



LESSON 3:

Choosing a Trade in Colonial America

OVERVIEW

Of all his many accomplishments, Franklin most wished to be remembered as “B. Franklin, Printer.” The craft of printing demanded both mental dexterity and hard physical labor. As a printer, Franklin worked with his hands and his muscles to set type and operate the manual presses in his shop. But despite the hard work, printing was a time-honored craft that often attracted literate, ambitious young men like Franklin. Many of Franklin’s peers in the colonies practiced trades that demanded both muscle and intellect. This lesson plan allows students to glimpse colonial life for young apprentices, as Franklin and other artisans would have understood it – through their work.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about the many trades practiced in colonial America, the process of becoming an artisan, and the role of artisans in colonial society.
- Investigate colonial trades through virtual tours of living history museums and through primary sources containing personal accounts of colonial apprentices.
- Create a detailed fictional diary of an apprentice’s life to demonstrate their knowledge.

TIME

This lesson and activity require two to three class periods. Preparations include reserving computer time for virtual tours and copying primary source materials.

MATERIALS

- Primary Source readings
 - Benjamin Franklin, “How I Became a Printer in Philadelphia” in his *Autobiography*. Available at http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/bfranklin/franklin_how.htm.
 - John Fitch, “I Was Sure of Getting a Trade,” in his *Autobiography*. Available at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5822>.
- Internet access (optional)
- Colonial Williamsburg films on colonial trades (optional)
- Stockham, Peter. *Little Book of Early American Crafts and Trades*. (New York: Dover, 1976). [reprint]
- Hazen, Edward. *Popular Technology or Professions and Trades*. (Albany: Early American Trades and Industries, 1981). [reprint]
- <http://hastings.ci.lexington.ma.us/Colonial/Life/Life.html> (Colonial Life)
- www.osv.org (Old Sturbridge Village)
- www.history.org/Almanack/life/trades/tradehdr.cfm (Trades at Colonial Williamsburg)

McREL STANDARDS

Language Arts

Standard 1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

United States History

Standard 5. Understands how European economic values and institutions took root in America

LESSON AND ACTIVITY

1. Introduction

Introduce the topic of contemporary work/occupations. Ask students what their parents do for a living while recording answers on the board. Expand the list by asking students about occupations of grandparents, great grandparents, and other family members. A diverse collection of jobs should develop. Give the list a heading: "Twenty-first Century Occupations." Then make a "T" chart with the developed list on one side and ask, "How did people in colonial America make a living?" The class generates a list. The teacher asks students to identify similarities and differences between the lists. The teacher may broaden the discussion by asking students to compare training for a job today with that for one in the 1700s.

2. Investigation

Teachers can take several approaches to familiarize students with colonial trades. With Internet access, the class can take a virtual tour of any or all of the websites listed in "Materials." Students can also refer to the referenced books or an encyclopedia.

Students may work in pairs or larger groups to list trades that they have heard of and those that they have not. They should also include what the trades make or do (e.g., coopers make barrels, tubs, and pails).

3. Homework

Read Primary Sources (see Materials). Teachers may choose to use selections from one or both of the documents or they may instead assign one of the documents in its entirety. In response to the readings, ask students to answer the following questions:

- What was life like for colonial apprentices and other youth?
- When did young people have to choose a trade?
- How do the lives of colonial apprentices compare/contrast to your own?

4. Research

Using the previous activities and the students' knowledge of apprentices, students select an occupation. They return to the research materials and investigate the tools and processes used in that trade.

5. Writing

Ask students to write a fictional diary. Using new knowledge from the above activities, students should write a week's worth of diary entries for a fictional colonial youth who is learning a trade. The diary must be creative and include the following details:

- Description of the writer [age, gender, parents, appearances]
- Where the character lives, with some description
- What trade the character is learning

- Who is the character's master and what is their relationship like
- Description of the tools and processes involved in the trade

6. Students share entrees from their diaries by reading them aloud.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed on class participation, quality of their group notes in the investigation, their homework, and the diary. The diary must include the required details.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Students can create artifacts that could have been made by the characters that they created in their fictional diaries. They can use plasticine, clay, or another material. They can take the activity a step further by creating several items and making a museum exhibition that includes the diary.
- Students can identify someone who still practices a trade existent in colonial America and interview that person. They should be sure to ask how that artisan learned the trade. Taking the activity a step further, students can film the artisan along with the interview and edit the film into a documentary.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Websites for additional major living history museums, such as Strawberry Banke.