

## COLONIAL LIFE

Since we will be reading several selections from Colonial times, this guide will give you an overview of everyday life in the colonies. Life in the American colonies was different from the way we live today. The towns in the colonies began simply as wilderness outposts but soon grew into thriving cities. This brought many changes for the colonists.

### Indentured Servants and Slavery

Survival in the New World was hard work. The colonists couldn't do it all by themselves, so they turned to servants for help. Some of these servants were called indentured servants. People became indentured servants when they signed a contract that promised that they would work for a master for a term of 4 to 7 years. Indentured servants commonly worked for no money. Instead their master "paid" them by paying for their passage from Europe, along with food, clothing, and shelter once they arrived in the colonies. When the indentured servants completed their term of indenture, they received freedom dues, which often included a piece of land and some of the necessary supplies for survival.

Many indentured servants who came to the New World were convicts, exiled from Britain for grand larceny (theft of any item worth more than a shilling, such as a yard of flannel cloth). Others were middle-class or poor men, women, and children looking for a better life. Indentured servants often ran away from their masters. Because they usually spoke English and were white—as were most of the other colonists—runaway indentured servants were difficult to capture.

### Colonial Law and Order

The British colonists liked the idea of representative government. This is a government in which the citizens have power through elected officials. Even though the colonists were developing their own ideas about government in the New World, the King of England was still in control over the colonies. In some cases, the king picked the governor of a colony.

The colonies were far away from England. At first the king was content to have little to do with the governing of this land. This allowed self-government to grow and become popular in the colonies. But as the colonies became successful, the king decided he wanted to have control over that was going on there.

The colonist began to get tired of England ruling their every action. Eventually, the colonists



who believed in self-government would stand as one against British soldiers in the Revolutionary War.

### Everyday Life

Colonial families didn't have indoor bathrooms like we do today. Outdoor bathroom facilities were called outhouses, privies, or necessaries. These were small outbuildings located away from the house. Inside there was simply a board with a hole in it placed over a hole in the ground. Even if toilet paper had been available, it's unlikely that a colonial family would have spent their hard-earned money on such an extravagance. Instead, colonists made use of other materials: dried corn cobs, leaves, moss, or newspaper if it was available. These outdoor facilities were for day use, but if anyone needed to relieve themselves in the middle of the night, they used a chamber pot. In the morning, the chamber pot was emptied. In the cities chamber pots were opened directly into the streets.

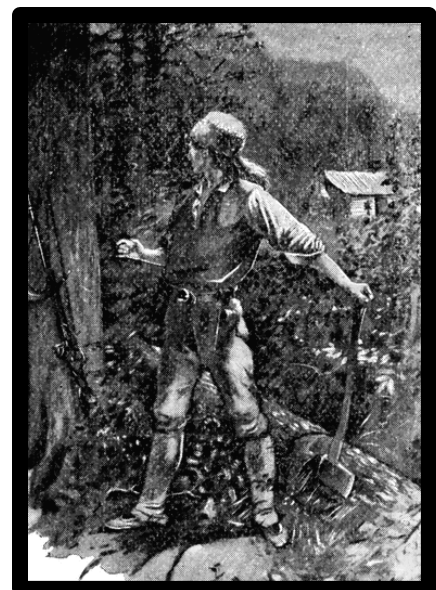
Many colonists slept on straw ticks—a large fabric cover (kind of like a pillowcase) filled with straw, leaves, cornhusks, or grass. When the materials inside the tick became matted with use, colonists replaced the old straw with fresh filling. The saying “sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite” refers to sleeping in a rope bedstead with a straw tick. Tight ropes on a bedstead meant a good night's sleep—as long as the straw tick wasn't harboring any bugs!

Colonial homes didn't have electricity, so people used candles for light after the sun set. The lady of the house was responsible for making candles. A typical colonial family might have only 100 candles to use in a year's time. Because making candles was such hard work and so time consuming, the colonists tried to conserve them. That meant the colonists lived by the schedule of the sun—they began work when the sun rose and stopped for the day when it set.

