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Daily Life in the Colonies: Housekeeping, Children, and Sex

"MY BASON OF WATER FROZE ON THE HEARTH"

If the Salem witch-craft "victims" were faking their attacks, they had the advantage of performing under the cover of half-darkness. Almost everything that the colonists did indoors occurred in dim light, or flickering shadows. The houses in which the women spent so much of their lives were generally extremely primitive—settlers in parts of Pennsylvania actually lived in caves. There was little in the way of windows, and for a long time there was no window glass; the colonists covered whatever small openings they made in the walls with oiled paper. Candles were expensive, and even at the beginning of the nineteenth century, most houses had only one or two candlesticks. What light there was generally came from the fireplace, although in some parts of the country splinters of pine were used as minitorches. Whatever the source of illumination, it was hard on the eyes. People who read by candle sometimes singed their books while trying to get the page close enough to the light. During the day, women who wanted to sew worked next to the window—an uncomfortable location in the winter.

During winter in the northern colonies, people must have felt cold all the time. Even the fireplace was limited help in a drafty, uninsulated

house. To take advantage of the heat, you had to stand so close as to risk incineration. Harriet Beecher Stowe described a New England housewife "Standing with her back so near the blaze as to be uncomfortably warm" while her dishtowel was "freezing in her hand." Anna Green Winslow, a Revolutionary War–era schoolgirl, gave thanks in her diary for living in a warm house, then added that "my bason of water froze on the hearth with as good a fire as we could make in the chimney."

The fireplaces were huge—big enough to walk around in, and the scene of perpetual hazard. Children fell into the flames, and embers rolled out and burned down houses. What little furniture the houses had was not designed for comfort. Feather beds, the closest thing the colonists had to luxury, looked more appealing than they felt. They were dreadfully uncomfortable in hot weather and so high that people needed bed steps to get on top. "Night and morning were made fearful to me by the prospect of having to climb up and down," a Massachusetts woman recalled. Unless she managed to land right in the middle, she added, "I passed my night in rolling down hill, or in vain efforts to scramble up to the top, to avoid falling out on the floor."

Women could live out their entire lives without ever feeling back support. The churches, where they spent hours listening to sermons, offered only benches. At home they sat on stools. There was at most only one real chair in the average seventeenth-century American home, and it was reserved for the head of the household; hence, the word *chairman*. (When the elders of Boston started bearing down on Anne Hutchinson, one of the things they noted with alarm was that in meetings with both male and female followers, she was the one who got the best seat.) Indoors was a spare and grim place, but the average female settler wanted very much to be there. Recruiting pamphlets always made it a point to claim that women in the American colonies spent all their time at housework. In reality, few of the early farmers could afford to pass up the chance to use their wives as field hands. But it was what the Englishwoman wanted to hear; her goal was not to work side by side with her spouse, but to be in charge of her own domestic establishment.

Women didn't shun outdoor labor because they feared the work. Their domestic duties were actually harder, with no downtime and less variety. Field tasks changed with the seasons—once the planting was done, the farmer knew he would never have to look at another seed for eleven months. The homemaker was trapped in an endless cycle of cooking, cleaning up, and then getting ready for the next meal. "This day is forty years since I left my father's house and come here, and here have I seene littel els but harde labour and sorrow," wrote Mary Cooper, a housewife who lived on a farm in Long Island in the years before the Revolutionary War. Of all the American women who wrote diaries in the eighteenth century, Mary is unique in that she constantly complained. Colonists were a stoic lot, experts at repressing emotion or throwing all their woes into the lap of a hopefully benevolent Deity. But Mary didn't withhold. "O I am tired almost to death," was one of her favorite refrains.

In the seventeenth century, even wealthy colonial women worked like demons. In the frontier towns, the wives of the leading citizens were responsible for sheltering the rest of the community when Indians threatened. The visitors were called "garrison crowds," and they sometimes stayed long past their natural welcome. Elizabeth Saltonstall of Haverill, Massachusetts, entertained sixty guests for months on end during the Indian alerts of 1694. One of her sons, writing to a sister from his college, reported gingerly that their family in Haverill was "all Well in health, but much thronged with Children and Lice; which discourages our taking a Journey thither."

