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The Invention Of Free Labor

By that standard, "The Invention of Free Labor" is very good history indeed. It reminds us how blurry was the line between work and slavery only 250 years ago, when workers could contract themselves into a state of "voluntary servitude," and bosses were allowed to use beatings and threats of imprisonment to compel "servants" to fulfill their contractual obligations.

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Robert Steinfeld's story, The Invention of Free Labor, comes first chronologically. Workers in the seventeenth century were all, in varying degrees, unfree. Until about 1700 the employer ("master") held a kind of personal sway over virtually all who labored for him, and after 1700 he still owned a kind of property right to their labor.

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"Unfree labor," it is widely recognized, of course, occupied a central position in the medieval labor system. When villeinage grew rare in England, however, and the provision of labor came to be based primarily on consensual transactions in which individuals exchanged their labor for wages or other compensation, free labor, it is commonly assumed, was the form these transactions took.

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