In the colonial era nearly all children worked. Those who did not work under their fathers' supervision usually served as apprentices. Mary Ann Mason discusses these child labor arrangements (1994).

Fathers/Masters: Children/Servants

Mary Ann Mason

Masters and Servants

A very large proportion of children in the colonial era did not spend their whole childhood under the custody and control of their own parents or stepparents. These children were put under the custody and control of masters (and sometimes mistresses), to whom they were indentured. "Binding out," "putting out," or "apprenticing" were all variations on the well-established English custom of placing children in the home of a master who was obliged to provide ordinary sustenance and some training in return for services. This training could be as specific as teaching a skilled craft or it could be as general as instruction in basic reading and the catechism. Laws under common law differed pertaining to articles of indenture for servants and for apprentices. In the New World the distinction between indentures for servants and apprentices was less clear. Binding out or apprenticing became a catch-all concept that both provided a controllable and skilled labor force to the new country and parent figures to thousands of children who had no parents. Whatever the terms of the indenture contract, it was ratified and supervised by the local court.

The master-servant relationship established by the indenture contract closely reflected the parent-child relationship. Master and servant shared mutual obligations, as did parent and child; and for the most part these obligations were the same: courts often described the master as serving in loco parentis. While the affectional bonds between a father and his child may have been of an entirely different nature, the legal responsibilities of father and master were not. Many laws... assigned identical duties to fathers and masters regarding the care and training of the children in their charge. In return masters could expect labor from their charges, just as fathers could. Blackstone clearly supported this analogy. "The father has the benefit of his children's labor while they live with him and
are maintained by him; and this is no more than he is entitled to from his apprentices or servants.

In a society where production relied on the economic services of children, the law strongly supported this master-servant relationship. In the absence of social workers and children's protective services, the courts cooperated with poor officials in creating and supervising the indentures of orphaned or impoverished children. They also settled the disputes between parents and masters over the treatment of apprentices and ordered runaway apprentices back to their masters if they could not prove gross abuse. While courts rarely, if ever, heard custody disputes following divorce, colonial courts every day struggled with problems relating to the "placing out" of children.

Courts supervised a broad variety of indentures, roughly divided into two categories: 1. voluntary apprenticeships, where a parent voluntarily arranged with a third party, usually to train the child in a specific trade in exchange for the child's services; and 2. involuntary apprenticeships, where the parents were dead or unable to properly raise their children and the town poor law officials placed the children with "parents" primarily in order to relieve the town of the financial burden. In the absence of the legal form of adoption involuntary apprenticeships were also used to ratify the legal position of close relatives who took in a child upon the death of the child's parents. Both types of indenture contracts were under the jurisdiction of the county court and were usually not enforced by other courts if the master moved.

**Involuntary Apprenticeships**

Children who came to America as indentured servants without parents provided critical labor for the settlement of the colonies. More than half of all persons who came to the colonies south of New England were indentured servants, and most servants were under nineteen years old. Whether these children who came alone to the colonies came as voluntary or involuntary servants is unknown. Certainly, some of the older children voluntarily signed their own indentures, as did adults, in hopes of a fresh start in an uncrowded country. However, many children were orphans, or children of the poor, and their indentures, like those of all impoverished children, were not voluntary.

In 1657 the Virginia Company actively solicited the lord mayor of London to send poor children to settle the colony. The lord mayor complied by authorizing a charitable collection to grant five pounds apiece for equipment and passage money, while the children were to be apprenticed until the age of twenty-one and afterward to have fifty acres of land in the plantation to be held in fee simple at a rent of one shilling a year. This arrangement apparently worked well, and was initiated again in 1659 for "one hundred children out of the multitude that swarm in that place to be sent to Virginia."

The children, like all settlers, did not survive long in deadly Virginia, and the London City Council once again complied with a request in 1624 for the transport of another hundred children, "being sensible of the great loss which [the plantation] lately sustained by the barbarous cruelty of the savage people there."

A similar process occurred in New Netherland (later named New York), where the directors of the West India Company asked for and received several shiploads of poor and/or orphaned children from Amsterdam. An official of Fort Amsterdam asked for more children in 1658 but specified their age: "Please to continue sending others from time to time but, if possible, none ought to come less than fifteen years of age and somewhat strong, as little profit is to be expected here without labor."

Other children, many of whom were not orphans or under the control of the poor law officials, were tricked into indentured servitude by "spirits" who gained a healthy profit for each suitable child (or adult) they could deliver to the colonies, where they sold their indentures. The custom grew out of hand by the middle of the seventeenth century; victims were often flatly kidnapped and held prisoner for a month or so until sent off to sea. One father obtained a warrant to search the ship for his eleven-year-old son whom he claimed had been spirited away. The search uncovered nineteen servants, eleven of whom had been taken by "spirits," most against their will. The spirit trade provoked public outrage and fear. Petitioned by merchants, planters, and masters of ships, the attorney general of Charles II established in 1664 a central registry recording the contracts of all servants leaving for the colonies. This remedy was supplemented by fierce prosecution of those caught spiriting.

