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Walter A. Hazen

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To Martha, Jordan, and Allison

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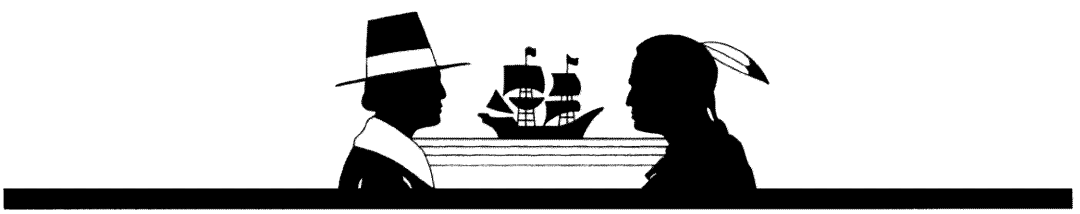

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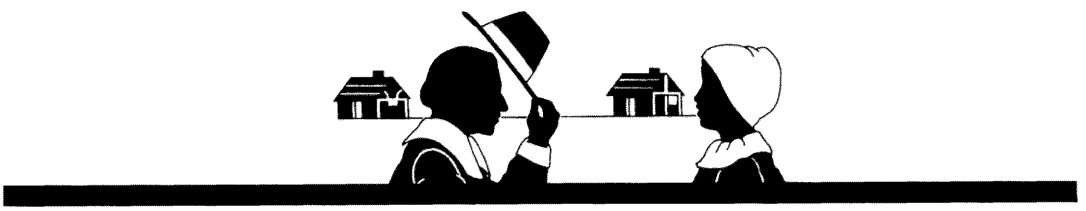


CHAPTER 1

Family Life and Customs

Life in colonial times centered on the family. This was especially true during the early days of America. With farms and settlements scattered, people often had contact only with members of their own family.

Families were large and close-knit. Many lived, worked, and played in a cabin or house consisting of just one room. It was important that they got along and that everyone did his or her fair share of the work. Usually they did.

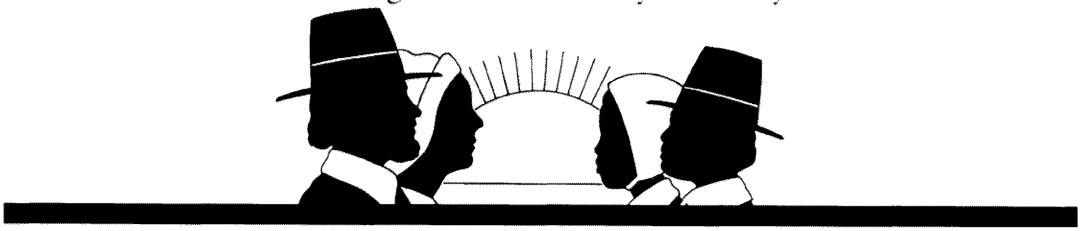
Colonists considered marriage a lifetime commitment and frowned upon divorce. For the most part, couples married young. Life expectancy was short, and adulthood came at an earlier age than today. A boy was considered a man at the age of sixteen. Any girl not married by the age of twenty was considered an old maid.

Colonial courtship as depicted on an 18th century dish by a Pennsylvania Dutch artist.

Customs surrounding courtship were much different in colonial times—some are amusing by our standards. For example, in New England when a young man courted a girl, he could only see her while in the presence of the girl's family. The frustrated suitor and the girl whispered to each other through a courtship stick. This was a hollow, wooden tube about eight feet long with an ear and mouth piece at each end. Any conversation between the two had to be carried on through the stick. You can imagine the good-natured teasing they must have endured at the hands of the girl's younger brothers and sisters!

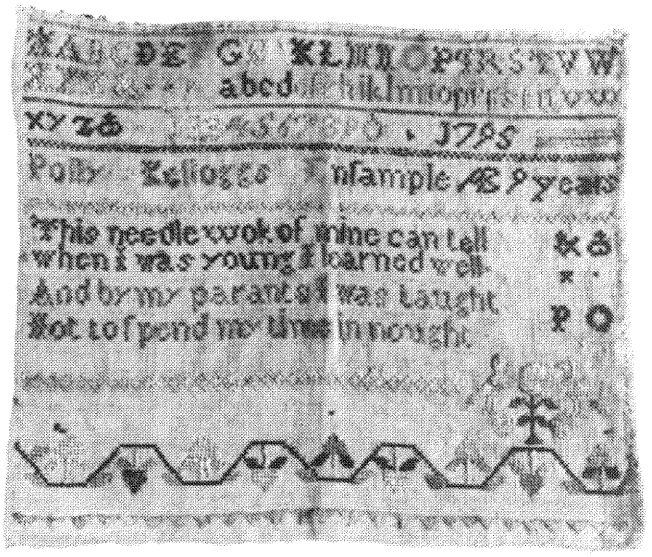
Wealthy parents arranged marriages for their children so they would marry someone of similar position. Love had little to do with it. The fathers of the girl and the boy agreed upon an acceptable dowry. Those girls who could not come up with a suitable dowry often remained unmarried. In poor families and on the frontier, boys and girls usually chose whom they wanted to marry.

