

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Settler John Sutton (Part 14)

Despite the dangerous pioneering challenges he faced in the Bucklesberry Pocosin, settler John Sutton (ca. 1730-bef. 1773) made a good life for himself and his family. Available documents suggest he fathered seven sons. He likely had daughters as well, but they are not named in surviving records.

Clearly, John had a sizeable household for whom he was responsible. Making room for an additional dependant not biologically his own may have been viewed by some as foolhardy. Yet, he opened his home to George Wiggins, an orphan.

The appointment of George to John's household was legally sanctioned. Transcribed by genealogist Rose Medford Parks and published online in 2010 by USGenWeb, the 1768 court record reads as follows (blanks signify omitted, partially faded, erased and illegible words; misspellings and capitalizations are literal):

"George Wiggins Indenture January Court 1768. This indenture ___ ___ the Thirteenth day of January in the year of our Lord [one thousand] seven hundred and sixty eight ___ that Stephen Cade ___ presiding Acting Justice of Dobbs County [North Carolina] Inferior Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions hath ___ and placed George Wiggins, an Orphan of Gersham Wiggins, deceased, an apprentice to John Sutton of the said County with in he dwells ___ serve untill he ___ of Apprentice shall arrive at ___ of Twenty-one years. ___ to the art of a family in ___ ___ time he the said Apprentice ___ the said Master Shall Faithfully Serve in all Lawfull Business and Orderly and Obediently in all things and behave himself Towards his Said Master for & during the Said Term as an Apprentice Ought to do, and the Said John Sutton doth Covenant, Promise and Agree to and with the Said Justices and their Superiors that he the Said John Sutton will provide and allow his Said Apprentice Convenient and Sufficient Meat, Drink, Lodging & apparel and will his best Indeavor to Instruct him in the art and ___ ___ ___ and also teach him as ___ ___ ___ Taught to Read & Write before the Expiration of his Apprenticeship. In witness whereof the Said Justice by the Clerk of the Said Inferior Court have hereunto interchangeably set their hands and Seals the day and year first above written. Signed, sealed and delivered in the presence of John Lindley } John Sutton (seal) Stephen Cade (seal)"

Orphans were often cared for by relatives or community people during the Colonial era. They served as substitute parents and reared orphans as their own or treated them as apprentices or indentured servants. Although included as members of a household, Robert W. Baird (n.d.)

explained that "None of these circumstances conveyed any special legal rights either to the child or the substitute parent."

Adoption in American society was not legally formalized until 1851 when Massachusetts passed the first state adoption law. The abolishment of indentured servitude followed in 1865 with passage of the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Prior to the mid-1800s, care provided to orphans by another family was viewed as informal adoption.

The 1768 court record plainly states George Wiggins was an indentured servant and apprentice assigned to John Sutton. However, the stipulated conditions of lodging, subsistence and education that John was to provide for George indicated an informal adoption arrangement.

According to Rita Meiser, Esq. and Marcie Velen (1995), the need for child labor typically meant that the motivation for informal adoption in the form of apprenticeships and indentured servitude was largely rooted in economics. Unfortunately, these children "were often treaded [sic., treated] as chattel [i.e., enslaved property]..."

Whether John's chief motive in apprenticing orphan George was a compassionate act of charity or a pressing need for farm labor may never be known.