

Apprenticeships in Colonial America



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During colonial times, people needed many things that were carved, sewn, or built by hand, such as barrels, wheels, kitchen tools, furniture, and shoes. These things were not made in factories, but created by craftspeople. Craftspeople were people with special skills.

Young people learned to be craftsmen by working as apprentices. An apprentice was someone who learned his or her skills from a master, or experienced craftsman. During colonial times, most teenagers were apprenticed rather than going to school. Boys often apprenticed with their fathers, while most girls learned domestic skills such as sewing and cooking from their mothers. Sometimes girls apprenticed with seamstresses or hatmakers. African American people, both slaves and free men, also learned special skills as apprentices.

Sometimes young people were sent away from home to be an apprentice. Sometimes families paid a master craftsperson to teach their sons a trade.

Apprentices worked hard. For their work, apprentices usually earned only food, clothing, and a place to stay. They were not paid with money. Wheelwrights, shoemakers, coopers, shopkeepers, leatherworkers, printers, blacksmiths, and most other craftspeople trained apprentices.



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When an apprentice first started, he worked many hours carrying materials, sweeping and cleaning up the workspace, and taking goods to customers. Once apprentices showed they were trustworthy, they were taught special skills and how to use tools. Masters also taught apprentices math and how to read and write. Apprentices spent from four to seven years learning how to make or do the things that the other colonists depended upon. When an apprentice finished learning, he sometimes took over the shop of the master craftsman, or began to travel, helping craftspeople in other villages while he saved enough money to open his own shop. During this traveling time, the new craftspeople were called “journeymen.”

Apprentices were important members of colonial villages. They helped master craftspeople provide the things their neighbors needed.

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Sources:

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Colonial Williamsburg Web site, History of Trades section (Q & A: Colonial Apprenticeships): www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume4/november05/apprenticeship.cfm?showSite=mobile (last accessed 10/25/12)