
Overview

The main purpose of this lesson is for students to use primary sources to compare and contrast the experiences of 18th and 19th century children and teenagers of varying genders and races who were contractually bound as apprentices. Working in pairs, students will have an opportunity to view and discuss a particular young person’s apprenticeship indenture (contract) in the context of the time period, and what was expected of both parties. They will record their findings for their individual, and then come together as a class to present their person’s contract. The class may discuss the what they have learned about the legal, economic and social circumstances of these young people. Students may also discuss those experiences compared with expectations of society today.

Essential Question: What can the exploration of a child’s or teenager’s apprenticeship indenture from the 18th or 19th century tell us about the life experiences of those young people in context, and how does that compare to young peoples’ lives today?

Grade Level(s): middle school or high school U.S. history; Virginia history

Time Needed: 30-45 minutes

Objectives

Learning Objectives or Topic:

- Students will use primary sources to identify and analyze a particular historical experience and place it in a broader context.
- Students will investigate the idea of a binding contract and what that means for both parties of the contract.
- Students will work together to use primary source evidence and their own knowledge and experience to draw conclusions and make meaningful generalizations.

Standards:

USI=5th grade; USII=6th grade; VUS=11th grade

VUS.a; USI.a; USII.a The student will apply history and social science skills to the content by selecting and synthesizing evidence from information sources including, but not limited to artifacts, primary and

secondary sources, charts, graphs, and diagrams, to question and understand information about events in Virginia and United States history.

USI.c; USII.c The student will apply history and social science skills to the content by developing questions, enhancing curiosity, and engaging in critical thinking and analysis.

VUS.e; USI.e; USII.e The student will apply history and social science skills to the content by comparing and contrasting historical, cultural, economic, and political perspectives.

USI.5.c The student will apply history and social science skills to the content by comparing life from the perspectives of various groups including, but not limited to large landowners, farmers, artisans, clergy, merchants, women, indentured servants, and enslaved and free Blacks.

Tools to Evaluate Learning

Primary Sources Worksheet: "This Indenture...Witnesseth": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures

Instructor Resources

Establishing Context:

Students will already have studied the concept of indentured servitude and enslavement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For step 4 of the activity, you will introduce students to the concept of the Overseers of the Poor and apprenticeship. For step 5, you will explain the ways in which apprenticeship laws differed between apprentices and people of color. See those steps for additional information.

Other resources listed in "Explore More" below may help the teacher prepare and provide context. This activity will reinforce the standards listed above in an interactive way.

Source:

[Henrico County \(Va.\) Apprenticeship Indentures, 1795-1871](#). Local government records collection, Henrico County Court Records, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Vocabulary/concepts:

- indenture
- apprentice
- master (of a trade)
- Overseer of the poor
- To "bind" yourself to someone
- British currency (pounds/shillings) vs. American dollars

Materials:

- Copy of *Primary Sources Worksheet: "This Indenture...Witnesseth": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures* for every student
 - *Documents and Transcriptions: "This Indenture...Witnesseth": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures* document. Includes images of the original documents (with references to three available transcriptions); one document for each student or pair.
 - PowerPoint *"This Indenture...Witnesseth": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures* presentation with transcriptions to present to the class
 - Pencils for each student
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Lesson

Before Class:

Room should be set up to allow for collaboration in pairs. Know how many students to expect, such that you can pair them and know how many pairs that will be. There are ten documents in this lesson, and a few are more complex, so you may duplicate however many sets of documents are needed. Merely ensure that any duplicated documents are distributed to students/pairs that are not seated near one another.

Print each set of documents in color if possible. Prior to the session, keep them in numerical order, and paper clip them together. If more than one set is needed, keep them in numerical order and paper clip them together also.

