



Apprenticeships in the mid-1800s

Imagine you live in the mid-1800s. You decide you want to go into a trade. You have learned about different types of trades, including building trades, blacksmith, pharmacist, printer, shoemaker, harness maker and more.

What was it like to be an Apprentice?

“In answer to several questions that I put him {a fellow more senior apprentice} he told me that those who got such a place as we had were pretty well off—they had good fare and though old Moneygripe was as cross as the Devil yet he took it all out in jaw—and never beat or abused them—and as to running of errands and such sort of things the youngest apprentice had to do it for a year before he tried his hand at the tools. This information galled me considerably—I determined however to bear my year’s indignity as patiently as I could consoling myself with the hope that after it passed I should have easier times and a more creditable station.” --Moneygripe’s Apprentice page 66

“After loitering about the yard for a few minutes I was told that I might carry my trunk to my sleeping room and that John would show me the way. At the name of John I turned my eyes upon a dirty vulgar looking fellow who approached and taking hold of one end of the trunk and bidding me do the same by the other, very good naturedly led the way to my lodging. Instead of entering the dwelling house, he made towards a pair of stairs that adjoined the workshop and I remember unconsciously expressing my surprise by asking him, ‘Are you sure this is the way?’ at which he naturally enough laughed and replied he had seen it often enough to know it. We ascended two flights of steps and at the end of the second which was dark and winding he pushed open a small shutter and shoving my trunk into one corner announced in a style of his own that my apartment was before me. I beheld the scene with an amazement which I was yet afraid to express. It was a small garret room under a sloping shingled roof the highest part of it barely admitting of a man’s standing upright. It had but one light and that was a window consisting of four small panes of glass. On the floor—which had certainly never been washed—lay two large beds—covered each with a filthy looking blanket and black spread. Sheets fortunately there were none: for two or three dirty looking pillowcases afforded as much of such material as one would ever wish to behold...I sickened at the sight...I ventured to ask in a faltering tone, ‘Do they all sleep here?’ ‘Oh yes—all six of us—good times we have of it too.’ ‘May be,’ I said ‘there is another room?’ without daring to express the faintest hope which I still felt of having a separate apartment. ‘Oh no—you’ll sleep over there,’ pointing to the corner bed ‘tween Alf and me—always put the last comer in the middle.” Moneygripe’s Apprentice page 60-62

“William Logan, President [of the Board of Trustees of the County Poor House]...doth put forth place and bind one Phebe Anne Lewis, a poor child now chargeable upon the said county of Morris aged seven years two months and twenty three days, unto the said Anthony A Jacobs as an apprentice to him to learn the art or mystery of a housekeeper until she arrives at the age of eighteen...” --Apprentice indenture for Phebe Ann Lewis 1839 found in NYSHA’s Special Collections

“Robert Roberts Tripp, of Utica in the county of Oneida aged seventeen and five months by and with the consent of his father hath of his own free will placed and bound himself apprentice...unto the full end of his term of four years six months and ten days.” --Apprentice indenture for Robert Roberts 1828 found in NYSHA’s Special Collections

“...George Tripp, son of Elisha Tripp of Exiter County and State aforesaid, aged twelve years ten months and six days and with the consent of his said father hath of his own freewill and voluntarily choice placed and bound himself as an apprentice...[until]...the age of twenty one.” --Apprentice indenture for George Tripp 1834 found in NYSHA’s Special Collections

“Another warm pleasant day. 2 years ago today I came here to learn the Cabinet trade & I suppose I must stay till 4th of August 846, a long time to look ahead, but short to look back. –The Diary of an Apprentice Cabinetmaker, page 386

1. What did you learn about apprenticeships from these passages? Be specific and use examples from the readings.

2. Were all apprenticeships voluntary? Explain your answer.

3. Are there still apprenticeships today? In what trades?

4. Think about your career goals? Do you know what you want to in the future? How will you achieve those goals: college, trade school, apprentice? How is this similar or different from apprenticeships in the 1800s?

5. If you could pick a trade from the mid-1800s to apprentice to, what would it be and why?

Resources:

Clark, Christopher. *The Diary of an Apprentice Carpenter: Edward Jenner Carpenter's Journal, 1844-45*. Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1988.

Mullin, Bruce. *Moneygrape's Apprentice: A personal Narrative of Samuel Seabury III*. Yale University Press, 1989.