



The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

TEACHER RESOURCES

Historic Trades Background and Lesson

Background

In the 1700s, the North American colonies were an integral part of the British Empire and active participants in the economic system (mercantilism) upon which the empire was based. The American colonies were a targeted market for English manufactured goods, as well as a source of raw materials. American colonists depended upon imported English manufactured goods that were sold in local stores. This dependence effectively discouraged the development in the colonies of the highly specialized trades and manufacturing techniques found in Britain.

During the eighteenth century, most American colonists lived in rural areas or small towns. Though more tradespeople could be found in urban areas, their work supported a society and an economy in which most people were involved in agriculture, so they were familiar members of even rural communities. Colonial tradespeople manufactured goods for sale but could not compete effectively against many imported English goods. The most successful colonial trades produced items that were not easily shipped (such as furniture or wheeled vehicles), goods that were custom-made (such as furniture), or goods for everyday use (such as hogsheads for shipping tobacco). American tradespeople also provided a wide range of valuable services, including carpentry, printing, and especially repairs of a wide variety of items.

Colonial tradespeople provided goods and services for a multitude of individual, business, and community needs. By 1710 in Williamsburg, there were at least two shoemakers, a tanner, a baker, two barber-wigmakers, two silversmiths, a tailor, a blacksmith, a glazier, and several carpenters and bricklayers. Along with the colonial population, the number of tradespeople and the variety of trades grew throughout the eighteenth century. Over a twenty-five-year period from 1750 to 1775, Williamsburg had no fewer than 228 identifiable tradespeople who worked in forty-four different occupations. Yet these numbers reflect only those about whom records survive; an untold number of slaves, indentured servants, apprentices, and free journeymen worked with these tradespeople.

Despite some individuality, apprenticeships were similar throughout the colonies. An apprentice served a master for an agreed-upon period of time, was educated in the necessary hand skills of the trade, and received as much education as necessary to practice that trade

effectively. Enslaved tradespeople acquired their skills through the same, slightly modified apprenticeship process. Training was usually supervised either by a free skilled tradesperson or by another skilled member of a plantation's enslaved community. Enslaved persons could also be sent to urban centers to serve a more formal apprenticeship under a master. One common variation, however, was for enslaved apprentices to serve shorter terms, often receiving no formal education (such as reading or writing) outside of the trade itself.

Though the apprenticeship experience was similar for most young people, there were diverse opportunities for making a living once the apprenticeship was over. Newly free journeymen faced futures that were affected by many factors, such as geography, population, economic conditions, politics, and personal situations. New journeymen chose one of three basic options: they could set up their own shops, work for other masters for wages, or leave the trade altogether. The vast majority of journeymen worked for wages.

Today, the common perception is that all colonial journeymen aspired to and achieved economic independence by becoming masters—that there was a natural, orderly progression from apprentice to wage earner to shop master. In this perception, the legend of “today’s journeyman, tomorrow’s master” is equivalent to the American Dream. In reality, many journeymen found the door to economic advancement closed.

The decisive factor in determining a journeyman’s ability to establish economic independence was often the very trade he or she practiced. If the trade required little investment in tools and overhead, then mobility from journeyman to master was attainable by practically every young person who completed an apprenticeship. On the other hand, if a trade required a large investment, more substantial capital was needed to establish an independent shop. Without the aid of family resources to acquire the necessary equipment and space, it was difficult if not impossible for the average journeyman in such a trade to free himself from the employ of his master. Even those few journeymen capable of opening their own shops found it difficult to breach markets in which established masters held influence.

If the advancement possibilities for the free, skilled wage earner were questionable, they were as nothing compared to the circumstances of enslaved skilled workers. While free journeymen (both white and black) could work hard, practice frugality, and at least dream about if not achieve the status of master, enslaved tradespeople harbored no such illusions. A skilled slave’s status was a hindrance virtually impossible to overcome. His labor was a commodity controlled solely by his owner. If he were highly skilled, he might train or supervise other slaves, but he did not enjoy the legal status of a journeyman, and he would never be the master of his own shop. His condition as a slave superseded his skill.

