

Richard Frethorne Letter Home to his Parents, 1623

Introduction

In the first two decades of its existence, the Virginia colony included a growing number of indentured servants, most of which were young men working on the plantations of wealthy plantation owners. Indentured servants signed a legal contract (an indenture) that bound them to work for either an individual or Virginia Company, usually for seven years. In exchange for their labor, indentured servants earned their freedom from bondage and some type of “freedmen dues,” either in coin or land. The Virginia Company implemented laws to protect servants, although they were legally subject to the rule of their master. It wasn’t long before enslaved Africans outnumbered white indentured servants in the Virginia colony. At the same time, the population of freed indentured servants expecting land and opportunity increased as well.

Richard Frethorne was about 12 or 13 years old when he arrived in Jamestown as indentured servant. Frethorne’s family was very poor and received relief from their parish church. In 1623, the parish clergy indentured him to the Virginia Company in exchange for continued poor relief for his family¹. Frethorne wrote several letters to the parish clergy and his parents describing his conditions working on the tobacco plantation called Martin’s Hundred. The letter below was his second letter to his parents, just four months after he arrived. He begged his parents to bring him home even though they could never afford to pay off his indenture. Frethorne died in 1624, about a year after he arrived. Remember that this letter was written by a 12-year-old child sent across the world in exchange for food for his family home in England².

Primary Source

LOVING AND KIND FATHER AND MOTHER:

My most humble duty remembered to you, hoping in god of your good health, as I myself am at the making hereof. 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

¹ The Frethornes lived in one of the poorest neighborhoods in London, in-between the Tower of London and the London Bridge – now one of most expensive neighborhoods in the city. [St. Dunston-in-the-East](#), the neighborhood (parish) church that sent Richard to the Virginia colony still exists. The church was built in 1100 and is a beautiful example of high Medieval church architecture.

² Richard Frethorne, letter to his father and mother, March 20, April 2 & 3, 1623 [Full source here](#). From: Susan Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 4: 58–62. Believed to be in the public domain.

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. A mouthful of bread for a penny loaf³ must serve for four men which is most pitiful. [You would be grieved] if you did know as much as I [do], when 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, yea, though they beg from door to door. For we live in fear of the enemy every hour, yet we have had a combat with them on the last Sunday before Shrovetide⁴ and we took two alive and made slaves of them⁵. But it was by policy, for 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 [also] his father and his brother. And there was some five or six of the last year's twenty, of which there is but three 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 nighest help that we have is ten mile of us, and when the rogues overcame this place [the] last [time] they slew 80 persons. How then shall we do, for we lie even in their teeth? They may easily take us, but [for the fact] that God is merciful and can save with few as well as with many, as he showed to Gilead⁶. And like Gilead's soldiers, if they lapped water, we drink water which is but weak.

And I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death, except [in the event] that one had money to lay out in some things for profit. But I have nothing at all–no, not a shirt to my back but two rags (2), nor clothes but one poor suit, nor but one pair of shoes, but one pair of stockings, but one cap, [and] but two bands [collars]. 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 too either spice or sugar or strong waters, without the 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 so strong as I was in England, and all is for want of victuals⁷; for I do protest unto you that I have eaten more in [one] day at home than I have allowed me here for a week. You have given more than my day's allowance to a beggar at the door; and if Mr. Jackson had not relieved me, I should be in a poor case. But he like a father and she like a loving mother doth still help me.

³ Small loaf of bread, more like a roll or bun.

⁴ Shrovetide refers to the week leading up to Lent, a period of fasting and devotion, traditionally associated with Catholicism. Lent begins roughly six weeks before Easter on Ash Wednesday. The three days prior have their own rituals and feasts, which is what Frethorne references here (the 3 days before Lent). Shrove Tuesday started as a small feast before six weeks of fasting. The French transformed the celebration into Marti Gras, which really doesn't have much to do with Catholicism.

⁵ Just to be clear – the indentured servants caught and enslaved Powhatan Indians.

⁶ Gilead appears in the Old Testament of the Bible as both a place and person. The character of Gilead created one of the Israelite tribes called Gilead.

⁷ Food and drink.

For when we go to Jamestown (that is 10 miles of us) there lie all the ships that come to land, and there they must deliver their goods. And when we went up to town [we would go], as it may be, on Monday at noon, and come there by night, [and] then load the next day by noon, and go home in the afternoon, and unload, and then away again in the night, and [we would] be up about midnight. Then if it rained or blowed never so hard, we must lie in the boat on the water and have nothing but a little bread. For when we go into the boat we [would] have a loaf allowed to two men, and it is all [we would get] if we stayed there two days, which is hard; and [we] must lie all that while in the boat. But that Goodman Jackson pitied me and made me a cabin to lie in always when I [would] come up, and he would give me some poor jacks [fish] [to take] home with me, which comforted me more than peas or water gruel. Oh, they be very godly folks, and love me very well, and will do anything for me.

And he much marvelled that you would send me a servant to the Company; he saith I had been better knocked on the head. And indeed so I find it now, to my great grief and misery; and [I] saith that if you love me you will redeem⁸ me suddenly, for which I do entreat and beg. And if you cannot get the merchants to redeem me for some little money, 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, or the more of one sort and none of another. But if you send cheese, it must be very old cheese; and at the cheesemonger's you may buy very food cheese for twopence farthing or halfpenny, that will be liked very well. But if you send cheese, you must have a care how you pack it in barrels; and you must put cooper's chips between every cheese, or else the heat of the hold will rot them. And look whatsoever you send me – be in never so much–look, what[ever] I make of it, I will deal truly with you. I will send it over and beg the profit to redeem me; and if I die before it come, I have entreated Goodman Jackson to send you the worth of it, who hath promised he will. If you send, you must direct your letters to Goodman Jackson, at Jamestown, a gunsmith. (You must set down his freight, because there be more of his name there.) 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. (But [though] it is a strange one, it is very well guarded.) Wherefore, for God's sake, pity me. I pray you to 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; and if you send me any thing let this be the mark⁹.

ROT

RICHARD FRETHERNE,

MARTIN'S HUNDRED¹⁰.

⁸ Bring me back home.

⁹ How you address the letter back to me.

¹⁰ Martin's Hundred was an 80,000-acre tract of land granted by the Virginia Company to a small group of wealthy London businessmen. The land was divided among the businessmen, who started indenturing poor Englishmen en

mass. The early plantations were spread out along the James River, and as Frethorne described, tended to be far away from the town centers.