"FOR SHE HAS BEEN AND IS A GOOD WIFE TO ME"

The house was the one place where a colonial housewife could be in charge, the chief executive and artisan of a little factory producing the items the family needed to survive. Elizabeth Buffum Chace said that besides the ordinary housework and the care of fourteen children, her colonial great-grandmother engaged in "candle making, soap making, butter and cheese making, spinning, weaving, dyeing and of course all the knitting and sewing and dressmaking and tailoring and probably

the shoe making and the millinery of this large household." The most time-consuming chore was the making of cloth, and it was also one of the most critical. Early on, fabric was in such short supply in America that there are records of court suits fought over a missing handkerchief or a hole burned in a blanket. The colonists regarded the production of new cloth as crucial to their survival, and in 1656, the New England General Court ordered "all hands not necessarily employed on other occasions, as women, Girles and Boyes" be required to spin three pounds of thread a week for at least thirty weeks a year. This was basically a tax on women, who must have felt the officials had their nerve in presuming they were not "employed."

Colonial clothes were made from wool or flax. Turning the flax into linen thread was an excruciating process in which the stalks were dried, combed, softened, cleaned, dried again, then "broken" to separate the fibers, pounded, cleaned, and pounded again. The little mass of fiber that emerged from all this was spun into thread on a small wheel with a hand pedal. The thread then had to be treated with repeated washing, rinsing, bleaching, and beating before it was ready for the loom. With wool, the women used a much larger wheel and stood to do the work. They performed a sort of graceful dance, gliding backward to draw out the newly spun yarn, then coming forward to let it wind onto the spindle. In a full day of spinning, a woman could walk over twenty miles.

Spinning was one of the jobs housewives most eagerly foisted off on their daughters or servants. Cooking was another duty they found particularly burdensome—it was both repetitive and difficult to do well because the temperature of the fire could not be controlled. (Roasting was occasionally facilitated by "turnspit dogs" who ran on a revolving cylinder that kept the meat turning over the fire, but that novelty appeared mainly at commercial inns.) Women might have found their seasonal duties more interesting. In the autumn, they made apple butter and cider. When the pigs were butchered, they cleaned the intestines for sausage casing and stuffed them with meat scraps and herbs. They collected the fat to mix with lye for soap making—a long and arduous process that probably never ranked high on anyone's list

of favorite chores. The grease and lye were boiled together, outdoors, in a huge pot over an open fire. It took about six bushels of ashes and 24 pounds of grease to make one barrel of soap, which was soft, like clear jelly.

In the cold weather, the women made candles and brewed beer. In the spring, they planted their kitchen gardens. Martha Ballard, a Maine midwife, grew beans, cabbage, lettuce, parsnips, carrots, turnips, beets, cucumbers, radishes, onions, garlic, peppers, squash, peas, muskmelon, watermelon, pumpkins, and a variety of herbs both for cooking and medicinal purposes. Cheese making started in early summer. The dairywoman slowly heated several gallons of milk with rennet—the dried lining of an animal's stomach. In an hour or two, the curd formed and she worked in some butter, packed the mixture into a mold, and put it in a wooden press for an hour or so, changing and washing the cheesecloths as the whey dripped out. A housewife who could make good clean butter and cheese was a real boon to her family, creating a product that was not only valuable at home but in the marketplace. To be a good dairywoman was a fine art and hard work. Turning milk into butter required an hour or so at the churn followed by kneading and pressing with the hands or wooden paddles.

