

Colonial “Generals” at Play

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Introduction .

As much as period glass is smokey, so seem to be many of the stories dealing with aspects of student life at Liberty Hall. Too many times records show rules, regulations, and the unfortunates who were caught breaking them. Not only are records incomplete, but also many will never be seen again. Attacking our problem of recreating a society with specific interest on leisure will be the basis for this paper. Many students are stripped of their identities in the classroom. The rules and regulations play an important role in directing the student's normal activities. To the Hall's dismay, an equally important part of many students' activities involved deviance. It should be noted that, much accepted behavior around the state was outlawed at school, and as well as records show, students often were influenced by their pre-Hall activities. Hopefully a look into their extra-curricular activities will provide helpful insight on the social life of a student at Liberty Hall. Because of the limited records of student activities at that time, correlations must be made with the students' leisure time at home with his peers. Perhaps with a closer look at how students played, we can form ideas on how they worked.

During the Liberty Hall era, dolls were very popular. "The most common of all relics of Victorian childhood to be recovered from American historical sites are the heads, arms, and legs, of German (Thuringian) 'china' dolls."¹ Legs seem to be the most often found. Every young lady had her collection of young girl dolls dressed in adult clothes. With some collections exceeding twenty dolls, many owned large, expensive wardrobes. Second only to dolls, tea sets, were very popular among younger girls. Common not only to females, dolls also were enjoyed by the more well-to-do young gentlemen. The less fortunate individuals played with toys and played games, such as marbles, spinning tops, balls, toy soldiers, toy watches, and biblo-catchers (ball and stick game). The jew's-harp is perhaps the historically musical toy most often found from colonial digs. Being a lasting object, marbles are common from the colonial period. "The majority are of plain-gray or brown clay, though some are 'agnates' made from the mixing of two clays of different colors, generally gray and a reddish brown."² With the availability of vast countryside, many pets were kept by local families. It was not uncommon for a family to own several different pets. Usually consisting of cats and dogs, some would undertake the tedious task of training small animals, and sometimes birds. Not all

games and activities were unisexual. Both boys and girls, together, played hide-and-seek, hop scotch, and games like leep frog.

"Altogether, the children of colonial Virginia amused themselves as readily as their elders—and as spontaneously—when lessons and chores were done."³ When added up, even these small toys that every child used provides us with a piece of the past. Because the Hall site has turned up marbles, dolls, pieces of a demitasse, jew's-harps, and toy soldiers, one could reason that, yes, their were children at Liberty Hall and they were not all male. Also, since these artifacts are similar to others found in Virginia, this helps produce a basis for correlating Hall activity with activity about the state.

It could almost be said that both men and boys are playing with similar toys, but men then add the needed wager to make the game more interesting. Any time was a good time for a good bet, even a party.

Parties were a Virginian's best friend. Taking great pride in good entertainment, large parties on special occasions were common. Most of these being formal. Although the larger parties centered around the tobacco plantations, with beautiful gardens, hospitality reached almost into every household. Basically being very simple, luxuries were rare indeed.

This constant entertaining was simplified for Virginians by the abundance of food (from their gardens) and the generous supply of drink. After a little work with the wives, the negro cooks soon became masters. A prohibitionist would brave no place in their society. "In Virginia a julip before breakfast was believed to give protection against malaria, and a toddy, or a glass of wine, punch, or beer at almost any time of the day or night to be good for the body as well as cheering to the spirit and indispensable to the practice of hospitality."⁴

Outdoor games seemed to acquire much popularity in the colonial times. Along with swimming, badminton, and lawn bowling, the average Virginian was exposed to a host of various games. Lawn bowling was generally played by both rich and poor alike. Ninepins and skittles were perhaps the most popular of the lawn games. With many families owning their own set, this game even spread to the town taverns. Quoits and pitching horseshoes, along with cricket, are also common pleasures of the past. Although not much can or has been found on badminton, there is evidence of its existence. Along with badminton, fives was even more popular. Fives or "hand-tennis" is the game that today's handball is derived. Winter months would bring with them the opportunity for each to try his hand at skating.

