

VISUAL 5.1

BACKGROUND ON INDENTURED SERVANTS

CONTRACTS

- Indentured servants' contracts bound them to perform work for an employer in North America.
- These contracts had the force of law, and they were enforced.
- Contracts typically called for three-to-seven years of service. The average period of service was four years.
- Early in the colonial period, women were offered somewhat shorter contracts than men.
- Contracts for harder work, such as growing tobacco, were often for shorter terms than contracts for easier work, such as performing household duties.

HOW THE SYSTEM WORKED

- Ordinarily a person would sign with a shipowner or a recruiting agent in England.
- As soon as the servant was delivered alive to an American port, the contract would be sold to a planter or merchant.

VISUAL 5.2

WHY WOULD FREE PEOPLE SELL THEMSELVES INTO BONDAGE?

Many workers in colonial North America were indentured servants — people who signed contracts stating they would work for an agreed number of years in exchange for passage to North America. The work they performed was often difficult — clearing land, planting tobacco, performing household services. The contracts signed by indentured servants had the force of law. Terms of service could be increased, for example, if a worker violated the indenture by trying to run away. Servants could even be sold to other owners.

Why would people accept difficult jobs that they could not quit on their own terms? Why would they sell themselves into bondage?