

Slavery vs. Indentured Servitude

As Defined and Dictated by The New York Historical Society

- Indentured servants were clearly people with rights, albeit limited (as were children, women, and men who did not own property in this era). Largely white, of lower economic means, and European, indentured servants were typically in debt, former convicts, or orphans who chose to come to the New World and New Nation to try their luck as workers/servants. They entered into contracts and labored under the understanding that after a certain amount of time they would work off their passage and be free to no longer be servants. No bonds of servitude passed to their children.
- Enslaved people were legally defined first and foremost as property, not people. Enslaved black people came to the Americans forcibly from Africa, regardless of their social stature. Slavery was an enduring institution, one that passed from mother to child.
- We don't know of any black indentured servants during the Revolutionary War era. While there are a very few examples of blacks as indentured servants in the early colonial era, slavery was quickly recognized as a more profitable system of free labor (compared to indentured servitude).
- To the question of day to day experiences, there are corollaries. But the overarching system of slavery – legally and in practice – imposes a stark and destructive context that would be inescapable to a person on a daily basis. In addition, the black enslaved person could not escape and lead a new life in another state as perhaps a white indentured servant could.