Given the circumstances of immigration, many children arrived with irregular indentures or none at all. The law required the would-be master to bring the child before the court to determine the terms of the indenture. Most common was the term set by the Virginia legislature: "Such persons as shall be imported, having no indenture or covenant, either men or women, if they be above sixteen years old shall serve four years, if under fifteen to serve till he or she shall be one and twenty years of age, and the courts to be judges of their ages." Other colonies fixed eighteen years of age or marriage as the termination date of indentures for girls.

The law did not require that masters teach these child immigrants a specific trade but rather allowed them to put the children to whatever service they wished. At the termination of the indenture, however, the law required masters to provide the servant with a suitable wardrobe and some provisions. A North Carolina law specified: "Every Christian servant shall be allowed by his master or mistress at the expiration of his or her time of service three barrels of Indian corn and two new suits of apparel of the value of five pounds at least or, in lieu of one suit of apparel, a good well-fitted gun, if he be a man servant."

In the New England colonies and in colonies south of New England, following the first decades of intense immigration, children were most often involuntarily apprenticed when their parents were unable or unwilling to care for them properly. Adoption was not then a legal option, and orphanages and asylums for children were rare until the end of the eighteenth century. The town of the child's
“settlement” was responsible for the child’s welfare. Elaborate laws determined how “settlement” would be carried out, since no town was eager to take on an unnecessary burden. Generally, the child’s place of birth was its settlement if neither his mother nor father had one. However, if the father or the mother had a town of settlement, that was the child’s, in that order of preference. Bastards, however, as filius nullius, had only the town in which they were born.

The officials of the child’s town of settlement charged with administering the poor laws took charge of these children and, with appropriate approval of the court, “bound them” to an appropriate master who gained full custody and control of the child, but under continued court supervision. Once the child was bound out the parents, if alive, lost any legal claim to its custody. In the case of orphans the child was often bound out to a close relative, providing the legal custodial authority to the relatives that was not available by adoption. If the child was an infant, poor law officials might pay a family to nurse the child until it was old enough to bind out. In this instance poor law officials maintained legal control of the child. These infants were often bastards. The records for one parish in Virginia between 1748 and 1753 indicate that fully half of the poor relief paid out went to families for the purposes of keeping a bastard child for a year.

The southern colonies were particularly needy of labor. Virginia attempted to persuade the mayor of London to ship street children to the New World to serve as apprentices. Slave children were also put to work alongside their parents at an early age, and were treated as harshly as their parents were.

Children’s Involuntary Labor

Colonial Documents

Request by Virginia Company to Mayor of London, 1619

The Treasurer, Council, and Company of Virginia assembled in their great and general Court the 17th of November 1619 have taken into consideration the continual great forwardness of his honorable City [London] in advancing the plantation of Virginia and particularly in furnishing out one hundred children this last year, which by the goodness of God there safely arrived (save such as died in the way), and are well pleased we doubt not for their benefit, for which your bountiful assistance, we in the name of the whole plantation do yield unto you due and deserved thanks.

And forasmuch as we have now resolved to send this next spring very large supplies for the strength and increasing of the Colony ... and find that the sending of those children to be apprentices hath been very grateful to the people: we pray your Lordship and the rest in pursuit of your former so pious actions to renew your like favors and furnish us again with one hundred more for the next spring. Our desire is that we may have them of twelve years old and upward with allowance of three pounds apiece for their transportation and forty shillings apiece for their apparel as was formerly granted. They shall be apprentices the boys till they come to twenty-one years of age the girls till the like age or till they be married, and afterwards they shall be placed as tenants upon the public land with best conditions where they shall have houses with stock of corn and cattle to begin with, and afterward the moiety of all increase and profit whatsoever. And so we leave this motion to your honorable and grave consideration.
Request by Virginia Company to Principal Secretary of James I, 1620

Right Honorable: Being unable to give my personal attendance upon the Lords, I have presumed to address my suit in these few lines unto your Honor. The City of London have by act of their Common Council, appointed one hundred children out of their superfluous multitude to be transported to Virginia; there to be bound apprentices for certain years, and afterward with very beneficial conditions for the children. And have granted moreover a levy of five hundred pounds among themselves for the appareling of those children, and toward their charges of transportation. Now it faileth out that among those children, sundry being ill disposed, and fitter for any remote place than for this City, declare their unwillingness to go to Virginia, of whom the City is especially desirous to be disburdened, and in Virginia under severe masters they may be brought to goodness. But this City wanting authority to deliver, and the Virginia Company to transport, these persons against their wills, the burden is laid upon me, by humble suit unto the Lords to procure higher authority for the warranting thereof. May it please your Honor therefore, to vouchsafe unto us of the Company here, and to the whole plantation in Virginia, that noble favor, as to be a means unto their Lordships out of their accustomed goodness, and by their higher authority, to discharge both the City and our Company of this difficulty, as their Lordships and your Honors in your wisdom shall find most expedient. For whose health and prosperity our Company will always pray.

Declaration by Privy Council of England, 1620

January 31, 1620.

