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## "Marriage Customs in Colonial New England"

by

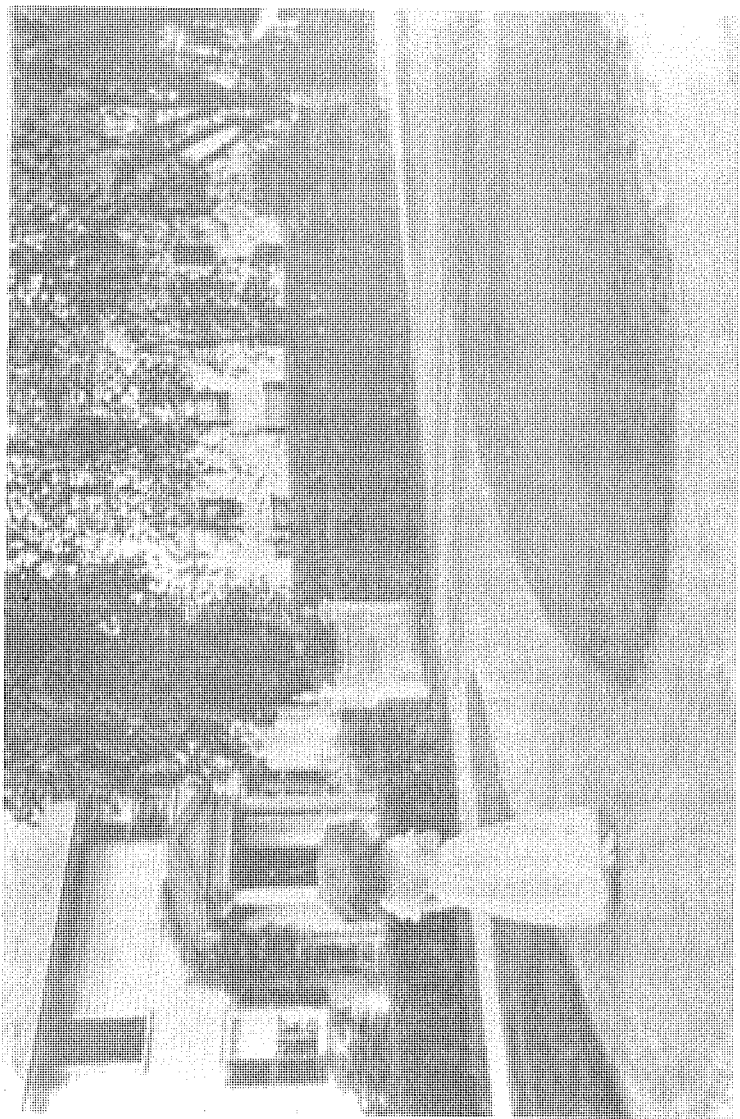
Irene Ktorides

In the early days of colonial New England, there was nothing more embarrassing for an adult Puritan than to be unmarried. In that new and unsettled land, a man needed a wife if for nothing more than a housekeeper. A woman needed a husband, for it was dangerous to be alone in the forest, especially with the constant fear of Indian uprising.

The colonists married early and often. Some girls were married at the age of fourteen, and many girls became mothers before they were out of their teens. There are many records of young marriages. One example of an early marriage is that of Sarah Heft who married Dr. John Rutledge when she was fourteen; she later had seven children. Another was Ursula Byrd who married Robert Beverley, had a son and was dead before she was seventeen.<sup>1</sup>

It was not unusual for a colonist to remarry shortly after being widowed. "Instances of a thrice widower marrying a twice or thrice widow are not uncommon."<sup>2</sup> "Isaac Winslow proposed to Ben Davis's daughter on the eve of the day he buried his wife and married her within a week."<sup>3</sup>

