

# Wigmaker and Barber

By Sharon Fabian

---

Cosmetology is a popular vocational subject in high school. In cosmetology class, students learn to wash and cut hair. They learn to give perms and to color hair too. They learn how to do a fancy hairstyle for a special occasion like a prom. They might learn to cut and style wigs as well as real hair. Cosmetology students often go on to work as hairdressers, styling hair for customers.

In colonial times, there were also people who worked as hairdressers. Some people are surprised to learn that, because we often think of the colonists as hard working people who didn't have time for frivolous things like a fancy hairdo. However, there were many people in colonial America who were very fashion conscious and who kept up with the latest styles in both clothing and hairstyles. This was especially true in the larger cities like Williamsburg, Virginia.

A city like Williamsburg had shops that catered to the fashion conscious. Wigmakers and barbers there both provided hairdressing services. A barber might provide shaves and haircuts in addition to his other duties, such as performing surgery and pulling teeth! A wigmaker, of course, made wigs, and in the 1700s, wigs were the latest fashion!



The fashion of wearing wigs began with the royalty in France; it spread to England and then to America.

In colonial times, the gentlemen, not the ladies, wore wigs. Colonial gentlemen also wore queues. A queue was like a ponytail wig that was tied on at the back of the head. Colonial women, although they did not wear full wigs, sometimes did wear curls or braids that they added on to their own hair.

Wigs were worn especially for formal occasions, like the special events during the weeks when court was in session and everyone came to town; however, some men wore wigs nearly every day. Others only wore a wig when they came into town on important business. Altogether, there was plenty to keep the wigmaker busy.

Some wigs were made from human hair. Others were made from the hair of a horse, a yak, or a goat. A wig took a long time to make, as much as hundreds of hours for a full wig.

Wigmakers used a head-shaped wooden form, called a blockhead, to design their wigs. First, they would attach the underneath layer of the wig, a net made of cotton or silk, to the blockhead. Then they would sew rows of hair to the net. When all of the hair was attached, the wigmaker would curl it on clay curling rods. Then he would trim and shape each curl. After the wig was completed, scented pomade might be added to give the wig a good smell. Finally, white powder might be sprayed on with a bellows.

White wigs were very popular, but so were wigs in many natural hair colors.

Some customers who were very particular about their wigs would have their head measured so that a custom blockhead could be made for a wig with a perfect fit. Anyone who wore a custom made wig would have his hair cut really short, or even shaved. Around home, when he was not wearing his wig, he might wear a cloth cap on his head.

There were many styles of wigs over the years. One popular style was called a full-bottomed periwig. It was a long, heavy wig with rows and rows of curls. There were also club wigs, campaign wigs, tie wigs, and others.

Wigs remained popular for over 100 years. Then, as happens with all fashions, wigs began to lose their popularity as the younger people discovered new styles. Soon, the only people still wearing wigs were older men and men who wanted an especially conservative appearance. By then, many wigmakers must have been looking for a new job.

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Wigmaker and Barber

### Questions

---

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. In colonial America, \_\_\_\_\_ wore wigs.
- A. many men
  - B. most women
  - C. few men
  - D. all adults
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Wigs were made of \_\_\_\_\_ hair.
- A. human
  - B. horse
  - C. yak
  - D. any of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Since one wig took many, many hours to make, you can infer that a wig was \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. expensive
  - B. curly
  - C. powdered
  - D. cheap
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. A queue is a \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. crewcut wig
  - B. woman's wig
  - C. ponytail wig
  - D. man's full curly wig
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Besides giving shaves and haircuts, what other jobs did a barber do?
- A. surgery
  - B. make wigs
  - C. make horseshoes
  - D. all of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. A wigmaker was a \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. educator
  - B. government official
  - C. unskilled laborer
  - D. skilled craftsman
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. All men's wigs in colonial times were coated with white powder.
- A. true
  - B. false
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Colonial women sometimes added curls or braids to their own hair.
- A. true
  - B. false

[illegible]

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.