

Youth In America: Indentured Servant Contracts

Democracy Quest Lesson

Compelling Questions	
Unit Question	In what ways does the Constitution meet or not meet its intended objectives? Additionally, did the Constitution make things better?
Lesson Compelling Question	How did the various potential paths to adulthood for youth in the Founding Era differ in terms of equality and opportunity?
Objectives	Students will learn that young people entered indentured servant arrangements in order to procure training and economic opportunity, and what those arrangements consisted of.
Supporting Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was indentured servitude? • What demands did indentures impose on young people? • What did young people receive through these arrangements? • How fair or unfair were indentured servitude contracts for young people? • How do these indentured servitude contracts reveal the expectations and opportunities available for boys and girls during this time period?

Featured Sources

John Henry Coats Indenture Contract • Signed May 23, 1750

Letitia Board Indenture Contract • Signed January 28, 1794

Learning Plan

Staging the Question:

- Before public education became common, how did they develop the knowledge and skills they needed to get a job? Where do you think they would go and how would they learn?
- Provide a few minutes for students to jot down their thoughts, ideas, and questions on a piece of paper.
- Allow students to discuss their responses with a neighbor.
- Discuss the results as a whole class - how did young people develop job skills before we developed a comprehensive education system?
- most children spent very little time in school. Abraham Lincoln reported that he spent less than 12 months in school in his whole life.
- The education you did receive at school was not enough to get a job. Some students learned their trade by working alongside their parents. If you wanted to learn a job that your parents did not do, you needed to become an apprentice to someone who worked in that field. For example, Benjamin Franklin did not want to become a candle maker like his father, so he was apprenticed to a printer and learned the printing and publishing trade.

Background Information:

- Public elementary schools existed in colonial times, but access was limited, and attendance was not required. Students who went to school would learn the basics of the three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic but

- To ensure this arrangement, children and parents would sign an indentured servitude contract with the business owner or craftsman to ensure that the child could work as an apprentice. Children would often enter into this arrangement between the ages of 12 and 19, after which they were considered an adult and could begin their career. Once this agreement was signed, the child owed their obedience to their master or mistress, who assumed authority over the child as a sort of parent until the contract expired.
- In this lesson, we will compare two indentured servant agreements that were created in the 1700s, one for a young boy and one for a young girl.
- John Henry Coats and his father signed an indenture agreement in 1750 to learn the trade of being a “cordwainer” or shoemaker.
- Letitia Board and her mother signed an indenture with the consent of her mother to learn the trade of being a housewife.

Reading the Sources

Before Reading:

In this section, our goal is to compare two indentured servitude contracts to understand and evaluate indentured servant arrangements. We will focus on the demands these arrangements placed on young people as well as the benefits young people were supposed to receive. We will also evaluate how girls and boys were treated in these arrangements.

- Make a three-column chart for student notetaking:
 - John Henry Coats
 - Both
 - Letitia Board
- Inform students that they will write down factors unique to John and Letitia’s arrangements in their own columns, and list facts that both contracts had in common in the center column

During Reading

- Remind students that these are actual contracts signed by the child, their parent, and the new adult who will take on the child as an apprentice
- Read the John Henry Coats source aloud together as a whole class
- Read the Letitia Board column aloud as a whole class
- Pause and identify important vocabulary words as needed for each source
- Ask students if they have any questions

Analyzing the Source

- Remind students of the task:
 - Understand and evaluate the demands these contracts placed on children and the benefits young people were supposed to receive
 - Compare the experiences and expectations of boys and girls in indentured servant arrangements during the founding era.
- Have students look for:
 - Obligations and expectations of the child – what is the child expected to do or not do in this apprenticeship?
 - Obligations and expectations of the adult – what is the child expected to learn and be able to do by the end of this apprenticeship?
 - Other terms and conditions – for example, how long is the contract for?
- Modeling - identify one or two facts and place them in the correct column for students to see.
- Place students into pairs or small groups. Have them go through each line of the contracts, comparing the two, and sorting facts into the correct columns
- Comparison with VR Character (see Youth Discussion Activity worksheet)
 - Have students make a 3-column chart on a piece of paper.
 - Label the left column Letitia James & John Henry Coats. Label the right column Samuel Turner (the AI character). Label the middle column “similarities.”
 - Have students write down the unique experiences of the youth apprentices in their character columns. Then have students write down the similarities in the center column.
 - Discuss the results as a class.