Whereas we are informed that the City of London hath, by an act of the Common Council, appointed one hundred children, out of the multitudes that swarm in that place, to be sent to Virginia, there to be bound apprentices for certain years with very beneficial conditions for them afterwards, and have moreover yielded to a levy of five hundred pounds for the appareling of those children and towards the charge of their transportation; whereas, as the City deserveth thanks and commendations for redeeming so many poor souls from misery and ruin and putting them in a condition of use and service to the State; so forasmuch as information is likewise made that among that number there are divers unwilling to be carried thither and that it is conceived that both the City wanteth authority to deliver and the Virginia Company to receive and carry out these persons against their wills, we have thought meet, for the better furtherance of so good a work, hereby to authorize and require as well such of the City as take charge of that service as the Virginia Company, or any of them, to deliver, receive, and transport into Virginia all and every the foresaid children as shall be most expedient. And if any of them shall be found obstinate to resist or otherwise to disobey such directions as shall be given in this behalf, we do likewise hereby authorize such as shall have the charge of this service to imprison, punish, and dispose of any of those children, upon any disorder by them or any of them committed, as cause shall require, and so to ship them out for Virginia with as much expedition as may stand with convenience. For which this shall be unto all persons whom the same may any way concern a sufficient warrant.
The terms of an indenture contract typically provided certain limited rights to apprentices: they were to be provided adequate food, clothing, and shelter; they were also protected from mistreatment. At the completion of the contract, usually at age twenty-one, the apprentice normally received clothing, some money, and, in the southern colonies, a piece of land from his or her master. In most colonies, the apprentice system was regulated by law as well as by contract.

Apprentices, Servants, and Child Labor

Colonial Documents

Standard Form of Indenture for an Apprentice, Virginia, 1659

This indenture made the 6th day of June in the year of our Lord Christ 1659, witnesseseth, that Bartholomew Clarke the son of John Clarke of the City of Canterbury, saddler, of his own liking and with the consent of Francis Plumer of the City of Canterbury, brewer, hath put himself apprentice unto Edward Rowzie of Virginia, planter, as an apprentice with him to dwell from the day of the date above mentioned unto the full term of four years from thence next ensuing fully to be complete and ended, all which said term the said Bartholomew Clarke well and faithfully the said Edward Rowzie as his master shall serve, his secrets keep, his commands most just and lawful he shall observe, and fornication he shall not commit, nor contract matrimony with any woman during the said term; he shall not do hurt unto his master, nor consent to the doing of any, but to his power shall hinder and prevent the doing of any; at cards, dice or any unlawful games he shall not play; he shall not waste the goods of his said master nor lend them to anybody without his master's consent; he shall not absent himself from his said master's service day or night, but as a true and faithful servant, shall demean himself. [And the said Edward Rowzie in the mystery, art, and occupation of a planter... the said Bartholomew shall teach or cause to be taught, and also during said term shall find and allow his apprentice liberal diet, drink, apparel, washing, lodging with all other things fitting for his degree, and in the end thereof, fifty acres of land to be laid out for him, and all other things which according to the custom of the country is or ought to be done.

No merchant, shopkeeper or handy craft tradesman shall take any apprentice to teach or instruct them in their trade or calling within this City, without being bound by indenture before the Mayor, Recorder or one of the Aldermen of the said City, and enrolling the same in the Town Clerk's Office. And that at the expiration of the said indenture the said apprentice shall be made free of this City by the master, if he hath well and truly served him, and the Clerk shall have for enrolling each indenture of apprenticeship the sum of three shillings to be paid by the master of such apprentice bound as aforesaid....

And whereas the emigration of poor persons from Europe hath conducted greatly to the settlement of this State, while a colony; and whereas doubts have arisen tending to the discouragement of further importation of such poor persons; therefore be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid. That every contract already made or hereafter to be made by any infant or other person, coming from beyond sea... the party entering into the same, for such term and for such services as shall be therein specified... But that no contract shall bind any infant longer than until his or her arrival to the full age of twenty one years; excepting such as are or shall be bound in order to raise money for the payment of their passages, who may be bound until the age of twenty four years, provided the term of such service shall not exceed four years in the whole. ...

And whereas, many persons are taken as apprentices or servants, when they are very young, and for several years of their apprenticeships or service, are rather a burthen, than otherwise, to their masters or mistresses: And whereas it frequently happens that such apprentices or servants, when they might be expected to be useful to their masters or mistresses, absente themselves from their service: And whereas the laws in being are not sufficient to prevent these inconvenient: For remedy whereof: Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That from and after the passing of this act, if any apprentice or servant shall absent him or herself from his or her master's or mistress's service, before the term of his or her apprenticeship or service shall be expired, every such apprentice or servant shall, at any time or times thereafter, whenever he or she shall be found, be compelled to serve his or her said master or mistress, for double the time he or she shall have so absented him or herself from such service, unless he or she shall make satisfaction to his or her master or mistress for the loss he or she shall have sustained by such absence from his or her service; and so from time to time, as often as any such apprentice or servant, shall, without leave of his or her master or mistress, absent himself or herself from his or her service, before the term of his or her contract shall be fulfilled.