### Daniel Boone: A Frontiersman Colonist

One colonist who is famous for his unusual clothing style is Daniel Boone. Everyone knows he wore a coonskin cap, right? Well, actually, no. Daniel Boone wore a beaver hat, not the raccoon-skin hat with dangling tail that he's famous for. The coonskin cap myth came later, when an actor hired to play Daniel Boone in a minstrel show wore one, simply because he couldn't find a beaver hat.

In 1750 when Daniel Boone was sixteen, he moved with his family to North Carolina. Always a frontiersman and explorer, he spent time as a Conestoga wagon driver during



one battle with Native Americans; many other battles followed. But it was when one of his acquaintances told him of a “secret door” through the mountains of what would become Kentucky that his famous pioneering began.

In 1773 along with his wife, Rebecca, their ten children, and several other families, Boone set off in search of that mountain passage. In 1775 he founded Boonesboro, Kentucky, in spite of King George III insisting that none of his subjects settle beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Boone survived several years of Indian captivity during the Revolutionary War and continued to move farther west. He died in Missouri at the age of 86.

## Fashion

In the colonial era fashion started from the head down. Wigs for both men and women, a fashion that came from Britain, were popular as early as 1630. White wigs were considered a fashion accessory, much like earrings are today. Around 1770 tall, white wigs became fashionable for women in Europe, and they appeared in the colonies in the biggest cities such as Philadelphia and Charleston. Ladies who wore wigs were the cause of much comment because the wigs were quite rare and made such a fashion statement. Those who wore these wigs rarely took them off, even at night. During the nighttime hours, some women actually set mouse traps in their wigs to prevent mice from nesting in them!



Men found that their wigs fit better on a hairless head, so they would pay someone to shave their head every two weeks. The finest wigs were made of human hair, although yak, goat, and horse mane were used as well.

Gentlemen prided themselves on their hats and seldom went anywhere without one. Even if a man wore a wig—making the wearing of a hat awkward—he carried his hat with him under his arm.

Wealthy men wore linen shirts trimmed with lace cuffs that extended beyond their jacket sleeves. These cuffs were white and clean, making it clear to everyone that the wearer did not work with his hands. Wearing cuffs was kind of a status symbol, a way for men to show their wealth.

Colonists walked *a lot*. Their shoes were made of leather and designed to fit on either foot, so they could be periodically switched to prevent wear on one side. Colonial shoes were often closed with straps or buckles. Walking on muddy streets could quickly ruin shoes, so colonists wore special wooden clogs strapped over their shoes. The clogs were an inch or two high and prevented shoes from directly contacting the ground.

Beneath their clothes, plain or fancy, colonists were likely to be a bit, well, smelly. Bathing in colonial America was a difficult task. When a colonist wanted to take a hot bath, he or she used a wooden tub. Colonists would haul the tub to an area where they would have much privacy as possible, which usually wasn't much. He or she would then carry buckets of water from a well or nearby stream or pond, heat the water over a fire, and finally pour it in the tub. The process was so time consuming that colonists only bathed a couple of times a year.

## Women in the Colonies

Puritan New England was most definitely a man's world! Women could not vote, testify in court, or sign legal documents such as wills. A married woman's wages belonged to her husband, and if any children were born, their father was the sole legal guardian. Husbands were even responsible for their wife's behavior. If a woman committed a felony, her husband received the punishment.

During colonial times it was considered improper for women to go about without a head covering—leaving the house with a bare head was like going out only partially dressed!

Fans in the colonial age were both fashionable and practical. They were useful for creating a breeze in warm weather, and they were also considered a necessary accessory to fashionable women's wardrobes. Fans also served other purposes like flirting. A silent "fan language" evolved. A fan could help a lady send subtle messages. During the 1700s ladies were not supposed to speak their minds or openly show affection. Fans gave ladies a way around these rules of society. If a woman was angry, she could show it by striking the palm of her hand with a closed fan. If she felt jealous, she would flutter the open fan in front of her face. She could express concern by fanning quickly. Fan language developed over the years.



