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FROLICS FOR FUN: DANCES, WEDDINGS, AND DINNER PARTIES IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

Bruce C. Daniels¹

The dour, joyless Puritan has all but disappeared from the pages of American history. Despite occasional literary attempts to resurrect the image, fifty years of scholarship have chased the ghosts of the grim prude from the colonial landscape. Flesh and blood humans, sober-minded and serious about religion, duty, and morality, but able to enjoy themselves, now inhabit early New England. Their intense religious beliefs did not prevent the settlers from realizing that leisure and recreation were necessary to any society, and in retrospect it was silly for historians ever to think that Puritans did not believe in fun.²

Having said this, it is surprising that more analyses have not been devoted to the specific ways that the New England colonists did choose to relax. Historians have tended to leave the details of leisure and recreational practices to antiquarians: thus, descriptions of social life have often been provided outside of a sophisticated context of Puritan ideology. Seventeenth-century theologians in both England and New England did develop a body of thought that provided guidelines for ideal conduct and identified unacceptable practices. The pursuit of pleasure, they believed, should not be Godless, break any Scriptural injunctions, squander undue amounts of time or resources, detract from the public good, become an end unto itself, cause one to neglect duty,

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1. The author wishes to thank the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its generous financial support, in the form of a research Grant.
 2. The first important scholar to humanize the Puritans was Samuel Eliot Morison. See in particular his Builders of the Bay Colony (Boston, 1930). No one has softened the Puritans' image more than Edmund S. Morgan. See, among his other books, The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England (New York, 1944); The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop (Boston, 1958); and The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1962).

or to injure others. The best leisure and recreational activities not only provided refreshment for body and soul, but also were useful in some other way to the individual or the community. Thus, reading, contests of marksmanship, and berry-picking, were all regarded as desirable types of relaxation, because they had beneficial effects on education, defense, and the food supply. Puritans also, it should be remembered, were a communal people: they placed an extraordinary emphasis on groups -- the family, the congregation, and the community. Leisure or recreational activities that took place in groups usually were more prized than those done individually. Therefore, one person reading aloud to several others from a book that combined instruction with enjoyment -- a sort of "reading party" -- would be high on the list of examples of leisure time well-spent. Many additional gatherings, house- and barn-raising, militia drills, discussions over lunches held between the Sunday morning and afternoon sermons, ordination celebrations, and so forth, also met the criteria for appropriate fun. Any of these could get out of bounds and become unacceptable -- militia drills often did -- but at their best all could be embraced as dutiful and productive ways to relax.³

Other types of parties, however, less clearly satisfied the requirement that leisure and recreation be useful. Dances, wedding receptions, and dinner parties were held for more strictly social reasons. One could, of course, defend dancing as physically healthy, wedding receptions as celebrations of the ideal of marriage, and dinner parties as opportunities to discuss matters of religious and civic consequence. But, in all three cases, no one seriously tried to defend these activities as having a direct public good. They were parties which were held to have fun, and everyone understood that this was their purpose. The best thing that could be said about them, from the standpoint of a strict interpretation of the Puritan code of morality, was that nothing in *Scriptures* unequivocally prohibited them. Some forms of each of

3. Puritan attitudes towards leisure and recreation course through much of the sermon literature. For the fullest statement, see Benjamin Coleman's three sermons published collectively as a 170-page tract: The Government and Improvement of Mirth, According to the Laws of Christianity (Boston, 1707). In other works, I have discussed Puritan thought on leisure and recreation. See Daniels, "Sober Mirth and Pleasant Poisons: Puritan Ambivalence Towards Recreation and Leisure in Colonial New England," American Studies (Spring, 1993).

the three parties were present throughout the history of colonial New England. An examination of changes in their nature reveals some of the ways in which Puritan thought grappled with modernity, and affected patterns of behavior over the course of nearly two centuries.

Dancing provided a puzzling challenge to New England's moral arbiters. No clear Biblical proscriptions forbade it; it was immensely popular with all classes of English men and women; distinguished Puritans ranging from John Milton to Oliver Cromwell enjoyed it; and, on the surface, dancing appeared innocent, it did not consume great resources, and it provided healthy exercise. It should therefore have been high on the Puritan list of productive entertainments -- but it was not. Neither, however, was it directly condemned by Puritans, as it was by some other Protestant denominations. Puritan moralists nurtured a nagging suspicion of dancing; the difficulty they had in identifying clear arguments against it increased rather than mitigated their wariness. The apparent goodness of dancing made it all the more dangerous. Lurking within what appeared to be a wholesome activity lay temptations that could promote sin and sloth.⁴

No New England colony ever passed a general statute forbidding dancing, but colony and local laws hedged it with extreme restrictions. At its worst, dancing was thought to incite adultery and fornication. Being particularly popular everywhere with women, dancing allegedly caused them to lower their guard against attacks on their chastity. Hence, "lewd dancing," which authorities defined as dancing which allowed men and women to touch or hold each other, was forbidden, as was any association between alcohol and dancing. Often towns in the first half of the seventeenth century forbade all dances. Hence, dancing had to be informal, and done either individually or in same-sex groups, but not in couples of men and women. In fact, virtually no organized dances or mixed-gender dancing took place in the first generation of New England's settlement; dancing was spontaneous and done in the home, outdoors, or at celebrations.⁵

4. See Joy Van Cleef and Kate Van Winkle Keller, "Selected American Country Dances and Their English Sources," in Barbara Lambert, ed., Music in Colonial Massachusetts, 1630-1820, 2 vols. (Boston, 1980 and 1985), I: 4-5.

