Two Becoming One

An Examination of Early American Courtship and Marriage Practices

Brandi Marie Hatfield

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_____
Samuel Smith, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

_____
Douglas Mann, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Carl Curtis, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Brenda Ayres, Ph.D.
Honors Director

_____
Date

Abstract

One may understand the significance of courtship and marriage practices in seventeenth and eighteenth-century America by examining the religious motivations drawn from Anglican and Puritan spirituality. Firsthand accounts, period literature, and scholarly works on early American culture work together to render images of religious experiences in Virginia and New England. The spiritual and material significance of marriage to an individual, that person's family, and the community made the attainment of marriage the fulfillment of duty. The need to preserve society, the skills acquired through education, the family context of courtship, and conduct of wedding ceremonies reflected the conviction that entering marriage was an act of Christian service.

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Introduction

One might imagine a courting couple as the leading characters of a play, standing front and center with the spotlight shining brightly upon them. Together they ponder what lies before them as they make plans for their future life as husband and wife. They wonder what their life together will be like as they raise a family of their own. However, if these characters were depicting an early American couple, the single spotlight would hardly do justice to the scene. Only the raising of the house lights would reveal the crowd of other characters on all sides of the couple. Among these newly revealed characters would be the couple's family members, fellow townspeople, the clergymen, and their local government officials. The twenty-first century couple would not likely expect such a multitude of participants in their relationship, but the community's high level of participation in a couple's preparation for marriage was quite expected during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A young man and woman who decided to marry made commitments to each other but only after attending to their duties as good Christian sons and daughters. For New Englanders and Virginians, religious impulses had a pervasive influence throughout their societies by shaping expectations, formulating social customs, and even dictating legal orders. As religious beliefs were interwoven throughout daily life, so members of the community had their lives and reputations entwined with one another. Massachusetts's Puritan tradition and Virginia's Anglican traditions often held different aims and therefore, produced varied practices. Many factors such as motivations for settlement,

the physical environment of the region, and composition of society combined to make marriage for settlers in the North differ from those in the South. However, people in the two regions did share many common experiences in navigating the path toward marriage. The need for societal preservation, the course of their education, the role of their families in courtship, and the customs of their marriage ceremonies impressed upon Puritans and Anglicans alike their religious duties in marriage.

Marriage as the Preservation of Society

The challenges of settling in a new land made the welfare of society a concern of every person. Without a stable population, no community could continue for long. Inspired by prospects for trade, the voyagers to Virginia in 1607 did not come to the New World with permanent settlement in mind. On the other hand, the primary aim for Puritans was the establishment of a purer social order in this new land. The colonists of Virginia differed from those in Massachusetts regarding their objectives for settlement, but both groups ultimately recognized the importance of families to their New World societies. The unique paths of settlement helped to shape the marriage expectations for men and women in each place.

In terms of population, Virginia had truly meager beginnings. In his account of the Jamestown Settlement between 1607 and 1608, Captain John Smith reported only two women among the band of roughly two hundred ninety-five settlers.[1] Bearing King James' charter, the men bound for Virginia dreamed of a land laden with valuable raw materials. Their 1606 charter declared that they would "dig, mine, and search for all

1. Mary Newton Stanard, *Colonial Virginia: Its People and Customs* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970), 16.

Manner of Mines of Gold, Silver, and Copper."[2] Commissioned on a quest for resources, these early colonists gave little thought to establishing a stable society. Thus, without a solid family structure and through periods of political disorder, Virginia remained stunted and underdeveloped. Virginia society did not truly blossom until the cultivation efforts of Sir William Berkeley, who assumed the position of royal governor in 1642. Although the colony's population growth had remained largely dormant during the thirty-five years before Berkeley's arrival, his thirty-five year governorship witnessed an increase from eight thousand inhabitants to forty thousand.

By extending his hand to the Cavaliers of England no longer welcome under Cromwell's Protectorate government, Berkeley marketed Virginia to fellow members of the British elite. Although small in number, Berkeley's fellow gentry proved vastly influential in transplanting their beloved way of life from the old world to the new.[3] While this group was far outnumbered by indentured servants, who composed seventy-five percent of the population, the Virginia gentry were able to set social standards in the stratified society they created. Among the vast number of servants, some were English young ladies who were coerced into making the voyage to provide marriage partners for the abundance of single men in the colony.[4] The verse entitled "The Trapanned Maiden" offered one perspective on the plight of a female servant in Virginia. It lamented that backbreaking labor, limited provisions, and lack of respect characterized the woman's

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2. Yale Law School, Lillian Goldman Law Library, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy, "The First Charter of Virginia; April 10, 1606," http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/va01.asp (accessed March 28, 2010).

