

Carroll Yesteryears  
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Apprenticeship Act Provided Security for Youths  
By Mary Kelsh

In the early 1800s, children often experienced the loss of one or both parents because the average life expectancy in those days, just before significant medical advances began, was about 40 years. What happened to children left without a parent's support?

In 1794, the Maryland legislature passed a bill called "An Act for the Better Regulation of Apprentices" which was designed to provide for orphans and poor or illegitimate children by apprenticing (indenturing) them to someone who would care for them and teach them a worthwhile skill. An apprenticeship was a formal agreement between a child (or his/her representative) and a "master," with each side promising to abide by specific terms. It usually lasted until a girl reached the age of 16 or a boy reached the age of 21. If the apprentice was very lucky, the agreement might include being taught to read and write, perhaps even learn basic arithmetic, and be given a sum of money and/or clothing when the apprenticeship ended, but this was not part of all agreements.

Below are just a few examples of apprenticeships in the period 1794-1800. If a parent didn't arrange an apprenticeship, a close relative or justice of the peace might be involved, but if a child were older, he or she could arrange the apprenticeship.

In May 1794 Samuel Bechtell was around a year old. His father, George Bechtell, arranged for Samuel to be apprenticed to Jacob Burgesser, a tanner. While it is impossible to know for sure at what age Samuel started working on the animal hides, he would have been exposed early on to the chemicals and fumes that all tanners worked with. The apprenticeship would have lasted until Samuel turned 21, and then any legal obligations between Burgesser and Samuel would end.

In 1795, John Harbaugh (not that John Harbaugh) was apprenticed to shop joiner and cabinetmaker Benjamin Farquhar with the consent of his father. A shop joiner would do similar work to a carpenter, but with smaller and more intricate pieces of wood than a typical carpenter. John would have made things such as wood panels to decorate houses. We don't know for sure how old John was when he was apprenticed to Mr. Farquhar, but he must have been a teenager since his apprenticeship lasted 3 years, 2 months, and 10 days.

Sometimes a father died before his son was of an age to support the family's household. Even if the boy's mother were still alive, he would be considered an orphan. One boy in this situation was 8-year-old John Rodrock. In 1796, he was considered an orphan and apprenticed to blacksmith Henry Booler until the age of 21, an arrangement organized with the consent of his mother.

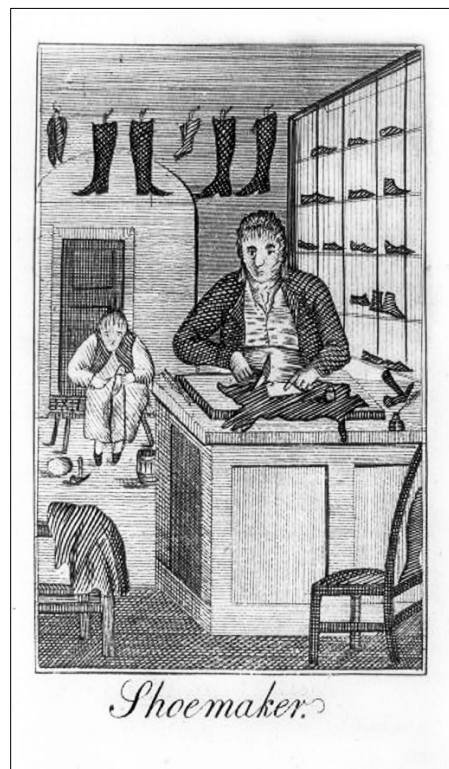
Another such orphan was David Major. Sometime in 1797, David's father died, leaving him with only his mother to care for him. In November of the same year, when David was 16, he was apprenticed to Henry Swope of Taneytown. Swope was a sadler (saddler), meaning David would help Henry make horse saddles for five years until turning 21.

On rare occasions, both parents might be alive but the apprenticeship involved an unusual situation. This was the case for 15-year-old Solomon Pepple who was apprenticed to David Kephart, a miller living near Taneytown. David's father was deemed insane and living out of state, so his mother agreed to the indenture.

Young girls were indentured during the same time period but they had few opportunities for instruction in any skills outside of those involved in housekeeping, although some apprenticeships might include being taught valuable tasks such as weaving and/or spinning. Girls, too, might be given the opportunity to learn to read and write if lucky.

As can be seen, boys had a much wider choice of apprenticeships than girls. Other trades available in the Frederick-Carroll County area included those of a printer, farmer, stone mason, painter, clockmaker, weaver, tailor, cooper, apothecary, accountant, distiller, boot and shoemaker, hatter, and gunsmith. The options for learning a trade promised the ability for a young man to eventually support himself and possibly a family.

*Guest columnist Mary Kelsh is a volunteer at the Historical Society of Carroll County.*



*Image: Courtesy of Library of Congress. This early drawing depicts a cobbler (shoemaker) and his apprentice working in their shop with boots and shoes they have made or repaired on display.*