Provided always... That nothing in this clause of this act shall extend to any apprentice, whose master or mistress shall have received with such apprentice any sum or sums of money to learn such art, craft, mystery, profession, trade or employment. And also that no apprentice or servant shall be compelled to serve for any time or term or to make any satisfaction to any master or mistress, after the expiration of three years, next after the end of the term for which such
apprentice or servant, shall have contracted to serve any thing herein contained to the contrary notwithstanding.

South Carolina Statute, 1740

All and every person and persons whatsoever, that now are or at any time or times after the passing of this Act shall be bound by indentures to serve as an apprentice within this Province, in any lawful employment, calling, art, mystery or trade, although such apprentice or any of them have been or shall be within the age of twenty-one years at the time of making their several indentures, shall be bound to serve for the years in their several indentures contained, as fully and effectually, to every intent, as if the said apprentice had been of full age at the time of making such indentures, and shall be bound, accepted and taken as an apprentice, accordingly ... and provided also, that nothing in this Act contained shall extend to oblige any male apprentice to serve after he shall have attained the age of one-and-twenty years, or a female after she shall have attained the age of eighteen years.

... Every person or persons under the age of one-and-twenty years, and hereafter intending to be bound by indenture as an apprentice, in this Province, shall execute such indenture in the presence and with the approbation of his or her father, mother or guardian; and if such intended apprentice hath neither father, mother or guardian, in the presence and with the approbation of the church-wardens of the parish where such person is indented ... which indenture or indentures, so executed ... shall be good and effectual, to all intents and purposes, as if such apprentice had been of full age and by indenture of covenant had bound him or herself, otherwise shall be void and of none effect. ... It shall and may be lawful to and for the master or mistress of any apprentice, indented to serve within this Province aforesaid, upon sufficient cause, to be approved of by the parent or guardian, where there is no parent or guardian, by the church-wardens of the parish where such master or mistress resides, to assign and transfer the indenture of such apprentice to any other master or mistress, exercising within this Province the same employment, calling, trade, art or mystery; which said indenture, so assigned, shall be valid and effectual to the assignee as to the time remaining unexpired, as if the said apprentice had been originally indented to such assignee; and the said assignee, on accepting such assignment, shall be equally bound to the said apprentice, according to the tenor or the said indenture, as the original master or mistress was. ...

And it be further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That if any master or mistress within this Province shall misuse or evilly treat his or her apprentice, or if the said apprentice shall have any just cause to complain, or do not his or her duty to the said master or mistress, then in such case the said master, mistress or apprentice being grieved, and having just cause to complain, shall repair and make such complaint to any two justices of the peace within the county where such master or mistress resides, who shall and are hereby authorized and required by their wisdom and discretion to make such order and give such direction between the said master, mistress and apprentice, as the equity and justice of the case shall require.
Children and Manufactures

Alexander Hamilton

As to the additional employment of classes of the community not originally engaged in the particular business, this is not among the least valuable of the means by which manufacturing institutions contribute to augment the general stock of industry and production. In places where those institutions prevail, besides the persons regularly engaged in them, they afford occasional and extra employment to industrious individuals and families who are willing to devote the leisure resulting from the intermissions of their ordinary pursuits to collateral labors, as a resource for multiplying their acquisitions or their enjoyments. The husbandman himself experiences a new source of profit and support from the increased industry of his wife and daughters, invited and stimulated by the demands of the neighboring manufactories...

It is worthy of particular remark that, in general, women and children are rendered more useful, and the latter more early useful, by manufacturing establishments, than they would otherwise be. Of the number of persons employed in the cotton manufactories of Great Britain, it is computed that four-sevenths, nearly, are women and children; of whom the greatest proportion are children, and many of them of a tender age.

And thus it appears to be one of the attributes of manufactures, and one of no small consequence, to give occasion to the exertion of a greater quantity of industry, even by the same number of persons, where they happen to prevail, than would exist if there were no such establishments.

Choosing a Trade

Benjamin Franklin

I continu’d thus employ’d in my Father’s Business for two Years, that is till I was 12 Years old; and my Brother John, who was bred to that Business, having left my Father, married and set up for himself at Rhode Island. There was all Appearance that I was destin’d to supply his Place and be a Tailow Chandler. But my Dislike to the Trade continuing, my Father was under Appearancess that if he did not find one for me more agreeable, I should break away and get to Sea, as his Son Josiah had done to his great Vexation. He therefore sometimes took me to walk with him, and see Joiners, Bricklayers, Turners, Braziers, &c. at their Work, that he might observe my Inclination, & endeavor to fix it on some Trade or other on Land. It has ever since been a Pleasure to me to see good Workmen handle their Tools; and it has been useful to me, having learned so much by it, as to be able to do little Jobs myself in my House, when a Workman could not readily be got; & to construct little Machines for my Experiments while the Intention of making the Experiment was fresh & warm in my Mind. My Father at last fix’d upon the Cutler’s Trade, and my Uncle Benjamin’s Son Samuel, who was bred to that Business in London, being about that time establish’d in Boston, I was sent to be with him some time on liking, but his Expectations of a Fee with me displeasing my Father, I was taken home again.

