

Benjamin Franklin and Apprenticeship in the 18th Century

by Susan E. Klepp

Benjamin Franklin learned to be a printer through the apprenticeship system. However, he gained his independence at age 17, not by completing his apprenticeship, but by running away from his master and leaving his family and hometown behind. He worked for wages in Philadelphia and London before setting out on his own. His life reflects both the benefits and the potentials for conflict in this most common 18th-century form of vocational education.

Background: Indenture of John Henry Coats as an apprentice cordwainer, May 23, 1750. Society Miscellaneous Collection.

One of the major responsibilities of parents in the 18th century was to dispose of their children. This was not as ominous as it might sound to modern ears. To “dispose” meant not to get rid of troublesome offspring, but to settle dutiful children in a particular occupation, and to make sure that they acquired the skills that they would need to support themselves as adults. For girls, rich or poor, this usually meant informal training in the domestic arts that would help bring offers of marriage. For the wealthy the disposition of male children increasingly involved an academic education, a tour abroad, and a clerkship with a prominent merchant or lawyer. For the poor it was being inured to a life of hard labor in dead-end, low-paying, and often dangerous jobs. For the majority of colonists who lived on farms, disposing of sons meant acquiring land or cash; training in agriculture came largely through daily practice, finding a place to farm was the difficulty. It was primarily the parents of the urban middling sorts, those who were neither very rich nor very poor, who disposed of their sons through apprenticeships.

Traditionally, a boy of 12 to 15 years of age, having had a basic education in reading, writing, and simple arithmetic, would express an interest in a specific trade. His father would negotiate the terms of the apprenticeship with the appropriate master craftsman who charged a fee for training, housing, clothing, and feeding the boy. The cost of an apprenticeship was proportionate to the status and potential profitability of the trade. A silversmith might charge a considerable fee for taking on an apprentice, a shoemaker very little. The initial fee, the length of the apprenticeship (usually around seven years), the additional formal schooling to be provided (generally

not more than one year and often less), housing, diet, clothing, opportunities to visit parents, freedom dues on completion of the apprenticeship (tools of the trade, one or two changes of clothing, and/or cash) were all debated. The father and master then drew up a contract or indenture, which was signed by all the parties involved. The consent of the child as well as the parents had to be obtained, but once the contract was in effect, the apprentice owed obedience to his master and the master stood in the place of the father, supporting and advancing the apprentice as if he were a son.

By serving a master, an adolescent would learn the mysteries of his trade. A new apprentice did grunt work. He might sweep floors,



Franklin's Youthful, Industrious Habits, working for his father, a soap boiler and tallow chandler, from John Bigelow, *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, 1868; illustrated and inlaid by Joseph M. P. and Emily Price, 1887).

clean tools, cart supplies. The new, young, and often homesick apprentice might also be hazed by older apprentices in the shop. Gradually he would become more acclimated and begin to learn something of the trade by observing.

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As he grew more knowledgeable, his formal education in the trade would begin. By the end of the apprenticeship, the 19 to 21 year old would know the basics of his chosen craft. At the end of the contract, his master would give him the appropriate tools so that he might begin to earn his way. The former apprentice could then hire himself out for wages as a journeyman while polishing his skills and eventually producing a master piece—for example, a watch with the latest technological innovations, a tailored suit in the latest fashion, a pair of elaborate shoes, or an extraordinary cabinet. The master piece proved to fellow craftsmen that the young man was competent in the art of watchmaking, tailoring, shoemaking, or joinery. He would then be admitted into the appropriate guild (trade organization), and he could establish his own workshop as a master, marry, and take on apprentices and journeymen of his own. This was the ideal.

This ideal, however, was rarely achieved in practice, even in England. William Moraley, for example, was apprenticed to his watchmaker father in a town without a watchmakers' guild. When his father died suddenly, Moraley had no opportunity for further training and few prospects. In the colonies conditions were more irregular. The colonies could not support the guild system. Because labor, and, in particular, skilled labor, was far scarcer in the New World than in London, young men could often find work without

completing an apprenticeship. Journeymen, if they had some access to capital, could set up as masters without having to ask permission from a trade group and without providing anyone evidence of mastering the necessary skills.