Obviously most women weren't able to do all the housewifely tasks well. Someone who was good at cheese making might trade her wheels of cheese for cloth or meat or candles. A midwife or dressmaker might be paid for her services with a brace of geese or tub of sweet butter. Martha Ballard, who worked as a midwife in the late eighteenth century, was still collecting payment for her services in coffee, candles, unwashed wool, and even shingles. (Mrs. Ballard's midwife business was no minor sideline. During one three-week period in August, while supervising her large and active household, she recorded four deliveries, one false alarm, sixteen medical calls, and preparing three bodies for burial.) The community of women was both an informal barter economy and a network of mutual assistance. Women dropped in on one another freely, picking up some household duty like shelling peas as they sat and gossiped or consulted with one another about recent events. A Maine author remembered seeing a

woman going to visit a neighbor on baking day, carrying her dough along with her. Daughters were regularly "lent out" by their mothers to help a neighbor with the spinning or harvest or nursing. "The women in families took care of their own sick by day and depended on their neighbors for watchers at night," wrote Elizabeth Buffum Chace. "I began to go out 'watching' when I was fourteen years old. We girls often went, two of us together, on such service. We had a good supper spread for us to eat in the night, and very sick patients were often left to our unskilled care."

Colonial women reached the height of their powers in middle age, when they were no longer burdened by continual pregnancy and had daughters old enough to help with the domestic enterprises. (The birth of a daughter was not unwelcome in most colonial families. The parents needed sons to help in the fields, but they also wanted girls to assist their mothers inside.) Although a prosperous matron had absolutely no voice in the public arena, she was expected to take a leading part in the parallel universe that was the world of women. Older women were the advisers, counselors, and judges of the younger. Male officials seemed to acknowledge their status. In 1664, Elizabeth Perkins and Agnes Ewens of Topsfield were summoned to court to testify in a case involving a young woman they both knew. The goodwives successfully invoked a kind of professional immunity. They had spoken to the woman, they said, as counselors, and because she had lived properly since their intervention, they preferred not to break her confidence.

A competent housewife also earned the respect of her husband, who could see firsthand the value of her labors. The farmer who slaughtered a pig needed his wife to make the sausages, process the bacon, and preserve the pork. As he sat by the fireside at night, mending his fishing net or fixing his tools, he could watch her turning the flax he had harvested and the wool he had sheared into the family's clothes. The candle that lit their way to bed came from her hand, as did the vegetables, eggs, cheese, and chickens they ate and the beer or cider they drank. They were very much partners in the family business, and if the man was at all sensible he understood how critical his

wife was to their mutual success. When Ensign Hewlett, a seventeenth century Ipswich man, needed cash for a new enterprise, he borrowed from his wife, a successful poultrywoman. A friend wondered why Hewlett didn't just claim the money as his own, but the husband replied: "I meddle not with the geese nor the turkeys for they are her For she has been and is a good wife to me."

"WOMEN CHOOSE RATHER TO HAVE A THING DONE WELL THAN HAVE IT OFTEN"

Cotton Mather urged Puritan women to take as their model Herpine who in her eagerness to serve her ailing husband "bore him on he Back, a thousand and three Hundred English Miles to Bath." It's a interesting image, which endows the wife with a combination of ter rific power and terrific deference. But if court records are any indica tion, New England women were much less submissive to the man o the house than Mather wanted. A third of the accused spouse-beater were women, and there are plenty of cases in which the goodwif seemed to be getting the best of her husband when their dispute wa hauled off to court. Still, in several critical areas, a married woma was virtually powerless. All her property was under her husband' control, and he had complete legal sway over the children. His charac ter determined how far she could rise in life. A hardworking woma could pull up a less-than-ambitious spouse, but she could not triumph over a dissolute one. Divorce was rarely an option—New Englanc courts sometimes allowed a couple to separate, but they hardly eve dissolved a union. Unhappy southern wives could at least hope fo early widowhood, but those in the North were yoked for what would probably be a long life. New Englanders who survived childhood could expect to live to their sixties, and a quarter made it into their eighties. If childbirth didn't kill you, you could wind up a very old woman, still married to your original husband.

Husbands' obligations to their wives included being affectionate, a good provider, and a good example. (The male colonists tended to regard women as frail creatures who were likely to stray from the path

of godliness unless wiser, stronger males continually herded them in the right direction.) The Puritans disapproved of wife beating, and in early New England towns, families lived so close to each other that the howls of an abused spouse would bring a delegation of concerned church members to the door. But a man who was indifferent to his neighbors' bad opinion could discipline his wife as harshly as he liked without risking serious punishment. Daniel Ela, who defended himself in a wife-beating case by arguing that she was "his servant and his slave," was not prosecuted further. One man who had beaten his wife, kicked her, hit her on the head, and threatened to slit her throat and burn her was sentenced to be lashed but was granted a reprieve when he promised to reform.

