

## “A Stranger in a Strange Land”

*Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge*

1774

Selections on Ashbridge's decision to emigrate to America and her servitude in New York, 1732-1735

Elizabeth Ashbridge arrived in America in 1732 as a nineteen-year-old indentured servant, a “Stranger in a Strange Land.” Five years earlier she had eloped but was soon widowed, and then sent to live with Quaker relatives in Ireland. Estranged from her parents and unhappy in Ireland, she decided to emigrate to Pennsylvania where an uncle lived. Ignorant of the trafficking in vulnerable young people into indentured servitude, she was tricked into signing a four-year indenture contract to pay for her transatlantic passage. Sold to a harsh “master” in New York City, she worked as a house servant in conditions that “would make the most strong heart pity the Misfortunes of a young creature as I was.” After three years she bought out the remainder of her contract and supported herself as a seamstress. In her religious quest she pursued several Christian denominations before deciding to become a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers): thus her memoir is at first a spiritual autobiography.

**M**y life having been attended with many uncommon Occurrences, some of which I through disobedience brought upon myself, and other I believe were for my Good, I therefore thought proper to make some remarks on the Dealings of Divine Goodness to me, and have often had cause with David to say, it was good for me that I have been afflicted &c.<sup>1</sup> and most earnestly I desire that whosoever reads the following lines, may take warning, and shun the Evils that I have thro' the Deceitfulness of Satan been drawn into. . . .

My Father still keeping me at such a distance that I thought myself quite shut out of his Affections, I therefore Concluded since my Absence was so Agreeable, he should have it; and getting acquainted with a Gentlewoman that then lately came from Pensilvania (& was going back again) where I had an Uncle, my Mother's Brother, I soon agreed with her for my passage & being ignorant of the Nature of an Indenture<sup>2</sup> soon became bound, tho' in a private manner, (for fear I should be found out) tho' this was repugnant to law.—As soon as this was over, She invited me to go & see the Vessel I was to go in, to which I readily consented, not Knowing what would follow, & when I came on board, I found a Young Woman I afterward understood was of a very good Family and had been deluded away by this creature. I was extremely pleased to think that I should have such an agreeable Companion & while we were in discourse, our Kidnapper left us & went on shore, & when I wanted to go, was not permitted. . . .

After being forced to stay on the ship for several weeks, Ashbridge and her companion are rescued by friends; but, desiring to pursue her plan to go to America, she reboards the ship with the captain's permission—not considering how she will pay for her passage. En route to Ireland, she overhears some Irish servants plotting to kill the ship's crew and sail to America as unindentured men. She informs the captain, who tricks the conspirators into leaving the ship near the Irish coast.

National Humanities Center, 2009: [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds). Elizabeth Ashbridge, *Some Account of the Fore Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge, who died in Truth's service at the house of Robert Lecky at Kilnock in the County of Carlow Ireland; the 16th of 5th mo. 1755. Written by her own Hand many years ago. 1774*; edited and introduction by Daniel B. Shea, in William L. Andrews, gen. ed., *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 147-176; permission pending. Footnotes by Shea; bracketed notes by NHC. Complete image credits at [nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagedcredits.htm](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/imagedcredits.htm).

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 119:71.

<sup>2</sup> *Indenture*: An agreement that, when legally executed, bound an emigrant to a period of service under a master who paid the servant's passage to America. [Shea footnote continues.]

In Nine Weeks from the time I left Ireland we arrived at New York, (viz) [i.e.] on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the 7<sup>mo</sup> 1732 & then those to whom I had been Instrumental under Providence to save Life, proved Treacherous to me: I was a Stranger in a Strange Land.<sup>3</sup> The Captain got an Indenture wrote & Demanded of me to Sign it, withal Threatning a Gaol [jail] if I refused it; I told him I could find means to Satisfy him [funds to pay him] for my Passage without becoming bound [as a servant]: they then told me I might take my Choice Either to Sign that, or have that I had signed in Ireland in force against me (by this time I had learned the Character of the afforesaid Woman, that she was a Vile Creature, & feared that if ever I was in her Power she would use me Ill on her Brother's Account). I therefore in a fright Signed that, & tho' there was no Magistrate present, I being Ignorant in such Cases, it Did well enough to Make me a Servant four Years.