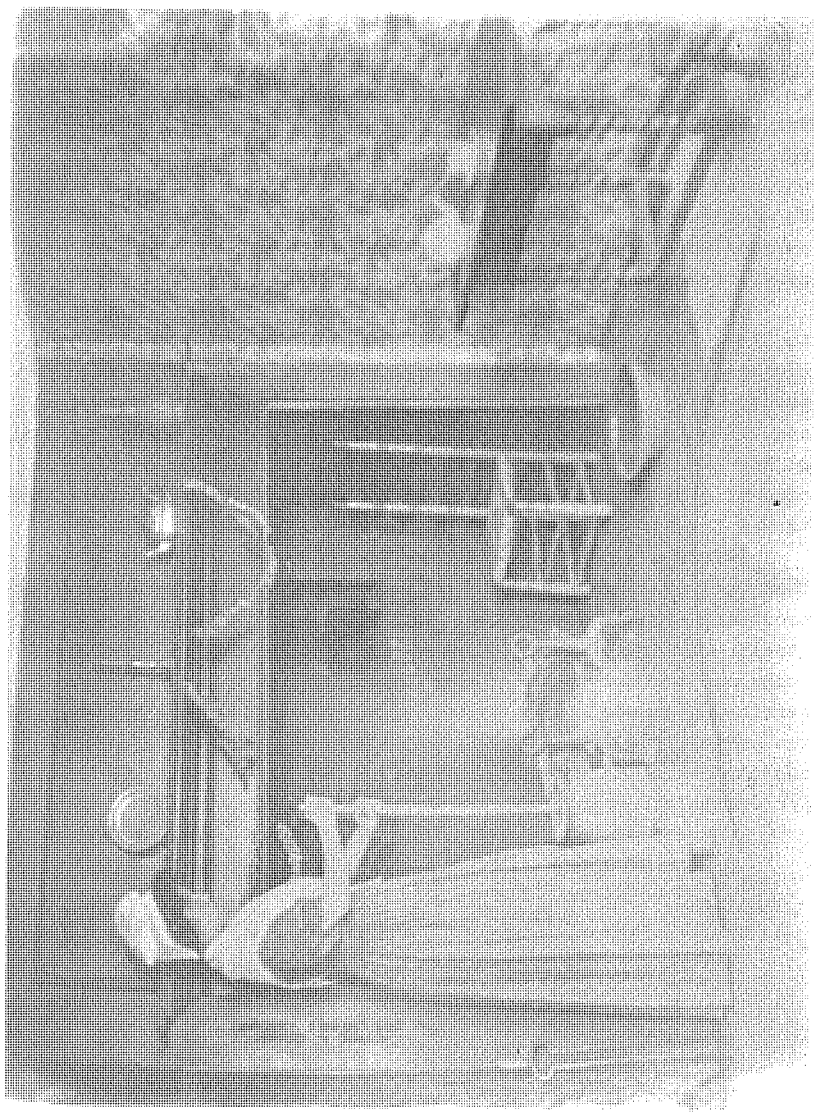
Bachelors were very rare and were looked at by the community as almost would-be criminals. They were seldom permitted to live alone or even choose their own residence, and they had to find a home wherever and with whomever the Court assigned. In Hartford, bachelors had to pay twenty shillings a week to the town for the



"selfish luxury of solitary living."<sup>4</sup> They were under constant supervision of the constable, the watchman, and the tithingman. So, a man could gain his freedom instead of losing it by marrying. A law in Eastham, Mass., in 1695 stated: "Every unmarried man in the township shall kill six blackbirds or three crows while he remain single; as a penalty for not doing it, shall not be married until he obey this order."<sup>5</sup> Women who were not married were also looked upon as the men were. These women were considered old maids by the age of twenty-five.