In New England, it was against the law for a couple to have sex before they were married. (Cynics might argue it was against the law to do practically anything.) If a first child arrived before a marriage was nine months old, the couple could be hauled into court and charged with fornication and punished with nine lashes "upon the Naked back" or a steep fine. But as time went on, fewer and fewer women saved themselves for their wedding night. In Bristol, Rhode Island, none of the couples that married at the end of the seventeenth century had a child less than nine months after the ceremony. But between 1720 and 1740, 10 percent had babies whose early arrival gave evidence of premarital intercourse, and by 1760 to 1780, it was 44 percent. In other parts of the country, premarital sex was taken for granted. A visitor to New York in 1695 reported that "commonly, enjoyment precedes the marriage, to which they seldom come till a great belly puts it so forward, that they must either submit to that, or to shame and disgrace."

Adultery was a more serious matter. The Puritans defined adultery as sex between a married woman and any man other than her husband. (A married man who strayed was only guilty of fornication.) Adultery was theoretically a capital offense, although like most of the early colonists' capital offenses, it generally carried a less drastic punishment. Still, at least three married women in New England were hanged for sleeping around. The most notorious, Mary Latham of

Boston, had married an older man and then took a dislike to him, "setting a knife to his breast and threatening to kill him, calling him old rogue and cuckold." She admitted committing adultery with twelve different men.

Women were expected to enjoy sex—indeed, the colonists felt it was critical. Most people believed conception could occur only if a woman reached orgasm. New Haven justices dismissed a young woman's claim that she had been impregnated while in "a fit of swooning" by arguing that "no woman can be gotten with child without some knowledge, consent & delight in the acting thereof." Men who read books about sex, like the popular *Aristotle's Master Piece,* got tips on how to arouse their sexual partners. ("Women choose rather to have a thing done well than have it often.") Colonial women were seen as flawed, but not particularly fragile creatures. One of their great failings, in fact, was believed to be their lustiness.

Many couples believed that when they made love, the man and the woman each emitted a "seed" and that conception occurred when the two seeds mixed. Others thought that a woman's womb contained seven sacs, three on each side and one in the center. The ones on the right produced boys, the ones on the left girls, and the one in the center, hermaphrodites. After sex, a woman was advised to lie on her right or left side, depending on which sex baby she hoped to bear. The colonists were more romantic than history gives them credit for, but having sex too often, they believed, "gluts the Womb and renders it unfit for its office."

"THIS MIGHT POSSIBLY BE THE LAST TRIAL OF THIS SORT"

Childbearing dominated the lives of early female settlers. The average woman in New England married before her twentieth birthday and gave birth to about seven children. She nursed each baby for twelve to eighteen months. Nursing, which suppresses ovulation, served as a rough form of birth control. Elizabeth Drinker, a Philadelphia Quaker whose thirty-eight-year-old daughter had just given birth, wrote

expressing her hope that "this might possibly be the last trial of this sort, if she could suckle her baby for 2 years to come."

In the malaria-ridden early South, a multitude of pregnancies produced a tragically small number of adults—half the children born in the Chesapeake area died before reaching adulthood. In New England, however, the fatality rate was much lower and people had very large families. Ten or more children were not at all uncommon. Benjamin Franklin was one of seventeen children. Sir William Phipps was said to be one of twenty-six, all from the same mother. In the eighteenth century, when colonists had learned how to survive the climate, the size of southern families boomed—a visitor to Charlestown reported that most of the households there had ten or twelve children. Southern women became obsessed with having babies, to the point where some announced their pregnancies in the newspaper. They also frequently took advantage of a happy superstition that held mothers-to-be would miscarry if they were denied anything they yearned for.

