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The Treacherous Travails of Traversing Tidewater's Tributaries

(Excerpts from the Journal of
Robert Hunter Jr., a Young
Merchant of London)

Eighteenth-century travelers faced many challenges. The weather, method of transportation, and road conditions created obstacles on their journeys. Robert Hunter Jr. was the twenty-year-old son of a Scottish merchant living in London.

In May 1785, Robert set out on a journey combining business and adventure that took him to Canada, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. While in the United States, Robert was to collect overdue debts to his father's mercantile firm incurred before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The following describes his journey from Petersburg to Suffolk, Virginia in 1786.

Petersburg, Virginia, to Suffolk, Virginia:

[Petersburg], Thursday, June 8, [1786]

Before I have done with this town let me endeavor to give you some description of the place. Petersburg is situated upon the Appomatox, a branch of the James River, 25 miles to the southward of Richmond. The town is very unhealthy, being built in the middle of a swamp betwixt two hills. . . .

We were called up this morning at three o'clock and in the stage and off a half an hour after. I was extremely happy to find Mr. Storey was one of the passengers. He yesterday had no intention of going. Mr. Cuthbert was another. They both of them know several of my acquaintances. It was



This 1795 watercolor of a view near Portsmouth (CWF 1961-42) shows the appearance of the city's nearby environs less than ten years after Hunter's visit.

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Arts & Mysteries

Today's Journeyman, Tomorrow's Journeyman: Colonial America's Wage Earners

by Noel B. Poirier

Noel, formerly a journeyman carpenter/joiner in Colonial Williamsburg's Department of Historic Trades, is now museum director for the Quiet Valley Farm Museum near Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

Master carpenters Philip Moody and John Lamb surveyed the tiny rented room where journeyman carpenter John Drewry recently had been living. The room was filled with Drewry's tools, a few items of clothing, and drawers filled with sundry items.¹ Drewry, the son of Peter Drewry of York County, was only twenty-five years old when he died in 1779. Orphaned at sixteen, he was apprenticed by his guardian John Chisman to Yorktown carpenter Nathan Stroud. For the next five years, Drewry worked and lived with Stroud. In return for providing room, board, and clothing, Stroud received regular payments from Peter Drewry's estate via John Chisman.²

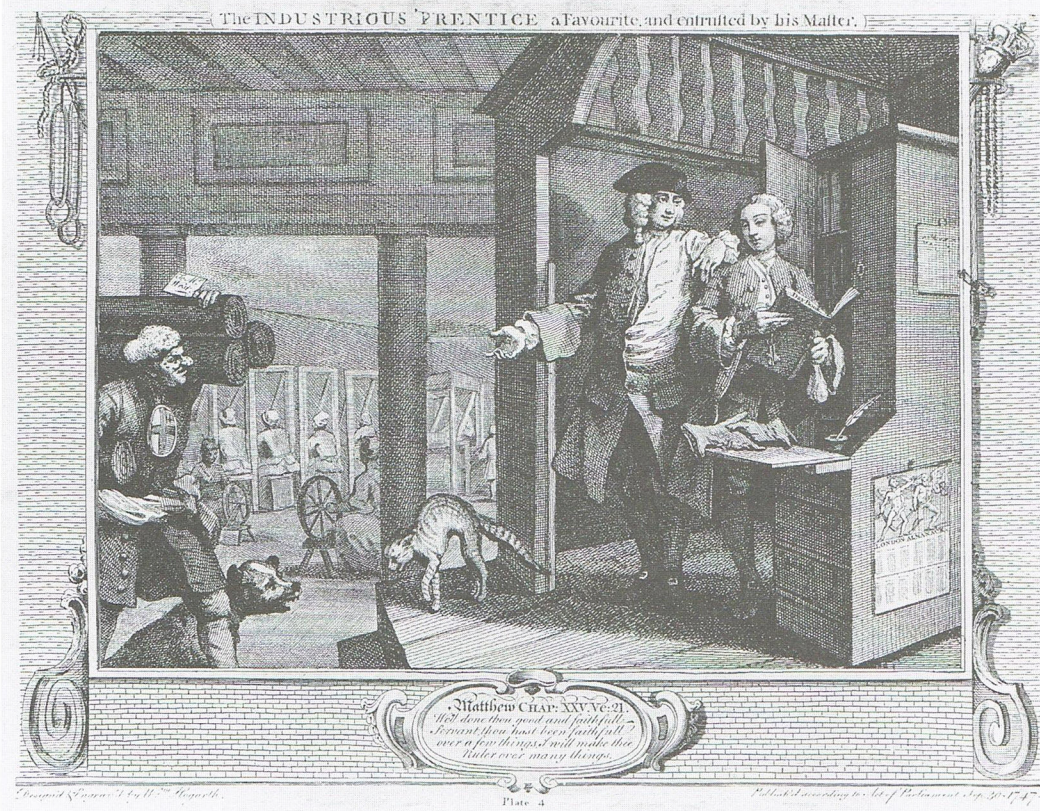
John Drewry could not have turned twenty-one at a better time for an aspiring tradesperson. The year 1776 found Williamsburg bursting with soldiers, artisans, and public servants. Tradespeople were desperately needed to provide Virginia with vital war material. Drewry, like many others including Lamb and Moody, took advantage of the opportunity and offered goods and services to the state.