Benjamin Franklin's memoir of his childhood illustrates other problems with the system. First, there was the potential for conflict between father and son over the son's career choice. As a child, Benjamin was intended for a professional career in the clergy. He advanced through two levels of a grammar school (a college preparatory institution stressing the learned languages of Greek and Latin) in a single year and would have gone on to study theology at Harvard College. However, his father worried about "the Expense of a College Education," especially as he had 17 children to dispose of, and pulled Benjamin from the grammar school and placed him in a common school. At about 10 years of age, Franklin expressed "a strong Inclination for the Sea." Again, his

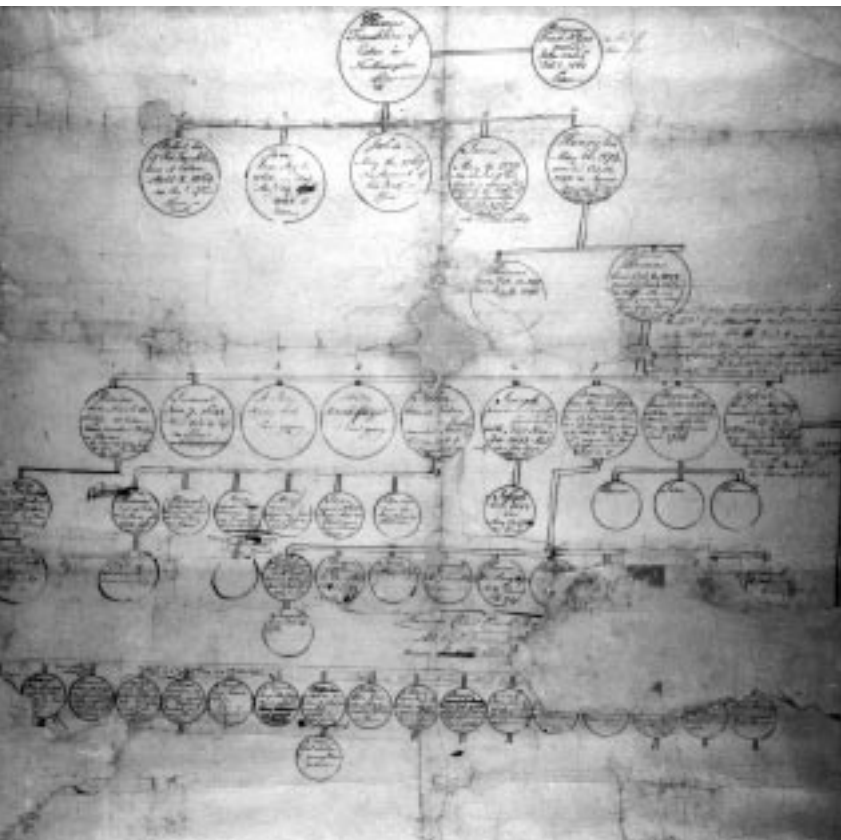
father exercised his authority and said no. If the first choice was better suited for young men who could expect a sizable inheritance, the second, shipping out as a cabin boy, would have been too closely associated with the fate of the sons of the poor. Seafaring would have been entirely inappropriate for a family whose ancestors had been both freeholders and "ingenious" workmen and writers for many generations back in England. A career choice had to be appropriate to the family's social rank.

Josiah Franklin was otherwise a moderately indulgent father. When Benjamin turned 12 and indicated that he "dislik'd" his father's trade of candle and soap making, Josiah took him to "see Joiners, Bricklayers, Turners, Braziers, etc. at their work." Benjamin settled on trying the cutler's trade with a relative, but an argument over the fee ended that experiment. Finally, his father played on Benjamin's "Bookish Inclination" and proposed an apprenticeship with Benjamin's older brother James, a printer. James

year's journeyman's wages during the last year of the term. Normally by age 21 the apprentice would have been free for two or three years, earning wages on his own account. Benjamin recalled that he "stood out some time, but at last was persuaded and signed the Indentures." He felt, however, that he had been taken advantage of, because, he recalled, "I was yet but 12 Years old," and he still would have preferred to go to sea. A 12 year old might technically have the right to consent to being bound as an apprentice, but few children could overcome societal expectations of duty and obedience to parents.