Childbirth was a communal affair, the great moment for the gathering of neighborhood women while their men waited on the other side of the door, passive outsiders. The early stages of labor were partylike, as was the celebration at the end of a successful delivery. Samuel Sewall of Boston recorded that after his wife gave birth to their twelfth child, he found the women who had helped her dining on "rost Beef and minc'd Pyes, good Cheese and Tarts." When she began to deliver, the mother-to-be might squat over a low open-seated stool or sit in another woman's lap. If there was a lactating woman in the group—and there almost always was—she nursed the baby first because a new mother's milk was believed to be impure. During very difficult childbirths, the woman in labor was urged to drink another woman's milk. When the crisis was over, there were generally bawdy jokes about the umbilical cord. (A long one for a boy meant he would grow a sizable member. A girl's was supposed to be cut short or she would become immodest.) Eventually, the husband was allowed to reenter the room, and the world of women gave way to the patriarchal family.

Midwives were a critical resource in colonial communities—the normally apolitical matrons of Boston went on a virtual strike when their favorite midwife came under attack by the church elders. Several New England towns provided a rent-free house for their midwife and in New Amsterdam, midwives were actually public servants who received rather large salaries. The support of the midwife and female neighbors during delivery was the emotional center of women's community, but it was also a matter of life and death. About a fifth of the pregnant women in New England died giving birth, and the figures were much higher in the South. Cotton Mather, ever one to look on the bright side, advised pregnant women that "PREPARATION FOR DEATH is that most Reasonable and Seasonable thing, to which you must now apply yourself." Wealthy women had special sets of childbed linens, which they put on their beds after delivery was completed. If tragedy occurred, the linens became the woman's shroud. In an era in which masculine bravery was celebrated, it was the women who actually dared to stare down death on a regular basis.

Since they were almost always either pregnant or nursing an infant, colonial women spent their lives in a continual balancing act, in which the dangers of overexertion had to be weighed against the simple necessity of getting through the day. The 40-pound pots had to be lifted on and off the fire, no matter what the mother's condition. Colonial-era Americans harbored many theories about the delicacy of expectant mothers, and the danger to the fetus if she should be surprised or confronted with an unpleasant object. (A woman who saw a deformed beggar in the street, they believed, might give birth to a deformed baby.) However, these were yet another series of rules that could be suspended whenever necessary. If a wife's services were needed in an area that was replete with alarming surprises—say, working in the fields of a frontier farm while under threat of Indian attack—she was expected to do her job, pregnancy or no.

Women traveled while they were pregnant, but once a baby was born, they tended to stay close to home while nursing. Some women took "weaning trips" when the baby was in its first year to make the withdrawal of the maternal breast easier—on the mother, at least. In a

crisis, a friend might provide "courtesy nursing" to a mother in need of help. Sometimes her own mother could do the favor. In a culture in which women began to have children very young, and continued until rather late in life, it wasn't at all unusual for mother and daughter to be pregnant at the same time. Given the amount of suckling that went on, there was obviously a lot of concern about how to treat sore breasts. One popular physician recommended a poultice: "take new Milk and grate white bread into it, then take Mallows and Red Rose Leaves, 1 handful of each then chop them small and boyl them together till it be thick, then put some honey and turpentine mix them, then spread it on a cloth and apply it."

"IF I ONLY KNIT MY BROW SHE WILL CRY"

All sorts of perils lay in wait for colonial children. Samuel Sewall, in his diary, constantly records accidents that befell youngsters in Boston—accidentally shot, dragged to death by a galloping horse, fallen through the ice while skating, scalded to death by boiling home-made beer. The Puritans regarded such incidents as a just God's punishment for the sins of the parents—Sewall felt that two of his young children died because he participated as a judge in the Salem witch trials. People seemed resigned, to some extent, that their offspring simply had to take their chances. Their greatest fear was infectious disease, which could sweep off entire families. In 1740, a virulent strain of diphtheria claimed as many as half the children in some New England towns.

Mothers didn't dote. They seemed to feel a generalized concern for the whole tribe of youngsters under their care (many of the servants were children themselves) rather than a concentrated devotion on a few individuals. In a large household community of children, servants, visiting friends, and relatives, the smaller children were often tended by people other than their mothers, and child care doesn't seem to have ranked as a true domestic duty. Women's advice books, which said a great deal about cooking and household management, hardly mentioned children. The diaries of colonial housewives, which are

mainly lists of chores and duties accomplished, do not generally refer to children except when one is being born or dying. Babies were called "it"—possibly because the parents wanted to make sure an infant had a good chance of survival before they began to bond.