In two Weeks time I was Sold, & Were it Possible to Convey in Characters a sense of the Sufferings of my Servitude, it would make the most strong heart pity the Misfortunes of a young creature as I was, who had a Tender Education; for tho' my Father had no great Estate, yet he lived well. I had been used to Little but my School, but now it had been better for me if I had been brought up to more hardship. For a While at first I was Pretty well used, but in a Little time the Scale turned. Occasioned by a Difference that happened between my Master & me,<sup>4</sup> wherein I was Innocent: from that time he set himself against me and was Inhuman. He would not suffer [allow] me to have Clothes to be Decent in, having to go barefoot in his Service in the Snowey Weather & the Meanest drudgery, wherein I Suffered the Utmost Hardship that my Body was able to Bear, which, with the afforesaid Troubles, had like to have been my Ruin to all Eternity had not Almighty God in Mercy interposed. . . .

*“I Suffered the Utmost Hardship  
that my Body was able to Bear”*

To one Woman (& no other) I had Discovered the Nature of the Difference which Two years before had happened between My master & Me; by her means he heard of it, & tho' he knew it was True yet he sent for the Town Whipper to Correct me. I was Called In; he never asked me Whether I had told any such thing but ordered me to strip; at which my heart was ready to burst; for I could as freely have given up my Life as Suffer such Ignominy. I then said if there be a God, be graciously Pleased to Look down on one of the most unhappy Creatures & plead my Cause for thou knows what I have said is the truth; and were it not for a principle more noble than he was Capable of I would have told it before his wife. I then fixed my Eyes on the Barbarous man, & in a flood of Tears said: “Sir, if you would have no Pity on me, yet for my Father's Sake spare me from this Shame (for before this time had heard of my Father & C. several ways) & if you think I deserve such punishment, do it your Self.” He then took a turn over the Room & bid the Whipper go about his business, and I came off without a blow, which I thought something Remarkable, but now I began to think my Credit was gone (for they said many things of me which I blessed God were not True) & here I suffer so much Cruelty I cannot bear it.

The Enemy [i.e., Satan] Immediately Came in & put me in a way how to be rid of it all & tempted me to End my Miserable Life: I joyn'd with it & for that Purpose went into the garret to hang my Self. Now it was I was convinced there was a God, for as my feet Entered the Place Horror seized to that degree, I trembled much, and as I stood like the one in Amaze, it seemed as tho' I heard a Voice say, “there is a Hell beyond the grave;” at which I was greatly astonished, & now Convinced that there was an almighty Power, to whom I then Prayed, saying, “God be merciful & Enable me to bear what thou in thy Providence shall bring or Suffer to Come upon me for my Disobedience.” I then went Down again but Let none know what I had been about. Soon after this I had a Dream, & tho' some make a ridicule of Dreams, yet this seemed a significant one to me & therefore shall mention it. I thought somebody knocked at the Door, by which when I had opened it there stood a Grave woman, holding in her right hand an oil lamp

<sup>3</sup> Moses so describes himself living among the Egyptians (see Exodus 2:22).

<sup>4</sup> Shea notes that the “difference” was “most likely his attempt to take sexual advantage of his young servant, a not uncommon result of the servant's status as property.” Shea, in Williams, p. 128, citing Sharon V. Salinger, “To Serve Well and Faithfully”: Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682-1800 (Cambridge University Press, 1987), iii.