If teenagers would be teenagers and inclined to get into trouble, it was also the case that masters would be masters and anxious to protect their authority. The result was often tension, anger, and resentment that, at least according to many accounts by former apprentices, often led to mistreatment. Franklin deeply resented his brother's conduct, especially the beatings that the elder brother inflicted on his headstrong younger sibling. Benjamin credited his later "aversion to arbitrary authority" to this experience (although his aversion was not strong enough to prevent him from becoming a slaveowner as soon as he could afford to buy human property). Other apprentices fared worse. Eliza Chadwick's brother was apprenticed to a tailor in New York City in the early 1790s. When he was uncertain how to undertake a new project, his master hit him on the head with a board, breaking his skull. He died a month later of his injury, but the tailor was never prosecuted. John Fitch's two Connecticut masters apparently never struck him, although both threatened to do so, but they never taught him the trade of watchmaking either. He left his last master early but he remained contractually indebted for eight pounds for the last four months of service. If apprenticeships were ideally familial and supportive, in

Franklin family genealogical chart. Benjamin and his 16 siblings appear at the bottom of the chart, though Benjamin's circle has been torn. Franklin Papers.



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practice they were often exploitative and potentially violent.

In a system where fathers, sons, and masters were carefully consulted at the onset, no one ever considered consulting the craftsman's wife. It was she who had another mouth to feed, another person to clothe, another bed to prepare. It is not surprising then that most apprentices complained about harsh mistresses, scanty food, watery soups, spoiled meat, and dirty linens. Franklin was lucky: his brother was unmarried and resided at a boardinghouse.

Franklin, like Fitch, tired of his apprenticeship before his term was over, but Franklin was canny enough not to fall into debt. Instead he took advantage of his brother's political troubles. James Franklin published a newspaper that offended the Massachusetts Assembly. He was ordered to cease publication. James circumvented this order by canceling his brother's contract and publicly declaring the very young Benjamin to be the editor. James was careful to hold on to Benjamin by having him sign a secret indenture, but Benjamin absconded anyway, counting on the fact that his brother dare not reveal his subterfuge.

When Franklin arrived in Philadelphia in 1723 the printing business reflected the breakdown of craft education in the colonies, at least according to Franklin's recollections. Of the two printers there, one "had not been bred to it and was very illiterate," and the other was "a mere compositor,

knowing nothing of presswork." Franklin, the runaway apprentice, was hired as a journeyman by a "master craftsman" who was less skilled than his employee. When Franklin left the colonies to advance his career in London, he found that the traditional career path was not possible for the vast majority of workers there either, although for different reasons. Franklin readily found journeywork, but it was not in a familial setting, nor was it considered a stepping stone to

Right: Benjamin Franklin's wife, Deborah Read Rogers Franklin, Simpson Plates, no. 91.

advancement to master. Large printing firms, one employing 50 men—a scale of operation that the American economy would not be able to support until well into the 19th century—dominated. Of those 50 men only one, named Wygate, apparently aspired to become a master printer and establish his own shop. If Wygate had superior skills as a printer, Franklin did not mention it. What Wygate did have was "wealthy relations." Access to money, not training in the craft, was what counted both in the Old World and the New.

Franklin tried a number of tactics to raise money once he

returned to Philadelphia: he clerked for a merchant, did journeywork with a printer, took on a partner, bought out his partner, failed to repay a debt, callously tried to wrangle a large dowry during courtship, and polished his public image as much as possible. He did not always succeed in his attempts to acquire the capital to open his own shop, but by 1729, still a young man, he was his own master, and in 1730 he entered a common-law marriage with a woman who shared his marketing skills and political interests. He succeeded through competition with other printers, not through cooperative assessments of training and skill.

Not all former apprentices did so well as Franklin: William Moraley and John Fitch faced underemployment for much of their lives.

Eliza Chadwick eventually opened a millinery shop, but it was not a trade she had apprenticed in. One of Franklin's masters ended up working for his former apprentice. The system that governed the training of boys was in serious decay even in the early 18th century. Soon apprenticeships no longer even pretended to offer advancement from raw adolescence to master of trade through the medium of a fatherly master. Nineteenth-century apprentices were older and had spent more time in school, they did not live in a family, but boarded out, they served far shorter terms, and they were destined to be skilled workingmen—wage earners—not self-employed. It is perhaps indicative of the changing economy and aspirations for middling-sort children that Benjamin Franklin did not dispose of his son in an apprenticeship, but gave him a grammar school education. ❖



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