Discussion

- Ask students to identify the similar aspects of both John and Letitia’s contracts.
- Ask students to identify the unique aspects of the Coats and Letitia contracts.
- Reflect - How do these contracts reveal ways in which boys and girls were treated differently under these arrangements? What were the different skills and opportunities they received?
- Evaluate the conditions of the contract. Do you think these contracts made fair demands about what the young people were expected to do and not do during their teenage years?

Performance Task (Choose 1)

Task 1: Mediation Lawyer

Pretend you are a lawyer for one of the two families. Provide 3-5 additional expectations or protections that the adult should provide to the children in this arrangement. Or, draw up a new indentured servant contract from scratch. What should be included and provided?

Task 2: Writing Prompt

Write a paragraph about why indentured servitude arrangements are not ideal for children, and why students should be provided with a wide-ranging education system to prepare them for life in our society. What should an education provide that indentured servitude arrangements do not provide?

Task 3: Character Diary Entry

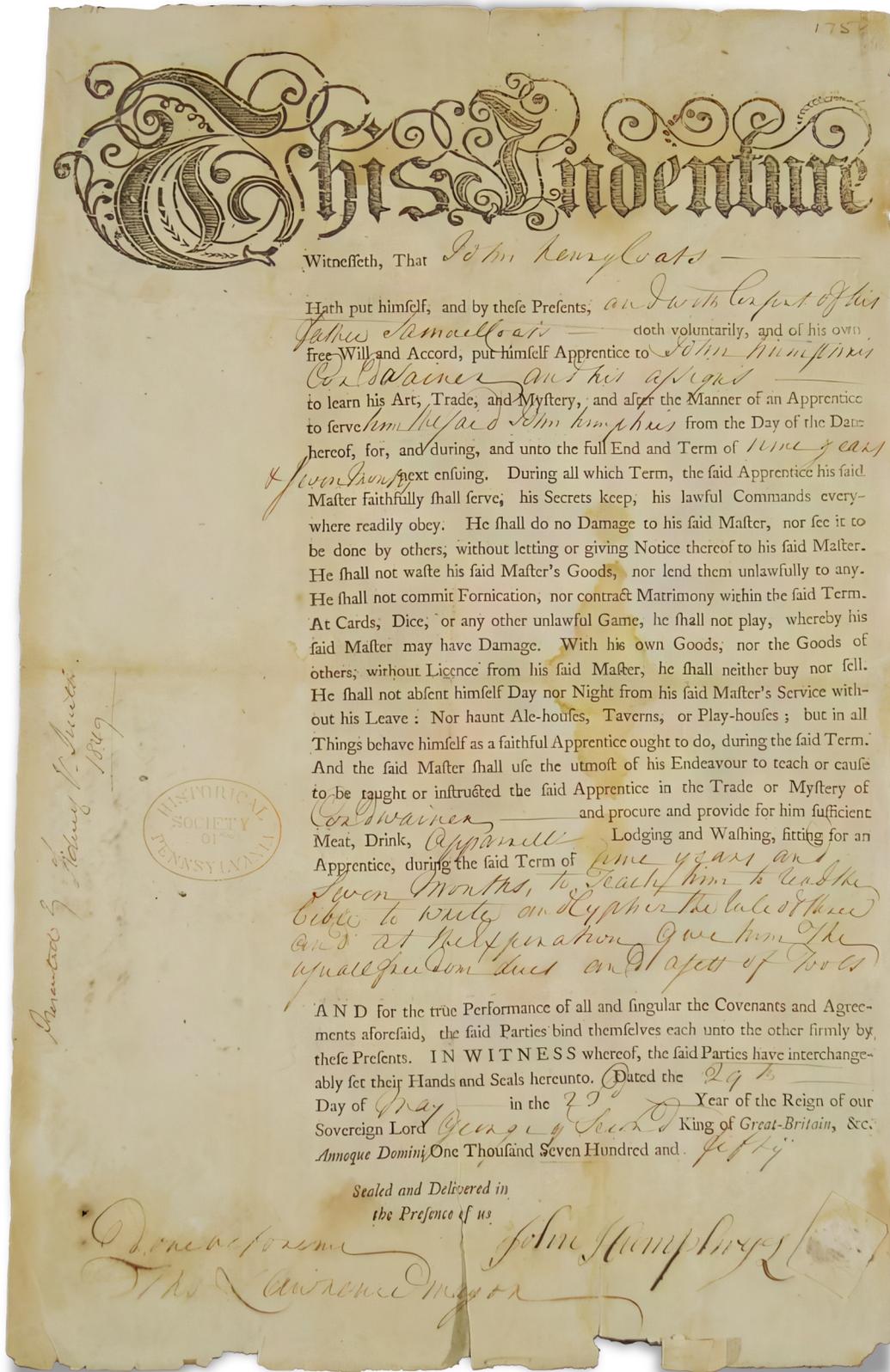
Choose one person (Letitia or John Henry) and write a letter to your parents telling them about what you are doing, learning, and experiencing in your life as an apprentice. Tell them what you enjoy about the job and also what is difficult about this arrangement.