5. *Ibid.*, I:4-6 and 10-12; Reet Howell, "Recreational Activities of Women in Colonial America," in Howell, ed., Her Story in Sport: A Historical Anthology of Women in

In 1684, in order to stop what he perceived to be an unsavory possibility -- the opening of a dancing school in Boston, Increase Mather published *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of The Scriptures*. Indeed, dancing schools had been opened in 1672 and 1681, but the vigilant authorities had closed them immediately. The founder of the school in 1681, Henri Sheriot, was not only a teacher of idle and licentious behavior, but also, he was French, a condition that made him *a priori* a person of "ill fame." Mather wrote his diatribe in the knowledge that a third school was being planned; it opened the following year, 1685, and it suffered the same fate of prosecution and closure.⁶

Mather's *Arrow* flew straight to the mark. Although he conceded that "dancing or leaping is a natural expression of joy," if done "men with men" or "women with women," Mather felt that serious problems emerged immediately with "gynecandrical dancing or that which is commonly called mixt or promiscuous dancing, of men and women." "Vile, infamous, and abominable," he called it. Showing a remarkable willingness to elasticize meanings, Mather argued that the Seventh Commandment forbade the "Devil's Procession" of dancing, because it condemned things which are evil in the sight of God. Not surprisingly, Mather believed that mixed dancing was indeed evil in God's eyes. With equal inclusiveness, Mather argued that the apostle Paul implicitly had dancing in mind when he condemned "rioting," in *Romans* 13: 13. Similarly, God referred to dancing when in *Isaiah* 3: 16 the Daughters of Sion were rebuked for "walking and mincing as they go and making a tinkling." Mather, himself, danced on a slippery theological floor when he summoned forth such vague and oblique references. The reality was that he feared the social consequences of dancing, but he felt compelled to buttress his position with Scriptural endorsements. In presenting his case, Mather admitted that he was arguing against a half-century of a softer position on the part of New Englanders. "It is sad," he lamented, "that when in times of Reformation, children have been taught in their

 Sports (West Point, N.Y., 1982), pp. 37-38; and Peter Wagner, "American Puritan Literature: A Neglected Field of Research in American Sport History," *Canadian Journal of History of Sport and Physical Education* VIII (1977): 68-69.

6. Increase Mather, *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing, Drawn Out of the Quiver of the Scriptures* (Boston, 1684). The opening of the schools is discussed by Cynthia Adams Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music in Early Massachusetts," in Lambert, ed., *Music in Colonial Massachusetts* II: 735.

catechism that such dancing is against the commandment of God, that now in New England they should learn practically the contrary."⁷

When he moved from theological to social and historical reasons for outlawing dancing, Mather became nearly rabid. "Dancing is a regular madness," he wrote. "The Devil was the first inventor and the Gentiles who worshipped him the first practitioners." After that came "Apostatizing, idolatrous, Israelites, Greeks who worshipped Bacchus," and others who thought "their Gods were adulterers." Among the evil historical men who Mather identified as lovers of dancing were "Caligula, Nero, and such like atheists and epicures." At the present time, Mather argued, "Popish caustists justify it, as they do many other moral evils." Dancing first appeared innocently in Godly societies, such as at weddings or on days of Thanksgiving, but inevitably, Mather wrote, it moved rapidly into full expressions of evil. To combat New England's existing practice of grudgingly allowing some dancing under decorous circumstances, Mather wrote that "it is an eternal truth that whenever any sin is forbidden, not only the highest acts of that sin, but all degrees thereof, and the occasions leading thereon are prohibited."⁸

On few matters did Increase Mather argue to less effect. After Massachusetts' transition from a private to a royal colony in 1692, dancers went on the offensive, under the leadership of the first royal governor, Sir William Phips, who enjoyed and sponsored formal balls. Dancing and dances became the delight of Boston's elite in the 1690s, and showed signs of moving throughout the region and into all strata of society.⁹ The leadership of the opposition to this heightened danger fell to

7. Mather, An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing, pp. 2-3, 6, 8, and 21. Mather's sermon is often discussed in the literature on dance; see, for example, Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 6-8; and Wagner, "American Puritan Literature," pp. 66-68.

8. Mather, An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing, [29- pp. 2-3, 6, and 8-12.

9. See Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 8 and 11, for the growth of dancing under royal patronage. G. B. Warden, Boston, 1689-1776 (Boston, 1970), pp. 37-39, discusses Phips' relationship with the Mathers. For the impact of royalization on Boston's social life, see Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742 (London, Oxford, and New York, 1938), pp. 250-251.

Increase's son, Cotton Mather, who in 1700 published *A Cloud of Witnesses Against Balls and Dances*, as a sequel to his father's *Arrow*. The change in tone between the father's and the son's moral tracts tells much about the changes in attitudes and practices in the intervening sixteen years. Cotton Mather conceded much that his father earlier had castigated. Grudgingly, Cotton accepted mixed dancing, dances, and even the opening of dancing schools. "The Case before us is not whether people of quality may not employ a dancing master with due circumstances of modesty," the younger Mather wrote, but rather "whether the dancing humour as it now prevails and especially in balls or in circumstances that lead the young people of both sexes unto great liberties" should be tolerated. He also placed his opposition to extravagant balls and dancing parties in the larger context of Puritan fears of Anglicanism. Puritan young men and women attended Anglican parties because of the opportunity to dance that they offered; late hours, immodest dress, vanity, lewdness, and, of course, eventual spiritual loss, would inescapably result if one accepted these seemingly innocent invitations. Thus, whereas Increase Mather had tried to roll back the clock to some imagined time in Reformation England, when Godly people prohibited all manner of dancing, Cotton Mather tried to guard against excess and its accompanying vices.¹⁰

Cotton Mather's *Cloud* proved little more successful than Increase Mather's *Arrow*. The practice of holding dances spread throughout the region as the eighteenth century unfolded. They moved first to the large provincial centers, then to secondary towns, and finally, in the immediate pre-Revolutionary years, to remote villages and rural areas. The emphasis placed on dances in a given locale provided a barometer of its urbanity. Newport, Rhode Island, joined Boston as one of New England's two dance capitals; Hartford, New Haven, Norwich, Portsmouth, and Providence all were anxious to emulate their sophistication.¹¹

10. Cotton Mather, *A Cloud of Witnesses Against Balls and Dances* (Boston, 1700), pp. 2-4. Mather's tract is discussed by Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 10-11; and by Wagner, "American Puritan Literature," p. 66.

