



DAILY LIFE

1789-1816

Young People in the Early Republic

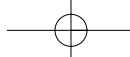
Whether in farms on the frontier or in any of the cities and towns sprouting up throughout the nation, life in the early United States required energy and perseverance. This was especially true for young people, who were expected to shoulder responsibilities that, in our own time, even an adult would find challenging. Children worked alongside adults from the time they could walk and were considered adults at 14. School and leisure-time activities were work oriented and were meant to prepare young people for the challenges that lay ahead.



▲ EDUCATION

Country children attended school only when they weren't needed to do chores at home or in the fields. Schoolhouses were one-room log cabins and supplies were scarce. Younger and older children learned their lessons together by reciting spelling, multiplication tables, and verses from the Bible. Schoolmasters, seldom more learned than their students, punished wrong answers and restless behavior with severe beatings.

Some city children were either tutored at home or attended private schools. Girls studied etiquette, sewing, and music. Boys prepared for professional careers. "Professors" punished poor students by beating their hands. There were no laws requiring a child to attend school until the mid-1800s.



◀ WORK

Country children were expected to work alongside their parents from the time they were about six. Even when children went to school, they were expected to put in many hours performing such chores as chopping wood, watering the horses, gathering vegetables, and spooling yarn.

City boys as young as eight years old—especially poorer ones—went to work as “apprentices” for a tradesman who taught them such trades as printing, or, like the boys pictured here, dying cloth. Other boys worked in shops or went to sea. Girls learned from their mothers how to sew, spin, mend, and cook.

▼ LEISURE

Young people from the country gathered for events that were both entertaining as well as practical, such as the “husking bee” pictured here. Huskers were divided into teams, and the team that stripped the husks off the most ears of corn was the winner. Cheating, though resented, was expected and was usually followed by a fight.



Young people from the city gathered for cultured social events such as the cotillion, or dance, pictured at right. Young men and women were expected to follow the lead of their elders with regard to the strict social codes that determined how one behaved in polite society.



DATA

FILE

CHILD MORTALITY

In Puritan America, one out of every two children died before they reached their teens. Child mortality remained high throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Common causes of death for children were cholera, smallpox, diphtheria, and dysentery.

CHILDREN IN THE MILITARY

From the American Revolution until World War I, boys 14 and younger served in the United States military. Some as young as six were musicians and aides in the army and marines, while others served as deckhands and cartridge carriers in the United States Navy.

CHILDREN AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Colonial law forbade the execution of children under 14, but exceptions were made. In December 1786, in New London, Connecticut, 12-year-old Hannah Ocuish was hanged for killing a six-year-old girl who had accused her of stealing strawberries.

CHILD LABOR

Apprentices who learned a trade could later go into business for themselves, but children who worked in factories had no such future. Virtually every industry in the country depended on child labor. Children worked in mills, mines, factories, and laundries.

Child Labor Data

- **1790:** All of the workers—seven boys and two girls—in the first American textile mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, were under the age of 12.
- **1830s:** One third of the labor force in New England was under the age of 16.
- **1842:** For the first time, Massachusetts law limited the workday of children under the age of 12 to ten hours a day.

THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO HISTORY

1. **Identifying Problems** What types of physical hardships were young people exposed to during this period in history?

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R5.**

CONNECT TO TODAY

2. **Researching Jobs** In our own day, young people work at many different kinds of jobs. Some have even started their own businesses and have been very successful. Research some of the businesses that youths run on their own and present a report to the class.

