

Colonial Woodworkers

By Sharon Fabian

Take a walk through your neighborhood, and you may see houses made of brick, wood, stone, vinyl siding, and other materials. In colonial days, houses were mostly made of wood.

Today we have furniture made of wood, metal, plastic, and other materials. The colonists had furniture made almost entirely of wood.

We use containers made of plastic, glass, metal, cardboard, and other materials. Many of the containers used by the colonists were made of wood.

Most of our vehicles have tires made of rubber over metal wheels. The colonists' vehicles had wheels made of wood.

Today, boats and ships are made of metal, fiberglass, or other materials. The colonists' ships were made of wood.

It's no wonder that so many colonists were woodworkers. A young man in the colonies who wanted to work with wood had a choice of several good occupations. Colonial carpenters, cabinetmakers, coopers, wheelwrights, and shipbuilders all built things from wood. Colonial sawyers cut logs into boards that other woodworkers could use.

A carpenter built houses, barns, other outbuildings such as smokehouses, and public buildings. He used boards made from wood that was available in the area such as oak, locust, poplar, or pine. The carpenter would lay floors, raise rafters, nail walls, and hang doors. Apprentices and journeymen would do some of the jobs, and a master carpenter would be in charge.

A cabinetmaker built furniture - all kinds of furniture, not just cabinets. A master cabinetmaker might have his shop in town where colonists could buy finished pieces of furniture or order just what they wanted. Cabinetmakers built tables, chairs, desks, clothes presses, and even musical instruments like the harpsichord. Some furniture was carefully decorated with wood carvings.

Coopers built containers. They are best known now as barrel makers, but they also made a variety of wooden containers. Wooden containers held everything from flour to water to tobacco in colonial times.

Wheelwrights made wheels for colonial vehicles including carriages and wagons. Wheels were made of wood with a center hub surrounded by spokes like a bicycle wheel. The hub was turned on a lathe. Then, rectangular holes were made in the hub. Spokes, carved from wood, would be attached to the holes in the hub and then to wooden arches that made up the outer rim. Finally, a metal ring would circle the outside rim of the wheel. The metal ring would be heated to make it stretch just enough to be hammered onto the wheel. When the wheel was cool, the ring fit tightly.

Shipbuilders also provided transportation for the colonists. They set up their shipyards near an ocean or river so that their finished ships would be where they were needed. Shipbuilders built masts, spars, ribs, and planking; nearly all of the ship was made of wood.

Colonial woodworkers used only hand tools to create their products. There were no power tools at that time. Some of the tools used by colonial woodworkers include saws, planes, drills, chisels, vises, and mallets. They also used some tools with names that are less familiar now. A drawknife was a round tool used for the quick shaping of flat items like roofing shingles. A similar tool, the shave, was a round tool used for shaping chair seats. A bitstock and bits was a hand-operated drill. Augers and gimlets were small tools for drilling holes.

Colonial woodworkers took years to learn their trade, and they learned to make finished products that were useful, beautiful, and would last for a long time. Houses, furniture, ships, and other wooden objects made in colonial times



Name _____



Date _____

are much admired today for the skill and care that went into their making.

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Questions

- _____ 1. A colonial carpenter built _____.
- A. furniture
 - B. houses
 - C. ships
 - D. barrels
- _____ 2. A colonial cabinetmaker built _____.
- A. furniture
 - B. houses
 - C. barrels
 - D. ships
- _____ 3. A cooper built _____.
- A. ships
 - B. barrels
 - C. furniture
 - D. houses
- _____ 4. Colonial woodworkers used _____.
- A. saws
 - B. drills
 - C. shaves
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 5. Colonial woodworkers did NOT use _____.
- A. saws
 - B. drills
 - C. power tools
 - D. all of the above
- _____ 6. A sawyer _____.
- A. made saws
 - B. built large houses
 - C. made fine furniture
 - D. cut boards from logs
- _____ 7. A bitstock and bits were used to do the job that a _____ is used for today.
- A. power saw
 - B. circular saw
 - C. sander
 - D. power drill