Activity:

1. Seat students in pairs. Provide each student (or pair) with the student worksheet *Primary Sources Worksheet: "This Indenture...Witnesseth": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures* and have each put their names on it immediately.
2. Open by discussing with students questions such as: What are some important jobs in our world today? How does a person know what kinds of jobs they can do? Are there certain qualifications or training required for some of these jobs? How do you get those qualifications or training? If you had to get a job today, what could YOU do?
3. Tell them that they will be traveling back in time about 200 years and exploring the types of work that children or teenagers were often required to do if they were orphans or if their parents could not take care of them.

4. Addressing some of the vocabulary listed above, explain that in 1780 the government of Virginia (the Virginia General Assembly) established an elected group of people called [Overseers of the Poor](#), who would be elected in their local counties. The Overseers provided food, clothing, shelter, and medical treatment for any people who were too poor to support themselves or too sick to provide for their basic needs, or their children's needs. They also "bound out" children whose parents could not support them or who failed to educate or instruct them, as well as orphans to become apprentices. The boys learned a trade and the girls learned domestic skills. They were expected to serve for a certain number of years, obeying their "master," and when their apprenticeship was over, they were ostensibly free to work on their own.
5. As three of the ten documents relate to free children of color, you may also [explain laws regarding apprenticeships](#) for people of color:

In 1765, the General Assembly established that illegitimate children of "woman servants, Negroes, white women by Negroes were to be bound out" until the age of 21 for males and 18 for females. In 1785, the General Assembly transferred this responsibility to the Overseers of the Poor.

White children were to be taught various skills including reading, writing, and arithmetic. In 1805, the General Assembly amended the previous act to no longer require the master of "black or mulatto orphans" to teach reading, writing, or arithmetic, with the intent that this would prevent Black children from learning these skills.

6. Provide every student in a group with a facsimile of their group's original document. If a document also has a transcription, you may provide the students with the matching transcription. This should take between 5-10 minutes.
7. Be sure the PowerPoint "*This Indenture...Witnesseth*": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures is ready for displaying documents.
8. Once the students have completed the activity, use the PowerPoint "*This Indenture...Witnesseth*": Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures as a guide and ask student groups to report on their document. If more than one pair has the same document, the teacher may ask each to state one of the answers.

9. Then, discuss any interesting factors pertaining to that person's indenture, and compare it with other indentures that have been presented. What generalizations can be made based on the evidence of these documents? Were there any surprises?
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Alterations/Extensions

If the teacher is interested in focusing specifically on Black and multiracial people, the teacher may explore digital content of apprenticeship indentures available in Virginia Untold. See related links in "Explore More," below.

Explore More

- The documents for this activity were selected from [Henrico County \(Va.\) Apprenticeship Indentures, 1795-1871](#). This collection contains documentation for over 80 individuals, so there are many more to see.
 - As of 2025, the Library of Virginia has finding aids for [collections of original apprenticeship indentures](#) processed and made available for over 40 localities. Come and explore them!
 - Many apprenticeship indentures involving [Black or multiracial people](#) from many localities have been scanned and are available digitally, often with transcriptions, at [Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative](#).
 - See specifically LVA's *Uncommonwealth* blog 5/27/2020 [The Farmer's Apprentice: African American Indentures of Apprenticeship in Virginia](#)
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Answer Key – Primary Sources: “This Indenture...Witnesseth”: Exploring Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures

Henrico County Apprenticeship Indentures Needed for the Core Activity

What was the name of the apprentice?
What was the apprentice’s age and gender?
What was the name of the person for whom the apprentice worked?
What job or skill was the apprentice supposed to learn?
What was the apprentice agreeing to do, according to the document? A few things: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A• B• C
What was the apprentice’s “master” agreeing to do, according to the document? A few things: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A• B• C
Was the apprentice supposed to be paid? If so, how much?
What date did the apprenticeship agreement begin?
When was that apprenticeship supposed to end?
Do you think this agreement was fair? Why or why not?

