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Amusements in Colonial Times

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AMUSEMENTS IN COLONIAL TIMES.

MILDRED WAYNE HARVEY.

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Amusements in Colonial Times.

No true American has any feeling other than pride in looking back to the time when the American colonies of England declared themselves free and independent. Although more than a century ago, it seems but yesterday, so realistic are the great events and minor incidents of that stirring period. The time when these "free and independent" states were dependent colonies is scarcely less interesting, especially as regards the customs and habits of the people, and society in general. It was a period when men and women exerted themselves to be attractive and charming, and many and varied were their amusements. This feature of social life was not so marked in early colonial times, for in New England the people were under Puritanic restraint and the middle and southern colonies had not yet reached that prosperity which they afterwards attained.

The New England laws were strict and rigid, and together with the Puritanic principles made the people stiff mannered and solemn, and few indeed were their pleasures and diversions. Their chief entertainment was the mid-week meeting or

"lecture day" as it was called; this meeting took place on Thursday of each week and was attended by everyone: men, women and children. Lectures and sermons were delivered all day with only an interval for dinner. At the present time most people would feel quite uncomfortable after sitting for an hour and a half listening to a sermon, especially if it were of less than ordinary interest; probably the prospect of a four hours' talk would frighten them away altogether. After this restraint of Puritanism wore off, the people of New England became gayer and began to pay more attention to social life.

The south eastern portion of Rhode Island, called Narragansett, was perhaps the gayest part of New England; in fact its people and their manners suggested the South. They had their great farms, which, peopled by large numbers of slaves, seemed almost like the southern plantations. Then, too, they were fond of outdoor sports and pastimes. It was here that the Narragansett pacers, famous as saddle horses in Europe and America, originated. Much time was given to amusements, and the husking and quilting parties and apple parings were eagerly attended by everyone. Later in colonial times, dancing was the favorite amusement in Boston and Newport.

In Pennsylvania and New York religious principles did not prevent the colonists from enjoying themselves, for although the Quakers in Pennsylvania were sedate and even prim in some cases, they were not proof against a good time, and added greatly to the social life. It is said that the Quaker maidens of Philadelphia were among the greatest attractions of that city. They were noted for their quick wit, brilliancy and charm of manner.

People in Philadelphia had various ways of passing time pleasantly. Dancing was a favorite diversion; polite society danced formal minuets; the common people, hipposaws and jigs. It is supposed that a Mr. Bolton was the first dancing-master about 1730. When Whitfield was in Philadelphia the religious excitement was so great that the "dancing-school assembly and the concert room were shut up as inconsistent with the gospel." Later, dancing was very popular among the better class of society, from which the families of mechanics, however wealthy, were excluded. No gentleman under twenty-one or lady under eighteen could subscribe to the dancing-class. Their refreshments were very simple, consisting of tea, chocolate and rusk. Everything was conducted by rule, partners

were engaged for the evening, and the gentlemen always drank tea with them the day after the assembly. The names of some of the later dances are very suggestive of the times: A Successful Campaign, Burgoyne's Defeat and Clinton's Retreat. "The dance 'A Successful Campaign' was the one selected by diplomatic Peggy Champlin to open the ball, when she danced in Newport with General Washington to the piping of De Rochambeau and his fellow officers."

Fox hunting formed the favorite field exercise and was enjoyed by both ladies and gentlemen. Horse racing was early introduced, but for a long time trotting-horses were looked down upon, pacers only being used. Besides fox-hunting and horse-racing, the Philadelphians indulged to some considerable extent in bull-baiting and cock-fighting. In the year 1724 slack rope and tight rope dancing by men and women was announced in the "Gazette." There was also a place near Vine St. where they kept "flying horses and coaches". The women sat in boxes, the men on wooden horses, and in this way they were whirled about. This must have been very similar to our modern merry-go-round. It was regarded with horror by some of the people and enjoyed by as many more.

Favorite amusements among the gentlemen were shooting and fishing. Wild pigeons, reed-birds, black birds and squir-

rels abounded. As late as 1720 an act was passed imposing a fine of five shillings for shooting birds in the streets, gardens or orchards of Philadelphia. This act had especial reference to partridges, quail and doves.

The fishing parties of the young people must have been delightful. Sixteen ladies and as many gentlemen formed a so-called "Fishing Company" which met fortnightly in a pleasant room on the banks of the Schuylkill. They had plenty of boats and fishing-tackle, and their chief amusements were walking, fishing, boat riding up and down the river, dancing and singing. The ladies wore a neat uniform which made them appear very graceful. This "Fishing Company" comprised some of the most distinguished people of the colony; a stranger was considered a most fortunate person if he were admitted to it, for it was a certain way of mingling with the best element.

Skating was one of the favorite winter amusements. Graydon in his memoirs considers his countrymen the most expert and graceful skaters, also the best swimmers in the civilized world. The fashionable skating-dress for gentlemen was a red coat and buckskin tights.

