

Public Abstract

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The paucity of sources presents a challenge for historians attempting to uncover the experiences of indentured servants in seventeenth-century Maryland. However, court records can provide insight into the relationships of masters, servants, and communities. In this study they are used to address the questions of what options were available to servants who were physically abused and how they made use of them, how local and provincial courts defined and adjudicated cases of abuse, and how communities responded. The complicated story of Sarah Taylor and her repeated attempts at relief is interspersed throughout the analysis to demonstrate the competing interests and options involved in the plight of abused servants.

Historians have debated the court's response to cases concerning the physical abuse of servants. Some contend that the courts upheld the master's authority because of ulterior motives and indifference towards servants. Others argue the courts were generally fair and protected the servant's rights. This study finds that judicial responses to complaints of ill-usage were consistent and reflected conflicting concerns. Courts were under competing pressure to sustain the household hierarchy essential to social and economic order but also to protect the rights of servants, who would soon become active participants in the free community, from excessive abuse. They attempted to establish balance in an unbalanced environment; for the sake of the present, they were concerned with upholding the master's authority and, for the sake of the future, they recognized the need to protect the rights of indentured servants.

Similarly, although Maryland communities were spread out and relatively unstable and servants were unlikely to develop strong networks of support, concerned community members actively aided servants in informal (although still risky) ways that were appropriate for the social context, like testifying on their behalf in court or by providing food and shelter to runaways. Although both officials and neighbors displayed their intolerance of the physical abuse of servants, they were aware of the economic and social importance of the hierarchical system that framed their society and acted accordingly.