

Slavery in Scotland?

April 1666 City fathers of Edinburgh were exporting beggars and vagabonds because they were “not fit to stay in the kingdom”. A ship named “Phoenix” which was captained by James Gibson would sail from Leith loaded with the unfit and poor to be sold in Virginia. These people were seen as a commodity in Virginia to be bought and sold like tobacco or firewood.

In February 1659 merchants in Barbados requested a ship load of “shiftless people and vagabonds” to be sold on the block. The Burgh Council was happy to comply, this would clear some of the streets of Edinburgh of the unwanted and unfit.

Many men and women were slaves in Scotland working in the coal mines until 1799. Their status as slaves was hereditary being passed on to their children.

Ships sailing to Virginia needed a cargo. A good example was the ship “Charles” sailing from Leith in 1669. The syndicate that owned her was granted “saleable cargo of any loose beggars or gypsies plus any poor, or unfit they could find on the streets of Edinburgh, Canongate or Leith. Some of these were termed “indentured labor” a polite term.

In 1681 a ship's captain who sailed from Port Glasgow told the government he was ready to sail to Virginia, if they had a cargo of “sorners, lusty beggars or gypsies”

It is said many Edinburgh ships in 1690 would top off their ships with mugged and kidnapped people before sailing to the colonies. In 1694 a merchant from Glasgow one James Montgomerie Jr. requested to the Edinburgh Council “collect dissolute women” for shipment to the colonies.

There is a manuscript in the British museum which states that any two judges in any city, towne of the commonwealth can from time to time issue warrants for the arrest of any beggar or vagrant. The said beggars or vagrants to be shipped to the colonies as cargo. The judges in Edinburgh from 1662-1665 ordered the enslavement and shipment to the colonies of any rouges, beggars or any other persons of low class who are a plague on society.

The calendar of state papers, colonial series 1701 records 25,000 slaves in Barbados, of the 25,000 slaves it is noted 21,700 were white slaves.

The term Redlegs or Redshanks in Barbados was used to describe Scots slaves whose fair skin legs would burn in the tropical sun.

It is a dark tale, but part of history, a part that needs to see the light of day cast upon it. We can hide our past if we choose or admit the wrongs done in past history and move on.