Despite their unfree status, enslaved persons who had learned marketable skills did enjoy some benefits. They were often exempted from field labor, for example. Rather than performing repetitive drudgery, they continued to learn new skills. Some enjoyed a change of scenery when they were hired out to work on neighboring plantations or in town. Skilled slaves often worked with little direct supervision from masters or overseers and were sometimes permitted to hire themselves out for wages. They worked in a variety of trades, especially in those found most useful in agricultural areas.

Learning a skilled trade also placed an enslaved tradesperson in a better position to run away. This risk-filled act was more common among skilled slaves because their skills enabled them to pass as free persons and to support themselves once they reached a place of safety. Nevertheless, it was just as dangerous and difficult for enslaved tradespeople to run away as it was for their unskilled fellows. An enslaved tradesperson, just like a free wage-earning journeyman, was basically locked into his position in colonial society.

There are many accounts of the lives of colonial Americans who were property owners, shop masters, or otherwise mentioned in public records. But these same records are often silent about those who labored for others in urban workshops or on rural plantations. Yet the lack of historical records should not belie the fact that the lives of colonial journeymen varied tremendously. Each colonial tradesperson arrived at his or her trade through a variety of ways, as a result of different life experiences, and from diverse economic conditions and geographic locations. Many journeymen flourished as successful wage earners. Others who achieved the status of master may have struggled all their lives. Still others fortunate enough to hold the right skills at the right economic moment might meet with wild success. But most colonial journeymen worked and lived quietly, leaving little evidence of their existence.

While few documentary records survive regarding the lives of eighteenth-century tradespeople, many examples of their work can be seen in museums. Many colonial trades are still practiced both at living history museums and as full-time occupations by individual artisans. These modern masters and journeymen still follow the time-honored traditions and skills of their trades.

Introduction

In 1936, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation began its eighteenth-century Historic Trades program. In traditional settings utilizing techniques and tools from the period, men and women demonstrate many of the trades that were a part of colonial life. The book *Historic Trades* highlights these historic trades as preserved and practiced at Colonial Williamsburg. It provides a visual introduction to the various trades practiced in the American colonies and highlights the tools and techniques used by eighteenth-century tradespeople. Some of the trades

included in the book are no longer practiced outside of a museum setting such as Colonial Williamsburg.

As an instructional resource, *Historic Trades* provides teachers with the means to introduce students to the eighteenth-century workplace as well as providing a bridge to comparing and contrasting it with the twenty-first-century workplace.

Objectives

- Analyze images depicting various eighteenth-century trades practiced at Colonial Williamsburg to gather information.
- Make inferences based on available information.
- Record data obtained from image analysis on a graphic organizer.
- Using information entered on the graphic organizer, discuss the contributions of tradespeople to colonial society.

Materials

- *Historic Trades* book
- Graphic Organizer: Examining the Trades
- Additional Resources
- Trades Glossary for Teacher Reference

Strategy

1. Divide the class into groups of three to four students.
2. Give each student the Graphic Organizer: Examining the Trades and each group a copy of *Historic Trades*. (Note: if multiple copies of the book are not available, use a document camera to show pages of the book.)
3. Have groups read the book, gather information, and complete the graphic organizer. [Note: each group may be responsible for all trades, or each group could focus on one section of the book or one or two specific trades.] Tell students they may need to make inferences—educated guesses based on available information—to complete the graphic organizer.
4. Provide time for students to share their findings with the class and identify the contributions each trade made to the eighteenth-century community.
5. If desired, have each student complete additional research using the Additional Resources and add their findings to the Graphic Organizers. They can then turn in their graphic organizers to be graded or share their new information with the class informally.

Lesson Extensions

1. Have each student select a trade and compare the way it is practiced today to the way it was practiced in the eighteenth century. Students should then present their findings in a

visual manner (drawings, magazine clippings, online images, multimedia presentation) to the rest of the class.