Weddings in New England took place in the church. But in the Middle and Southern colonies, couples usually married at the bride's home. These weddings were festive affairs characterized by much drinking and eating. Guests often came from long distances and stayed for days.



Families considered children a blessing. An old Danish proverb states that "children are the poor man's wealth." This helps explain why families were large. Much work needed to be done both on the farm and in the home. Modern conveniences such as tractors and washing machines did not exist. The more children a family had, the more quickly and easily the many chores were finished.

Parents assigned children tasks when they were quite young. Boys and girls learned to make their own clothes. Children knew how to knit and sew by the age of four. Every little girl produced a sampler showing her skills at needlework. Young girls also helped their mothers cook and keep house. Young boys chopped wood, gathered corn, and fed livestock. There was little time for play.

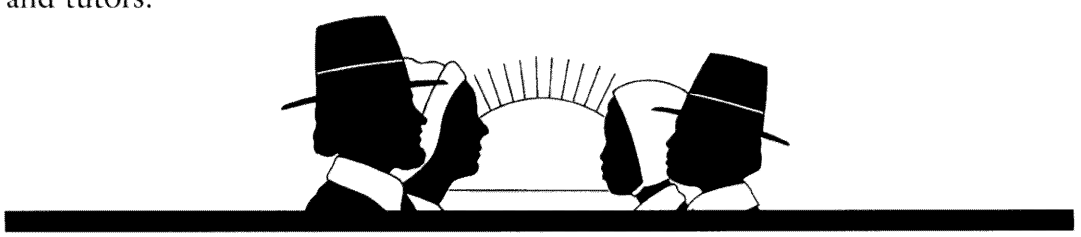


Girls in colonial times made samplers to learn needlework. On a piece of cloth held in a frame, they embroidered their name, age, and the date the sampler was completed. They might also stitch poems, Bible verses, flowers, or trees.

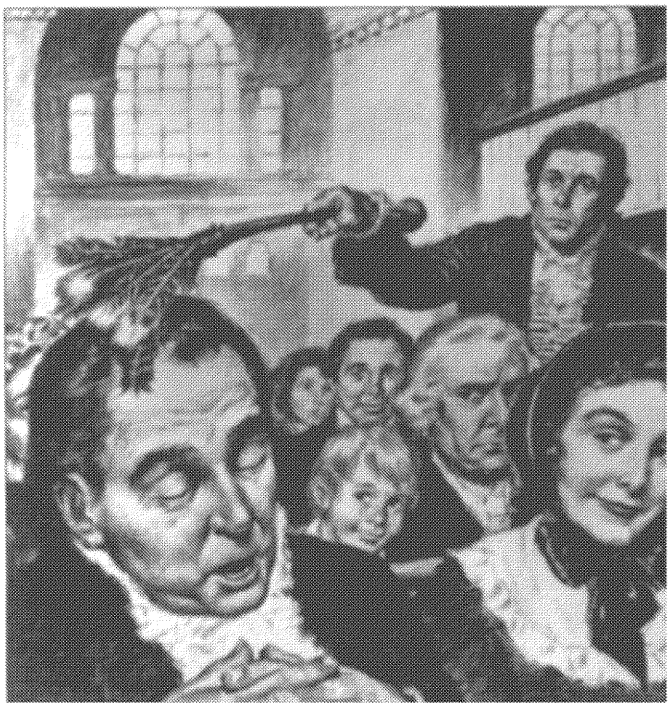
Half the population of early colonial America was under the age of sixteen. People died young from diseases such as smallpox, measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria. Children died from colds and influenza as well. Old family Bibles tell us of the grief and heartache that colonial parents suffered each time a child died. Cotton Mather, a famous Massachusetts minister, saw nine of his children die before their second birthday. Records show that many parents outlived all their children. And some women had as many as twenty or more!

