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Law limiting terms of servitude, 1652

This is an excerpt from the May 18, 1652, meeting of the "General Court of Election," a precursor to the General Assembly. The law states that indentured servants who have served ten years are to be given their freedom. The law also makes a provision for children indentured before turning 14; those children are to be free when they reach age 24. It was the earliest such law in the colonies, however it was not well enforced.

Acts and Orders made at the General Court of Election held at Warwick this 18th of May, anno. 1652

The Commissioners of Providence and Warwick being lawfully met and set.

Whereas, there is a common course practiced amongst English men to buy "negers," to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventing of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that no black mankind or white be forced to covenant bond or otherwise to serve any man or his assignes longer than ten years, or until they come to be twenty four years of age if they be taken in under fourteen, from the time of their coming within the liberties of this Colony; and at the end or term of ten years to set them free, as the manner is with the English servants. And that man that will not let them go free or shall sell him away elsewhere to that end that they may be enslaved to others for a longer time, he or they shall forfeit to the Colony forty pounds.

This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, Proceedings of the General Assembly, Vol. 1 pp. 24-25.