Below are some fan language messages:

Twirling the fan in the left hand	"We are being watched."
Placing it on the left ear	"I wish to get rid of you."
Dropping the fan	"I belong to you."
Drawing the fan across the eyes	"I am sorry."
Drawing the fan through the hand	"I hate you."
Resting the shut fan on the right eye	"When may I see you?"
Drawing the fan across the cheek	"I love you."
Covering the left ear with the open fan	"Do not betray our secret."
Resting the fan on the lips	"I don't trust you."

## 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Trades

In order to survive the colonists had to be hardworking. Below are some of the most common jobs performed by the colonists:

Apothecary: Pharmacist, doctor, dentist, and general storekeeper

Blacksmith: Shaped iron into tools and horseshoes

Bookbinder: Bound printed pages into books

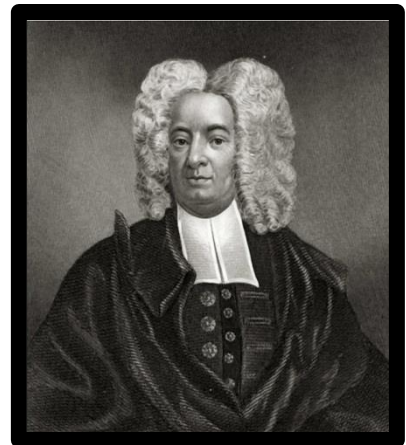
Brass founder: Made items out of brass like bells and shoe buckles  
 Brickmaker: Crafted bricks from clay  
 Cabinetmaker: Made furniture  
 Chandler: Make candles  
 Cooper: Made wooden barrels and tubs  
 Cutler: Made and repaired knives  
 Farrier: Put shoes on horses and sometimes acted as a veterinarian  
 Hatter: Made hats  
 Miller: Ground grain into flour  
 Milliner: Made dresses and sold fashionable accessories  
 Printer: Published the newspaper and often acted as the postmaster  
 Saddler: Crafted harnesses, saddles, and other leather items  
 Shoemaker: Made and repaired shoes  
 Silversmith: Made items like tea sets out of silver  
 Tavern Keeper: Provided meals, drinks, and lodging  
 Whitesmith: Made items like candleholders and foot-warmers out of tin  
 Wigmaker: Made wigs

### **Metalworkers**

Metalworkers were skilled craftspeople who made many important goods for the colonists. They used hammers and other tools to pound, pinch, and twist hot metal into functional—and often beautiful—shapes. Metal was heated up and poured into molds. This was hot and dangerous work! Silversmiths didn't appear in the colonies until later because silver was very expensive, and only the elite could afford items made from silver.

### **Cotton Mather and the Smallpox Vaccine**

Smallpox was a deadly illness that ravaged colonial town and often ended in death. But smallpox, like chickenpox, was a disease that people could only catch one time. After that the person was immune to the disease. Cotton Mather was born in Boston and educated at Harvard College. He had an intense interest in science, and learning a folk practice for easing the smallpox problem from an African slave. Mather became convinced that smallpox could be prevented using this method. The fluid from a smallpox blister carries the smallpox virus.



Mather believed that if a person was exposed to this fluid through an injection (similar to a shot you would receive today) that person would contract only a very mild case of smallpox. The person would only get a little bit sick and would get a lifetime of immunity to the disease.

Many doctors didn't think this experiment would work. Some were quite angry that anyone would try it. But Cotton Mather convinced one other doctor, Dr. Boylston of Boston, to give it a try. Dr. Boylston infected 300 Bostonians using Mather's experimental method, and the results proved that Mather was right. Two percent of the inoculated people died, compared to fifteen

percent of the colonists who caught smallpox naturally. Soon this method of inoculation was used throughout the colonies and in Europe.