With death a common occurrence, funerals were frequent. But funerals were quite different in colonial times. The family of the deceased gave gifts to mourners in attendance. The usual gifts were rings and gloves. Those who were most likely to attend every funeral in a town, such as the pastor, accumulated vast stores of such gifts. A pastor in old Boston received 2,900 pairs of gloves in 32 years. Many of these he sold.

The disciplining of children varied throughout the colonies. In early New England, discipline was strict and sometimes even severe. Life was hard and Puritan parents had little patience for unruly children. Among the Dutch and other settlers in the Middle colonies, discipline was more relaxed, and parents tended to show more affection. In the South, parents left discipline to nannies and tutors.



In New England, the well-known saying "children should be seen and not heard" was the general rule. This was especially true during meals. In some New England homes, children sat and ate with their parents. In many others, children ate while standing. Sometimes they stood at the end of the table where their parents sat. At other times they stood elsewhere. They could not talk during the entire meal and had to be courteous and mannerly. Any child who bit into a portion of bread without breaking it into pieces received a good thrashing. As soon as they finished eating, children excused themselves and left the table.

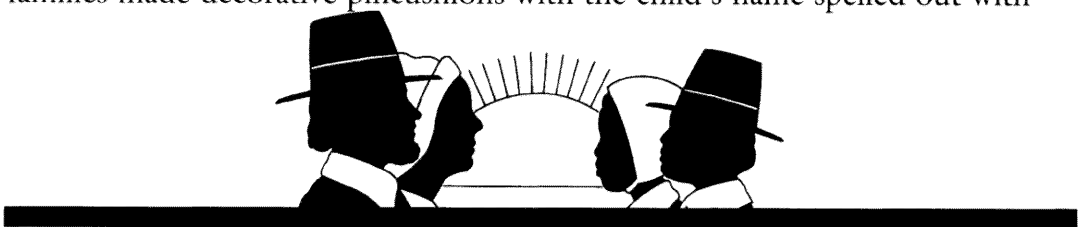


A New England tithingman ends the nap of a church sleeper. Services were long, and the tithingman was kept busy keeping people awake.

Discipline extended beyond the family circle. Church leaders in New England selected an official called a tithingman. The tithingman had several jobs. One was to keep people awake during church services. Sermons were long and the backless benches churchgoers sat on were uncomfortable. The tithingman had a long stick with a hard knot on one end. On the other end was a fox tail or a cluster of feathers. If a woman or girl dozed during the service, the tithingman tickled her nose with the fox tail or feathers. If a man or boy nodded for a moment, they may be warned with the soft end or receive a sharp rap on the head with the knobbed end.

The tithingman also checked on the study habits and behavior of children in the community. From time to time he appeared unannounced at the door of a home. Woe unto those children who had not learned their religious lessons or who were frolicking and having too much fun! Boisterous behavior was punished. The tithingman could take children out of the home and recommend punishment for the parents.

In spite of the strict discipline, colonial parents truly loved their children. The birth of a child was a joyous occasion. In New England, parents gave special cakes to all who came to see a new baby. In New Amsterdam, Dutch families made decorative pincushions with the child's name spelled out with



pins. They proudly hung these on the front doors of their homes.

The names given to babies are interesting and oftentimes meaningful. Some show the pride parents felt at the birth of a new child. Abigail, which means "father's joy," and Hannah, meaning "grace," are two examples. Parents gave other names associated with certain traits or hoped-for virtues. The more common ones were Hope, Faith, Charity, Joy, Patience, Comfort, and Endurance. Sadly, a few names resulted from some tragic incident. A New England mother whose husband had died in a snowstorm named her little girl Fathergone.

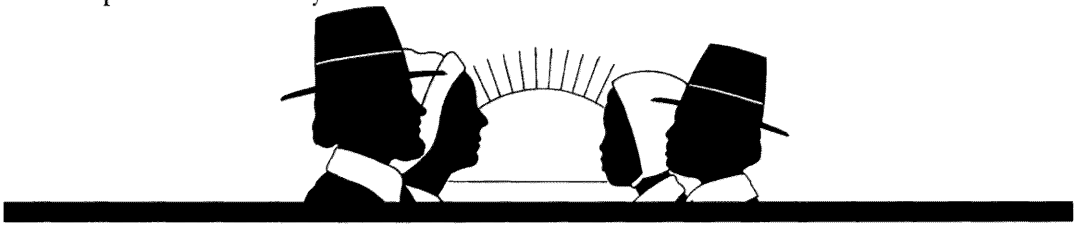
Many names were unusual. Supply, Thanks, Preserved, Unite, Wait, Return, Believe, and Tremble show up in records of the time. And would you believe Waitstill, Hopestill, Silence, and Submit? In other sections of the colonies, biblical names were popular. Sarah, Rebekah, Abraham, Joseph, and Israel were a few.