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John Henry Coats Indenture, 1750¹



This Indenture...²

John Henry Coats...and with the consent of his father Samuel Coats...John Humphries, Cordwainer, and his assigns...him the said John Humphries... nine years and seven months... Cordwainer... apparel... nine years and seven months, to teach him to read the Bible, to write and cipher the Rule of Three and at the expiration give him the usual freedom dues and a set of tools...dated 29th of May, in the 23rd year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord George the Second, 1750.

¹ For ease of use, alternative spellings, some punctuation and abbreviations have been standardized in these transcriptions.

² transcription of the handwritten lines only.

Indenture of John Henry Coats as Cordwainer, 1750

This Indenture witnesses that John Henry Coats, by those present and with consent of his father Samuel Coats, does voluntarily and of his own free will put himself apprentice to John Humphries, **cordwainer**, to learn his art, trade, **and mystery**, and in the manner of an apprentice to serve him from this date unto the full end and term of nine years and seven months next ensuing.

During all which term, the said apprentice shall faithfully serve his master, keep his secrets, everywhere readily obey his lawful commands. He shall do no damage to his said master, nor see it to be done by others, without giving notice to his said master. He shall not waste his master's goods, nor lend them unlawfully to any. He shall not commit **fornication**, nor **contract matrimony** within the said term. At cards, dice, or any other unlawful game, he shall not play, whereby his said master may have damage. He shall neither buy nor sell his own goods, nor the goods of others, without permission from his said master. He shall not leave day nor night from his master's service without his permission, nor visit **ale-houses, taverns, or play-houses**; but in all things behave himself as a faithful apprentice ought to do during the said term.

And the said Master shall use the utmost of his endeavor to teach or instruct the said apprentice in the trade or mystery of cordwainer, and procure and provide for him sufficient meat, drink, **apparel**, lodging and washing, fitting for an apprentice, during the said term of nine years and seven months. To teach him to read the Bible, to **write and cypher the rule of three** and at the expiration give him the usual freedom dues and a set of tools.

And for the true performance of all these agreements, these parties bind themselves to each other firmly by those present. In witness whereof, the said parties have interchangeably set their **hands and seals** hereunto.

Dated the 29th day of May in the 23^d year of the reign of our sovereign Lord George the Second King of Great Britain, 1750.

Sealed and delivered in the presence of John Humphreyes

Source: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/attachments/indenture_of_john_henry_coats_transcription.pdf

Vocabulary

Cordwainer – a shoemaker who makes new shoes out of leather, distinct from a “cobbler” who repaired shoes for customers

“and mystery” – apprentices were entitled to learn the skills and mysteries, or the unknown elements of a craft

“fornication” – sex outside of marriage

“contract matrimony” – get married

“ale-houses” and “taverns” - bars

“play-houses” – the theater

“apparel” – clothing

“write and cypher the rule of three” – understand basic arithmetic

“freedom dues” – some sort of payment in money or supplies to help an indentured servant establish a new life as a free adult

“Hands and seals” – signatures

Philadelphia, printed by FRANCIS BAILEY, at Tord's Head.

THIS Indenture Witnesseth, That

Letitia Board with Consent of her Mother Elizabeth Board

Hath put herself, and by these Presents, *she* doth voluntarily, and of her

own free Will and Accord, put herself Apprentice to *Subarah Evans*

of the City of Philadelphia to learn *the* Art, Trade and Mystery, and after the Manner of an Appren-