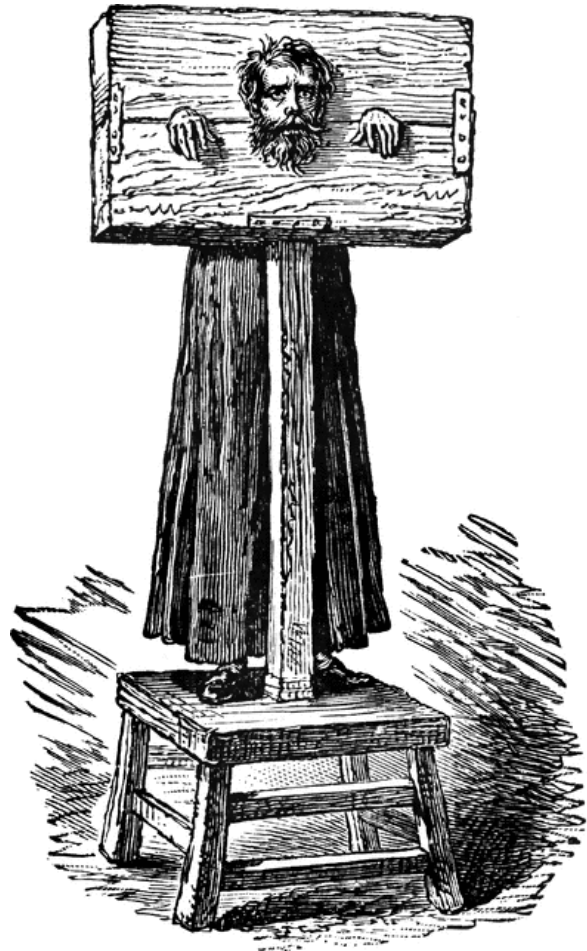
### Crime and Punishment: Colonial Style

The colonists weren't perfect. There were robbers, murderers, and other lawbreakers, just like there are today. But some things that were considered criminal during the colonial period would make us laugh today. For instance, meddling or sticking your nose into other people's business was a crime. So was scolding, gossiping, falling asleep in church, and lying. In 1672 the Massachusetts General Court ordered that anyone accused of "scolding" (nagging or quarreling) should be either gagged or "set in a ducking stool and dipped over head and ears three times." The colonists thought that public humiliation was the most effective form of punishment. Putting someone in prison was not a punishment that most people supported. It was considered cruel and a waste of taxpayers' money.

The colonists thought of themselves as moral and religious people, but they had a number of punishments to discourage people from acting inappropriately or breaking the law. The stocks were a wooden contraption that had holes near the bottom for the criminal's feet. With ankles locked in place, the criminal sat on a bench, which often had an uncomfortably sharp edge. The pillory, a standing version of the stocks, was also made of wood, but had holes to lock a person's head and hands in place. It was common for the public to jeer and throw rotten food—often fruit—at the criminal. A criminal sentenced to the pillory could hire someone to wipe his or her face to prevent suffocation. Sticky fruit also attracted insects, such as ants and wasps, making the criminal's time in the pillory even more uncomfortable. Criminals were sometimes tied to a whipping post where they were whipped in front of the entire town or tied to the ducking stool, then dunked under water as many times as their sentence required.

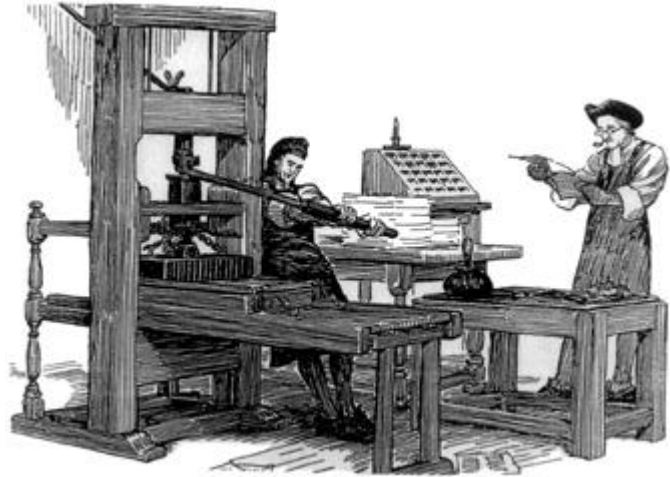
Colonists who committed a felony—a crime resulting in the loss of life or limb—risked death by hanging. But because there was such a need for labor, the colonies didn't always enforce this type of punishment as strenuously as might have been done in England.