Answers for each primary document

[1]	<p>Apprentice Name: Solomon Veney Gender & Age: male, age unknown Name of Master: Thomas Veney Job/skill: planter Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve B) Keep secrets C) Obey lawful commands</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging C) Teach to read/write and do arithmetic to “rule of three” Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 3 pounds 10 shillings at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Oct. 4, 1796 When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss...</p>
[2]	<p>Apprentice Name: Samuel Patterson Gender & Age: male, age unknown Name of Master: John W. Smith Job/skill: tailor Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve B) Keep secrets C) Obey lawful commands</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging C) Teach to read/write and do arithmetic to “rule of three” Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 6 pounds at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Nov. 13, 1817 When apprenticeship would end: 3 yrs, 3 mo. Was this fair: discuss</p>
[3]	<p>Apprentice Name: Nathan Lewis Gender & Age: male, 16, “free boy” Name of Master: Ephraim Speed Job/skill: blacksmith Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve in lawful business B) Behave honestly/orderly toward master and rest of family</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Teach whatever else “belongeth” or “appertaineth” C) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, twelve dollars at end of term Date apprenticeship began: May 5, 1820 When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss</p>

[4]	<p>Apprentice Name: Richard Wade Gender & Age: male, 18 Name of Master: Jesse Franklin Job/skill: shoemaker Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve in lawful business B) Behave honestly/orderly toward master and rest of family</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Teach whatever else “belongeth” or “appertaineth” C) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging D) Teach to read/write and do arithmetic to “rule of three” Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 12 dollars at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Jan 12, 1828 When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss</p>
[5]	<p>Apprentice Name: Margaret Ford Gender & Age: female, 12 Name of Mistress: Patsey Allen Job/skill: housewifery Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve in lawful business B) Behave honestly/orderly toward master and rest of family</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Teach whatever else “belongeth” or “appertaineth” C) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 12 dollars at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Jul. 3, 1828 When apprenticeship would end: Age 18 Was this fair: discuss</p>
[6]	<p>Apprentice Name: Elizabeth Isaacks Gender & Age: female, 12 Name of Master: William O. Tripp Job/skill: housewifery Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve in lawful business B) Behave honestly/orderly toward master and rest of family</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Teach whatever else “belongeth” or “appertaineth” C) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 12 dollars at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Sep. 4, 1828 When apprenticeship would end: Age 18 Was this fair: discuss</p>

[7]	<p>Apprentice Name: Beverley Gender & Age: male, 5, “free boy” [age found on second document; not on indenture document] Name of Master: James O’Brine Job/skill: farming Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve B) Keep secrets C) Obey lawful commands</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 3 pounds 10 shillings at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Jun 14, 1832 (order date was Jan. 4, 1830) When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss</p>
[8]	<p>Apprentice Name: William Isaac Gender & Age: male 13 Name of Master: Charles Purcell Job/skill: house painting Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve B) Keep secrets C) Obey lawful commands</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging C) Teach to read/write and do arithmetic to “rule of three” Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 3 pounds, 10 shillings at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Apr. 25, 1834 When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss</p>
[9]	<p>Apprentice Name: Jesse Clarke Gender & Age: male, 9 Name of Master: Frederick A. Mayo Job/skill: book binding Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve B) Keep secrets C) Obey lawful commands</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging C) Teach to read/write and do arithmetic to “rule of three” Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 3 pounds, 10 shillings at end of term Date apprenticeship began: Mar. 19, 1835 When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss</p>
10]	<p>Apprentice Name: Thomas Spurlock Gender & Age: male, 18, “free boy” Name of Master: Nathaniel Crow Job/skill: carpenter Apprentice agreed to...: A) Faithfully serve in lawful business B) Behave honestly/orderly toward master and rest of family</p>	<p>Master agreed to: A) Teach the trade B) Provide food, drink, clothes, washing, lodging Was apprentice paid, and if so how much: Yes, 25 dollars per year Date apprenticeship began: Dec. 12 1842 When apprenticeship would end: Age 21 Was this fair: discuss</p>