

DAILY LIFE

1630-1763

Colonial Courtship

The concept of dating among teenagers was nonexistent in colonial times. Young people were considered either children or adults, and as important as marriage was in the colonies, sweethearts were older than one might suspect. The practices of courtship and marriage varied among the different communities.

▼ FRONTIER OR BACKCOUNTRY PEOPLE

Andrew Jackson, depicted with his wife in the painting below, “stole” his wife (she was willing) from her family. Jackson was following a custom of the backcountry people, who lived along the western edge of the colonies.

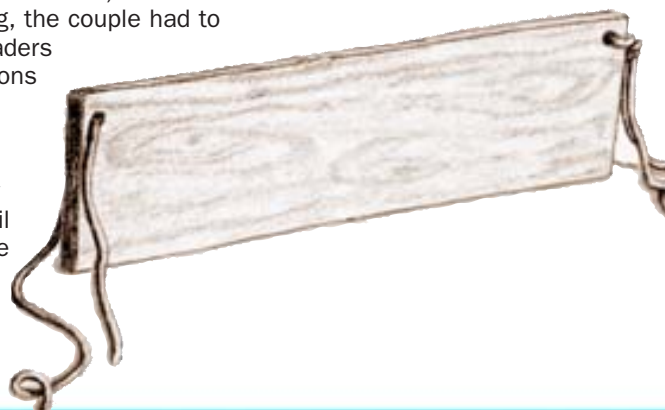
These colonists, mostly Scots-Irish, based their marriages on the old custom of “abduction”—stealing the bride—often with her consent. Even regular marriages began with the groom and his friends coming to “steal” the bride. Much drinking and dancing accompanied these wild and hilarious weddings.

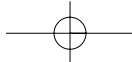


PURITANS

For Puritans, marriage was a civil contract, not a religious or sacred union. Although adults strictly supervised a couple’s courting, parents allowed two unusual practices. One was the use of a courting stick, a long tube into which the couple could whisper while the family was in another room. The other was the practice of “bundling”: a young man spent the night in the same bed as his sweetheart, with a large bundling board (shown below) between them.

Before marrying, the couple had to allow for Puritan leaders to voice any objections to the marriage at the meeting house. Passing that, the couple would marry in a very simple civil ceremony and share a quiet dinner.





THE SOUTH ▲

Many African slaves married in a “jumping the broomstick” ceremony, in which the bride and groom jumped over a broomstick to seal their union. Although there is disagreement among African-American scholars, some suggest that the above painting depicts a slave wedding on a South Carolina plantation in the late 1700s.



◀ QUAKERS

Quaker couples intent on marrying needed the consent not only of the parents but also of the whole Quaker community. Quakers who wanted to marry had to go through a 16-step courtship phase before they could wed. Quaker women, however, were known to reject men at the last minute.

VIRGINIA ►

In Virginia, marriage was a sacred union. Since the marriage often involved a union of properties, and love was not necessary, parents were heavily involved in the negotiations. In this illustration from a dance manual (right), a young upper-class couple work to improve their social graces by practicing an elaborate dance step.



D A T A

F I L E

WHO MARRIED?

Puritans:

- 98% of males and 94% of females married
- Grooms were usually a few years older than brides
- Discouraged marriages between first cousins

Virginians:

- 25% of males never married; most females married
- Grooms nearly 10 years older than brides
- Allowed first-cousin marriages

Quakers:

- 16% of women single at age 50
- forbade first-cousin marriages

Frontier People:

- Almost all women and most men married
- Ages of bride and groom about the same
- Youngest group to marry

Average Age at Marriage

Group	Males	Females
Puritan	26	23
Virginians	26	19
Quakers		
in Delaware	31	29
in Penn. & N.J.	26	22
Philadelphians	26	23
Frontier People	21	19
Modern Americans	25	24

Who Could Divorce?

Puritans:	Yes
Virginians:	No
Quakers:	No

Source: David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed*

THINKING CRITICALLY

CONNECT TO HISTORY

1. Interpreting Data What was a common characteristic of courtship among Puritans, Quakers, and Virginians?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R22.

CONNECT TO TODAY

2. Synthesizing Research modern courtship practices by interviewing your parents or relatives. Write a brief paper comparing and contrasting modern-day and colonial courtship practices.



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