From a Child I was fond of Reading, and all the little Money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books. Please’d with the Pilgrim’s Progress, my first Collection was of John Bunyan’s Works, in separate little Volumes. I afterwards sold them to enable me to buy R. Burton’s Historical Collections: they were small Chapmen’s Books and cheap, 40 or 50 in all. My Father’s little Library consisted chiefly of Books in polemic Divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted, that at a time when I had such a Thirst for Knowledge, more proper Books had not fallen in my Way, since it was now resist’d I should not be a Clergyman. Plutarch’s Lives there was, in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great Advantage. There was also a Book of Defoe’s,
called an Essay on Projects, and another of Dr. Mather's, call'd Essays to do Good which perhaps gave me a Turn of Thinking that had an Influence on some of the principal future Events of my Life.

This Bookish Inclination at length determin'd my Father to make me a Printer, tho' he had already one Son, (James) of that Profession. In 1717 my Brother James return'd from England with a Press & Letters to set up his Business in Boston. I like'd it much better than that of my Father, but still had a Harkering for the Sea. To prevent the apprehended Effect of such an Inclination, my Father was impatient to have me bound to my Brother. I stood out some time, but at last was persuaded and signed the Indentures, when I was yet but 12 Years old. I was to serve as an Apprentice till I was 21 Years of Age, only I was to be allow'd Journeyman's Wages during the last Year. In a little time I made great Proficiency in the Business, and became a useful Hand to my Brother.

Many children worked in factories in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. In response to anti-child labor fervor, August Kohn, a journalist, defends the practice of hiring children to work in cotton mills in the South in the early twentieth century (1907).

Children in the Mills

August Kohn

There has been very much more interest shown by the outside world in the matter of the employment of children in the cotton mills—more indeed than any other phase of cotton mill life. The employment of children has always been a matter of concern to the public at large. It is probably very well that there is so much interest in this phase of mill life. Most of those who have undertaken to present the matter of child labor have done so from the sensational or sentimental view point, and very many of those who have undertaken to arouse a sentiment against the employment of children have added an appeal for subscriptions to a fund with which to prosecute this work against the employment of children, but suggest no other means of the children making a livelihood. My purpose shall be to present the matter as fairly as I can, with due regard to the sentimental side; the injury that is done by the employment of children; the reason that these children are employed, and the law in South Carolina and how it is enforced; and what, if anything, can be done, or ought to be done, to minimize the employment of children . . .

The best way to get at the actual facts is to visit the cotton mills. I went through at least twenty-five cotton mills; one of the chief purposes of my visits being to see with my own eyes and to hear with my own ears the facts relative to the employment of children. In a recent magazine paragraph it is stated: "Sixty thousand little children are to-day toiling in Southern cotton mills: little girls, eight years old, work through a twelve-hour night." In The Outlook this advertisement was printed: "The national child labor committee wants your help to rescue two million children from premature labor. The sweet-shop, the coal mine, the glass factory, the silk mill, the cotton mill, the cigar shop, and the whiskey bottling works invade the school and the home to capture the American child. Our work is a campaign against race deterioration. Child labor is a menace to industry, education and good citizenship."
This may be a very good scheme by which to gather money for the committee which is undertaking the work of minimizing child labor, but when one considers that, according to the census, out of the 1,790,778 children employed in "gainful occupations" there are 1,061,977 of this number engaged in agricultural pursuits, the force of the advertisement is very considerably weakened. It should be remembered, too, that of the total number of children reported who are engaged in "gainful occupations" 499,227 are children between 10 and 11, and 501,854 are 14 and 15 years of age, and this number will have to be eliminated from the claims made in the advertisement. In other words, almost 90 per cent of the number given as engaged in "gainful occupations" are eliminated, first, by being in agricultural pursuits, and then on account of being 14 years of age or over. And, if the whole thing were dissected in the same way as to the remaining number, it would be found that very few of the 2,000,000 are left—certainly in the Southern cotton mills—for the good offices of the committee that is raising general subscriptions for the work. The fact of the matter is that the census report does not show more than 95,000 employed in the various occupations itemized in the advertisement, and yet it is claimed that 2,000,000 children are to be saved, and that 95,000 includes children of 14 and 15 years of age engaged in "gainful occupations..."

As stated before, the trouble with so many of these sensationalists is that they do not begin at the right place. If they could only compare the conditions of these families to-day with what they were twenty years ago they would probably write in a more conservative strain. In a recent article by Mr. D. A. Tompkins published in the Textile Manufacturers' Journal, he refers to the conditions in the South immediately after the war and reconstruction. And then he goes on to say: "...Here was a possible opportunity to escape the smouldering anes of reconstruction and the pinching poverty of five-cent cotton. The problem was not one of seeking wealth, but of human welfare. It would have been peculiarly unnatural if the welfare of children should not have been left behind in this life-saving movement. They were not left behind, but, on the contrary, their welfare has been as assiduously pressed as any other phase of development in the South. It was regarded that the first prerequisites in the interest of children were Christian training in church and mental training in school. From the very beginning both these essentials have been provided, and are still provided. Any exception is so rare that it may be omitted. The age limit has been constantly increased, and the purpose has been, and is still, to replace the better training as the mill training is displaced.... The great benefactors are those who have formulated plans for the industrial development of the South, and accomplished the maintenance of regular work and a cash pay roll at regular intervals. Whoever finds the way to keep people employed as profitable wages may depend upon it that they, in turn, will, in time, be more instrumental than anybody else in their own betterment. Working together, the mills and the operatives, there have been found ways in all the mills for building churches, establishing and maintaining schools, shortening the work day, increasing the pay per day, stopping night work, and bringing about other reforms by natural means...."

