



## Reliving History, Inc.

Supporting the ca. 1751 Peter Burr House

The oldest wood frame house in West Virginia

[www.RelivingHistoryInc.org](http://www.RelivingHistoryInc.org)

Contact us for upcoming events and to arrange presentations at your school or organization.

## Colonial Occupations that Disappeared in the Modern World

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Village Backsmith" begins with the line, "Under a spreading chestnut tree the village smithy stands..." Longfellow's poem, written in the 19th-Century, refers romantically to an earlier period when colonial Americans identified with villages. A "Smith" or smithy was a skilled worker in metals. He could be a whitesmith, another term for tinsmith, a coppersmith, jewel smith, or a blacksmith.

The "Scrivener" or conveyancer was a writer of contracts or professional scribe. Another term employed for this occupation was that of "Penman," from which the modern term penmanship is derived. Scrivener as a defined term dates to the 14th century to denote a scribe.

Early colonial ship manifests, notably from the 17th Century, list the occupation of passengers conveyed from England to the American colonies. Many of these occupations included that of "husbandman." The husbandman was a farmer and denoted the status as head of the family. The "patriarchal" allusion is not without precedent. The term is traced to old Latin and refers to a settler in a new land, specifically a colony.

The colonial occupation "Chirurgeon" comes from the Latin *chirurgia* meaning surgeon. During the Renaissance, the term was resurrected from the Greek spelling and used universally in the colonial period.

### Other Unique Occupations in Colonial America

- **Cordwainer:** a shoemaker. Derived from the French cordovan and referring specifically to leather from Cordoba, Spain
- **Crimp:** an agent of a shipping company but more specifically one who recruits men to work on ships

- **Ganymede:** a servant boy, most likely an indentured servant; the term is derived from the Greek, referring to a Trojan youth made cup bearer to Zeus
- **Picaroon:** used to refer to either a pirate or a pirate's ship
- **Lorimer:** a worker who made bits for horse's bridles
- **Fellmonger:** a dealer in skins or animal hides; the term monger is a general term found in Old English to denote one who deals or trades
- **Joiner or Joyner:** a skilled craftsman who created ornamental wood working although also used to denote a maker of cabinets

### Skilled Crafts and Lost Arts

Unlike most men of the colonial period, modern and post-modern males have no more use for wigs, although the toupee still hides baldness. Wigmakers or "peruke-makers" went out of business in the early 19th Century. Today, people use the term "blockhead" to refer to an idiot yet it derives from the wooden models used by wig-makers to fashion their creations.

Contemporary Americans no longer await the visit of a Tinker to mend kettles, pots, or pans. Old kitchen items are trashed. Yet during the Colonial Era, such items were costly and the timely arrival of the surly Tinker helped to preserve an investment.

After describing the long, hard work hours of the village smithy, Longfellow concludes with the line, "Something attempted, something done, has earned a night's repose." Colonial occupations prospered because of the so-called Puritan or Protestant "work ethic." Like Longfellow's smithy, this culminated in a well deserved night's sleep. Colonial occupations represented hard work, yet left a sense of satisfaction and completion.

### Visit the Peter Burr House

170 E. Burr Blvd., Kearneysville, WV 25430

(at Burr Industrial Park in the far right back corner)

See website for directions: [www.RelivingHistoryInc.org](http://www.RelivingHistoryInc.org)