Matrimonial advertisements were common, and appeared first in 1759. On February 23, in the Boston Evening Post, a young man advertised for a bride between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, of "Midling Stature; brown Hair, regular Features and a Lively Brisk Eye;" with good morals, and 300 or 400 pounds of her own. He promised that they would not have to obtain the consent of the parents, as was the custom. Whomever answered this ad was to meet him at a coffee house.<sup>6</sup>

Before a marriage could take place, there were many steps that the young man and woman had to take that were absolutely necessary— courtship, engagement, contract, and the ceremony itself. Prior to courtship, however, Puritan law required the young man to come to the girl's father and formally request permission to see his daughter. Judge Sewall, whose diary covers the period from 1686 to 1725, provided a description of this custom in his diary: "Dec. 7, 1719. Mr. Cooper asks my Consent for Judith's Company; which I freely grant him."<sup>7</sup>

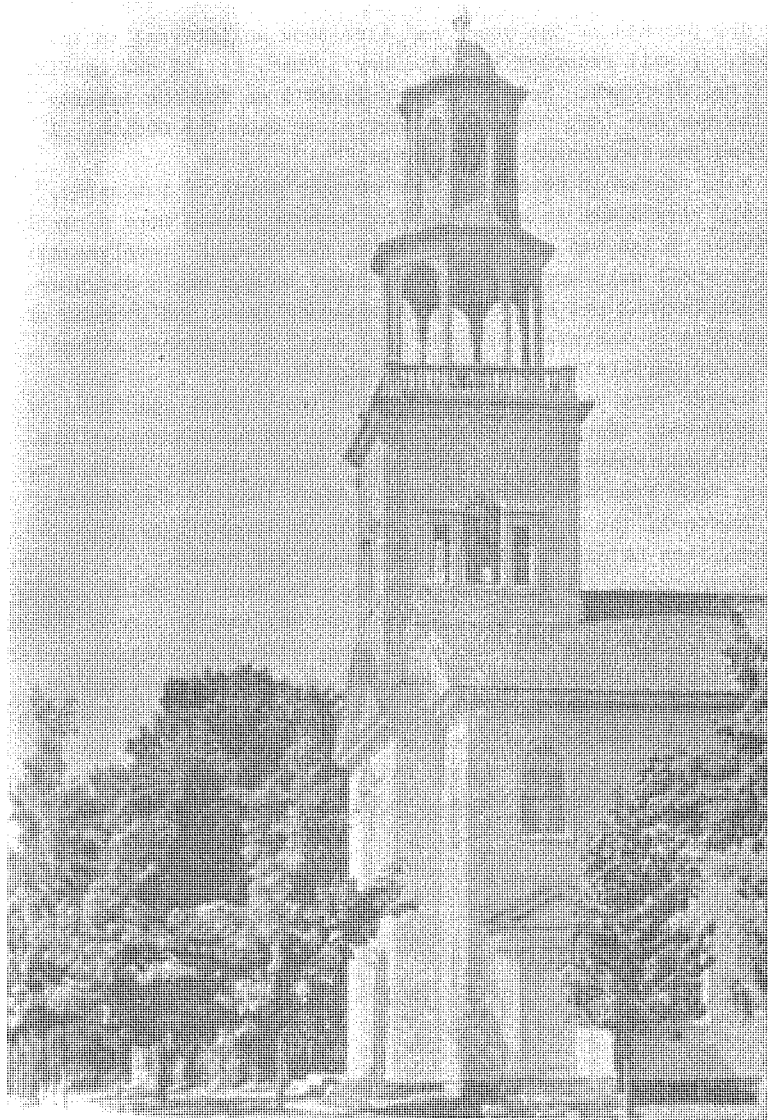


The parents of the young man also took an interest in the matter. Sewall recorded in his diary: "Dec. 11. I and my Wife visit Mr. Stoddard. Madam Stoddard Thank'd me for the Liberty I granted her Son (Mr. Cooper) to wait on my daughter Judith. I returned the Compliment and kindness."<sup>8</sup>

When courtship developed to a certain point of intensity, that is, very close to marriage, the parents became more directly involved. A law was enacted regarding the parents' involvement: "If any shall make any motion of marriage to any man's daughter or mayde servant not haveing first obtayned leave and consent of the parents or masters so to doe (he) shall be punished either by fine or corporall punishment or both."<sup>9</sup>

Houses were very small and crowded; most homes consisted of only one room. During courtship, privacy was almost impossible. Young men and women were not allowed to walk together, except on the way home from the meeting house. After leaving the church door together, the group of young people would split up into couples, each naturally taking the longest way home!