It is even possible that Drewry had been hired to work in the public carpenter shop, managed at the time by Philip Moody.³ John Drewry is a rarity, for journeymen trades people are "historic ghosts" who, if they worked their entire life as wage earners, may never have purchased real property and, if they lived within the law, rarely appeared in the historic record. He is just one illustration of the countless journeymen whom history has all but forgotten.

The tradesperson of colonial America, male or female, was the product of a long-standing system for the training and education of the colonies' youth. The absence of public education in most of the colonies and the need for skilled artisans demanded the establishment of a structure for the education of young people.

In England, that structure prior to the mid-1500s was controlled principally by trade guilds

Plate 4 of Hogarth's apprentice series, published in 1747, shows the "industrious 'prentice" who works hard and diligently and earns the trust and favor of his master (CWF 1947 481).



or municipal organizations until the establishment of the Statute of Artificers in 1562. This act provided that all apprenticeships be documented through the recording of an article of indenture, be contracted for a minimum of seven years and not expire until the apprentice reached the age of twenty-one or twenty-four. Under this legally binding agreement, the apprentice's master was to serve as his or her legal guardian and endeavor to educate the apprentice in his trade.⁴

Subsequently, the Poor Law of 1601 amended the British apprenticeship system by allowing churchwardens to apprentice children of poor families. These children, referred to as "pauper apprentices," were to serve terms ending at age twenty-four for men and twenty-one (or marriage) for women. Both of these laws gave communities the means to control their youth populations, supply the trades with inexpensive labor, provide for the support of poor children and indigent orphans, and give children a skill with which to earn a living as adults, making them less likely to need public assistance. Each colony in America adapted these provisions to their own situations and enacted laws that were relevant to their own economies and populations.⁵

While each colony adapted the traditional apprenticeship to its own environment, the fundamental apprenticeship was the same. Apprentices in the free population, be they in South Carolina or Massachusetts, served for an agreed upon period of time with a master, were educated in the hand skills necessary to the master's trade, and received as much schooling as necessary to be effective in the practice of that trade. (See below for variations in the training process by which an enslaved person became a skilled tradesperson.) Surrounded by journeymen of varying skills and demeanors and beholden to the shop's master, all apprentices received instruction in the skills necessary to make their way in colonial America.⁶

While the apprenticeship experience for most young people was similar, their opportunities for making a living afterward were considerably more diverse. There were many factors at play when newly liberated journeymen contemplated their futures. Geography, economy, population, and politics all played a part in shaping the opportunities available to journeyman trades people, as were personal situations of individual journeymen.

Whether a journeyman was just beginning to earn wages or had been working in the trade for years, or whether he was married or single, each person's definition of success affected the decision. Newly minted, free journeymen essentially

had to decide to do one of three things: attempt to become a master, leave the trade altogether, or work for a master for wages.