2. Discuss with students the training that was necessary to become a tradesperson in the eighteenth century and compare that training with what is required in the twenty-first century.
3. Have the class consider what trades are no longer practiced and what new ones we rely on today. If they are still practiced, how have they changed, what tools are needed, and do they serve the same function?
4. Create a student podcast about colonial trades as outlined on this page:
http://www.history.org/History/teaching/images/CreatingAPodcastEpisode_CWF.pdf
5. Create a slide show of colonial trades using images, video and podcasts from the Additional Resources. Students should properly cite their sources.

Additional Resources

- *The Industrious Tradesmen: A Teachers Guide with Historical Background and Lesson Plans* (available to [HERO](#) subscribers at <http://hero.history.org/industrious-tradesmen>)
- *The Industrious Tradesmen* video (available to [HERO](#) subscribers at <http://hero.history.org/industrious-tradesmen>)
- “Earning a Living as a Tradesperson In Colonial America” lesson unit (available for [purchase](#))
- Articles on trades in the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*:
<http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/categories.cfm#trades>
- Trades information on the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s website:
<http://www.history.org/Almanack/life/trades/tradehdr.cfm>
- “Bibliography of Crafts and Trades in Colonial Virginia”:
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/library/branches/vr/craftsandtrades.htm>
- Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s podcasts on trades:
<http://podcast.history.org/category/trades-technology/>
- Colonial Williamsburg Foundation slideshows on trades:
<http://www.history.org/media/slideshows.cfm?sort=trades>
- Using Podcasts in the Classroom: Listening to the Colonial Trades:
http://www.history.org/History/teaching/images/Past&Present_Lesson_CWFv2.pdf

Trades Glossary for Teacher Reference

- **apothecary**—makes and sells medicines and treats minor illnesses
- **military artificer**—maintains military equipment such as cartridge boxes, belts, scabbards, saddles
- **armorer**—repairs and maintains firearms for the government or for an army
- **basketmaker**—weaves baskets of various sizes
- **blacksmith**—works with the black metals, iron and steel
- **bookbinder**—makes and binds books
- **brickmaker**—makes bricks from clay and fires them in a kiln
- **cabinetmaker**—builds furniture in the latest fashion
- **carpenter**—constructs the frames of buildings, makes doors, lays floors, installs moldings, partitions the interior of a house, etc.
- **cooper**—makes wooden casks and other containers such as buckets and barrels
- **farmer**—grows food for personal consumption and produces tobacco, wheat, and corn as a cash crop
- **founder**—makes castings for items such as candle sticks by pouring molten brass into sand molds
- **gunsmith**—manufactures firearms
- **harnessmaker**—makes and repairs leather harness and saddles for horses and carriages
- **joiner**—woodworker specializing in fine finish woodwork and trim for houses
- **mantuamaker**—dressmaker
- **milliner**—makes and sells goods such as caps, cloaks, aprons, and other clothing accessories
- **printer**—publishes newspapers and other printed materials
- **professional cook**—prepares meals for the governor and other dignitaries.

- **sawyer**—saws lumber out of logs by hand with a pit saw
- **shoemaker**—makes shoes and boots (note: different from a cobbler, who makes repairs)
- **silversmith**—makes fashionable flatware, hollowware, jewelry and other items from silver.
- **tailor**—cuts, fits, and sews men’s coats, waistcoats, and breeches as well as women’s stays and riding habits
- **tinsmith**—makes or repairs articles such as cups, kettles and plates from tin-plated sheet iron
- **weaver**—makes cloth
- **wheelwright**—makes and repairs wheels, carts, wagons, and ploughs
- **wigmaker**—makes and styles wigs and hairpieces using human and animal hair

Graphic Organizer: Examining the Trades

Name of the Trade	What materials were used in this trade?	What tools were used in this trade?	What does this trade make/repair?