

# *John Halfhead, Plantation Master*

An Indentured Servant's Story

Good day! 'Tis me, your old friend, John Halfhead. I hope that you have been pleased with your time in the new colony of Maryland. I, myself, see great potential in this place. I learned a great deal in my four years indentured to Master Calvert. Now with my time complete and my debt repaid, I can truly reap the benefits of my new home—I am now owner and master of my own land. I could never have dreamed of it, but 'tis true.

I will not tell you that it was an easy path, mind you. I, as many others like me, took great pains to accustom myself to this new land. I was stricken with what some call now the seasoning—dreadful mix of those illnesses that one who never ventures beyond England might never face. They call them malaria, dysentery, influenza—I call them the near death of Halfhead. I thought I might never recover and, in truth, I still fight the symptoms now and again. No matter that, I am certain I will make a full recovery, hopefully sooner rather than later. The work required to start my plantation will surely distract me from my pains.

I could not imagine the amount of work that would be required of me here. As you surely remember, I was trained as a brick mason, not as a planter, but despite the fact that I am one of the few here with such a skill, it is not the manner to make a

living in Maryland. There is so much more land here than in England and demand for tobacco across the ocean is so great, that only a fool would not begin to grow it. I learned about the sotweed, that is tobacco, in my time with Master Calvert, as others did, from the Indians here. They were very helpful in instructing us about the ways of this place. They taught a manner to clear land with the least amount of our effort that is, to remove a strip of bark from the trees and let the leaves die above. The underbrush is then cleared by a low fire. The loose dirt remaining is hoed into hills and the tobacco planted therein.



All must be done by the hand, for plows as we have used at home are of little good with trees so large that one can scarce put their arms about them. In truth, that is only the beginning of the long season of growing tobacco as one must work upon his fields, all by the hand, for almost the whole year together. The tiny seeds of the plant must be put to seedbeds in the early spring and watched carefully lest the frost destroy that which is planted. Upon their growing to a hand high, the plants are moved to hills hoed in the fields, prepared for their arrival. The remainder of the summer long is spent tending to the growing leaves—weeding about the plants, cutting the flowers before they bloom, and picking tobacco worms from the leaves—the last, a most despicable occupation, to be certain, but all for the good of the crop.

Not that the sotweed is the only thing that requires attention on my new land—there is much to do beside. I grow, along side my tobacco, a new grain—that which is called Indian corn. It is the most miraculous of plants, as it will return hundreds of seeds for just one put to the ground. I am growing accustomed to eating some manner of bread made of corn with almost every meal. It has been a great long time since I have had wheat or barley in my bread.



I am acquiring cattle, pigs, and other such livestock to be used to feed my family, as well. The manner in which they are cared for is another thing to become accustomed to here in Maryland. At home, animals were kept in pens to be tended and fed by their masters. Here, the land is plentiful, but people to work it, scarce. No man wants to take time away from his tobacco fields to grow feed for his animals. The beasts are left to their own, then, foraging in the woods for what food they happen to find. There is but one difficulty with this arrangement—all manner of beasts in the wood look alike. That is, my pigs differ little from yours, and yours, likewise, from your neighbor's. A clever solution is at hand—the beasts are to be marked by cuts and notches upon their ears. My mark is the left ear swallow forked and the right ear whole. This mark has been duly registered with the clerk of the court and no other may have a similar mark. When I wish to butcher a hog, I must find one marked thus and keep the ears as proof of ownership, at least until the pig is eaten.

Aye, there is much to become accustomed to here in this fair colony, but I trust that all will be for the best. Until such time as we should chance to meet again, I remain your humble servant, John Halfhead.