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The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century

1601–1700

Native Americans, tobacco planters, servants, and slaves peopled the world of the seventeenth-century southern British colonies. Spanish New Mexico and Florida had few tobacco planters, but many more Indians and priests. Few of these people jotted down their activities, their thoughts, or their longings. Their experiences can nevertheless be glimpsed in rare private letters and more common official reports, court testimony, and political announcements. The documents that follow disclose tensions, conflicts, and pleasures of daily life in the seventeenth-century southern colonies.

DOCUMENT 3-1

Richard Frethorne Describes Indentured Servitude in Virginia

Indentured servant Richard Frethorne arrived in Virginia in late December 1622. Just three months later he wrote the following letter to his parents in England begging them to rescue him from what he called "this bondage." Frethorne's letter vividly portrays a servant's perspective on the deadly challenges English colonists confronted fourteen years after the first settlement at Jamestown. His spelling and punctuation were common among seventeenth-century Englishmen but differ from usages today. The best way to decipher the words and layers of meaning in Frethorne's letter is to read it aloud.

Letter to Father and Mother, March 20, April 2, 3, 1623

Loveing and kind father and mother my most humble duty remembred to you hoping in God of yo[u]r good health, as I my selfe am at the making hereof, this is to let you understand that I yor Child am in a most heavie Case by reason

From *The Records of the Virginia Company, 1606–1626*, vol. 4, ed. Susan Myra Kingsbury (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935), 58–62.

of the nature of the Country is such that it Causeth much sicknes, as the scurvie and the bloody flix [dysentery], and divers other diseases, wch maketh the bodie very poore, and Weake, and when wee are sicke there is nothing to Comfort us; for since I came out of the ship, I never at[e] anie thing but pease [porridge], and loblollie (that is water gruell) as for deare or venison I never saw anie since I came into this land, ther is indeed some foule, but Wee are not allowed to goe, and get [it], but must Worke hard both earelie, and late for a messe of water gruell, and a mouthfull of bread, and beife, a mouthfull of bread for a pennie loafe must serve for 4 men wch is most pitifull if you did know as much as I, when people crie out day, and night, Oh that they were in England without their lymbes and would not care to lose anie lymbe to bee in England againe, yea though they beg from doore to doore, for wee live in feare of the Enimy evrie hower [hour], yet wee have had a Combate with them on the Sunday before Shrovetide,¹ and wee tooke two alive, and make slaves of them, but it was by pollicie, for wee are in great danger, for o[u]r Plantac[i]on is very weake, by reason of the dearth, and sicknes, of o[u]r Companie, for wee came but Twentie for the marchaunts, and they are halfe dead Just; and wee looke everie hower When two more should goe, yet there came some fo[u]r other men yet to lyve with us, of which ther is but one alive, and our L[ieutenant] is dead, and his ffather, and his brother, and there was some 5 or 6 of the last yeares 20 of wch there is but 3 left, so that wee are faine to get other men to plant with us, and yet wee are but 32 to fight against 3000 if they should Come, and the nighest helpe that Wee have is ten miles of us, and when the rogues overcame this place last, they slew 80 Persons how then shall wee doe for wee lye even in their teeth, they may easilie take us but that God is mercifull, and can save with few as well as with many; as he shewed to Gylead and like Gileads Souldiers if they lapt water,² wee drinkee water wch is Weake,³ and I have nothing to Comfort me, nor ther is nothing to be gotten here but sicknes, and death, except that one had money to lay out in some thinges for profit; But I have nothing at all, no not a shirt to my backe, but two Ragges nor no Clothes, but one poore suite, nor but one paire of shooes, but one paire of stockings, but one Capp, but two bands [collars], my Cloke is stollen by one of my owne fellowes, and to his dying hower would not tell mee what he did with it but some of my fellows saw him have butter and beife out of a ship, wch my Cloke I doubt [not] paid for, so that I have not a penny, nor a penny Worth to helpe me to either spice, or sugar, or strong Waters,⁴ without the wch one cannot live here, for as strong beare in England doth fatten and strengthen them so water here doth wash and weaken the[se] here, onelie keepe life and soule togeather. but I am not halfe a quarter so strong as I was in England, and all is for want of victualls, ffor I doe protest unto you, that I have eaten more in [a] day at home th[a]n I have allowed me here for a Weeke. you have given more th[a]n my dayes allowance to a beggar at the doore; and if Mr Jackson had not relieved me, I should bee in a poore Case, but he like a ffather and shee

¹Shrovetide: The days immediately preceding Lent in the Christian calendar.