3. David H. Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 210-214.

4. Stanard, *Colonial Virginia*, 167.

life. The fictional woman advised that no one follow her to Virginia, and she longed for the chance to return home.[5] Although not all women were sent to Virginia by force, the women who did come found themselves outnumbered by men, four to one. As a result, females had little difficulty making it to the altar during their teenage years as men eagerly secured wives before they were all gone.[6]

Motivated by different ideals, Puritan settlers envisioned themselves as representatives of God's covenant to the world as they established their society in New England. A group of twenty-one thousand sojourners settled in New England over an eleven-year period between 1630 and 1641. Their colony experienced successful growth from the start. Arriving on the shores of the New World in 1630, the *Arbella* was one of seventeen vessels the Puritans used to flee England for a new beginning. On their decks were people of an average sort in England, being neither prominent nor lowly, who shared the common goal of the Puritan faith, building a model society as a testimony before the world.[7] Capturing the gravity of their situation, Governor John Winthrop explained that by claiming themselves as partakers in God's "covenant," they accepted the responsibility of bearing His name well. Should they renege on their responsibility to honor God, they would rightly bear the condemnation of the world. Winthrop called their destination "a place of cohabitation and consortship" which would be "under a new form of government both civil and ecclesiastical." Pointing his fellow sojourners to reverence

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5. The term *trapanned* described a woman captured and sent to the New World. "The Trapanned Maiden" in *Women's Voices, Women's Lives: Documents in Early American History*, ed. Carol Berkin and Leslie Horowitz (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 103-106.

6. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 26, 286.

7. Ibid., 13-17.

God's sovereignty, he urged each man and woman to sacrifice personal desires for the welfare of the community. Vested with God's blessing upon their establishment, he believed that they needed to remain faithful to God's commands as the people around them watched to see what kind of lives these chosen people would live.[8] Although they crossed an ocean, the journey was not over for these covenant people when they set foot on present-day New England. In their quest to establish a model community, the Puritans saw the family unit as both their means of survival and the vehicle for spreading Christianity. Puritan preachers such as Jonathan Mitchell urged Puritans to appreciate the foundation families laid for their society by describing the family as "the root whence church and commonwealth cometh."[9] Thus, population growth by means of marriage was a holy purpose for the Puritans.

The need for population growth to sustain the settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts placed upon men and women the expectation of marriage. Since marriage equaled the fulfillment of one's obligation to society, singleness was quite naturally an object of scorn among colonists in Virginia and Massachusetts. Churches in both regions explained the push for marriage by identifying a religious imperative. Utterly repudiating the Catholic Church's promotion of abstinence from marriage as a holy service to God, clergymen in Anglican and Puritan churches preached that marriage was a colonist's religious duty. On a societal level, marriage was a necessity to the establishment of the colonies, and on a personal level, it was the essential means of self-preservation for both

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8. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," The Religious Freedom Page. http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html (accessed February 24, 2010).

9. Edmund Sears Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 143.

men and women. Thus, even after the colonists had firmly established their settlements in the New World, expectations still compelled men and women to enter marriage as part of their Christian duty.

Virginians had to be married to be considered productive members of society. The mandate to marry placed a stigma upon the unmarried by classifying single men as aimless and irresponsible and single women as deficient in personality and appearance.[10] It was commonly believed that every woman was created to be a wife and that she should wholeheartedly pursue that object to grow the population and perform her religious duty as a supportive partner to a husband. [11] Aspiring for marriage from birth, young ladies saw the culmination of their lives in matrimony. Since singleness demonstrated failure, Virginia women often married by their mid-teens and usually no later than early twenties.[12] The push to marry was, on the other hand, tempered by warnings against foolishly rushing into marriage. Although detractors lacked respect even for virtuous single women, conduct literature cautioned the women against accepting the worse fate of entering hastily into an unwise marriage out of the fear of remaining single.[13]

On the one hand, women needed to preserve their reputations, but on the other, they were urged to avoid bad matches. While the marriage imperative during the seventeenth century formed families to sustain the society, courtship remained a pivotal

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10. Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (New York: Norton, 1972), 137-38.

11. Ibid., 136.

12. Arthur W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family: Volume I: The Colonial Period* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), 245; Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 139.

13. Richard Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, in *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640-1720*, vol. 3 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002), 213.

part of Virginians' lives throughout the eighteenth century. The needs of survival and establishment gave way to the need for maintenance of social order. Crucial to one's social standing, marriage was the desirable state that Virginians diligently sought through courtship. In fact, Robert Hunter, an English visitor to Virginia in 1786, designated "courtship" as "the principal business of Virginia."[14] Young men were not the only suitors that pursued courtships. Older men who experienced the deaths of their wives often remarried several times, even into their fifties, preferring the companionship, social stability, and material advantages of marriage throughout their lives.[15] Thus, Virginians' active pursuit of marriage conveyed their conviction that it was far better to be in the marriage state than outside of it.

Puritans cast the same disapproving glare on singleness as did Anglicans. Their preachers strongly advocated marriage as a religious duty. John Cotton's *A Meet Help or, A Wedding Sermon* opened with God's ordination of the first marriage in the Garden of Eden. With concern for man's wellbeing, God in His wisdom provided Adam with a wife. Declaring that "Matches are made in Heaven," Cotton declared that this was a reality in first marriage as well as all subsequent unions.[16] Declaring marriage to be the course for all, he said that those who did not marry were exceptions either because of special circumstances or unsavory dispositions. He even went so far as to say that the

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14. Emory Evans, *A "Topping People": The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 124.