The historian David Nasaw describes the lives of children—usually immigrants—who worked as peddlers and street performers in the early twentieth century (1985).

Children at Work in the City

David Nasaw

The children who earned their money as street traders peddled whatever they could buy cheaply, fit into their pockets or the canvas bag slung over their shoulders, and sell for a profit. Beside Turner Kriesberg, a Russian émigré whose oral history translated from the Yiddish is found in the YIVO archives, was astounded on her arrival in Chicago by the number of boys on the streets—and the variety of items they sold. "She enjoyed watching the young boys acting as businessmen. They were shouting out the merchandise they had for sale. One was selling newspapers, one chewing gum, one peanuts, one theater tickets, and the youngest carried on his shoulder a small wooden box with tools to clean shoes for people."

Many children sold more than one item at a time. The newspapers in particular were always adopting "side lines" to hawk with their papers. Hy Kraft, the future Broadway playwright, who claimed to have held more jobs as a child "than there are categories in the Yellow Pages of the phone book," sold newspapers with his brother Willie "at the corner of 116th Street and Lenox Avenue, in front of the pool parlor next to the subway kiosk, defying the ostrich of bicycles and streetcars. We almost got ourselves killed, but we never got rich. So we took on a side line—Spearmint gum. We had the same deal as we had on the newspapers—two for a penny and sold them for a penny a slice, when we sold them. Packages were two for a nickel, we sold them at a nickel a pack. A 100 percent profit."

George Burns claims in his autobiography that he sold so many different items he "became sort of a one-man conglomerate. And that was before I became a man, or before I knew what conglomerate meant.... One of my many big business ventures lasted exactly two hours and twenty minutes. I thought there was money to be made by selling vanilla crackers. I'd go into a grocery store and buy a bunch of vanilla crackers at ten for a penny. Then on the street I'd sell them eight for a penny.... The problem here was by the time I sold eight crackers I'd
eaten two crackers. It didn’t take me long to realize that this was the wrong business for a kid who was hooked on vanilla crackers.”

Al Jolson and his brother Harry sold newspapers in Washington, D.C. In the summer, they went into the watermelon business. “We could buy watermelons at the wharves at a wholesale price, three for a nickel. Sometimes we could get four for a nickel. We had a patched and battered wagon, for which we had traded. We would load it with melons, and haul them to a promising section of town for resale. Here our voices . . . became part of our stock-in-trade. We made up a little song which Al and I [Harry] would sing in tones that carried far:

Wa — a–termelons
Red to da wind
Five cents a piece
And you eat ‘em all da time.”

As the Jolsons and the other young hustlers quickly discovered, their youth was their greatest selling point: There was something irresistible about innocent-looking children trying to hard to earn money. The incongruity between their size and their salesmanship attracted customers. In their own neighborhoods, the children were helped out by working-class and immigrant adults who had children of their own. Downtown, they were patronized by prosperous Americans who found the little hustlers too cute to pass by.

All the street traders had to perform for their customers. One needed a bit of bravado and an immunity from embarrassment to perform on the streets. Children with a surfeit of each—and a bit of talent—went a step further. The streets of the city were filled with young hustlers who cowered, pantomimed, sang, and danced, some for the sheer sport of it, others for the change they hoped to collect from bystanders. The Jewish neighborhoods in particular were, as Irving Howe has written, the training grounds for future generations of comics, dancers, and singers. “There are the famous or once-famous names: Al Jolson, George Jessel, Eddie Cantor, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, Ben Blue, Jack Benny, George Burns, George Sidney, Milton Berle, Ted Lewis, Ben Blue, Fields, and others. And there are the hundreds who played the small towns, the ratty theaters, the Orpheum circuit, the Catskills, the smelly houses in Brooklyn and the Bronx.”

The children of the streets observed from the outside the great panorama of urban life, taking it all in, and then, if they had the talent, representing it in comic or melodramatic form from the stage (and later on the screen, over the radio, on television). They learned to mimic the dialects, the dialogues, the patter of peddlers, policemen, and “the hoity-toity Irish teacher who recited Browning in high school.” They began by entertaining each other. Only later would they begin charging for it.

At the age of six, Eddie Cantor began keeping “late hours . . . with a band of boys two years and three times [his] age who spent their nights in a revelry of song. For the East Side at night is not only menaced by the caterwauling of cats, but by gangs of youngsters who sit on the stoops and the corner stands, singing all the popular songs with all their might at an age when their voices are changing.”