If colonial parents followed the practices of Britain—as they did in most things—they bound their newborns, sometimes wrapping them against a board to straighten their backs. The tight binding tended to slow down the baby's metabolism, so that it cried less. Fanny Kemble, the British actress who spent a long unhappy period at her husband's American plantation in the nineteenth century, noted that the slaves had adopted a custom that had only recently been abandoned among white colonists and "pin up the lower part of their infants, bodies, legs, and all, in red flannel as soon as they are born and keep them in the selfsame envelope till it literally falls off."

New Englanders believed in early discipline. The Puritan minister John Robinson had famously advised that "there is in all children . . . a stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride, which must, in the first place, be broken and beaten down." Esther Burr, the wife of the president of Princeton, wrote to her best friend in 1754 that she had "begun to govourn Sally," her firstborn. "She has been Whip'd once . . . and she knows the differance between a Smile and a frown as well as I do. When She has done anything that She Suspects is wrong, will look with concern to See what Mamma says, and if I only knit my brow She will cry till I Smile." Sally was not yet ten months old.

The colonies lacked an orderly progression to maturity, with certain achievements earmarked for certain ages. It was not unknown for ten- and eleven-year-old boys to enter Harvard, or for near infants of two or three years of age to be bound out as indentured servants. A Madam Coleman wrote about her problems with her eight-year-old granddaughter Sally, who was sent from Barbados to live in Boston in 1719. The little girl arrived with her maid and, offended that her grandmother made her drink water with her meals, decamped on her own and moved into a boardinghouse. Her brother wrote demanding that Sally return to her grandmother's home. But Mrs. Coleman

reported that Sally had said that "her Brother has nothing to do with her as long as her father is alive," and sent word that she needed a new muff.

Girls who were neither wealthy nor indigent were still given what we would regard as extraordinary responsibilities. Susan Blunt recalled that when she was ten she was sent to keep house "for a week" for a man who left her in charge of his twin little girls and an elderly father. Her duties began at 5:00 A.M., when she toted water in from a distant well, then made everyone a breakfast of boiled potatoes, fried pork, and coffee. She tended the old man, baked biscuits and beans for dinner, cleaned and mended. As her reward, she received enough money to buy a new apron.

Girls generally didn't receive much schooling in the colonial period. "Female education in the best families went no farther than writing and arithmetic and in some few rare instances, music and dancing," wrote Abigail Adams, the wife of the second president. Few towns permitted girls to be educated past the "dames schools" which were closer to day care centers than actual institutions of learning. (There's a pathetic story about a little girl in western Massachusetts who sat outside the schoolhouse door every day, trying to learn what she could from listening to the boys recite their lessons.) The women who ran dames schools were the only female teachers in America during the pre-Revolutionary period and their pay reflected the community's estimate of the value of education imparted by a female. In Woburn, Massachusetts, in 1641, a respected local widow named Mrs. Walker established a school. Her salary for the first year, after deductions, was 1 shilling and 3 pence.

In the North, Puritan and Quaker families wanted their daughters to learn their letters well enough to read the Bible, if not necessarily to write. In the South, most women were totally illiterate in the seventeenth century. In Virginia, only one in three could sign her name, compared to three in five men. Wealthier young women were prepared for a good marriage, and too much learning was regarded as a defect in an attractive woman. Caroline Howard Gilman recalled that

when the family tutor proposed teaching her the same lessons as her brother, her father worried that "the girl would consider herself more learned than her father," and finally reluctantly agreed, saying: "Well, well, only do not spoil her eyes and shoulders."