In the house itself there were only two ways in which lovers could talk intimately to each other. One way was through a "court-  
ing stick": a hollow tube six feet long, with a flaring mouthpiece at each end. Luke Montagne, a bachelor of twenty-seven, brought the courting stick to South Hadley. It was useful on cold winter nights when the whole family was present. The lovers sat apart from each other with the courting stick between them, thus enabling them to whisper back and forth without their conversation being overheard.<sup>10</sup>



The other way lovers could talk privately to one another was through the custom called "bundling"---consisting of the couple in bed together, in an unheated room, fully dressed, with a board between them.<sup>11</sup> Bundling usually followed the drawing of the formal contract in which the dowry and other financial requirements were determined.

There have been efforts to explain bundling as an "innocent custom allowed by a simple-minded people living under very primitive conditions."<sup>12</sup> However, this custom led to lamentable results; there are examples of severe punishment to both husband and wife because the birth of a child came less than nine months after marriage.

In courtship, there was also the custom of "seizing a girl's gloves and demanding a kiss as a forfeit."<sup>13</sup> We learn something of this in Samuel Sewall's diary. As he courted the widow Winthrop, on one occasion, he "succeeded in removing her gloves and holding her hand, which he conceives as a great triumph." His diary reads: "I asked her to Acquit me of Rudeness if I drew off her Glove. Enquiring the reason I told her 'twas great odds between handling a dead Goat and a Living Lady. Got it off. . . ."<sup>14</sup>

After the courtship, if the couple decided to marry and had their parents' approval, the next step was the "betrothal", or "contract" - similar to the present day "engagement".

In Plymouth, this was a formal ceremony---a Pastor was employed and a sermon was preached. The meaning of the contract was stated in the Colony Records: "by a lawfull contract the Court understands the mutuall consent of two parties with the consent of parents or



guardians if there be any to be had and a solemne promise of marriage in due tyme to each other before two competent witnesses."<sup>15</sup>

The minimum time a couple could wait between contract and marriage was two weeks, but most waited longer, usually two or three months. The penalties for sexual intercourse during the period between contract and marriage were relatively light. The penalty before contract was a fine of ten pounds for each party, or a public whipping. For the same offense after contract and before marriage, the fine was fifty shillings.<sup>16</sup>

Breach of contract meant legal action and a damage suit of very high proportions. It was a serious matter to toy with a girl's affections. If the young man attempted to make love to the young lady without her parents' consent, he could be brought to court. The records of Suffolk County Court in 1676 showed that "John Lorin stood convict on his own confession of making love to Mary Willis without her parents consent and after being forewarned by them, five pounds."<sup>17</sup>

A young man, after capturing a girl's heart, had to become engaged to her or be brought into court by her father. The Plymouth Colony Records show that "Richard Silvester, in the behalfe of his dautheter, and Dinah Silvester, in the behalfe of herselfe; to recover twenty pounds and costs from John Palmer, for acting fraudulently against the said Dinah, in not performing his engagement to her in point of marriage."<sup>18</sup>

The next step toward marriage was to guarantee economic stability and welfare for the couple. This was the dowry. In most cases, a man would receive most of his portion in the form of land and housing, while a woman was given domestic furnishings,

cattle, and money. These arrangements were detailed and precise, drawn up as a deed. They usually corresponded to the family's ability to pay, and tough bargaining was involved. Judge Sewall gives an account of a dowry which he had to settle. Judge Davenport spoke to him on behalf of his eldest son, "that he might have Liberty to wait upon Jane Hirst now at my House in way of Courtship. He told me he would deal by him as his eldest Son, and more than so. Inten'd to build a House where his uncle Addington dwelt, for him; and that he should have his Pue in the Old Meeting-house."<sup>19</sup>