The common perception of tradespeople from the colonial period is that all journeymen aspired to, and achieved, their economic independence. In many ways, the notion of the "American dream" has its roots in this perception. Unfortunately, the door to economic opportunity, as expressed in the movement from wage earner to shop master, often was closed to many journeymen.

Being highly skilled in a trade was not enough. Journeymen about to venture out on their own also needed to be strongly motivated, have sufficient capital, and know how to run a successful business. Good business practice included everything from keeping accurate accounts to setting up shop in a location that provided a ready market for their work, as well as what we might call public relations know-how.

Often the decisive factor in determining journeymen's abilities to establish economic independence was inherent in the very trades they practiced. If a journeyman was a barber or bookbinder, for example, he required little in the way of tool and overhead investment, making the road from journeyman to master easier—provided always that sound business sense and perseverance were present. For them, freedom dues were sometimes sufficient to provide an economic leg up.⁷

Trades that required considerable capital investment in materials, tools, and workspace—a goldsmith or cabinetmaker, for example—made it difficult for the average journeyman to free himself from the yoke of the master tradesman for whom he worked. Aid from a patron or family resources was often the only way to make the move from journeyman to master early in one's career.⁸

Philip Moody, son of local cabinetmaker/carpenter/taverner Matthew Moody Sr., was apprenticed in 1753 to Williamsburg master carpenter Christopher Ford. Philip Moody was in business for himself shortly after completing his apprenticeship, undertaking work for prominent Williamsburg resident John Prentis and joining the Masonic lodge.⁹ Moody's rapid entry into the competitive Williamsburg building market implies assistance, both monetary and social, from his father, Mathew, who was a member of the local Masonic lodge.

Another tradesperson who used patronage to establish himself in Williamsburg was joiner Joshua Kendall. In late July 1768, King George III appointed Lord Botetourt governor of the colony of Virginia. Shortly afterward, Bote-

tourt began to contract with various tradesmen, including Kendall, to travel with him to Virginia. On August 14, 1768, Botetourt contracted Joshua Kendall to serve as his joiner-in-residence in Virginia. Kendall was paid £30 for the one-year contract.¹⁰

One of the first Virginia references to Kendall appears in the *Virginia Gazette* in May of 1769. At the time, Joshua Kendall was in partnership with another Botetourt transplant, Joseph Kidd. The two men advertised that they had "engaged a person from England, well acquainted with the useful branches of plumbing, glazing and painting."¹¹

Four months later the men advertised they had acquired a "choice collection of the most fashionable paper hangings" and that they offered lead products for sale at their shop "behind the church." This advertisement led to a public chastisement of the partners in the competing *Virginia Gazette* printed by William Rind. The complaint accused the partners of violating the recently passed Association, which prohibited the importation of paper, paint, and glass from Great Britain. Shortly after this reproach the partnership of Kendall and Kidd dissolved, and Kendall went into business on his own.¹²

It is doubtful that Joshua Kendall, without the assistance of his patron, could have established himself in a community abundantly supplied with joiners. Evidence of Kendall's reliance on patronage is best illustrated by his departure from the Williamsburg scene shortly after the death of Botetourt.

One of the themes running through the study of artisans is that journeymen sometimes eschewed their trades for other economic pursuits, notably farming. The evidence for this is often anecdotal or based on evidence from the seventeenth century when land could be more cheaply acquired. In the eighteenth century, the pens of individuals such as Benjamin Franklin, who were courting prospective European settlers, perpetuated this idea.¹³

The fact is, the cost of obtaining a significant amount of land in older, established areas of the colonies was, like that of establishing one's own shop, often beyond the reach of many journeymen tradespeople. Even land in frontier areas could be beyond the reach of the most frugal artisan. A wage-earning tradesperson who wanted to buy land in frontier Amelia County between 1742 and 1758, for example, would have paid anywhere from £1 for 30 acres to £180 for 400 acres. Wages for a journeyman artisan in Virginia about the same time averaged around £30 per year.¹⁴