In some cases criminals were branded at the base of thumb on their right hand with a hot iron. This is where the custom came from raising the right hand when being sworn in before a court or while taking an oath: This made it possible for the court to see a person's criminal record.



## Colonial Printers

Printing during the colonial period was all done by hand. The type for every document had to be hand set using tiny metal cubes with letters on them. These letters were arranged side by side in special trays in a print shop. The letters formed the words that made up a printed document. The printing process required work by two men: a compositor and a pressman. The compositor set the type. This means he arranged the individual metal letters into words and sentences. The work was tedious and time consuming. The type had to be set backward since printing reverses the image. Setting type for one page of a newspaper required twenty-five hours of hand labor.



The pressman's job required a lot of strength. The pressman pulled a level on the printing press to lower a pressure plane onto a sheet of paper. This plate pressed the paper against inked type under about 200 pounds of pressure. Each impression required fifteen seconds of pressure, and then the paper was set aside to dry before the second sheet could be printed.

Printers used their craft to create broadsheets or flyers and to print newspapers. Newspapers were usually printed weekly and were one of the few sources of information for colonists. Newspapers and flyers introduced letters and essays from readers and advertisements for runaway slaves or items for sale.

## Life for Colonial Children

Children over the age of six were considered small adults. They dressed like adults and were expected to help with chores and work. Children rose early and often began the day by emptying the family chamber pot.

Adults usually passed the simplest (and often the most boring) chores to younger members of the family. Husking corn, hauling wood, carding wool, and churning butter were just a few of the chores children helped with. Another chore was picking feathers from a live goose (yes, a live goose). Kids did this three or four times a year. The feathers were used for making pillows and featherbeds.

## Benjamin Franklin

Born in Boston in 1706, Benjamin Franklin was a writer, printer, inventor, and patriot. As a boy, he excelled in writing, but struggled with arithmetic. He was much more interested in inventing things than studying.





One summer, he wanted to figure out how to move fast in the water. First he tried paddles he made to specially fit his arms and help propel him through the water. He could go faster, but the paddles made his wrists and arms tired. He had more success with a kite—he floated on his back in the water and held onto a stick tied to the kite’s string. The kite pulled him across the water! Ben Franklin was what we might call a “mover and a shaker.”

As an adult, Franklin was constantly trying to improve the quality of life in the colonies. Franklin started a library system in the city of Philadelphia, helped form the Union Fire Company (one of the first fire departments), and transformed the city’s night watch (a group of volunteer citizens) into the Philadelphia Police Department with paid employees.

All his life Benjamin Franklin was interested in electricity and experimented with it extensively. He set up a laboratory in his house after seeing a demonstration of an electrical experiment. He soon discovered that a mild electrical shock could kill a chicken. In a careless moment, he shocked himself badly and was able to determine that a shock strong enough to kill a turkey was strong enough to scare a scientist.

In 1752 Franklin conducted his famous kite-flying experiment to prove that lightning is an electrical spark. If he had know how risky some of his experiments were, he may have hesitated to put himself in so much danger.

#### Some of the many inventions of Benjamin Franklin:

- Lightning rod
- Fireplace insert (or the Franklin stove)
- Bifocal glasses
- A chair that folded into a stepladder
- The harmonica (a musical instrument)
- Magic squares

A magic square is a group of numbers arranged so that the sum of the numbers in each row, column, and diagonal is always the same. Ben Franklin’s magic square shown here is eight numbers high and eight numbers wide, using numbers 1 to 64. The numbers in each row, column, and diagonal add up to 260. Half of each row or column adds up to half of 260.

Benjamin Franklin—unlike many of his colonial counterparts—took regular hot baths. He also took what he called a “tonic bath.” He wrote of them to a friend: “I rise almost every morning and sit in my chamber without any clothes whatsoever, half an hour or an hour, according to the season, either reading or writing.” Needless to say, Franklin was an eccentric, interesting man.

**Source:** Bordessa, Kris. *Great Colonial American Projects You Can Build Yourself*. Chicago: Nomad Press, 2006. Print.