Often the dowry was used by the parents to maintain discipline. One man left his daughter a gift of household furnishings for her marriage, only if she pleased her mother in her choice of a husband. Another man willed most of his property to his four sons, providing "that att what time all or any on my said sonnes, ar or shalbe Disposed to marry; they each one for him selfe, shall advise therin with, and have the Consent of all or the Major part of the said overseers ther surviveing; upon penalty of being by them Disinherited."<sup>20</sup>

After the formal engagement, and after the dowry and contract had been agreed upon, signed and sealed, the next step was the publishing of the banns. The law in Massachusetts stated: "For the prevention of unlawful Marriages, it is ordered, that no person shall be joyned in Marriage, before the intention of the parties proceeding therein hath been published three times at some publick meeting, in the Towns where the parties or either of them do ordinarily reside, or by setting up in writing, upon some Post

of their Meeting House door in publick view, there to stand as it may be easily read, by the space of fourteen days."<sup>21</sup> In 1647, the Rhode Island laws required the posting of the banns at two town-meetings, confirmed by the head officer, and registered in the town clerk's book; otherwise, the marriage would be void.

Marriage was regarded as a civil affair. It was a contract between two persons, bound with matters of ownership, inheritance, residence, and so on. Since it was a civil ceremony, not a religious one, the law required all marriages be performed by a justice of the peace or other magistrate, "sometimes under penalty of nullity for those solemnized in any other way."<sup>22</sup>

"Disorderly marriages" were not uncommon. These were marriages where a man and woman lived together as man and wife without any legal or religious ceremony, with the man usually being much older—a great scandal to the whole community. One such couple wed in this way were met walking in the street by a magistrate. Asking John Rogers if he persisted in calling this woman his wife, he violently answered yes. And asking Mary if she wished "such an old man as this" to be her husband, she too, answered yes. The governor then, "by the laws of God and this Commonwealth", pronounced them man and wife. They were thus married legally.<sup>23</sup>

Before the actual wedding ceremony, the couple walked together to where the ceremony was to take place so that all might see them. Sewall describes in his diary one of his daughters with her new husband, leading the procession of six couples on the way to the church. Everyone observed them as they passed through the narrow Boston streets and in to the Puritan meeting-house, although the usual place for a wedding ceremony was the bride's home.

The habit of the Puritans in the seventeenth century to simplify everything affected wedding customs. They were not like the weddings of the eighteenth century with great feasts and merriment. The ceremony was short and simple, and there were no prayers. It was considered as much a "church superstition" to have a prayer at a wedding as at a funeral.<sup>24</sup> There were no set patterns as to the content of the ceremony as we have today. It was spontaneous; any fitting words would do.

No one was expected to dress extravagantly; there were not many flowers or candles as decorations. In one typical wedding, both mother and daughter wore simple dresses of pale-blue woolen cloth. The bride wore a starched white cap, similar to a nurse's cap. The groom, his father, and brothers wore dark gray coats and knee breeches, tied with ribbon at the knees.<sup>25</sup>

It was, however, the custom to allow the bride to choose the verse from the Bible for the sermon to be delivered on the Sunday when she became a bride. In some communities, the bride and groom sat in the gallery, and in the middle of the sermon rose and turned several times so that everyone might see them.<sup>26</sup>

Just before the ceremony, as the couple stood before the judge, each held the right hand behind the back as the best man and bridesmaid went up behind them and removed the gloves. The gloves were then kept by the best man and bridesmaid as cherished possessions.

The feast after the wedding was given at the home of the bride's parents. It was, in the eighteenth century as opposed to the seventeenth century, accompanied by much revelry and extravagance, with some festivities lasting two or three days, and the guests

staying a week. Wedding rings were rarely used, although they were worn in some cases.