The Jolson brothers, George Burns, and Fanny Brice began their careers in similar fashion, singing or clowning on street corners and in backyards and alleysways with their friends. When they discovered that adults were willing to throw pennies their way, they quickly abandoned their amateur status. Fanny Brice roamed with her gang through backyards until they found “a likely-looking tenement” to perform in. The children sang all the popular songs of the day and, when they were lucky, were rewarded with a “brief, scattered shower of pennies.” When the Jolson brothers and their gang in Washington, D.C., “found that grown people would stop to listen” and even throw coins at them, they moved away from the street corners they had been gathering on to well-situated sidewalks where they were sure to meet adults with change in their pockets. “Our favorite stage was the sidewalk in front of the Hotel Raleigh. In those days, congressmen, high government officials, and even Supreme Court justices would sit on chairs on the sidewalks during spring and summer evenings, just as people did in small towns. They not only appreciated our singing, but they became an unusual source of income for us. We sang all the popular songs, such as Sweet Marie, The Sidewalks of New York, Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy’s Chowder, Daisy Bell, and Say Ah Revoir But Not Goodbye. We soon learned that statesmen and jurists preferred the songs that carried them into the romantic past, the songs of Stephen Foster, and Listen to the Mocking Bird, Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming, and When You and I Were Young, Maggie. Songs such as these brought a shower of nickels, dimes, and even quarters.”

For children whose songs or clowning met with applause, laughter, and pennies, there was no turning back. George Burns and the three friends who mixed syrup with him in Rosenweig’s basement began work as the Pee-wee Quartet after school one afternoon “at the corner of Columbia and Houston.” “We stood there and sang from three-thirty to six, and made exactly four cents.” The boys did not give up. They continued to sing—in saloons until they were thrown out, on the Staten Island ferry until “Mortzy” got seasick, and in backyards where they were greeted by rotten fruit and occasional pennies.

Though future show business characters tell the best stories about performing on the streets, they were by no means the only children who tried to make some money this way. Of the four friends who made up the Pee-wee Quartet, only George Burns went into show business. Two others went into the taxi business; the third became an insurance broker. Similarly, the dozens of children who sang in groups with Eddie Cantor on the Lower East Side, Fanny Brice in Brooklyn, and the Jolson brothers in Washington, D.C., had neither the talent nor the inclination to go into show business.
Many children worked with their parents in small businesses or stores. In her autobiography (1518) Rose Cohen, a Jewish immigrant, describes her experience in New York City’s garment industry, where she worked with her tailor father in the late nineteenth century.

A Child Worker in the Garment Industry

Rose Cohen

On the following day father came home at noon and took me along to the shop where he worked. We climbed the dark, narrow stairs of a tenement house on Monroe Street and came into a bright room filled with noise. I saw about five or six men and a girl. The men turned and looked at us when we passed. I felt scared and stumbled. One man asked in surprise:

“Avrom, is this your daughter? Why, she is only a little girl!”

My father smiled. “Yes,” he said, “but wait till you see her sew.”

He placed me on a high stool opposite the girl, laid a pile of pocket flaps on the little narrow table between us, and showed me how to baste.

All afternoon I sat on my high stool, a little away from the table, my knees crossed tailor fashion, basting flaps. As I worked I watched the things which I could see by just raising my eyes a little. I saw that the girl, who was called Atta, was very pretty.

A big man stood at a big table, examining, brushing and folding coats. There was a window over his table through which the sun came streaming in, showing millions of specks of dust dancing over the table and circling over his head. He often puffed out his cheeks and blew the dust from him with a great gust so that I could feel his breath at our table.

The machines going at full speed drowned everything in their noise. But when they stopped for a moment I caught the clink of a scissors laid hastily on a table, a short question and answer exchanged, and the pounding of a heavy iron from the back of the room. Sometimes the machines stopped for a whole minute. Then the men looked about and talked. I was always glad when the machines started off again. I felt safer in their noise.

Late in the afternoon a woman came into the shop. She sat down next to Atta and began to sew on buttons. Father, who sat next to me, whispered, “This is Mrs. Nelson, the wife of the big man, our boss. She is a real American.”

She, too, was pretty. Her complexion was fair and delicate like a child’s. Her upper lip was always covered with shining drops of perspiration. I could not help looking at it all the time.

When she had worked a few minutes she asked father in very imperfect Yiddish: “Well, Mr.—, have you given your daughter an American name?”

“No yet,” father answered. “What would you call her? Her Yiddish name is Rahel.”

“Rahel, Rahel,” Mrs. Nelson repeated to herself, thoughtfully, winding the thread around a button; “let me see.” The machines were going slowly and the men looked interested.

The proser called out from the back of the room: “What is there to think about? Rahel is Rachel.”

I was surprised at the interest every one showed. Later I understood the reason. The slightest cause for interruption was welcome, it broke the monotony of the long day.

Mrs. Nelson turned to me: “Don’t let them call you Rachel. Every loafer who sees a Jewish girl shouts ‘Rachel’ after her. And on Cherry Street where you live there are many saloons and many loaferers. How would you like Ruth for a name?”

I said I should like to be called Ruth.

Father made the life for me as easy as he could. But there were many hardships he could not prevent.

We began the day at six in the morning. I would stand dressing with my eyes closed and feel about for my buttons. But once I was out on the street and felt the moist early morning air I was wide awake at once.