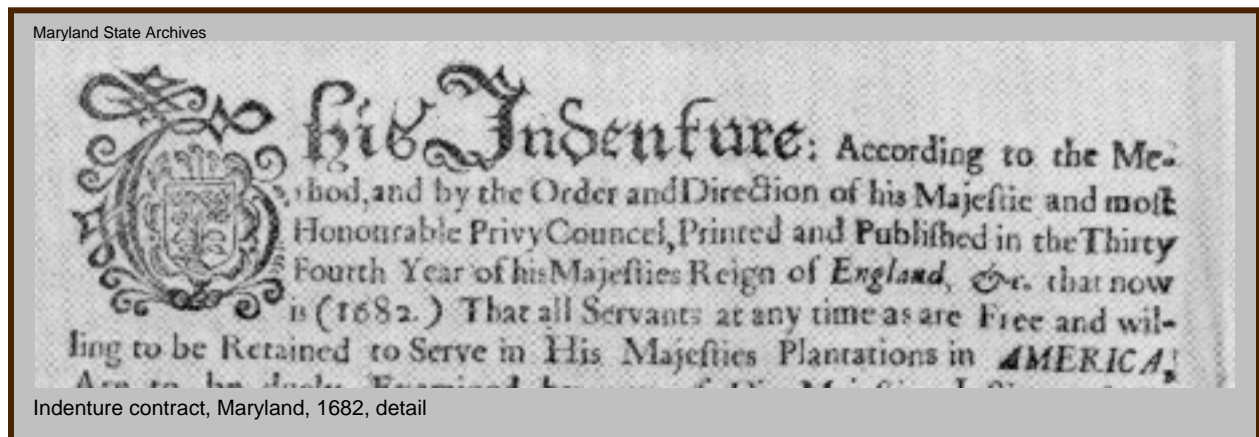
burning, who with a Solid Countenance fixed her Eyes upon me & said—“I am sent to tell thee that If thou’l return to the Lord thy God, who hath Created thee, he will have mercy on thee, & thy Lamp shall not be put out in obscure darkness;” upon which the Light flamed from the Lamp in an extraordinary Manner, & She left me and I awoke.

But alas! I did not give up nor Comply with the heavenly Vision, as I think I may Call it, for after this I had like to have been caught in another Snare, which if I had would Probably have been my Ruin, from which I was also preserved. I was Counted a fine Singer & Dancer, in which I took great Delight. and once falling in with some of the Play house company then at New York, they took a Great fancy to me, as they said, & Perswaded me to become an Actress amongst them, & they would find means to get me from my cruel Servitude, & I should Live Like a Lady—The Proposal took with me & I used no small Pains to Qualify my Self for it Reading their Play Books, even when I should have Slept, yet was put to the Demur when I came to Consider what my Father would say who had forgiven my Disobedience in marrying and earnestly desiring to see me again had sent for me home, but my proud heart would not Consent to return in so mean a Condition; therefore I chose Bondage rather.

*“So when I had Served near three years, I bought off the remainder of my Time & then took to my needle, by which I could maintain my Self handsomely”*

So when I had Served near three years, I bought off the remainder of my Time [indenture contract] & then took to my Needle [became a seamstress], by which I could maintain my Self handsomely: but, alas, I was not Sufficiently Punished; I had got released from one cruel Servitude & then not Contented got into another, and this for Life. A few months after, I married a young man that fell in Love with me for my Dancing, a Poor Motive for a man to Choose a Wife, or a Woman a Husband. But for my Part I fell in Love with nothing I saw in him and it seems unaccountable that I who had refused several, both in this Country & Ireland, as Last married a man I had no Value for.<sup>5</sup>

Ashbridge’s second marriage dissolved when she became a Quaker (her husband deserted her and died in the British army), and she wrote her memoir before marrying a fellow Quaker, Aaron Ashbridge, in 1746. She died nine years later on a return trip to Ireland. Little is known about her beyond the “account of the fore part” of her life.



Indenture contract, Maryland, 1682, detail

<sup>5</sup> See excerpts relating to Ashbridge’s second marriage and her decision to become a Quaker, in History Matters (George Mason University and the City University of New York) at [historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6511](http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6511).