
Colonial Tradesmen: Who They Were and What They Did
Teacher's Guide



Reporting Category: United States History to 1865

Topic: Colonial America and the American Revolution

Primary SOLs: VS.4, VS.5, USI.5, VUS.2

Materials: Interactive Video, Discussion Questions (see attached)

Directions:

Students will watch an educational video discussing life in Colonial Virginia and the purpose of tradesmen within colonial society. Students will then use what they have learned to answer or discuss the attached questions.

Context:

Early Virginia & the Thirteen Colonies

When the first settlers arrived in Virginia, many of them were simply farmers who worked the land, grew crops and sold their harvests to support their families. In Prince William County, many of these farmers settled around the port of Dumfries, moving westward in search of better-quality farmland to cultivate crops, like tobacco. Yet, as society expanded along the continental east coast, it became more dependent on agriculture. However, there was still a necessity for manmade commodities, many of which could not be created by farmers.

To obtain these commodities, certain individuals were trained in a specialized field, known as a trade, in order to produce the necessary goods and services. These individuals were called tradesmen and they not only provided insight into the daily lives of early American settlers, but also helped sustain a growing colonial economy that encompassed much of North America, the Caribbean, Africa and Europe, creating what is known today as the Atlantic Triangular Trade.

How Did Professional Tradesmen Learn Their Craft?

A tradesman's craft was more than a job; it was their entire livelihood for it defined their social standing. Novice tradesmen were usually apprenticed to experts in their field at a young age, assisting the master craftsman in his job and learning his techniques until they were old enough or well-experienced to work independently. In some cases, the master in question could be the apprentice's parent, a family friend, a neighbor, or even a local shopkeeper in town. Women were also allowed to work a trade just like men, so long as the job was socially acceptable, like that of a weaver or a seamstress.

Some professional tradesmen were even contracted by patrons for special projects. For instance, a carpenter might be commissioned to build a lavish manor for a wealthy landowner, or a blacksmith might be asked to forge a ceremonial officer's sword for a soldier's recent promotion. Either way, colonial tradesmen were an integral facet of early American life and many of their specialties are still practiced today in the 21st century.

Common Professional Trades in Colonial America

Apothecaries: A precursor to the modern-day pharmacist, apothecaries were responsible for the creation and distribution of drugs and medicine. Usually acting in the role of a sales representative, apothecaries relegated medicinal treatments and operational procedures to trained doctors, physicians and surgeons. In the event no one experienced in medicine was available to assist ailing patients, an apothecary might step in to administer medical aid when necessary. Since illness was a common occurrence, an apothecary made sure as many colonists had access to medicine to treat whatever ailed them.

Blacksmiths: Arguably one of the most important occupations, blacksmiths used heated forges to smelt, shape and cool iron into tools and components that could be used for a variety of purposes. Some noteworthy creations included workmen's equipment, nails, door hinges, iron bars for jail cells, and horseshoes just to name a few examples. Blacksmiths were always in high-demand, especially in Colonial America until the Industrial Revolution in the later 1800s, where the invention of steam and coal powered machinery allowed for the mass



A blacksmith at work

production of iron, and later steel equipment, effectively putting trained blacksmiths into a more niche role.

Carpenters, Joiners & Barrel-Makers: Some professional trades, like carpenters, used lumbered wood to construct buildings and furniture, which was crucial in maintaining colonial towns. Carpenters cut, built and repaired wooden structures, combining framework pieces together through a process called joinery. Floors, walls, doors, stairs and roofs, were carefully measured, carved and assembled by carpenters and joiners using nothing but hand tools. When not building houses or other municipal structures, carpenters might be employed to build basic furniture like chairs, tables, bed frames, dressers and cabinets.

Barrel-makers, also known as coopers, took lumbered wood and fashioned them into barrels, which were used to transport and store economic goods. The barrels were often labeled cargo and loaded onto departing wagons and ships. Coopers made sure the barrels were sturdy enough to guarantee the cargo arrived at its destination undamaged and unspoiled, especially if food was transported over long distances.

Note: Rippon Lodge is one of the oldest homes still standing today in Prince William County. The original owner and builder, Richard Blackburn, was a carpenter who finished the main house in 1747. His son, Thomas, also knew carpentry and built new additions onto the home around the year 1800.

Gunsmiths: A metal-working trade similar to the blacksmith, gunsmiths were responsible for the creation and maintenance of firearms and ammunition. In the colonial era, gunsmiths carved out pieces of wood to form a rifle or musket stock. Similarly to a blacksmith, a gunsmith might also use a forge to craft metal parts out of brass and iron that were then attached onto the firearm, such as the barrel, matchlock, and the trigger.

Gunsmiths were highly sought after to guarantee firearms were repaired and that local militias were well-equipped with guns to defend their towns, the latter of which was crucial when the Thirteen Colonies rebelled against the British monarchy in the American Revolution. Essentially, gunsmiths used skills that were commonly associated with blacksmiths and carpenters, highlighting the importance of an individual's professional trade.

Weavers, Tailors & Cobblers: Apparel-makers ensured citizens were properly clothed for the ever-changing seasons and unpredictable weather. Weavers took raw materials like cotton and wool and turned them into fabrics and textiles. These new threads were then given to tailors, who sewed the materials together to create and sell clothes. A cobbler was a shoemaker, who used materials like leather and rawhide to craft wearable shoes and boots. As the Continental Army was formed and later required uniforms, weavers and tailors played an important role in outfitting American soldiers with appropriate attire to differentiate them from the British regulars.

Exercise (can be used as a separate worksheet or as discussion questions for the classroom):

Name: _____

Directions: Watch the instructional video and answer the following short-answer questions.

1. Question: If you were suddenly transported back in time to 18th century Prince William County, what profession would you work in and why? Describe how your chosen occupation or trade might influence your social standing in life.

2. Question: Describe how an aspiring tradesmen learned to become an expert within their field.

3. Question: Considering the time period and how early American society operated, could colonial women have an opportunity to work in a trade, or was this specialized line of work restricted to only men? What were acceptable jobs a woman might work in?

4. Question: The video discussed examples of several common trades that colonists practiced. Write down three trades that were talked about and discuss what each one did.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

5. Question: In what way would professional trade work impact the American Revolution? Use examples from the video to support your answer.

6. Question: Describe how some of the discussed trades are still used today in the 21st century and why they might be considered important.

Additional Resources:

1. Historic Trades & Skills

<https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/discover/historic-area/historic-trades-skills/>

2. Craftsmen & Tradesmen

<https://guides.loc.gov/colonial-america-business-research/craftsmen>

3. 6 Common Jobs in Colonial America

<https://www.history.com/articles/13-colonies-jobs>

4. Colonial Occupations Playlist

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLYLZ-AE-flsdpL9KpmudvUXa1TSNj0-Tz>