When we had been in the shop about an hour a grey-bearded little old man used to come in hugging a big basket of food covered with black oil cloth. He was the shop pedlar. He always stopped near the door, rested his basket against it and groaned: “Oh, the stairs, the stairs in America!” The men looked at him with pity and Atta at the sight of him would sometimes begin to sing “The Song of the Pedlar.” If the boss was not in the shop or the men were not very busy, one of them would take the basket from the pedlar and place it on a chair in the middle of the room. Then each shop hand picked out a roll and the little old man poured him out a tiny glass of brandy for two cents. Father used to buy me an apple and a sweetened roll. We ate while we worked. I used to think two cents a good deal to spend for my breakfast. But often I was almost sick with hunger. At noon we had our big meal. Then father would send me out for half a pound of steak or a slice of beef liver and a pint of beer which he sometimes bought in partnership with two or three other men. He used to broil the steak in the open coal fireplace where the pressed heated his iron, and cut it into tiny squares. He always picked out the juiciest bits and pushed them to my side of the plate, and while there was still quite some meat he would lay down his fork and push his chair away from the table with an air as if he had had more than enough. He also got me to drink beer. Before long I could drink a
full glass. But I did not like it. One day it made me quite sick. After that I refused to drink it.

I liked my work and learned it easily, and father was pleased with me. As soon as I knew how to baste pocket-flaps he began to teach me how to baste the coat edges. This was hard work. The double ply of overcoat cloth stitched in with canvas and tape made a very stiff edge. My fingers often stiffened with pain as I rolled and basted the edges. Sometimes a needle or two would break before I could do one coat. Then father would offer to finish the edge for me. But if he gave me my choice I never let him. At these moments I wanted so to master the thing myself that I felt my whole body trembling with the desire. And with my habit of personifying things, I used to bend over the coat on my lap, force the obdurate and squirming needle, wet with perspiration, in and out of the cloth and whisper with determination: "No, you shall not get the best of me!" When I succeeded I was so happy that father, who often watched me with a smile, would say, "Babe, your face is shining. Now rest a while." He always told me to rest after I did well. I loved those moments. I would push my stool closer to the wall near which I sat, lean my back against it, and look about the shop...

I liked the life in the shop yet there were times when I felt unhappy. The men often told vulgar jokes. The first time this happened father looked at me and growled:

"Don't listen," he said, "or pretend you don't hear."

But I could never keep my face from turning red.

One day when Atta and I were alone at our table she said:

"It is too bad that you have a 'tell tale face.' You better learn to hide your feelings. What you hear in this shop is nothing compared with what you will hear in other shops. Look at me." But when I would look over at Atta it seemed to me that her needle actually flew in and out of her sleeve lining and her pretty little mouth looked more pursed than usual.

When I learned to find my way home alone my hours were not so long. For father was a piece worker and as I was only helping him he could do as he pleased with my time. And so now I came into the shop at seven o'clock in the morning and found my roll and apple already waiting for me. And when I went home at seven o'clock in the evening it was still broad daylight.

Our room was a dingy place where the sun never came in. I always felt lonely and a little homesick on coming into it. But I would soon shake off the feeling. I would cook and eat some soup and then go out and stand on the stoop and watch the children playing.

One night as I came out of our room into the hall I caught a few strains of music coming from the roof. I went up and found under the sky, blue and bright with the stars and the city lights twinkling all around, a group of Irish-American girls and boys waltzing to the music of a harmonica. I sat down in the shadow near one of the chimneys and watched the stars and the dancing and listened to the song of "My Beautiful Irish Maid."

After this I went up every evening. At first the girls and boys showed that I was not welcome by making ugly grimaces at me. But as I persisted, for I wanted to know the Americans, they became used to seeing me. And soon they paid no more attention to me than to the chimney near which I sat.

On Friday I worked only the first half of the day, then I would go home to do the washing and cleaning in our room. All morning I would count the hours and half hours and my heart beat with joy at the thought that I would soon leave the shop. When at last I heard the noon whistle from the big paper factory on Water Street I used to bend my head low to hide this joy. I felt ashamed at my eagerness to leave off work. When I came out into the street I had to stand still for a while and look about. I felt dazed by the light and the air and the joy of knowing that I was free. For at these moments I did not remember the work at home. I would start to walk along slowly, linger under the trees, of which there was one here and there on Cherry Street, and watch the children on the way home from school to lunch. In their white summertime dresses and with books under their arms, they appeared to me like wonderful little beings of a world entirely different from mine. I watched and envied them. But I often consoled myself with the thought, "When our children come they too will go to school."

On the stoop I lingered too. I watched the children playing jacks and from minute to minute I put off going in. At last with a feeling of guilt I would realise that the afternoon was almost gone and my work not even begun. But it was at such moments that I did my best and quickest work. I would rush upstairs, catch up the bundle of soiled clothes under my arm and run down into the cellar to the wash tubs. Once the washing was done I did not feel so guilty, and by the time I was at the floor, which I scrubbed with great swishes of water, I sang cheerfully, "After the Ball is Over."