

Social Events of the Eighteenth Century

by Terry Manning, Atlanta Chapter SAR

Revised 29 December 2014

We're all familiar with such iconic social events as barn raisings and quilting bees, but there were dozens of other types of social activity in colonial times. Certainly the plantation owner of the South and the potato farmer in New England would have entertained differently, as would a Quaker in Pennsylvania or Mrs. Washington at Valley Forge. Such events were often as practical or educational as they were recreational. An excellent source for background on various social events of early America is *Tidings from the 18th Century* by Beth Gilgun.

(Reading the Bible)

Many could not read or write, thus Sunday worship was a means of learning the lessons of the Bible as well as hearing of great miracles and exciting battles. One of my ancestors served as a minister on Sundays, and he too could not read. So in order to give the sermon he would have the appropriate Bible chapters read to him earlier in the week, and then relate the story to his parishioners on Sunday. The story of Jonah and the whale was one such topic, and as he listened to the scripture he sat amazed and shouted, "Hallelujah!" and "Praise the Lord," as the story progressed. Did he have any questions, his neighbor asked, appreciating that the old man not only could not read, but was also hard of hearing. "No," he replied, "It was truly a miracle." And so it was on the next Sunday that the old man related with great fire and brimstone the story of Jonah --- and the quail. The story of that little quail swallowing a man whole had to have been quite entertaining to his flock.

(Gentleman's Frolic)

Now let me tell you of one popular event of the time that regardless of occupation or social status, your ancestors likely participated in at the time of the Revolution -- the gentleman's frolic. Once a year, it was not uncommon for all of the neighbors in a community to take several days off to attend a competition at one of their homes. The competition was usually quite intense, as the winners got bragging rights for the entire next year! "Neighbors" [air quotes] of course could be quite some distance from each

other, and it was not unusual to invite friendly Indians from the area in order to assist in maintaining the Indians as friendly allies and to assess their skills with the weapons of the period.

On such a frolic about 20 men comprised of the heads of household and their eldest sons from a dozen or so families would arrive to compete in about five types of competition. They would form groups of 4 with each group starting at a different station. Women did not usually compete in the competitions, but might watch their husbands, or keep the score, or be busy with preparations for the meals. Although the men shot their guns for fun, the women only shot a gun when they meant business.

Like many social events of the period which were recreational in nature, the frolic's activities had a serious vent to them meant to sharpen one's survival skills.

The first event might be shooting at a target such as a drawing of a turkey at 38 paces. The men drew cards to determine the order of fire. The closest to the "heart" of the target got the most points. Missing the target gave one zero points – a not uncommon result given the accuracy of muskets.

The second event might surprise you -- a mock duel. Standing back-to-back, two men would on the count of three, turn and fire while still standing next to each other at man-sized targets on opposite ends of the field. Speed was important, so the first to fire got 3 points, but accuracy awarded 5 points for hitting your target in a lethal "kill" zone, with fewer points for other parts of the figure's body. Imagine, regularly practicing your dueling skills!

Speed shooting might be next – an important skill when supper might be a fast moving deer or you served in the militia. Three gongs at different distances were fired at. Once you had hit all three gongs, you scored points for subsequent hits with 3 points for hitting the furthest gong and 1 point for the closest gong. You had 3 minutes to compete, probably 12 shots total if you were skilled at reloading.

The remaining contests might be in croquet, nine pins, or archery. It was often surprising that the colonial men were more adept at archery than the visiting Indians, the Indians losing their skills with bow and arrow as muskets replaced them in their culture. As each contestant was required to provide a prize to enter the competition, the highest scorer at the end of the

day got first choice among the prizes, and the 20th man got the last remaining prize. Having your donated prize selected first could be as much of an honor as winning the competition. A rich neighbor might donate an expensive pocket watch, but an oak bucket that didn't leak, created and donated by one of less means with the most skill in the area for woodworking, might be more prized than the watch.

Such an event might seem more recreational for the men perhaps, but it was a welcome change of pace for the ladies as well with a chance to exchange news among them, learn new cooking and medicinal skills, and compare housekeeping techniques. You'd better believe that when it came time to listen to the compliments on the best onion pie, the spiciest ale, or the cutest quilts, the competition was just as fierce, if not more so, than that of the men.