Labor to work the land presented another often-insurmountable problem for the journeyman who hoped to switch to farming. The cost

of enslaved male farm hands rose gradually throughout the eighteenth century. The Virginia wage earner of the latter half of the eighteenth century would have paid at least £30 for one male slave capable of fieldwork.¹⁵ Once again, even if wage-earning artisans were interested in becoming planters, the economic costs of land and labor made it virtually impossible. A careful study of tradespeople offered as examples of artisan turned planter shows that many of them, such as James Geddy Jr. in Williamsburg, were people who had already achieved levels of success in their trades high enough to provide them the income necessary to purchase land and the labor to work it.¹⁶

The concept of movement from skilled laborer to independent planter is further undermined by the question of expertise in running a farm. A skilled journeyman silversmith, who knew nothing but the study and practice of silversmithing from the age of fourteen, was ill equipped to grow crops or raise livestock. Eighteenth-century farming was not so uncomplicated that anyone could do it without any specialized knowledge or training.

The fact that there were identifiable skills required to undertake agriculture as distinct from an artisan's skills is clearly illustrated in demands from the colonies for indentured servants who were either "tradesmen" or "farmers."¹⁷ Wage-earning artisans were often creatures of, and at home in, an urban setting. Their exposure to agricultural practices was limited and certainly not significant enough to place them in a position to establish themselves as independent planters.

Like their free counterparts, enslaved artisans acquired their skills through the same, though modified, apprenticeship process. Enslaved persons sometimes were sent to urban centers where they could serve a more formal apprenticeship under a master tradesperson. The handful of slaves known to have served formal apprenticeships did not always serve as long as their free counterparts and often did not receive formal schooling outside the workshop.¹⁸

Training could be supervised by a free skilled tradesperson by arrangement with the slave's owner or by another skilled member of a plantation's enslaved community. There was value in a wealthy plantation owner apprenticing his enslaved labor to trades because the apprenticeship of one slave made it possible for that enslaved artisan to train others when needed, limiting the need to hire more expensive free artisans. While there were growing numbers of skilled enslaved artisans throughout the eighteenth century, most enslaved individuals continued to labor in the fields of their masters.¹⁹

If the situation for the free skilled wage earner was often bleak, it was nothing when compared to the circumstances of America's enslaved skilled workforce. Skilled slaves sometimes hired themselves out for their own benefit or earned extra money in other ways, but their unfree status dictated that these benefits in many cases accrued to their masters rather than to enslaved artisans themselves.

There were other advantages, within the confines of their unfree status, to the enslaved person who had learned a skill. The environment in which enslaved artisans worked was far different from their unskilled counterparts. They were often exempt from having to work in the fields, continued to learn new skills, and occasionally were hired out to work on neighboring plantations and in town. Skilled slaves also intermittently worked without any direct supervision from masters or overseers, and were sporadically permitted to hire themselves out for wages.²⁰

The learning of a skilled trade also placed the enslaved artisan in a better position to undermine the authority of the slave owner by running away. This act of resistance was more common among skilled slaves than the unskilled due to the opportunities for skilled persons to practice their marketable skills and pass themselves off as free persons.²¹ Nonetheless, opportunities for enslaved individuals to use their skills to free themselves from bondage were few. Enslaved artisans were similar to free wage-earning journeymen in that both groups were for the most part locked into positions under their masters' thumbs in colonial society.

There are countless references to colonial Americans who were property owners, shop masters, or otherwise mentioned in public records. These records, however, recounted little about the lives and work of those colonists who labored in the workshops of urban masters or on rural plantations. The legend of "today's journeyman, tomorrow's master" morphed over time into the concept of "the American Dream." The historical reality of the wage-earning or enslaved skilled artisan of colonial America falls far short of accepted lore.