Barbecues were also common because of their convenience and the pleasure they involved. Often times little plays, long stories, and readings from the Bible would be rendered at an open gathering. Many of the Scotch-Irish, being very religious, would celebrate religious occasions with large balls. These balls would be spirited parties, where a great deal of liquor would be consumed, and the dancing would never stop. Virginians preferred minuets and French dances. In the northern provinces, country dances were more in vogue. "Dancing was a far more popular amusement than had been before the Restoration. This was no longer an amusing exercise for the ladies while the men had a game of Bowles or Billiards. It was developing into a series of Ballroom entertainments, large or small, where gentlemen were expected to put up a show and dance a measure with as much grace as their wives and sisters." Although the students were not normally allowed to attend balls or dances on Washington's birthday, in 1810, the Ann Smith Academy was invited to a ball, held in the Stewart's house. Miss Ann, a friend to some Hall students, and her students were in attendance and the ball was a success.⁵ "Kercheval tells us that even in The Valley, which was settled chiefly by Scotch-Irish and Germans who are supposed to have had stricter ideas in regard to worldly pleasures, dancing three and four-handed reels and jigs was the principle amusement of the young."⁶

To provide music, many homes were blessed with musical talent within the family. Filling the house with cheer, most often the families would recite poetry and sing songs. Women with soft touch would play the spinet or harpsichord, where as gentlemen stayed more towards the violin, French horn, and flute. Often times the servants would be gifted with a musical flair, which could earn him both some money and some respect. Although the Virginians did not really back slavery, they had no solution except to keep blacks second class citizens. The feelings from the plantation owners was that of a king of their castle, but not "slave driver." If the man of the house should die, then in the wills the wife would usually get the entire estate, often without bond. This also tells us that husbands and wives were, for the most part, close.

"As Virginia women loved to dance, so Virginia men loved to gamble."⁷ Virginia gentlemen were very serious about their gambling. Gaming was not considered an evil in itself, but the abuse of it was. Some would neglect their business or would even lose more money than he could afford. Gambling was not discouraged, it was outlawed by this state. Virginians played games that reflected their sociable nature: card games of all kinds except solitaire, simple dice games, and table games in which luck is as important as skill."⁸

Card games not only varied in style, but also in bets.

nothing better was available, some were known to resort to tossing coins. (Usually not well-to-do gnetlemen.)

Perhaps the most popular game, outside cards, would be billiards. Liked for its gentleman atmosphere, billiards is a clean game. It is also a game wheré one may increase his skill with practice. Billiards is a game of easy rules that can get very intricate. Virginians have mastered the concept of winning billiards. "Be careful that you lay not your hand on the table when you strike nor let your sleeve drag when upon it, if you do it is a loss; or it you smoke a pipe of Spanish or Virginian, being so wedded to that fume, that where you are sure to smother all the rest of the company you are insensible of the indecency, be careful that the ashes fall not on the table, lest the cloth be burnt which many times falls out."¹¹ Homes, as well as many taverns, had billiards tables. Lending themselves out, billiards tables provide any game room or tavern with a beautiful piece of furniture, besides recreation. Billiards was such an honest and clean game of the times that "George Washington alternated billiards with card playing when he was young, before public office illuminated his leisure time."¹²

Horse racing was a favorite pastime diring nicer weather. Virginia, blessed with top horses, was also full of top riders. Through some trouble and expense, even an amateur could buy a

champion line horse. Maryland bred many of its best horses in Virginia because a Virginia horse was allowed to enter a Maryland race but not vice-versa. "At the end of the Colonial period the English horse lover, J. F. D. Smyth, found the same curious personal characteristic. 'The Virginians, of all ranks and denominations,' he wrote, 'are excessively fond of horses...; even the most indigent person has his saddle-horse, which he rides to every place, and on every occasion; for when hunting: indeed a man will frequently go five miles to catch a horse, to ride only one mile upon afterwards.'"13

Virginia was a hunter's paradise. Every type of woods animal was within a shot way. Dogs were sometimes used, but were not bred well natively. Washington was very big on wildlife preservation in his later years. Wolves were encouraged bounty because of their destruction. George Washington was perhaps the most famous fox hunter of his time. Once Robert Alexander even stayed with Washington for a week just to hunt fox. Property owners set high values on their land and resources. When hunting, "The gun was chiefly used in the pursuit of birds, of which there was an extraordinary abundance..."14 Beaver, otter, and deer hunting were also among the most popular diversions of some Virginia sportsmen. Along with the enormous hunting possibilities, Virginia is fortunate enough to have excellent fishing and striking (a process of killing fish by hitting them

when a light has surfaced the fish) they fished for both sport and food.