11. Hoover ("Epilogue to Secular Music," pp. 735 and 746-747) discusses the growth of dance culture, as do Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 10-12; and James E. Morrison, *Early American Country Dances: Cotillions and Reels* (New York, 1978), pp. 9-10.

Worse than dances themselves to recalcitrant moralists were the dance schools that inevitably followed closely on their heels. Boston, which had closed three of them in the late seventeenth century, had four competing schools of dancing in 1720, and eight by 1730. This nucleus of dance-masters in Boston helped to spread schools throughout New England. By 1790, towns such as Greenfield and Brookfield in western Massachusetts, or Durham in central Connecticut, three relatively small communities, had professional dancing schools. Even more horrifying to some diehards who had agreed with Cotton Mather about the spectre of Anglicanism hanging over the dance parties, was the propensity of the dancing schools to seek out French dance-masters, who were prized beyond almost all English ones, due to their "elegant deportment." French masters presided over several of Boston's mid-century dancing schools. Newburyport, Massachusetts, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, provincial towns with high social aspirations, vied with one another for two "French gentlemen of education and agreeable manner." Thus, to the Puritan mind, Anglicanism was just the first dance step on a road leading to Popery and French degeneracy.¹²

The combination of making a profession of a recreation, Anglican and French influence, and the fears of an enhanced sexuality in mixed dancing, meant, of course, that some New Englanders remained suspicious of dancing even as it spread like wildfire in the second half of the century. John and Samuel Adams, the two dour Revolutionary cousins who agreed on little, both thought dancing to be dissipating. John confided to his diary that he "never knew a good dancer good for anything else." He, himself, did not dance, but he admitted that he knew some men of "sense and learning," such as James Otis and Samuel Sewall, who could and did; yet, neither of them "had the more sense or learning or virtue for it." Occasionally, people would put their opposition into action -- in once case, a mid-eighteenth-century "besieging party of Puritans broke open the front door" and scattered some noisy dancers "like cattle jumping out of the window helter skelter" -- but usually most people distrustful of

12. Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music," p. 747; Bridenbaugh, Cities in the Wilderness, pp. 276-277. For an account of a dancing school coming to a small town, see William Chauncey Fowler, History of Durham, Connecticut, from the First Grant of Land in 1662 to 1866 (Durham, Conn., 1970), p. 22. For the contest over French dance-masters, see Jonathan Jackson to Joshua Brackett, Feb. 20, 1798, in Putnam Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society.

dancing were, like John Adams, content to sniff the air in disdain and reprove with a mutter. Near the end of the eighteenth century, John Griffith, a dance-master in Northampton, published a book to help dances and dancing schools overcome the last pockets of small-town and rural opposition. It contained, among other things, a list of "ill manners to be avoided," lest they give offense.¹³

Although conservative Puritan sensibilities could not prevent the spread of dances, they could and did affect the nature of the dancing itself. More than the people of any other colonial region, New Englanders preferred "country dances," as the folk dances they imported from England were called. These resembled modern square or contra dances, and were carefully described in John Playford's, *The English Dance Master*, published in London in 1651, which was the most popular dance book in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century New England. Country dances originated as folk dances in rural England, but were given form and sophistication by English and French dance-masters in the seventeenth century. The French rechristened these folk dances "contredanse," which was just a translation of the term country dance. New Englanders tended to use the term "country" in the early eighteenth century, but increasingly called them "contra" dances as the century developed, and as the French influence on dancing increased. By the time of the American Revolution, urbane dancers referred to contra almost exclusively, and country became known as a term used by rustics.¹⁴

Contra (country) dances were of three basic types: circles composed of large numbers of dancers -- sometimes all of those in attendance; sets for two, three, or four couples; and longways, in which two long lines faced each other. In the eighteenth century, longways became the most popular of the three. Most importantly, however, none of these dances placed a primary emphasis on couples. Dancers usually had partners, but little close or intimate physical contact took place between them. Thus, the

13. For the discussion of the attitudes of John and Sam Adams, see Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music," pp. 746 and 752; for the incident in which the dance was broken up, see Spencer Mead, *Ye Historie of Ye Town of Greenwich* (Harrison, N.Y., 1979), p. 48; John Griffith, *Etiquette for Dancemasters* (Northampton, 1794).

14. Morrison, *Early American Dances*, pp. 6-7; Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music," p. 746; and Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 4-6.

nature of the dances blunted one of the greatest criticisms which had been raised by the opponents of dancing. Little sensuous or lewd conduct could be directly attributed to circles, sets, or lines of people performing routines to music. Moreover, the group nature of these dances fit smoothly into Puritan social thought, which emphasized communal activity.¹⁵

To date, scholars have identified about twenty separate contra-dance manuals published in eighteenth-century New England, most of them in the 1780s and 1790s. Several of these were published outside of Boston, in other cities such as Hartford, Portsmouth, and Providence, but a few were published in small towns such as Walpole, New Hampshire, and Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The books gave elaborate instructions on how to perform the various dances, and they included local favorites or variations on well-known dances. Some zealous dancers took notes and kept personal commonplace books in which they described specific steps and maneuvers, which they shared with other enthusiasts. All together, 212 dances were described in these manuals, all but three of which were longways. Often named after creators, events, places, or prominent dance-masters, the names originated in New England, even though the dances themselves were derivative of English and French ones, done to English tunes, and repeated familiar steps. "Nancy Dawson," "Sukey Bids Me," "Rickett's Ride," "Mr. Turner's Academy Cotillion," "Money in Both Pockets," and "Balance a Straw," were some of the colorful names. The tunes, often borrowed from military music or from well-known songs, were meant to be catchy, easy to play, and hard to forget. Manuals did not specify the instruments to provide the music; people danced to whatever was available. Only at great balls were several instruments likely to be used. Fiddles were most popular -- often a lone one sufficed -- sometimes a flute, horn, or a drum, or a combination of them were used. Occasionally, if no instruments were available, dancers made do with an unaccompanied singer or "caller."¹⁶

15. Morrison, Early American Dances, pp. 6-10 and 64-66; and Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 3-6 and 8-12.

