

Colonial Cooper

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This page describes the work of a colonial cooper. Did you know that coopers made a type of barrel called a hogshead, which was used to ship huge quantities of tobacco.

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Trades

Coopers were tradesman who made casks, buckets, barrels, and containers for flour, gunpowder, tobacco, shipping, wine, milk, and other liquids. One kind of container, the hogshead, was used to ship huge quantities of tobacco from the colonies to England. Because the demand for containers was high, colonial coopers made millions of such containers every year. Although coopers are traditionally known for creating barrels (casks), it was actually the “tight cooper” who made them. Other coopers began specializing in making specific types of containers that they could mass produce quickly.

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The construction of a barrel (more accurately called a cask) took skill, experience, and significant manual labor. It was very difficult to construct the perfect cask, with a bulging round center and with sides that taper inward toward both ends. Clear white oak staves (wooden planks for barrels) were split from the centers of mature trees. The tight cooper would then fashion the wooden parts with axes and knives before gathering them in a circular formation and securing them with iron rings. The staves were then heated to make them pliant (flexible) and pulled together with a special tool called a windlass. They were then banded with hickory hoops. Grooves were cut into lips that were formed to make sure the barrelheads fit tightly. Next, the lid was made. Finally, the cooper would cut a hole in the top and side and then fit the holes with plugs. This was done so people could see what was in the barrel.

The word cooper comes from the Middle English word “couper,” which means tub or container.