²they may easilie take us . . . water: In the book of Judges in the Old Testament, God directed Gideon to reduce the size of his army so that his enemies would be sure to attribute his victory to God's guidance. Gideon kept the three hundred soldiers who cupped water from the river in their hands and lapped it and left those who knelt to drink.

³Weake: Without added alcohol.

⁴strong Waters: Alcoholic drink; strong beer.

like a loveing mother doth still helpe me, for when wee goe up to James Towne that is 10 myles of us, there lie all the ships that Come to the land, and there they must deliver their goods, and when wee went up to Towne as it may bee on Moonedaye [Monday], at noone, and come there by night, then load the next day by noone, and goe homes in the afternoone, and unload, and then away againe in the night, and bee up about midnight, then if it rayned, or blowed never so hard wee must lye in the boate on the water, and have nothing but alitle bread, for when wee go into the boate wee have a loafe allowed to two men, and it is all if we staid there 2 dayes, wch is hard, and must lye all that while the boate, but that Goodman Jackson pityed me & made me a Cabbin to lye in always when I come up, and he would give me some poore Jacks [fish] home with me wch Comforted mee more than pease, or water gruell. Oh they bee verie godlie folkes, and love me verie well, and will doe anie thing for me, and he much marvailed that you would send me a servaunt to the [Virginia] Companie, he saith I had been better knockd on the head, and Indeede so I fynd it now to my greate greife and miserie, and saith, that if you love me you will redeeme me suddenlie, for wch I doe Intreate and begg, and if you cannot get the marchaunts to redeeme me for some litle money then for Gods sake get a gathering or intreat some good folks to lay out some little Sum of moneye, in meale, and Cheese and butter, and beife, anie eating meate will yeald great profit, oile and vyniger is verie good, but ffather ther is greate losse in leakinge, but for Gods sake send beife and Cheese and butter or the more of one sort and none of another, but if you send Cheese it must bee very old Cheese, and at the Chesmongers you may buy good Cheese for twopence farthing or halfe penny that will be liked verie well, but if you send Cheese you must have a Care how you packe it in barrells, and you must put Coopers Chips⁵ between evrie Cheese, or els the heat of the hold [of the ship] will rott them, and looke whasoever you send me be it nev[e]r so much looke what I make of yt I will deale trulie with you I will send it ov[e]r, and begg the profit to redeeme me, and if I die before it Come I have intreated Goodman Jackson to send you the worth of it, who hath promised he will; If you send you must direct yo[u]r letters to Goodman Jackson, at James Towne a Gunsmith. (you must sett downe his frayt⁶) because there bee more of his name there; good ffather doe not forget me, but have mercie and pittye my miserable Case. I know if you did but see me you would weepe to see me, for I have but one suite, but it is a strange one, it is very well guarded, wherefore for Gods sake pittie me, I pray you to remember my love my love [sic] to all my ffreinds, and kindred, I hope all my Brothers and Sisters are in good health, and as for my part I have set downe my resoluc[i]on that certainelie Wilbe, that is, that the Answere of this letter wilbee life or death to me, therefore good ffather send as soone as you can, and if you send me anie thing let this be the marke. ROT

Richard Ffrethorne
Martyn's Hundred.

[Here are t]he names of them that bee dead of the Companie came ov[e]r with us to serve under our L[ieutenants] . . . [a list of twenty names: seventeen men, two women, and a child] All theis died out of my m[aster's] house since I came, and

⁵Coopers Chips: Chips of wood.