16. Morrison, Early American Country Dances, pp. 46-53, and Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," p. 73, both provide lists of popular local dances. See Kym S. Rice, "Early American Taverns: For the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers," Early American Life XIV (1983): 50, for a discussion of

In addition to contra dancing, New Englanders tried a few other types, although none proved to be very popular. Some kinds of couple dancing took place in urban areas and among the elite, who were more Anglicized and were anxious to copy the fashionable styles of England and France. Most of the couple dances had French names, such as the minuet, gauotte, rigadoun, and bourre. The most popular of them, the minuet, was often used to begin formal balls in mid-eighteenth-century high society; but even in New England's most cosmopolitan areas, it did not enjoy the popularity it did in New York and the South. The minuet offended some New Englanders who otherwise thought dancing to be acceptable, and during the Revolutionary era it declined even among the urban elite. The nineteenth century revived the minuet, but modified it into a contra dance done in sets. Hornpipe jigs also skirted on the edges of acceptability in New England. If the minuet challenged the Puritan legacy by smacking of Anglicanism and the nobility, jigs posed challenges from the other direction. Usually done solo, jigs were aggressive dances which were associated with drunken sailors trying to outdo each other in boastful competition. Always regarded as unsavory by New Englanders, at best jigs engendered vanity and excessive pride; at worst they provoked fights and brawls. When men started dancing duelling jigs, it was usually a sign that a wedding reception, dance, or waterfront party had gotten out of control. The ribald and aggressive jig fit no more comfortably with eighteenth-century New England's notion of ideal behavior than did the excessively polite minuet.¹⁷

By the second half of the eighteenth century, even though dancing could still raise the eyebrows of some New Englanders, it was the most widespread recreation of the youthful, and it was popular with all ages. Young adults filled their diaries with memories of past dances, and with dreams of future ones. Special shoes were often worn; dress styles for parties changed to

 dance instruments. See also the critique of dance music in the travelogue of William Gregory, "A Scotchman's Journey in New England in 1771," published in New England Magazine XII (1895): 336 and 351.

17. For material on these dances and the attitudes toward them in New England, see Cleef and Keller, "Selected American Country Dances," pp. 7-10; Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music," pp. 746-748; and Morrison, Early American Dances, pp. 10-12. For a revealing comparison of the role and type of dances that were popular in New England and in the South, see Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982), pp. 80-87.

less restrictive and cooler clothing. Dancing opportunities abounded in a wide range of formal balls, wedding receptions, organized dances, impromptu get-togethers, and so forth. Just about every kind of activity was sometimes celebrated by dancing. Expecting a drab social landscape, a French visitor to New Haven was shocked when he attended a ball with "a hundred charming girls with bright rosy cheeks," and he was even more shocked to see another such "enchanted spectacle" in the small and nearby town of Wethersfield. Twelve year-old Anne Winslow of Boston had a few girlfriends drop by one day, and they "made four couples at country dancing." In the evening, learning of the "assembly," an adult houseguest "put his flute in his pocket and played tunes to which we danced mighty cleverly," the exhausted but happy little girl wrote later that night.¹⁸

Although dancing became a ubiquitous pastime in New England, it reached its height in the capitals and urban centers. In the 1760s and 1770s, Boston's elite held regular winter dances once every two weeks from January through April. Attendance ranged from one hundred to two hundred, and invariably included the governor of Massachusetts, other important royal officials, military officers, and the leading merchants. At these, the usual fiddler and piper of the small dances were replaced by five to ten musicians, who were led by a conductor. Often, the governor sent formal invitations to selected individuals; prominent visitors to Boston were honoured guests. About ten other New England cities emulated these balls, which often became items of conversation and subjects of gossip. A few people became renowned for their dancing ability or for their love of dancing. John Adams wrote that an acquaintance of his, Zab Howard of Weymouth, "had the reputation for at least fifteen years of the best dancer in the world. Several attempted but none could equal him, in nimbleness of heel." One young man's grandmother lamented -- surely with overstatement -- that he wore out "12 pairs of shoes a year."

18. See the accounts of dancing in three distinguished local histories of secondary centers: Frances Caulkins, A History of Norwich, Connecticut (Hartford, 1866), p. 322; Elizabeth Schenck, The History of Fairfield (New York, 1889) II: 102-103; and Fowler, Durham, p. 22. For the comments by the French visitor, see J. P. Brissot De Warville, New Travels in the United States of America (1788), ed. by Durand Echeverria (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 118; Anna Green Winslow, Diary of Anna Green Winslow: A Boston School Girl of 1771, ed. by Alice Morse Earle (Boston and New York, 1894), p. 6.