Journeymen tradespeople were, principally for reasons of economy, constrained from establishing themselves as independent shop masters. Even those capable of acquiring the necessary capital from family or patrons found it difficult to breach markets in which established shop masters held sway. Enslaved artisans, while enjoying more freedom of movement than their field-working counterparts, could not gain legal freedom from slavery simply through learning a trade. Enslaved artisans sometimes decided that their best hope

was to run away to a place where the value of their skill would encourage others to accept them as free. The full story of wage-earning artisans and their enslaved counterparts is one that has yet to be completely written. Only when it is done will the contributions to colonial American history of men such as John Drewry truly be understood.

Additional Reading

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¹ Inventory of John Drewry, York County Records, Wills and Inventories 22 (1771–1783): 431–432 (microfilm, John D. Rockefeller Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation).

² Peter Drewry Estate Settlement, York County Records, Wills, and Inventories 22 (1771–1783): 41; York County Records, Guardian Accounts (1736–1780): 462–463, 482, 499–500, 510–511 (microfilm, Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg).

³ Deputy Quarter Master General, Accounts, 1776–1780, Virginia State Library (microfilm, Rockefeller Library, Colonial Williamsburg).

⁴ Raymond R. Townsend, Study Manual #2, Part 2, *Apprenticeship in Colonial Virginia* (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series, 1960), 1.

⁵ Townsend, Study Manual #2, Part 2, *Apprenticeship in Colonial Virginia*, 1–2; James M. Gaynor and Nancy Hagedorn, *Tools, Working Wood in Eighteenth-Century America* (Williamsburg, Va.: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1993), 35–39.

⁶ Gaynor and Hagedorn, *Tools*, 35–39; Vanessa E. Patrick, “as good a joiner as any in Virginia:” *African-Americans in Eighteenth-Century Building Trades* (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library Research Report Series, 1995), in *Enslaving Virginia Resource Book* (Williamsburg, VA: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), 281–285; Mary Allison Carll-White, *The Role of the Black Artisan in the Building Trades and the Decorative Arts in South Carolina's Charleston District, 1760–1800* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1982), 37–52.

⁷ Christine Daniels, “From Father to Son: Economic Roots of Craft Dynasties in Eighteenth-Century Maryland,” Howard B. Rock, et al., eds., *American Artisans: Crafting Social Identity, 1750–1850* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 8.

⁸ Billy G. Smith, *The “Lower Sort” Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), 138–144.

⁹ Estate of Mr. John Prentis to Phil Moody, Joseph Prentis Papers, photocopy (PH29), John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; “Williamsburg Ma-

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¹⁰ Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal*, August 6, 1768; Patricia A. Gibbs, “The Governor's Household and Its Operations: A Thematic Paper Prepared for the Department of Interpretive Education,” Colonial Williamsburg Research Report, 1981.

¹¹ Gibbs, “Governor's Household and Its Operations,” 11, 20; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), May 4, 1769.

¹² *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), September 28, 1769; *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), November 2, 1769; Gibbs, “Governor's Household and Its Operations,” 20.

¹³ Harold Gill, *Artisans of Williamsburg, 1700–1800* (Williamsburg, Va.: The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1994), 21–22; Benjamin Franklin, “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America,” February 1798, in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed. *Benjamin Franklin, Writings*. (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1987), 978.

¹⁴ Michael L. Nicholls, “Origins of the Virginia Southside, 1703–1753: A Social and Economic Study” (Ph.D. diss., College of William and Mary, 1972), 93; Harold B. Gill, “Prices and Wages in 1750” (September 29, 1977).

¹⁵ Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 133–134.

¹⁶ Gill, *Artisans of Williamsburg*, 28–30.

¹⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 264–270.

¹⁸ Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 373; Patrick, “as good a joiner as any in Virginia,” 281–285; Gaynor and Hagedorn, *Tools*, 35–39; Mary Allison Carll-White, *The Role of the Black Artisan in the Building Trades and the Decorative Arts in South Carolina's Charleston District, 1760–1800* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms International, 1982), 37–52.

¹⁹ Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 403–405; Carll-White, *Role of the Black Artisan in the Building Trades*, 37–52; Patrick, “as good a joiner as any in Virginia,” 283.

²⁰ Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves*, 413.

²¹ Patrick, “as good a joiner as any in Virginia,” 285–286.