many redemptioners agreed to serve a three or more years term of service and bound out their children until the age of 21.

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During the voyage there is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, many kinds of sea-sickness, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and the like, all of which come from old and sharply salted food and meat, also from very bad and foul water, so that many die miserably.

Add to this, want of provisions, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, anxiety, want, afflictions, and lamentations, together with other trouble, as for example, the lice abound so frightfully, especially on sick people, that they can be scraped off the body. The misery reaches the climax when a gale rages for two or three nights and days, so that every one believes the ship will go to the bottom with all human beings on board. In such a visitation the people cry and pray most piteously....

At length, when, after a long and tedious voyage, the ships come in sight of land, so that the promontories can be seen, which the people were so eager and anxious to see, all creep from below on deck to see the land from afar, and they weep for joy, and pray and sing, thanking and praising God....

But alas! When the ships have landed at Philadelphia after their long voyage, no one is permitted to leave them, except those who pay for their passage or can give good security. The others, who cannot pay, must remain on board the ships till they are purchased, and are released from the ships by their purchasers. The sick always fare the worst, for the healthy are naturally preferred and purchased first. And so the sick and wretched must often remain on board in front of the city for two or three weeks, and frequently die; whereas many a one, if he could pay his debt and were permitted to leave the ship immediately, might recover and remain alive....

The sale of human beings in the market on board the ship is carried on thus: every day Englishmen, Dutchmen, and High-German people come from the city of Philadelphia and other places, in part from a great distance, say 20, 30, or 40 hours away, and go on board the newly arrived ship that has brought and offers for sale passengers from Europe, and select among the healthy persons such as they deem suitable for their business, and bargain with them how long they will serve for their passage-money, which most of them are still in debt for. When they come to an agreement, it happens that adult persons bind themselves in writing to serve 3, 4, 5, or 6 years for the amount due by them, according to their age and strength. But very young people, from 10 to 15 years, must serve till they are 21 years old.

Many parents must sell and trade away their children like so many head of cattle; for it their children take the debt upon themselves, the parents can leave the ship free and unrestrained. But as the parents often do not know where and to what people their children are going, it often happens that such parents and children, after leaving the ship, do not see each other again for many years, perhaps no more in all their lives.

When people arrive who...have children under 5 years, the parents cannot free themselves by them; for such children must be given to somebody without compensation to be brought up, and they must serve for their bringing up till they are 21 years old. Children from 5 to 10 years, who pay half price for their passage, viz. 30 florins, must likewise serve for it till they are 21 years of age. They cannot, therefore, redeem their parents by taking the debt of the latter upon themselves. But children above 10 years can take part of their parents' debt upon themselves.

A woman must stand for her husband if he arrives sick, and in like manner a man for his sick wife, and take the debt upon herself or himself, and thus serve 5 to 6 years, not alone for his or her own debt, but also for that of the sick husband or wife. But if both are sick, such persons are sent from the ship to the sick-house, but not until it appears probable that they will find no purchasers. As soon as they are well again they must serve for their passage, or pay if they have means.

It often happens that whole families--husband, wife, and children--are separated by being sold to different purchasers, especially when they have not paid any part of their passage-money.

When a husband or wife has died at sea when the ship has made more than half of her trip, the survivor must pay or serve not only for himself or herself, but also for the deceased....

If some one in this country runs away from his master, who has treated him harshly, he cannot get far. Good provision has been made for such cases, so that a runaway is soon recovered. He who detains or returns a deserter receives a good reward.

Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750 (1898), 20-29

Source: Gottlieb Mittelberger, Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750 (Philadelphia: J.J. McVey, 1898).

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