In the family papers of Sukey Heath Goddard, a young woman from Brookline, Massachusetts, and her husband, Dr. John Goddard, a Harvard graduate and a physician, one can witness the role that dancing played in the life of a young, successful couple, and the way in which dance culture spread. The Goddards moved from Boston to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, so Dr. Goddard could set up his medical practice. Obviously inferior to Boston in sophistication, Portsmouth had a lively social whirl of dances and dance parties, which the Goddards joined soon after their arrival. Their love of dancing thus eased the young Goddards' transition from Boston to Portsmouth, lessened any hardships they might have felt, and provided them with new friends and social opportunities. In turn, the Goddards added to Portsmouth's growing reputation as a cosmopolitan city. As the dancing twig was bent, so grew the trees; the Goddards' young children grew up as part of Portsmouth's elite society, filling their own diaries with stories about "dancing til two o'clock."¹⁹

Only a small fraction of New Englanders enjoyed the social status of the Goddards or lived in an urban area. Most residents of Boston, Portsmouth, or other cities, did not receive invitations to lavish balls or have the wherewithal to afford the costs of going to them. Similarly most New Englanders lived in relatively small towns. Even well-placed members of the local elite had to find their dancing pleasures in modest circumstances. Dances were usually held in private homes during the winter; during the summer they were also held outdoors. Barn dances, so much a part of the present folk-cultural view of early American dancing, belong to a later era; most barns were too small, crowded, and otherwise inhospitable for socializing in the eighteenth century. Neither were the meetinghouses physically well set-up to accommodate dances -- the pews were close together and were fastened in place; moreover, holding a dance in a meetinghouse offended some people's sense of good taste. Nevertheless, despite the drawbacks, dances -- particularly ordination balls -- did occasionally take place in the meetinghouse

19. Hoover, "Epilogue to Secular Music," pp. 744-752; John Rowe, *Letters and Diary of John Rowe, Boston Merchant*, ed. by Anna Rowe Cunningham (Boston, 1903), pp. 34-36, provides a series of wonderful descriptions of Boston's balls. For the importance of dancing in Portsmouth and in the Goddard family, see Richard Crawford and David P. McKay, "Music in Manuscript: A Massachusetts Tune-Book of 1782," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, LXXXIV (1974): 46-47.

and in the adjacent Sabbath or horse-houses. Some towns had school buildings which were used.

Communities developed differing traditions about where to hold dances outside of private homes. For much of the colonial period, authorities permitted no dancing in taverns. Alcohol and dance seemed too combustible a mixture, virtually guaranteed to promote unacceptable behavior between the sexes. Yet, because taverns were ideal for both spontaneous and organized dances, the proscription against mixing alcohol and dancing proved difficult to enforce. In the second half of the eighteenth century, a few taverns in the large towns began to permit mixed dancing; during the American Revolution the floodgates opened, and dancing and dances became regular parts of New England tavern life. After this taboo receded, few if any barriers to dancing remained. In 1790, many New Englanders shared Increase Mather's sentiments of a century earlier but, unlike Mather, they nursed their suspicions quietly, not pleased but aware that they were out of step with the times.²⁰

The most frequent type of party at which eighteenth-century New Englanders danced was the wedding reception; it became central to the social life of every type of community. At the middle of the seventeenth century, one would not have guessed that this would likely become the case. The Puritans, who regarded the family as a political and religious institution, as well as a social and economic one, believed that marriage was far too serious to permit ribald or even slightly frivolous festivities. The Puritans did celebrate marriage with two social activities, an espousal ceremony and the wedding itself. On both occasions, neighbors and family marked the event by feasting much in the manner of a day of thanksgiving. Espousals took place a week or two before the wedding itself. Both were joyful but quiet and sedate gatherings that traditionally took place in the bride's home. At espousals, the bride's minister gave an espousal sermon, in which he instructed the couple in the proper way to prepare for marriage; at the wedding, he gave a parallel sermon on the duties and obligations of husbands and wives.²¹

20. Rice, "Early American Taverns," p. 50. See also Gregory, "A Scotchman's Journey," p. 351.

21. For the best discussion of seventeenth-century weddings, see Morgan, The Puritan Family, pp. 31-33; see also Francis J. Bremer, The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards (New York, 1976), pp. 176-177;

Until 1686, when the Dominion of New England imposed a code of law based on Anglican practices, in neither Massachusetts nor Connecticut could ministers perform the marriage ceremony -- magistrates did. Using a secular justice signalled the civil importance of marriage to a well-ordered society; it was also a sign of the Puritans' theological quarrel with the Catholics, who made marriage a Sacrament which the Puritans thought to be unjustified by *Scripture*. After 1686, the couple could choose to have either a minister or magistrate conduct the ceremony, a choice that had been the practice all along in Rhode Island. For a generation after the Dominion of New England, weddings generally remained sedate, and continued to be celebrated primarily by feasting. "I was married to Elizabeth Garrish," rural minister Joseph Green wrote in his diary in 1699 -- "a virgin." Nothing else about the day or her status seemed remarkable enough to cause more comment. Three of New England's most well-known diarists for this period, Michael Wigglesworth, Cotton Mather, and Samuel Sewall, describe many weddings -- including their own -- in much the same matter-of-fact terms. "Had a good supper and cake," "had our cake and sack-posset," Sewall wrote of wedding celebrations. The most extravagant reception he went to, that of the wealthy Bostonian, Colonel Fitch Joy, consisted of "good bride-cake, good wine, Burgundy and canary, good beer." Mather worried about ways to impress upon celebrants "maxims of piety, I may with brevity, but pungency let fall on the people."²²

The quiet feasting era of wedding celebrations began to end in the 1730s and 1740s: by mid-century, boisterous and lavish receptions had emerged. An extremely conservative rural minister, John Ballantine of Westfield, described his own wedding in 1743 as a "two-day feast" in Dedham, that ended with a triumphant open-carriage ride to Boston. The 1751 wedding reception of Nicholas Gardiner's daughter in South Kingston,

 John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York, 1970), pp. 162-163; and Darrett B. Rutman, *Winthrop's Boston: A Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630-1649* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1965), pp. 232-233.

22. Morgan, *Puritan Family*, pp. 31-32; Joseph Green, "Commonplace Book," edited by Samuel E. Morison, *Colonial Society of Massachusetts Publications*, XXXIV (1937-1942): 250; Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth* (New York, 1946), pp. 69, 74, and 87; M. Halsey Thomas, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (New York, 1973), II: 921, 933, 949, and 1057; and Cotton Mather, *The Diary of Cotton Mather* (New York, 1948), II: 97.