Not only were families close-knit in colonial times, but towns and communities were as well. People shared and helped each other in times of need. They looked after the sick and the elderly. Neighbor helped neighbor clear land, raise houses and barns, gather crops, and make quilts, soap, and other items of necessity.

But the colonists, especially in the North, could be cool to outsiders. Most towns took steps to discourage newcomers. No townsman could sell his house to an outsider without the consent of the town's inhabitants. Some towns went so far as to disallow the sale or rent of a dwelling to anyone other than a local resident. Residents wishing to entertain a guest from outside the town had to get permission from the authorities. When a stranger entered some communities, he was met by either the sheriff or the tithingman and encouraged to leave.

The opposite was true in the South. Settlements and plantations were so spread out that people were starved for news and information. They welcomed all strangers and went out of their way to be hospitable. Plantation owners often stationed slaves at road crossings and alongside lakes and rivers with invitations for travelers to stay over for a night. Innkeepers complained that such Southern hospitality took away a lot of their business—which it did.

In summary, this chapter points out how the colonists felt about marriage, family life, children, and certain customs. Colonial families were close and strong-willed. It was this strength that saw them through the many hardships of life in early America.



Name _____ Date _____

Finish the Tithingman Story

You have learned that some New England communities had town officers called tithingmen. These officers had wide powers. They could punish anyone whom they considered to be "acting out." They watched people in church, in taverns, and in their homes. They were especially watchful for disorderly children.

With these facts in mind, complete the story that is started for you at right.

The Tithingman Story

William Quincy, a tithingman in Salem, Massachusetts, entered the Bradford home unexpectedly one Sunday afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Bradford were not home. However, the tithingman was furious to find that the Bradfords' son John and two neighborhood boys were home and were wrestling on the floor, laughing loudly, and upsetting chairs and other household articles.

Name _____ Date _____

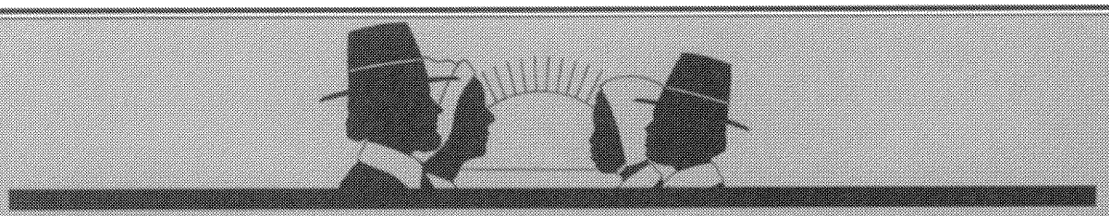
Research Six Diseases

People in colonial times died of illnesses that are treatable today. Even the common cold claimed many lives.

Listed at right are six diseases that often swept through the colonies in epidemic proportions. Research their causes, symptoms, and prevention or treatment, and write the information on the chart provided for you.

Common Colonial Illnesses

Disease	Cause	Symptoms	Prevention or Treatment
Typhoid Fever			
Malaria			
Smallpox			
Diphtheria			
Scarlet Fever			
Measles			



Name _____ Date _____

Distinguish Fact and Opinion

Sometimes people say things they believe to be true. In reality they may be only stating an opinion. It is often difficult to distinguish between opinion and fact.

Carefully read the story at right. Then, on the lines at the bottom of the page, write several statements you think are facts and several which you consider opinions.

Jordan and Allison were having a conversation about everyday life in colonial times. As they talked, they compared colonial families with families today.

"Wow!" exclaimed Allison. "Families back then were certainly large!"

"That's true," replied Jordan. "But everyone got along well and there were never any arguments."

"One thing that strikes me about colonial times," continued Allison, "is that parents cared more for their children than parents do today."

"Well, that may be true," said Jordan, "but parents, especially in New England, were very strict."

"Yes," agreed Allison. "And because of that, children were not very happy in those days."

I think these statements are facts:

_____

_____

_____

_____

I think these statements are opinions:

_____

_____

_____

_____