Before sitting down to eat at the feast, everyone had a glass of wine and prayed for the blessings of the couple. Immediately after the asking of the blessing, usually by the oldest minister present as was done at one feast in Sharon, Connecticut, in 1726, "tankards filled with spiced hard cider were passed from hand to hand down the table, each person filling his own mug or tumbler."<sup>27</sup> This cider that they drank--equivalent to the wedding drink of champagne used today-- was called "sack-posset"--a drink mixed with milk, liquors, and other ingredients and eaten with a spoon.<sup>28</sup>

Guests were "seated with regard to precedence." There were few chairs, and those were reserved for "the most infirm and the greatest dignitaries". Otherwise, guests brought their own chairs, along with their own tankards and mugs, spoons and forks. "All the well-to-do neighbors contributed the best of such as they possessed, this generous sort of neighborliness being a characteristic of the time and of all new settlements."<sup>29</sup>

All the housewives and their servants helped in the preparation and also in the serving of all of the food and drink. The meal was not served in courses; rather, there was a great variety of food served, and a great quantity of it, everyone took whatever pleased them without changing plates. A list of food at one wedding feast included roast venison, roast turkey, fricasse of chicken, beef hash, boiled fish, stuffed cod, pigeon, boiled eels, Indian pudding, succotash, roast goose stuffed with chestnuts, pumpkin pies, apple tarts, and many kinds of vegetables.<sup>30</sup> Soups were rarely served.<sup>31</sup>

After the meal "the ladies left the table, the table cloths were removed and various strong liquors, together with pipes and tobacco, were brought in along with trays filled high with broken blocks of nut-sweet" (peanut brittle).<sup>32</sup>

The amusements at a feast consisted of young men engaged in "rastling, quoits, running, leaping, archery and firing at a mark."<sup>33</sup> Dancing did not become an amusement until 1769. In 1651, it was necessary to forbid dancing at taverns on the occasion of a wedding, as that was considered immoral. But by 1769, at a wedding feast in New London, "ninety-six jigs, fifty contra-dances, forty-three minuets, and seventeen hornpipes were danced, and party broke up at quarter of one in the morning."<sup>34</sup>

The relatives were the only ones who were supposed to give gifts to the couple; consequently there were very few presents. Gifts consisted mostly of linen for the new household. Pewter was cherished, and a full set of pewter tableware was considered a fine wedding gift from a father to his daughter. Bride-cake and bride-gloves were sent as gifts to the friends and relatives of the couple.

One custom that has been carried over is the throwing of the garter. Whomever caught it was brought good luck and a speedy marriage. Although not carried over into today, another custom practiced in Marblehead, was that of "bedding." This consisted of the bridesmaids and groomsmen putting the wedded couple to bed, and along the Massachusetts coasts, "the groom was led to the bridal chamber clad in a brocaded night-gown."<sup>35</sup>

Another sport in Connecticut was that of stealing "Mistress Bride." A group of young men, usually those not invited to the

wedding, rushed in after the ceremony, seized the bride, carried her to a waiting carriage, and rode to the tavern. The groom and his friends followed, getting back his bride by offering a supper to the bride stealers. The last bride stolen in Hadley was Mrs. Job Marsh, in 1783.<sup>36</sup>

There was no wedding journey (equivalent to our honeymoon) following the ceremony. However, in the afternoon, many of the invited guests—either on horseback or on foot—escorted the newlyweds to the groom's house.