Rhode Island, was New England's social event of the year. Over 600 guests drank, danced, and feasted for three days, all at Gardiner's expense. In 1753, Jacob Bailey, a Harvard student, travelled from Cambridge to remote Rowley, Massachusetts, to celebrate a friend's wedding to the local minister's daughter. Inasmuch as it involved a clergyman's daughter and took place in a small town, the wedding was a decorous affair, by prevailing standards. Nevertheless, the hosts threw a three-day party. "About the coming of the evening," Bailey wrote, "the younger sort, to the number of about fifty, repaired to the western chamber, where we spent the evening in singing, dancing, and wooing the widow" [a game similar to spin the bottle.] The next day, Bailey continued, "having saluted the bride, we spent our time, some in dancing, the other in playing cards . . . after dinner, we young people repaired to our chamber where we spent the day, in play such as singing, dancing, wooing the widow, playing cards, box, etc."²³

By the eve of the Revolution, weddings, even rural ones, could take on extravagant and ribald dimensions, and still be regarded as respectable. Elihu Ashley described one he attended in Greenfield in 1774, that took four days to celebrate, involving a procession of twenty-six couples in wagons, several dinner and breakfast feasts, three dances, and the consumption of vast quantities of wine and beer. On the way home to neighboring Deerfield, where he lived, Ashley confessed that he and his girlfriend, Polly, "were very dull" from lack of sleep and over-indulgence. A few months after this wedding bash in the upper Connecticut River Valley, a diarist described a fancier one in Windsor, Connecticut, a day's ride downstream. Wethersfield's young minister, John Marsh, married Anne Grant, the daughter of East Windsor's leading citizen, Ebenezer Grant. Guests came from all over New England and celebrated with two days of food, wine, and dancing. Reverend Marsh and his bride did not dance themselves, but they did not think it unseemly to be escorted to

23. John Ballantine, "Diary," in John Hoyt Lockwood, ed., Westfield and its Historical Influences, 1669-1919 (Westfield, 1922), pp. 378-380; Christian McBurney, "The South Kingstown Planters: Country Gentry in Colonial Rhode Island," Rhode Island History, XLV (1986): 89; Jacob Bailey, "Diary," in William S. Bartlet, ed., The Frontier Missionary (Boston, 1853), pp. 10-11.

their new home by an honor guard of twenty whooping horsemen.²⁴

Hijinks more often than not characterized weddings in the late colonial period. A joke so commonplace as to become a near ritual involved the groom running away, to be caught and "dragged back to duty" by the other men at the wedding. Cutting the reins on the groom's horse, or bobbing the horse's tail, was another particular wedding joke that was somewhat akin to tying tin cans to a car today. Men who had "dragged back" the groom before the wedding sometimes would "steal the bride" in the middle of the reception. Friends of the new couple would rush the house where the reception was being held, to spirit the bride away to a nearby tavern or to a second party. Custom required people attending the primary reception to "rescue" the bride from her "kidnappers." Usually the two parties amalgamated during the rescue attempt, and they ate and danced together in a truce. One wonderful story in Windsor told of a "kidnapped" bride, who turned out to be a man dressed as a decoy.²⁵

Weddings convulsed entire areas of towns with party activities, with people coming and going at all hours of the night, with sounds and shouts of music and dancing, all of which lasted at least a weekend. Things could get out of hand. Rev. John Ballantine fumed at the "sons of Belial," whose "riotous behavior" was an "outrageous insult to a newly married couple. What incivility, what rudeness, nay, of what barbarity you were guilty of that night," he preached to some of the penitent revellers on the day after their unspecified offense. The fact that the outrages took place at Ballantine's own daughter's wedding undoubtedly added insult to injury. Receptions became a place for toasts, sometimes risque ones. When one of Boston's legendary *femmes fatales*, Polly Smith, married in 1770, the best man read a poem when drinking to the bride's health that would have shocked an

 24. Elihu Ashley, "Diary," in George Sheldon, ed., A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts (Deerfield, 1896), II: 690; Elizabeth Porter Phelps, "Diary," in Arrias Huntington, ed., Under a Colonial Roof: Fireside Chronicles of Early New England (New York, 1941), p. 35; Judge Sherman Adams and Henry R. Stiles, The History of Ancient Wethersfield, Connecticut (New York, 1904), pp. 338-339.

25. Sarah Kemble Knight, The Journal of Madame Knight, ed. by Malcolm Frieberg (Boston, 1972), p. 20; and Ashley, "Diary," p. 610. The story of the hoax is in Henry R. Stiles, The Histories and Genealogies of Ancient Windsor, Connecticut (Hartford, 1891), I: 420.

earlier generation: "At length gay Polly you have paid for all your triumphs past, the scene is changed and you are made a vassal at the last." The maid of honor added her own mocking *bon mots* to her sister, the headstrong bride: "In wedlock women all must say that horrible frightful word *obey*; then Polly no uncommon fate will have for every married women is a slave."²⁶

Eating and talking -- this is the essence of the dinner party, a type of social gathering that has been and still is popular with people in most societies. Sabbath dinners, thanksgivings, dances, and wedding receptions, all had some of the trappings of a dinner party, but they all had other explicit purposes or activities as well. The explicit purpose of a dinner party is to enjoy one another's company, while eating and drinking.