"NOT HAVING BEEN WETT ALL OVER ATT ONCE, FOR 28 YEARS PAST"

Cleanliness was not high on the colonists' list of priorities. Virtually no one took baths—there were no bathrooms, and whatever bathing was done usually occurred from a basin, in the presence of other people. Most people simply scrubbed their faces with cold water. In 1798, Elizabeth Drinker, a highly respected sixty-five-year-old Quaker matron in Philadelphia, bathed in a shower box that her husband set up in the backyard of their house. "I bore it better than I expected, not having been wett all over att once, for 28 years past," she wrote in her diary. The baths in Elizabeth's life seem to have been infrequent enough to be recorded as milestones. The incident twenty-eight years before the momentous shower had taken place on the Delaware River, where she and her husband were spending seven weeks at what was the colonial equivalent of a spa. Elizabeth and some of her friends went to the baths, where she "found the shock much greater than expected." Although she returned the next day, she "had not courage to go in."

These baths would have been immersions in mineral water for the sake of health or sociability. The concept of giving oneself a good scrub seemed unknown. The soft soap that women made themselves was used for washing clothes, not people. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, innkeepers were still surprised when European travelers asked for a bar of soap with which to wash. If a woman's hair was dirty or greasy, she could conceal it under a linen cap, which was worn indoors and out. It was harder to hide the evidence of a lack of toothbrushes. Visitors remarked about the poor condition of colonial teeth. "The women are pitifully tooth-shaken, whether through the

coldness of the climate, or by sweet-meats, of which they have a score, I am not able to affirm," said a visitor.

One of the great mysteries of colonial women's lives is what they did about menstruation. They didn't wear underpants, and while later settlers may have used rags, the early colonials probably would have been reluctant to waste precious cloth. Neither their diaries nor the midwives' manuals say a word about what women used as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century versions of sanitary napkins. Talking about menstruation seems to have been the ultimate taboo—child molestation was written about more freely. In Northampton in the late seventeenth century, Hannah Clark and a friend were stopped on the street by one Oliver Warner, who asked them, "When will the moon change?" and hinted that he knew they were having their periods: "I believe you have circles round your Eyes—I believe it runs." Their minister, the famous Jonathan Edwards, decided this sort of behavior was the result of young men reading midwifery books for titillation and launched a campaign against the practice.

Given how often they were pregnant or nursing, colonial women did not spend nearly as much time in normal menstrual cycles as modern women. When they did have their periods, their scanty diets probably restricted the amount of bleeding. Perhaps poor women allowed the blood to flow and cleaned up as best they could. (Moreau de St. Mèry, a French traveler after the Revolutionary War, said that for servants, the only protection during menstruation "is a skirt of bunting which they wear next to the skin, and which they use until its old age forces them to take another.") But middle-class and wealthy women certainly used some kind of protection. Those living along the coast may have used sponges, and some colonial women may have emulated the Indians and used moss or grass or leaves. But chances are most created a sort of makeshift diaper out of linen homespun.

The colonists were not as sensitive to smells and the sight of dirt as modern Americans. The farmers' homes and yards were filled with offal, debris, and garbage. People were less likely to use an outhouse than to take to the bushes. Clothes were washed infrequently—many women did the laundry only once a month, and on the frontier, never.

Washing clothes was an arduous process that began very early in the morning, when water was carried in from the well, then heated to a boil over those troublesome fireplaces. The laundress scrubbed and pounded the clothes in the tubs, working up to her elbows in hot water, sometimes for hours on end. When she was done, she spread the clothes out to dry on bushes—clotheslines didn't seem to come along until later. A truly dedicated housewife might then iron her husband's shirts and her aprons. The irons had their own heaters, which had to be filled with coals from the fire. The laundress always used two, so clothes didn't dry out while she was reheating her iron.

Given the amount of effort laundering required, it's unlikely that many women actually washed their babies' diapers. Most simply left the wet napkin by the fire to dry, then put it back on. It was a practice Dr. William Dewees, an early-nineteenth-century expert on obstetric issues, was still thundering against. "It is much better that it be without a diaper from time to time than have those returned to it stiffened with salts and reeking with offensive odor," he wrote. The entire issue of colonial diapering practices doesn't bear close examination by those with delicate sensibilities. Some women actually regarded wet diapers as a wholesome device for hardening the baby's constitution—another "monstrous error" Dr. Dewees was still decrying in the 1800s. In some households, the family dog was encouraged to lick the baby clean. And many women solved the diaper issue by toilet training their babies very early—sometimes beginning within a few weeks of birth. To train an infant to have its bowel movements at regular times, the mother used the equivalent of a suppository, made of a quill covered with lubricated cloth.