Maydays were formerly celebrated much more than now. All young people went into the woods, gathered flowers and cut maypoles unhindered. Christmas was always observed. Sliding down hill on snow and playing marbles in the streets furnished amusements for the boys.

School boys then were just as mischievous as they are today. At the Friends' School on South 4th St. they were very gravely disciplined. When Robert Proud was historian there he wore a very large bush wig. On one occasion the boys bored a hole through the ceiling, let down a bent pin attached to a string, caught it in his wig and drew it up, leaving it hanging from the ceiling. Another time they marched along to meeting behind their unsuspecting master, with wooden guns and little flags attached. The master in his dignity never once looked around, but supposed that his boys were following meekly. The "Uptown" and "Downtown" boys were rival clans, and were accustomed to have their nightly battles, and on Saturday an extra severe one by way of celebration.

In New York one of the most popular amusements was the "Kermis", a kind of fair which was first held on the spot that the governor used as a parade ground, directly north of

the government enclosure, on one side of which was the church and on the other the official buildings. This spot was called "D'Marck Velt". At this Kermis cattle were exhibited, farm implements sold, and things woven and made by the housewife were exposed for sale. Dances, trials of skill and other amusements were indulged in by the young people. The Kermis was the great social festival of the year. The meeting-place was later removed to the common which is now the city hall park, and finally it was leased from the city authorities, sodded over and used for a bowling-green.

Backgammon, chess, dominoes, checkers and golf were favorite games, and were often played to excess with much gambling. In 1860 some sailors were arrested at Jan Backus' tavern for playing backgammon after it should have been closed for the night. People were often arrested for playing golf in the street, and an ordinance was passed in December 1859, to prevent a recurrence of the offence. Cards were sometimes played, but whist was not introduced till nearly a century after the colonisation of America.

The principal amusements in summer were boating-parties, fishing and turtle feasts, while in winter the people enjoyed balls and sleighing parties. When a gentleman and lady rode

together, they nearly always went by way of the "Kissing bridge" where it was the custom for the gentleman to salute his companion. Sleighing was very popular in New York, but some evidently did not approve of it. We have an amusing account of the sleigh ride which Mr. Houston of Houston St., gave his two daughters who had for a long time been teasing him to take them sleighing. He told them to wrap up warmly and ordered some mulled wine prepared for them on their return. He asked them to step up stairs for a moment when they were ready, and upon reaching the attic chamber he made them sit down in two old arm chairs; he opened all the windows and then urged on an imaginary horse until the young ladies were extremely cold. Finally when he thought they had enjoyed their sleigh ride sufficiently, he allowed them to go down stairs, where they were very glad to drink their mulled wine. They did not tease their father for any more sleighing-parties.

After the English gained control of New York, fox hunting became very popular. In the autumn the people were allowed three days for this sport in Flatbush; nowhere else was it permitted. Cock-fighting and bull-baiting were also countenanced among the New Yorkers, the latter being especially

popular in Brooklyn among the British officers during the Revolution. Horse racing was much enjoyed about New York, and took place as early as 1665 at Hempstead. The first real course was at Salisbury Plains. The course at Jamaica Plains Long Island, was naturally level and well adapted for a racing-track because it was so smooth. The holidays most observed were New Year's day and Mayday. On New Year's there was much calling and giving of presents, and the day was often spent in Beckman's swamp in the shooting of wild turkeys. Mayday was celebrated by visiting, firing of guns and rearing maypoles. November 5th was also celebrated, in memory of the gunpowder plot in England in 1605. Every minister was expected to preach a sermon on that day.

In the southern colonies life was especially gay, and of all the colonies in Dixie land, Virginia was the gayest. The great plantations afforded abundant means for entertainment. The better class, light-hearted, clever and hospitable, sought enjoyment as their chief aim; and with great numbers of slaves to do all the labor, it was possible for them to spend most of their time in quest of pleasure.

Fox-hunting and horse-racing as in the North were the favorite outdoor amusements, while card parties and dancing

prevailed within doors. Washington was very fond of horses; he always took part in the fox hunts till he was injured by a fall. He liked dancing almost as well as he did fox-hunting and at one ball he danced nearly three hours with Mrs. Greene without once sitting. It is said that when on campaigns he missed the balls and parties more than anything else.

The ladies of the South were gifted in many ways but they were so much out-of-doors that they did not have time to cultivate feminine accomplishments. A writer of that period says that the southern ladies "might make very good musicians if the hounds would only stop baying long enough for them to practice."

The fact should be especially impressive that in spite of all the hardships which they were obliged to endure, the colonists thoroughly enjoyed their simple amusements, and by them were cheered and strengthened for the gloomy and evil days which were to follow.

In our own time and country all harmless recreation should be encouraged, for the American people especially need the diverting and recuperative influences which wholesome amusement alone can exert.