

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

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American Philosophical Society's Center for Digital Scholarship Launches *Investigating Indentured Servitude*, an Open Data Initiative Project

Philadelphia, PA, October 7, 2020 – The Center for Digital Scholarship (CDS) at the Library & Museum of the American Philosophical Society is pleased to announce the launch of [*Investigating Indentured Servitude: Visualizing Experiences of Colonial America*](#). This digital exhibition is part of the [CDS Open Data Initiative](#) and the culmination of three years of work with an 800+ page bound volume—“Book of Record of Indentures ... of Philadelphia from October 3rd, 1771 to October 5th, 1773.”

The digital exhibition offers a glimpse of the story of migration to colonial British North America. The original source, which includes information on over 5,000 labor contracts, was digitized and transcribed to create an open source dataset that has the potential to tell thousands of stories, and reveal new knowledge about migration, unfree labor, and exploitation. Many of the individuals recorded in the “Record of Indentures” have been lost to history. We hope that this resource will open a path for their stories to be told.

Billy G. Smith, Professor of History and Distinguished Professor of Letters and Science at Montana State University, shared his excitement for this project: “Michel de Montaigne, appreciating the value of primary documents, declared that some historians ruin history because they ‘chew our meat for us’. These records about indentured servants and apprentices allow everyone to chew the ‘meat’ of history—primary documents. Besides including original records, the project both tabulates and helps readers visualize a great deal of information about European immigrants and others who served in short-term bondage. It is a rich source useful for non-scholars, historians, genealogists, and others.”

The goals of releasing the dataset and developing the digital exhibition are threefold. First, the project seeks to engage users in a conversation about indentured servitude centering on its data by deploying a suite of interactive visualizations based around three themes: distance, gender, and time. Second, it aims to model for users how they can pull individual stories out of the data by highlighting individuals like Catherine Biesman, a woman who was indentured for a shockingly-long 26 years. And third, it wants to understand how users interact with the site and the data by including a section for user-generated feedback.

To get the conversation started and encourage users to visit the site, the APS will be hosting a virtual conversation about the creation of *Investigating Indentured Servitude* on October 15, 2020 at 1:00 PM EDT. The event will be open to the public and held via Zoom, featuring

project partner and Digital Humanities Fellow Nicôle Meehan, APS Digital Projects Specialist Cynthia Heider, and introduction by Head of Digital Scholarship and Technology Bayard Miller. Register to attend [here](#).



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