Richard Frethorne Describes Indentured Servitude (1623)

# **Richard Frethorne became an indentured servant to travel to colonial Virginia. For many servants, their life in Virginia and other colonies was very different than expectations. In his letter to his parents Frethorne describes his struggles.**

Loving and kind father and mother my most humble duty remembered to you, hoping in God of your good health . . . This is to let you understand that I your child am in a most heavy case by reason of the country, [which] is such that it causeth much sickness, [such] as the scurvy and the bloody flux and diverse other diseases, which maketh the body very poor and weak. And when we are sick there is nothing to comfort us; for since I came out of the ship I never ate anything but peas, and loblollie (that is water gruel). As for deer or venison I never saw any since I came into this land. There is indeed some fowl, but we are not allowed to go and get it, but must work hard both early and late for a mess of water gruel and a mouthful of bread and beef… People cry out day, and night, Oh that they were in England without their limbs and would not care to lose any limb to be in England again…We are in great danger, for our plantation is very weak by reason of the death and sickness of our company. For we came but twenty for the merchants, and they are half dead just; and we look every hour when two more should go. Yet there came some four other men yet to live with us, of which there is but one alive; and our Lieutenant is dead, and his father, and his brother. And there was some 5 or 6 of last year’s 20, of which there is but 3 left, so that we are fain to get other men to plant with us; and yet we are but 32 to fight against 3000 if they should come. And the nearest help that we have is ten mile [from] us, and when the rogues overcame this place last they slew 80 persons…

And I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death. . . . I have nothing at all—no, not a shirt to my back but two rags, nor clothes but one poor suit, nor but one pair of shoes, but one pair of stockings, but one cap . . . My cloak is stolen by one of my fellows, and to his dying hour [he] would not tell me what he did with it; but some of my fellows saw him have butter and beef out of a ship, which my cloak, I doubt [not] paid for. So that I have not a penny, nor a penny worth, to help me to either spice or sugar or strong waters, without which one cannot live here. For as strong beer in England doth fatten and strengthen them, so water here doth wash and weaken these here [and] only keeps [their] life and soul together. But I am not half [of] a quarter as strong as I was in England, and all is for want of victuals; for I do protest unto you that I have eaten more in [a] day at home than I have allowed me here for a week…

And indeed so I find it now, to my great grief and misery, and saith that if you love me you will redeem [but out his indenture] me suddenly, for which I do entreat and beg. And if you cannot get the merchants to redeem me…then for God’s sake get a gathering or entreat some good folks to lay out some little sum of money in meal and cheese and butter and beef. Any eating meat will yield great profit. Oil and vinegar is very good; but, father, there is great loss in leaking. But for God’s sake send beef and cheese and butter…But if you send cheese, you must have a care how much you pack it in barrels; and you must put cooper’s chips between every cheese, or else the heat . . . will rot them. And look whatsoever you send me—be it never so much…I will deal truly with you. I will send it over and beg the profit to redeem me; and if I dies before it come, I have entreated Goodman Jackson to send you the worth of it, who hath promised he will…

Good father, do not forget me, but have mercy and pity my miserable case. I know if you did but see me, you would weep to see me; for I have but one suit... Wherefore, for God’s sake, pity me. I pray you remember my love to all my friends and kindred. I hope all my brothers and sisters are in good health, and as for my part I have set down my resolution that certainly will be, that is, that the answer of this letter will be life or death to me. Therefore, good father, send as soon as you can… O that you did see my daily and hourly sighs, groans, and tears, and thumps that I afford mine own breast, and rue and curse the time of my birth… But this is certain I never felt the want of father and mother till now, but now dear friends full well I know and rue it although it were too late before I knew it.

Richard Frethorne

Source: Richard Frethorne, letter to his father and mother, March 20, April 2 and 3, 1623, in Susan Kingsbury, ed., The Records of the Virginia Company of London (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 4: 58-62. <https://archive.org/details/recordsofvirgini04virg>