**Note:** These excerpts from *Great Colonial American Projects You Can Build Yourself* were used with permission of Nomad Press. To find out more about this text please visit: [nomadpress.net/books/colonial-america](http://nomadpress.net/books/colonial-america)

Benjamin Franklin's Magic Square

52	61	4	13	20	29	36	45
14	3	62	51	46	35	30	19
53	60	5	12	21	28	37	44
11	6	59	54	43	38	27	22
55	58	7	10	23	26	39	42
9	8	57	56	41	40	25	24
50	63	2	15	18	31	34	47
16	1	64	49	48	33	32	17



**Colonial Life Questions**      Name \_\_\_\_\_ Hr. \_\_\_\_\_

1. What are three reasons indentured servitude is different from slavery?
2. Why did the idea of "self-government" gain popularity in the colonies?
3. What did colonial people use for toilet paper?
4. Why were colonial streets disgusting?
5. Where does the saying "sleep tight" originate?
6. Why did colonists try to make their candles last as long as possible?
7. What determined the colonists' schedule for working hours?
8. Why was Daniel Boone such a famous colonist?
9. **Infer:** What are some similarities between Boone and Hawkeye from *The Last of the Mohicans*?
10. What was a fashion accessory that came to the colonies from England?
11. Where did some wealthy women catch mice?
12. What did men do to make their wigs fit better?

13. What fashion accessory showed people that a man did not work with his hands?
14. Why did colonists wear wooden clogs strapped onto their leather shoes?
15. Why were colonists smelly under their clothes most of the time?
16. What are three reasons why Puritan New England was a man's world?
17. Why did men sometimes receive the punishment for a woman's crime?
18. For a woman what was like going outside half-naked?
19. What fashion accessory allowed women to silently speak their minds?
20. What are three silent messages that women could send and how?
21. Using a prop, try one of these secret messages on one of your classmates. What was their reaction?
22. Which type of job had the duties of pulling teeth?
23. What job made shoe buckles?
24. What was the colonial equivalent of a clothing store?
25. Who would make your tea set for you?

26. **Respond:** Which job would be the best fit for you? Explain.
27. What was very hot and dangerous work?
28. How did Cotton Mather, a famous Puritan preacher, develop a smallpox vaccine?
29. What liquid from an infected person was used to get the vaccine?
30. How does a vaccine work?
31. What are two laughable crimes from colonial times?
32. What did colonists think was the most effective form of punishment?
33. What did they consider to be a waste of taxpayer's money?
34. How were the stocks and the pillory different?
35. Someone condemned to the pillory would often hire someone else to do what for them?
36. Why didn't the colonists hang many criminals?
37. Where did the custom of raising your right hand when being sworn in come from?
38. Why was printing in colonial times tedious and time-consuming?

39. How long did it take to set one page of type?
40. Why did you have to be strong to work a printing press?
41. What were three lousy jobs that adults gave to colonial children?
42. With what subject did Benjamin Franklin struggle?
43. What was one of Franklin's experiments as a boy?
44. What are three community betterment projects that Franklin began?
45. What type of animal did Franklin try to kill with electricity?
46. How did Franklin prove that lightning is indeed an electrical spark?
47. Which famous invention of Franklins do you think is the most impressive? Explain.
48. What is a magic square?
49. What did Franklin call a "tonic bath"?
50. **Respond:** For you what would have been the hardest part of living in colonial times? Explain.

## Colonial Life Questions      KEY

1. What are three reasons indentured servitude is different from slavery?

*It was only for a set period of time, for whites only, and a voluntary arrangement*