Before summation, the colonial merchants also deserve some attention, for they were responsible for the transactions and trading of these goods. "George Washington of Virginia, spoke of the peculiarities of the local trading situation when he transmitted a copy of the Philadelphia non-importation agreement, in a letter of April 5, 1769, his neighbor, George Mason."¹⁵ Because of the import-export controversies of the time, Virginia was finally forced to boycott all foreign products, and was also forced to cease exporting. These interesting factors could have limited the amount of import items of that period. During the "Boston Tea Party," Virginia was no doubt against the East India Company.

How do all these pieces go in to form a somewhat complete puzzle is what shall be attempted in closing. Virginians seem to be very polite, friendly, hard working, gambling, dancing individuals, drinking at every occasion and at the same time, still find time to be in the open country air. "Their idea of amusement was associated with the outdoors. Indoors, at night or in bad weather, pastimes were simple and sociable. The colonial Virginian's convivial nature, like his hospitality, was rooted in the social isolation of the plantation. Good food, good drink, good company, good conversation—components

of his social grace—he cultivated as arts and practiced with flair."¹⁶ From the opening of Liberty Hall, Robert Alexander ruled with stern discipline. Because of the great quantity of games and fun, Virginians had grown accustomed to, at these times, it was necessary to bring back the concentration to learning. With this crack down also came seventeen "Rules to be Observed by the Students of Liberty Hall Academy." These regulations consisted of restrictions on smoking, drinking, swearing, frolicking, along with no ball playing in Lexington. Because of the pressures and conflicts revolving around this stern system, there was a mutual dislike among the students and faculty. Students did not want to overthrow the system, they grew up having fun, playing billiards, riding horses in races, and perhaps their favorite, gambling. These wants had, in many cases, never been taken away, and therefore created many problems. Perhaps a few left because they could not take the strict rules set by the Academy. For the most part, though, the students probably played cards, went dancing, or played billiards at the parlor, being hustled by a town sharpie. As rules were broken in those days, they are broken today, and will probably be broken tomorrow. "Apparently the whole art of gambling for the fantastically high stakes won and lost in society circles must rely on the poker face of the victim. The veneer of casual nonchalance so obvious on the faces of

the aristocracy of the eighteenth century was part and parcel
of their education."¹⁷

footnotes

1. Hume, Ivor Noel, A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America, (New York, 1926), p. 317.
2. Hume. p. 320.
3. Carson, Jane, Colonial Virginians at Play. (Williamsburg, 1965), p. 101.
4. Standard, Mary Newton, Colonial Virginia: Its People and Customs. (Philadelphia and London, 1917), pp. 126-127.
5. Crenshaw, Ollinger, General Lee's College: Rise and Growth of Washington and Lee. (Volumn I). p. 25, Chapter II.
6. Standard. p. 144.
7. Carson. p. 49.
8. Carson. p. 48.
9. Bruce, Phillip Alexander, Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century. (Lynchburg, 1927). pp. 195-196.
10. Crenshaw. p. 3, Chapter II.
11. Brooke, Iris, Pleasures of the Past. (London, 1955). p. 44.
12. Carson. p. 84.
13. Carson. p. 103.

14. Bruce. p. 217.

15. Schlesinger, Arthur Meier, The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution. 1763-1776.
(New York, 1918). p. 135.

16. Carson. p. ix-x.

17. Brooke. p. 50.

bibliography

1. Brooke, Iris. Pleasures of the Past. London: Odhams Press, Limited, 1955.
2. Bruce, Philip Alexander. Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century. Lynchburg, VA.: J. P. Bell Company, Inc., 1927.
3. Carson, Jane. Colonial Virginians at Play. Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1965.
4. Crenshaw, Ollinger. General Lee's College: Rise and Growth of Washington and Lee. Unpublished Transcript. Volumn I.
5. Gambling in America. Edited by Herbert L. Marx, Jr. New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1952.
6. Hume, Ivor Noel. A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.
7. Kaplan, Max. Leisure in America: A Social Inquiry. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1960.
8. Schlesinger, Arthur Meier. The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution. 1763-1776. Edited by the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University. New York: Columbia University, 1918.
9. Standard, Mary Newton. Colonial Virginia: Its People and Customs. Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1917.

It should also be noted that the illustrations are copies of the micro-film from the Trustees Minutes of 1774-1804.