Throughout New England's colonial and Revolutionary periods, food and conversation played a major role in virtually everyone's social life. People seldom ate alone, or even in intimate groups; few meals were eaten on the run. Regular breakfast, dinner, and supper meals invariably were social occasions, with at least seven or eight people at the table. Although they rhetorically worried about the sin of gluttony, Puritans had few reservations about unabashedly enjoying food. The ambiguities that characterized most of their attitudes towards pleasure failed to diminish their zest for the dinner table. Diarists placed an inordinate amount of emphasis on food. Partly this was because the colonists encountered so many new and seemingly exotic foods that were exciting to note; partly it was because food was so abundant after the first few years of settlement. But, mainly it was because the Puritans liked recreational eating, and saw few dangers lurking beside "the family altar," as the fireplace was called by one wag. When people who kept diaries went out to dinner, they usually wrote down in detail what they ate. John Winthrop's journal is spare with references to all pleasures except food; here he waxed extravagantly about the joys of "fat hogs, kids, venison, poultry, geese," "fine strawberries," "good beer," and "rich pastry."²⁷

26. Ballantine, "Diary," p. 435; John Boyle, "Boyle's Journal of Occurrences in Boston," New England Historical and Genealogical Register, LXXXIV (1930): 265.

27. For an overall view of food in early Puritan society, see James W. Baker, "Seventeenth-Century English Yeoman Foodways at Plymouth Plantation," in Peter Benes, ed., Foodways in the Northeast (Boston, 1982), pp. 105-113; James

Food played a similar role with all classes of New Englanders, unlike in England and Europe, where distinctive patterns of consumption characterized the different classes. In medieval and early modern England, two culinary traditions existed, that of the court and that of the peasant. The court eating of the well-off emphasized meats, sauces, and other high-fat items; the peasant tradition centered on the three staples: bread, cheese, and beer. In seventeenth-century England, the distinctions between the two strands of eating culture began to blur, as the nobility and gentry became aware that their diet lacked health, and tried to put more fruit and vegetables in it. In turn, the farm and urban workers in the peasant tradition began to aspire to more of the rich foods of the upper classes. Puritan New Englanders did not transplant these two traditions. Instead, everyone ate "above their station." Laws in Massachusetts and Connecticut prohibited people from dressing above their social rank, or using titles to which they were not entitled, but everyone tried to eat as well as they could. And, they usually ate very well; servants as well as the "better sort" had much meat, cake, and fruit in their regular diet.²⁸

No dramatic change occurred in recreational eating habits over the course of the colonial period; the eighteenth century elaborated on the patterns of the seventeenth. Dinner parties outside of the family existed from the first settlements; in the eighteenth century, they were inclined to be larger, more frequent, more formal, and more extravagant. The "art of cookery" as one author called it, began to be developed along sophisticated lines. Bookstores started stocking cookbooks, and a few were published in Boston. At mid-eighteenth century, a series of innovations in preparation and storage techniques substantially reduced the seasonal nature of the food supply, and foods that had been served only at certain times of the year became available for longer periods. An increase in animal husbandry and a corresponding decrease in hunting as a source for meat added to this process. Mutton, turtle, salmon, and veal, the

Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal: "History of New England, 1630-1649*, (New York, 1908), I: 47, 49-50, and 69-71.

28. Baker, "Seventeenth-Century Foodways," p. 113; Daphne L. Derven, "Wholesome, Toothsome, and Diverse: Eighteenth-Century Foodways in Deerfield, Massachusetts," in Benes, ed., *Foodways*, pp. 54-57; and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "It Went Away She Knew Not How: Food Theft and Domestic Conflict in Seventeenth-Century Essex County," in Benes, ed., *Foodways*, pp. 98-101.

luxury meats and seafoods of the early modern era, became more commonplace as a treat at special family meals or at dinner parties in the eighteenth century. By mid-century, New England's two-dozen newspapers carried innumerable advertisements for specialty foods which were often identified by place of origin: East Indies Bohea and Hyson tea, coffee, and chocolate; West Indies fruit and rum; Irish pork and butter; Philadelphia flour; Dorchester ale, and so forth. Spices, too, received a big play: cloves, mace, nutmeg, pimento, ginger, cinnamon, aniseed, and allspice among them. Exotic vegetables abounded. The *New Hampshire Gazette* carried an ad in 1764 for a Portsmouth merchant who had "just imported from London, Black-eyed non-pareil and Essex reading beans; early bush and pale beans of all sorts; early Dutch, Yorkshire Battorica; sugarloaf, May, Red, turnip and winter cabbage; green, curled and yellow savoy; early and late cauliflower; broccoli, summer, winter, and mountain spinach; Spanish and silver onion; orange and horn carrot; swelling and Dutch turnip; Redith; white mustard; Asparagus; white and green Gofs; cabbage and seletia lettuce; early cucumber."²⁹

The *Gazette* undoubtedly targeted its ad for the above foods, drinks, spices, and vegetables at the nearby urban elite. Dinner parties became an avocation with many of its members. At least once a week on average, John Rowe, a merchant in pre-Revolutionary Boston, attended or hosted private dinner parties ranging from four to forty people. As John Winthrop had at his more demure parties in the 1630s and 1640s, Rowe usually listed in his diary the foods he ate while dining out, and he appraised their quality. Among the one hundred and fifty or so dinner companions Rowe identified in his diary were most of the Revolutionary luminaries: John Adams, Samuel Adams, Thomas Barnard, John Hancock, Thomas Hutchinson, James Otis, Robert Treat Paine -- even Captain William Preston of Boston Massacre notoriety -- were guests at his home. Rowe also attended over a dozen large banquets each year, most of which were held at the Concert Hall or at Faneuil Hall. Private groups such as the

29. For the growth in sophistication in foods, see Sarah McMahon, "A comfortable Existence: The Changing Composition of Diet in Rural New England, 1620-1840," *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLII (1985): 31 and 50-51; see also Derven, "Wholesome, Toothsome, and Diverse," pp. 55-57. The Portsmouth advertisements were called to my attention by Steven R. Pendery, "The Archeology of Urban Foodways in Portsmouth, New Hampshire," in Benes, ed., *Foodways*, pp. 12-27.