A typical menu for the day for a group of 45 might include 20 pounds of roast beef, 20 pounds of roast ham, 23 pounds of roast turkey, and 14 pounds of fish – almost 2 pounds of meat per person! And we think eating a quarter-pounder at McDonalds is a lot! In addition to a variety of pies, vegetables, potatoes, rice, breads, and jellies, the menu would likely include 13 gallons of fine ale, 4 gallons of rum punch, and cider – a good half gallon of drink per person. Rather than a sit-down meal, as each item was finished cooking during the day, they ate it. The men were usually very involved in the process other than just eating – cutting the firewood, managing the fires, and preparing their own specialty dish such as a partridge pie.

But how might the ladies enjoy a common social event more exclusively of their own?

(Tea Time)

Popular among the gentry of the time and soon copied by those other ladies that wanted to enhance their social standing, as soon as they might afford their own tea set, was hosting a tea time, a real sign of your family's affluence. In Boston, there was quite a ritual attached to the practice. All of the proper accoutrements were of course necessary – a proper table, teapot, slop bowl, milk or cream pitcher, sugar container, teaspoons, cups, saucers, and a tea canister. While some might store the tea set in a cupboard, many homes displayed the tea set on the tea table which was placed against the

wall when not in use and pulled to the middle of the room when it was tea time.

The cups and saucers were not stacked but spread upon the table, from where they were filled and passed. There was general agreement that when set upon a circular table, the cups were arranged upon their saucers in a circle around the pot. On a rectangular table, they were placed in rows. The pot occupied the position of honor in the center, with the slop bowl on one side and the sugar container and milk jug on the other.

The practice of pouring one's tea from the cup into the saucer to drink it, supposedly to cool it down, is a popular movie and TV reenactment, but may have never been practiced at all. The notion might have come from writings noting drinking the tea from a dish, which some have interpreted to mean the saucer, when the term "dish" at the time was meant to convey the "cup."

Making the tea was a ceremony reserved by the hostess until the guests arrived. With a good kettle of boiling water at hand, the tea was measured out from the canister and into the pot. The lid of many canisters could serve as a measure. Otherwise, a dainty spoon was used to scoop tea from the caddy. With the tea leaves placed in the pot, boiling water was poured into it. Cups were then poured for each person and milked and sweetened to taste. In some parts of the country, they never put sugar into the cup, but took a small bit of it into their mouths while they drank.

In some social circles, it was inexcusable for the hostess to leave an empty cup unfilled. It was similarly ill-bred to refuse a cup of tea when offered. One foreign visitor to the home of Robert Morris wrote that, "I partook of most excellent tea and I should be even now drinking it, I believe, if the [French] Ambassador had not charitably notified me at the twelfth cup, that I must put my spoon across it when I wished to finish with this sort of warm water..." Another signal, was to turn the cup upside down in the saucer when finished. Another foreign visitor after numerous refills and unfamiliar with the customs is reported to have hidden his cup in his pocket until everyone else finished.

(Fan Language) [Use a fan during this part if one is available.]

Let me finish by relating to you, if you have not heard of it before, that hand fans were of course popular and fashionable during the time among men and women. A scented fan was indispensable in a crowded room that included some that might not have bathed in several months. It served to hide a mouth of bad teeth or an ugly smallpox scar. You could also use it for “text messaging.”

Not having an iPod or other device at the time to send simple messages to potential beaux at a social event, and perhaps not permitted to openly converse with someone with whom you might be smitten because of family feuds, there was a fan language available to the young men and women with which to communicate. Let me relate one version of “fanology” or the language of fans that was published in England in early 1797.

In a crowded room, a young man might catch a young lady’s eye and use a closed fan touching the right eye to mean, “When may I see you?”

The young lady standing behind her stern looking father might respond with a fan held in the right hand in front of her face to mean, “Follow me.”

A second young man might present a shut fan to ask the lady of his interest, “Do you love me?”

If she rested her fan on the right cheek, her answer was, “Yes.”

Let me close these tidbits of social activity from the period of the Revolutionary War, with one last fanology code, which I always reserve for my DAR audiences – (place the fan near the heart), “You have won my love.”

Thank you.