People who lived in towns maintained a higher level of cleanliness than those in the country, but by modern standards they would have seemed pretty gamy. The fireplace, dirt roads, and summer flies brought far more filth into the house than housewives could possibly drive away. When a room seemed to need freshening, they simply sprinkled around a little vinegar. Animals were everywhere—dogs and cats walked freely through houses, churches, taverns, even courthouses. There was no system of garbage disposal, and housewives

generally threw things they were through with out the window. Chamber pots were often just dumped onto the street. (Lewis Miller, writing about York, Pennsylvania, in 1801, reported the unfortunate story of a woman on her way to a wedding whose silk dress was ruined when a man poured his chamber pot from an upper window.) Some of the historians who've studied the diaries of Mary Cooper, that Long Island farm wife who kept complaining about how exhausted she was, theorized that she was so fatigued because she was one of the few women of her era who actually attempted to keep things clean.

"STRANGERS ARE SOUGHT AFTER WITH GREEDINESS"

Unlike the women in the North, the white women of the South had little opportunity to create a community of their own. Things were too spread out—a whole county might contain only a couple thousand people. Southern hospitality was to a great extent the creation of a desperately lonely people. George Washington used to post a slave at the crossroads near his plantation to invite any passerby to dinner. "Strangers are sought after with Greediness," wrote an observer. A circuit judge in North Carolina in the Revolutionary War era stopped at the home of some well-to-do newlyweds who were living on the husband's farm, eighteen miles from the nearest neighbor. He wrote that when a male visitor told the young bride he would bring his own wife to visit her, she wept with gratitude. But a good hostess had no control over when the blessing of company would arrive, or for how long. Friends, family, and unknown passersby felt free to drop in by the wagonful without notice, and they expected to be fed and lodged when they arrived. Neighbors who came together for balls, weddings, or even dancing lessons often stayed on for several days.

Church was an important social event for southerners, who didn't take their religion quite as seriously as the colonists up north. Visitors were scandalized to see southern women joining the men as they

smoked after church. Inside during services, it was the general cus tom for the women and lower classes to take their seats on time, an for the wealthy men to arrive a half hour into the proceedings, th better to display their fine clothes. The less prosperous families i rural areas also came together for communal events like barn raising and husking frolics that might attract thirty to fifty people. Thes combinations of neighborly helpfulness and socializing were popula in the rural North, too. Women must have approached them wit mixed emotions. They were a chance to see neighbors, but they wer often alcohol fueled and violent. As time went on, farmers began t question whether their half-drunk neighbors were really doing a ver good job of husking the corn or building the house, and the traditio died out.

Southern women weren't expected to pursue the finer household crafts, like butter making or even spinning. They were needed in th fields, and back home they spent much of their time grinding corn—a pastime that made spinning look like a picnic. As they gained wealth the most prosperous families graduated their daughters directly into the world of fine needlepoint and dance lessons. Carving became a major domestic art, and some wealthy young women took training from a special carving master. The hostess was responsible for cutting up the meat and making sure that each honored guest had the appro priate tasty bits. It was a chore so demanding that some women dined before their dinner parties in order to be able to devote complete con centration to the job. There was a different term for cutting up differ ent types of bird—theoretically, at least, one would "break" a goose, "thrust" a chicken, "spoil" a hen, and "pierce" a plover.

The wild and wooly era of early colonial settlement in the South had faded by the end of the seventeenth century. People were no longer dying off so quickly—thanks in part to the new apple orchards that had been planted, providing juice that displaced the brackish water. The male-female sex ratio began to even out, and families were no longer necessarily the collection of offspring from widows' and widowers' former marriages. Men had male relatives they could rely

on to handle their estates in case they died, as well as lawyers to take care of plantation business in their absence. More men lived to see their children grow up, and they were able to leave their estates directly to their adult sons. Meanwhile, the windows of opportunity for independent women were beginning to close.