tice to serve *her*

from the Day of the Date hereof, for, and during, and to the full End

and Term of *nine years and five months*

next ensuing. During all which Term, the said Apprentice her said

Mistress faithfully shall serve, her Secrets keep, her lawful Commands

every where readily obey. She shall do no Damage to her said *Mistress*

nor see it to be done by others, without letting or giving Notice thereof

to her said *Mistress*. She shall not waste her said *Mistress* Goods, nor lend

them unlawfully to any. She shall not commit Fornication, nor contract

Matrimony within the said Term. She shall not play at Cards, Dice,

or any other unlawful Game, whereby her said *Mistress* may have Da-

mage. With her own Goods, nor the Goods of others, without Licence

from her said *Mistress* she shall neither buy nor sell. She shall not absent

herself Day nor Night from her said *Mistress* Service without her

Leave: Nor haunt Ale-houses, Taverns, or Play-houses; but in all Things

behave herself as a faithful Apprentice ought to do, during the said

Term. And the said *Mistress* shall use the utmost of her Endeavour to

teach or cause to be taught or instructed the said Apprentice in the Trade or

Mystery of *housewifery* and

procure and provide for her sufficient Meat, Drink, *apparel*

Lodging and Washing, fitting for an Apprentice,

during the said Term of *nine years and five months* to give

her *twelve months* schooling, and at the expiration

of *the* Term to give her *two compleat* suits of apparel

one of which to be new

AND for the true Performance of all and singular the Covenants and Agreements aforesaid, the said Parties bind themselves each unto the other, firmly by these Presents. IN WITNESS whereof, the said Parties have interchangeably set their Hands and Seals hereunto. Dated the *Twenty eighth* Day of *January* Annoque Domini, One Thousand Seven Hundred and *ninety four*

Elizabeth Board
her
mark

Scaled and delivered in }
the Presence of & }

her
Letitia Board
mark

Bound before me
Samuel Bedford
one of the Aldermen
of the City of Philadelphia

her
Subarah Evans
mark



¹ Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania
Historical Society of Pennsylvania, https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/letitiaboardindenture.pdf

Indenture of Letitia Board as Housewife, 1794

This Indenture witnesses that Letitia Board, with the consent of her mother Elizabeth Board, has of her own free will and accord put herself apprentice to Susanah Evans of the City of Philadelphia to learn the art, trade, **and mystery**, of a **housewife**, and in the manner of an apprentice to serve her from this date to the full end and term of nine years and five months next ensuing.

During all which term the said apprentice shall faithfully serve her said mistress, keep her secrets, everywhere readily obey her lawful commands. She shall do no damage to her mistress nor see it to be done by others, without giving notice to her said mistress. She shall not waste her mistress's goods, nor lend them unlawfully to any. She shall not commit **fornication**, nor **contract matrimony** within the said term. She shall not play at cards, dice, or any other unlawful game, whereby her said mistress may have damage. She shall neither buy nor sell her own goods, nor the goods of others, without permission from her said mistress. She shall not leave day nor night from her mistress's service without her permission, nor visit **ale-houses**, **taverns**, or **play-houses**; but in all things behave as a faithful apprentice ought to do, during the said term.

And the said mistress shall use the utmost of her endeavor to teach or instruct the said apprentice in the trade or mystery of housewifery and procure and provide for her sufficient meat, drink, **apparel**, lodging and washing, fitting for an apprentice, during the said term of nine years and five months. To give her twelve months schooling, and at the expiration of said term to give her two complete suits of **apparel**, one of which to be new.

And for the true performance of these agreements, these parties bind themselves to each unto firmly by those present. In witness whereof, the said parties have interchangeably set their **hands and seals** hereunto.

Dated the 28th day of January, 1794.

Sealed and Delivered in the Presence of:

Letitia Board: (her mark) X

Susanah Evans (her mark) X

Witness: Elizabeth Board (her mark) X

Bound before me, Lansing Bedford, one of the Alderman of the City of Philadelphia

Source: Historical Society of Pennsylvania https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/legacy_files/migrated/letitiaboardindenture.pdf

Vocabulary

Housewife – a woman whose main occupation is caring for her family, managing household affairs, and doing housework, while her husband or partner goes out to work.

“and mystery” – apprentices were entitled to learn the skills and mysteries, or the unknown elements of a craft

“fornication” – sex outside of marriage

“contract matrimony” – get married

“ale-houses” and “taverns” – bars

“play-houses” – the theater

“apparel” – clothing

“Hands and seals” – signatures

Youth Comparison Activity

Directions: Using the information from the Source Analysis Questions and interacting with Samuel Turner, the printshop apprentice character in the VR, fill out the T-chart to compare their experiences to one another.

Categories	Letitia Board and John Henry Coats (Primary Sources)	Samuel Turner (VR)
Work Environment		
Daily Tasks		
Educational Opportunities		
Duration		
Compensation		
Personal Development		
Economic Factors		