Customs were retained in many isolated communities similar to those from the "old country." The settlers of Londonderry, New Hampshire—Scotch-Irish Presbyterians—celebrated a marriage noisily with firing of guns just as their ancestors had in Ireland, "when the Catholics had been forbidden the use of firearms, had ostentatiously paraded their privileged Protestant condition by firing off their guns and muskets at every celebration."<sup>37</sup>

After the publishing of the banns, guests were invited. The wedding day was welcomed at daybreak by firing of guns at both the bride's and groom's house. The groom and his male friends headed toward the bride's house. On the way, salutes were fired at each house passed, and those in the houses in return answered with a blast from their guns. Half way to the bride's house, the groom and his friends were met by the male friends of the bride, and another round of guns was fired. Each group of men then picked someone to "run for the bottle," that is, racing to the bride's house for a pot of rum. Both men raced to the house, the winner grabbed the bottle, returned to the bridal group, drank to the bride's health and passed the bottle. Upon reaching the bride's

house, another salute was fired, and the groom and his party entered a room set aside for them. None of the bride's friends could enter this room until the bride, with the best man, entered and placed herself next to the bridesmaid before the minister, with the best man at the side of the groom. When it came time to join hands, the couple put their right hands behind their backs, and the bridesmaid and the best man pulled off the wedding-gloves at the same moment. At the end of the ceremony, everyone kissed the bride, and the firing again started. The day ended with more firing.<sup>38</sup>

In case of second marriages, the second husband was responsible for the debts of the first, except in certain cases. This was when the bride was married "in her chemise in the King's Highway."<sup>39</sup> This was known as a "shift marriage"—an English custom brought to the colonies consisting of a widow wearing only a shift in marriage to avoid burdening her new husband with her first husband's debts. In one instance, a bride stood naked in a closet and extended her hand through the door so that she might be wed.<sup>40</sup>

In Westminster, Vermont, Widow Lovejoy, while nude and hidden in a chimney recess behind a curtain, wedded Asa Averill. Another example of a shift marriage was in February, 1774, in York, Maine. It is said that one minister took pity on the shivering bride and threw his coat over her. This was the Widow Mary Bradley who met the groom half way from her home to his, clad only in a shift.<sup>41</sup>

In a marriage certificate of a shift marriage, Justice William Hall wrote: "On March 11, 1717, did Philip Shearman Take the Widow Hannah Clarke in her Shift, without any other Apparel, and led her across the Highway, as the Law directs in such Cases and was then



married according to law by me."<sup>42</sup> Since second marriages were the rule, and shift marriages beneficial to the new husband, it is no surprise that they were a common occurrence.

In married life itself, "the proper attitude of a wife towards her husband was a reverend subjection." This was because some principles of authority were essential, since "differences will arise and be seen, and so the one must give way, and apply unto the other; this, God and nature layeth upon the woman, rather than upon the man."<sup>43</sup> She could not raise her hand to him or use harsh words without fear of public punishment in the stocks.

"The colonists were extremely anxious to restrain vice by legislation. The whole field of private morals was brought under the purview of the magistrate."<sup>44</sup> The penalty for adultery in early Massachusetts was whipping, branding, banishment, or even death. In 1632, a law was passed in Massachusetts punishing adultery with death. In 1643, it was recorded; "At this court of assistants one James Britton... and Mary Latham, a proper young woman about eighteen years of age... were condemned to die for adultery, upon a law formerly made and published in print..."<sup>45</sup>

When punishment by death was too severe and when the crime deserved more than whipping, the guilty person was given a mark of disgrace by means of branding. This mark was sometimes sewed on the front or the sleeve of the dress. Other times it was burnt right into the flesh of the breast. In 1639, in Plymouth, a woman was sentenced to be whipped through the streets and to wear the mark upon her left sleeve. If she was ever seen without the mark, she was to be "burned in the face with a hot iron." In 1641, a man and a woman, for committing adultery, were severely

whipped at a public post and condemned to wear the letters AD on a conspicuous place on their clothing.<sup>46</sup>

The majority of the colonists were "God-fearing" people who led blameless lives. So it was natural that these people were most severe in dealing with those who lowered the morality of the colonies.