Masons or merchant associations sponsored these banquets. If Rowe had visitors from afar -- a sea captain from Halifax or a business associate from New York -- he assembled a dinner party to introduce and entertain them. And at times he disposed with formalities; Rowe and his wife often joined a circle of friends in the warm weather for a "barbekue."³⁰

Neither the elite nor the people of Boston enjoyed a monopoly on dinner parties. Most extant diaries that provide mundane detail of day-to-day living describe them. A few types, often seasonal, became known by name and by the customs associated with them. The most famous, the turtle frolic, took place in port towns -- sometimes in a waterfront tavern, sometimes outdoors -- and could be counted on to be loud, rollicking, and well-attended. A huge sea turtle, preferably over two hundred pounds, served as the centerpiece and guest of honor. If towed back alive from the Caribbean by a sociable captain, as was usually the case, the turtle's arrival in town would be known several days ahead of the frolic, and plans were made accordingly. Much rum, punch, and other food preceded the ceremonial cooking of the turtle, which the captain or some other specially-trained chef supervised, to the cheers of the other guests. Some Newport merchants placed with their West Indian suppliers standing orders for turtles. A Rhode Island slave, known as "Coffee-Cockroach," achieved fame in the 1750s as the best turtle cook in New England. Commonly attended by young adults and visiting seamen, turtle frolics also attracted respectable people -- even some couples -- who were out for a good time. Dr. Edward Holyoke and his wife Mary, eminent members of Salem's social elite, attended three turtle frolics in the summer of 1759. Oysterbakes were less dramatic, but more frequent. These, too, usually took place in summer or early fall, and were held on the waterfront or as barbecues. Strict moralists associated oysterbakes with revelry, much in the same way as turtle frolics. They were not wrong. In the 1780s, Providence briefly prohibited serving open oysters outdoors at night, because the practice occasioned so many disturbances.³¹

30. Rowe, "Diary," pp. 26-50.

31. Alice Morse Early, Stage Coach and Tavern Days (New York, 1900), pp. 89-91, discusses turtle frolics at great length, as does Carl Bridenbaugh, Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776 (New York, 1955), pp. 164-165. See also C. P. B. Jefferys, Newport, 1639-1976: An Historical Sketch (Newport, 1976), p. 26. A

At the other end of the spectrum in landlocked rural areas, winter tea-parties became popular in the middle of the eighteenth century. The high cost of tea, coffee, and chocolate, gave these non-alcoholic drinks a special status as a treat to middle-class or poor people, or to small-town residents who customarily drank fruit juices or alcoholic beverages. Although much more sedate than plunging a turtle into a huge kettle, the serving of tea at a party also took on a form as the central ritual of a party. Elizabeth Phelps, a newly-married woman, described tea-parties in Hadley, Massachusetts, in the 1770s. Invited guests received formal, written invitations a week or so in advance; usually ten to fifteen couples attended. Because the parties were usually held during the winter, people fretted about the possibility of bad weather. About an hour after everyone had arrived, the hostess served the tea by "sending it round," which meant passing it cup by cup in a circle made by the guests. When everyone had tea, someone would be asked to say a blessing, after which "the hum renewed," and biscuits and cakes made similar rounds. After the first cups of tea were consumed, the circle broke up into smaller groups for chatting. About a half hour before the party was to end, the hostess circulated with nuts and apples, as a desert treat and as a signal that the party was almost over. Tea-parties lasted from about six to nine p.m., and most frequently were held on Friday nights. The men went outside before the women, to ready the horses and wagons, or the sleighs, if snow permitted. New Englanders loved sleighs and considered it a wonderful ending to take one home after a party.³²

Wholesome, pious, and quiet, Hadley's tea-parties were a far cry from John Rowe's elegant dinners for visiting merchants, or from a boisterous turtle frolic in Providence. But, of course, young couples in Boston and Providence had tea-parties also; and people in rural western Massachusetts kicked up their heels at parties lasting all night. The location, size, and class structure of a community obviously conditioned the opportunities its residents

riotous one is described by Solomon Drowne, "Dr. Solomon Drowne's Journal," Newport Historical Magazine (1880-1881): I: 67; "Providence Town Meeting Minutes," (June, 1786), in Providence City Hall. The Holyoke's summer of turtle frolics is described in James Phillips, Salem in the Eighteenth Century (Boston and New York, 1937), p. 256.

32. The special status of tea and other drinks is discussed in Michael D. Coe and Sophie E. Coe, "Mid-Eighteenth-Century Food and Drink on the Massachusetts Frontier," in Benes, ed., Foodways, pp. 41-45; Phelps, "Diary," pp. 90-92.

had for socializing; but the diverse experience of prosperous eighteenth-century New England suggests that inventive and energetic colonists could seek out the social life they wanted. Far from drab and somber, late colonial New England hummed with a constant variety of parties. Many of the dances, wedding receptions, and types of dinners would have offended New England's first generation of Puritans. But none of them were categorically rejected by the founders. Even dancing had some proponents in the first generation, and had not been condemned out of hand, only so limited as to be made nearly impossible. A relatively austere world of quiet Puritan group celebrations and fellowship evolved into the lively whirl of parties that characterized the late colonial period. But the new social world did not overturn the old one: it grew incrementally out of it. And, the opportunities New Englanders developed for a very active -- even ribald -- social life should not obscure two crucial points: most of these party activities stayed within respectable limits that at least paid lip service to Biblical guidelines; and many people continued to live by standards closer to the austere habits of their grandparents than to the less restrained conduct of some contemporaries. As it did in many matters, the late colonial and Revolutionary period offered New Englanders choices of how they got together to have a good time. Virtually all of these choices could be comfortably fit within a widening range of appropriate conduct as defined by the equally-widening visions that New Englanders had of Christian virtue.