2. Why did the idea of “self-government” gain popularity in the colonies?

*The King let the colonies rule themselves for the most part.*

3. What did colonial people use for toilet paper?

*Corncobs, moss, leaves, or newspaper (need one)*

4. Why were colonial streets disgusting?

*People emptied their chamberpots into the street*

5. Where does the saying “sleep tight” originate?

*Rope beds provided good sleeping only when the ropes were pulled tight.*

6. Why did colonists try to make their candles last as long as possible?

*Making candles was time-consuming*

7. What determined the colonists’ schedule for working hours?

*The sun*

8. Why was Daniel Boone such a famous colonist?

*He was a frontiersman who pioneered Kentucky*

9. Infer: What are some similarities between Boone and Hawkeye from *The Last of the Mohicans*?

*Answers may vary: They are both woodsmen.*

10. What was a fashion accessory that came to the colonies from England?

*Wigs*

11. Where did some wealthy women catch mice?

*In their wigs*

12. What did men do to make their wigs fit better?

*Shaved their heads*

13. What fashion accessory showed people that a man did not work with his hands?

*Cuffs*

14. Why did colonists wear wooden clogs strapped onto their leather shoes?

*To keep the mud from ruining their shoes*

15. Why were colonists smelly under their clothes most of the time?

*They only bathed a couple of times a year*

16. What are three reasons why Puritan New England was a man's world?

*Women could not vote, testify in court, women's wages went to their husbands, men were responsible for their wives' conduct*

17. Why did men sometimes receive the punishment for a woman's crime?

*Men were responsible for their wife's conduct*

18. For a woman what was like going outside half-naked?

*Not wearing a head covering*

19. What fashion accessory allowed women to silently speak their minds?

*Fans*

20. What are three silent messages that women could send and how?

*Answers may vary*

21. Using a prop, try one of these secret messages on one of your classmates. What was their reaction?

*Answers may vary*

22. Which type of job had the duties of pulling teeth?

*Apothecary*

23. What job made shoe buckles?

*Brassfounder*

24. What was the colonial equivalent of a clothing store?

*Milliner*

25. Who would make your tea set for you?

*Silversmith*

26. Respond: Which job would be the best fit for you? Explain.

*Answers may vary*

27. What was very hot and dangerous work?

*Metalworking*

28. How did Cotton Mather, a famous Puritan preacher, develop a smallpox vaccine?

*Convinced a doctor to inject people with a mild case of smallpox*

29. What liquid from an infected person was used to get the vaccine?

*Pus from a smallpox blister*

30. How does a vaccine work?

*You receive a mostly harmless version of the virus through a shot that immunizes you.*



31. What are two laughable crimes from colonial times?

*Falling asleep in church, gossiping, nagging, and scolding*

32. What did colonists think was the most effective form of punishment?

*Public humiliation*

33. What did they consider to be a waste of taxpayer's money?

*Prison*

34. How were the stocks and the pillory different?

*The pillory forced people to stand, and the stocks required people to sit.*

35. Someone condemned to the pillory would often hire someone else to do what for them?

*Wipe rotten vegetable debris from their face*

36. Why didn't the colonists hang many criminals?

*They needed workers in the New World*

37. Where did the custom of raising your right hand when being sworn in come from?

*Criminals were branded on the thumb sometimes; this showed your criminal record.*

38. Why was printing in colonial times tedious and time-consuming?

*It required moveable letters and took hours to arrange the letters on a plate.*

39. How long did it take to set one page of type?

*25 hours*

40. Why did you have to be strong to work a printing press?

*It took 200 lbs. of pressure to print one page of type.*

41. What were three lousy jobs that adults gave to colonial children?

*Emptying the chamber pot, husking corn, hauling wood, plucking feathers, and churning butter*

42. With what subject did Benjamin Franklin struggle?

*Arithmetic*

43. What was one of Franklin's experiments as a boy?

*Finding ways to swim faster (paddles on hands, tying a kite to himself)*

44. What are three community betterment projects that Franklin began?

*Library system, fire department, city's police force (night watch)*

45. What type of animal did Franklin try to kill with electricity?

*Chicken or turkey*

46. How did Franklin prove that lightning is indeed an electrical spark?

*Flying a kite in an electrical storm*

47. Which famous invention of Franklins do you think is the most impressive? Explain.

*Answers may vary.*

48. What is a magic square?

*A numeric puzzle where each row and column adds up to the same number.*

49. What did Franklin call a "tonic bath"?

*Sitting naked in his room for hours at a time*

50. Respond: For you what would have been the hardest part of living in colonial times? Explain.

*Answers may vary.*