To the modern woman, the colonial marriage, with its fixed rules from courtship on to marriage and after marriage, seems plain and unromantic. However, this was not the case. The colonists loved as passionately as ever men and women have, and they found much joy in their marriage as anyone ever has. Proof of this is in the few love-letters that still remain to show their affections. Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the Treasury, wrote this of his Betsy: "I suspect . . . that if others knew the charm of my sweetheart as I do, I would have a great number of competitors. I wish I could give you an idea of her. You have no conception of how sweet a girl she is. It is only in my heart that her image is truly drawn. She has a lovely form, and still more lovely mind. She is all Goodness, the gentlest, the dearest, the tenderest of her sex--Oh, Betsy, How I love her. . . ."<sup>47</sup>

There were some divorces, and as Madam Knight points out, they were plentiful in Connecticut. She wrote: "These uncomely Stand-aways are too much in vogue among the English in this indulgent colony, as their records plentifully prove; and that on very trivial matters of which some have been told me, but are not Proper to be Related by a Female Pen."<sup>48</sup>

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Charles M. Andrews, Colonial Folkways, v. IX, (New York, 1919), pp. 86-87.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 86.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup>Alice Morse Earle, Customs and Fashions in Old New England, (New York, 1893), p. 36.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 37.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 66.
- <sup>7</sup>Sewall's Diary, v. III, p. 237, cited in Carl Holliday, Woman's Life in Colonial Days, (Boston, 1922), p. 248.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup>Brigham, "The Compact with the Charter and Laws of the Colony of New Plymouth", cited in John Demos, A Little Commonwealth, (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 154.
- <sup>10</sup>B. A. Bodkin, Treasury of New England Folklore, (New York, 1947), p. 725.
- <sup>11</sup>Zephine Humphrey, A Book of New England, (Howell, Soskin, Publishers, 1948), p. 43.
- <sup>12</sup>Holliday, op. cit., p. 283.
- <sup>13</sup>Lillian Eichler, The Customs of Mankind, (New York, 1924), p. 201.
- <sup>14</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup>Brigham, op. cit., cited in Demos, op. cit., p. 157.
- <sup>16</sup>Demos, op. cit., p. 158.
- <sup>17</sup>George Elliot Howard, A History of Matrimonial Institutions, v. II, (Chicago, 1904), p. 166.

- <sup>18</sup>Holliday, op. cit., p. 249.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 250.
- <sup>20</sup>Mayflower Descendent, v. XI, p. 82, cited on Demos, op. cit., p. 156.
- <sup>21</sup>Brigham, op. cit., p. 272, cited in Demos, op. cit., p. 159.
- <sup>22</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 128.
- <sup>23</sup>Earle, op. cit., p. 71.
- <sup>24</sup>James Newhall, Ye Great and General Courte in Colonie Times, (Massachusetts, 1896), p. 371.
- <sup>25</sup>W. E. Woodward, The Way Our People Lived, (New York, 1944), p. 34.
- <sup>26</sup>Earle, op. cit., pp. 69-70.
- <sup>27</sup>Helen Everston Smith, Colonial Days and Ways, (New York, 1900), pp. 171-172.
- <sup>28</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 141.
- <sup>29</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 171.
- <sup>30</sup>Woodward, op. cit., p. 36.
- <sup>31</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 171.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid., pp. 175-176.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 180.
- <sup>34</sup>Earle, op. cit., p. 74.
- <sup>35</sup>Howard, op. cit., p. 140.

36 Earle, op. cit., p. 77.

37 Ibid., p. 74.

38 Ibid., p. 75.

39 Andrews, op. cit., p. 88.

40 Ibid.

41 Earle, op. cit., p. 78.

42 Bolkin, op. cit., pp. 727-728.

43 Demos, op. cit., p. 83.

44 Howard, op. cit., p. 169.

45 History of New England, v. II., p. 190, cited in Holliday, op. cit., p. 279.

46 Holliday, Ibid., p. 281.

47 Ibid., p. 272.

48 Earle, op. cit., p. 81.