⁶sett downe his frayt: Pay for the shipment.

wee came in but at Christmas, and this is the 20th day of March and the Saylers say that ther is two thirds of the 150 dead already and thus I end prayeing to God to send me good successe that I may be redeemed out of Egipt.⁷ So vale in Christo.⁸

Loveing ffather I pray you to use this man [who delivers this letter] verie exceeding kindly for he hath done much for me, both on my Journy and since, I intreate you not to forget me, but by anie meanes redeeme me, for this day we heare that there is 26 of English men slayne by the Indians, and they have taken a Pinnace⁹ of Mr Pountis, and have gotten peeces [muskets], Armour, swords, all things fitt for Warre, so that they may now steale upon us (and wee Cannot know them from English, till it is too late, that they bee upon us,) and then ther is no mercie, therefore if you love or respect me, as yo[u]r Child release me from this bondage, and save my life, now you may save me, or let me bee slayne, with Infidelle, aske this man [who delivers this letter], he knoweth that all is true and Just that I say here; if you do redeeme me the Companie must send for me to my Mr Harrod for so is this M[aster's] name.

Apr[il] the 2 day
Yo[u]r loveing sonne
Richard Ffrethorne

Moreover, on the third day of Aprill wee heard that after theis Rogues had gotten the Pinnace, and had taken all the furnitures as peeces, swords, armour, Coats of male,¹⁰ Powder, shot and all the things that they had to trade withall, they killed the Captaine, and Cut of his head, and rowing with the taile of the boat foremost they set up a pole and put the Captaines head upon it, and so rowed home, then the Devill set them on againe, so that they furnished about 200 Canoes with above 1000 Indians, and came and thought to have taken the shipp, but shee was too quicke for them wch thing was very much talked of, for they alwayes feared a ship, but now the Rogues growe verie bold, and can use peeces, some of them, as well or better than an Englishman, ffor an Indian did shoote with Mr Charles my M[aster's] Kinsman at a marke of white paper, and hee hit it at the first, but Mr Charles Could not hit it, But see the Envie of theis slaves, for when they Could not take the ship then o[u]r men saw them threaten Accomack that is the next Plantac[i]on and nowe ther is no Way but starveing ffor the Governour told us and Sir George, that except the [ship] Seaflower come in or that wee can fall foule of theis Rogues and get some Corne from them, above halfe the land will surelie be starved, for they had no Crop last yeare by reason of theis Rogues, so that wee have no Corne but as ships do relieve us, nor wee shall hardlie have anie Crop this yeare, and Wee are as like to perish first as anie Plantac[i]on, for wee have but two Hogsheads [barrels] of meale left to serve us this two Monethes, if the Seaflower doe stay so long before shee come in, and that meale is but 3 Weeks bread for us, at a loafe for 4 about the bignes [size] of a pennie loafe in England, that is but a halfe penny loafe a day for a man: is it not straunge to me thinke you? but What will it bee when wee shall goe a moneth or two and never see a bit of bread. as my M[aster] doth

⁷redeemed out of Egipt: In the book of Exodus in the Old Testament, God helped Moses lead the Israelites out of slavery through the wilderness of Egypt.

⁸vale in Christo: Latin for "Strength in Christ"; a farewell.

⁹Pinnace: A small boat.

¹⁰meale: Corn meal made of small, linked chains.

say Wee must doe, and he said hee is not able to keepe us all, then wee shalbe turned up to the land and eate barks of trees, or moulds of the Ground therefore with weeping teares I beg of you to helpe me. O that you did see may [my] daylie and hourelie sighes, grones, and teares, and thumpes that I afford mine owne brest, and rue and Curse the time of my birth with holy Job.¹¹ I thought no head had been able to hold so much water as hath and doth dailie flow from mine eyes.

But this is Certaine I never felt the want of ffather and mother till now, but now deare ffrends full well I knowe and rue it although it were too late before I knew it.

I pray you talke with this honest man [who delivers this letter] he will tell you more then now in my hast I can set downe.

Yo[u]r loveing Sonne
Richard Ffrethorne
Virginia 3d April 1623

¹¹holy Job: In the book of Job in the Old Testament, God tests Job's faith by delivering him into the hands of Satan. Job is seen as a symbol of human suffering.