15. Ibid., 124.

16. John Cotton, *Meet Help or, A Wedding Sermon Preached at New-Castle in New England, June 19th 1694, at the Marriage of Mr. John Clark, and Mrs. Elizabeth Woodbridge* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1699), 8-9, Early English Books Online, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:62369130 (accessed February 24, 2010).

unmarried failed in their purpose, brought ill upon their society, and violated God's intentions. Cotton declared celibacy to be a frustration of God's design for marriage and observed that "Women are Creatures without which there is no comfortable Living for man."[17] Puritan authorities ensured that his statement proved true. Considered outcasts of society, unmarried men had specific places designated for them to live, and they were essentially bribed with free land to marry.[18] A single person was truly an anomaly and thus became the natural object of suspicion and criticism by members of the Puritan community. If not induced to marry out of religious obedience, a young person certainly had the motivation to save his or her reputation.

Education as the Formation of Christian Spouses

While the social imperative strongly guided young people toward marriage, their education also helped to mold them into proper men and women of society. Whether instructed inside the home or sent away, children received educations centered upon their families' religious convictions. Both Anglicans and Puritans learned catechisms and read theological texts, and some of those children also developed skills in areas such as mathematics and music. While boys received more academic training than girls, both were expected to possess broad skill sets respective to gender. Thus, education served as an essential means whereby young people prepared for their God-given roles.

Desiring to mold their children into refined and well-rounded members of polished society, the Virginia gentry commonly sought tutors for in-home instruction. From such a post, New Jersey native and Princeton student Philip Vickers Fithian offered

17. Cotton, *Meet Help*, 11, 14-17, 23.

18. Calhoun, *A Social History*, 67-68.

a glimpse into the education of Robert Carter's children through his journal and letters. In August 1773, Fithian accepted Carter's request to instruct the young children as well as the teenagers of the house. By November, he was busying the boys and girls with weekly lessons of grammar, reading, writing, mathematics, and spelling, while the boys also learned classical languages.[19] His scholastic offerings were not the only schooling the children received. They spent much time learning from the traveling music and dancing masters. Mr. Stadley, the music master, regularly taught one daughter to play the piano forte and the harpsichord and another to play the guitar. The Carter family was just one along the music master's route, and thus, he spent several days with the family while in the area.[20] On Friday in December, Fithian explained that he ended the children's lessons until Monday due to the arrival of dancing master Mr. Christian.[21] As with the music master, Mr. Christian visited various plantations in the Northern Neck of Virginia to educate the children in the refinement of dancing. After having lessons for the children of a given house, it was customary to hold a dance for the students to demonstrate their skills.[22] Fithian came to realize how essential dancing was to Virginia culture and thus, often felt awkward when in company because he had never learned the skill. He regretted his inability to participate, especially since he recognized dancing as

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19. Philip Vickers Fithian, *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 8, 26.

20. Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 34, 37.

21. Ibid., 42.

22. Hunter Dickinson Farish, introduction to *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), xlii.

an indispensible social convention for Virginians.[23] Social dances gave the occasions for young people to mingle and make impressions on potential marriage partners and their families. Fithian's stay in with the Carter family allowed him to discover firsthand the importance of dancing to a proper genteel education as it enabled Virginia young people to present themselves well in society. Although he longed to dance, Fithian did not long to join in Virginia's style of courtship, maintaining a sincere devotion to his beloved Elizabeth Beatty at home. An avid reader, Fithian mirrored literary examples in articulating his affection for Elizabeth, whom he called Laura, in frequent letters. The homesick young man strove to maintain the delicate balance of rational restraint and romantic expression in corresponding with Elizabeth. Even though Fithian did not fully embrace Virginia planter culture, John Fea contends that his genteel surroundings did shape his thoughts and actions, increasing their sentimentality.[24]

Conduct literature was another form of education that helped young people conform to social expectations. For Anglicans, Richard Allestree's writings helped dictate the manners of their society. Desiring to replicate the culture of Europe, Virginians held to the essential guide of conduct in England called *The Whole Duty of Man*, an integral part of an Anglican family's library. Allestree published this work anonymously in 1658. Allestree also produced *The Gentleman's Calling* in 1673 and *The*

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23. Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 43.

24. John Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 118-125.

Ladies Calling in 1673.[25] The *Ladies Calling* provided descriptions of what it meant to be a proper Christian woman. This literature recommended that young women busy themselves in order to maintain good character. The cultivated skills becoming to females included artistic talent, verbal ability, and household management.[26] Although called to different earthly occupations than their male counterparts, ladies shared with them a common responsibility to pursue moral lives. Allestree's preface declares, "in respect of their intellects they are below men; yet sure in the sublimest [*sic*] part of humanity, they are their equals: they have souls as divine an Original, as endless a Duration, and as capable of infinit [*sic*] Beatitude."[27] For centuries, thinkers had disputed with one another concerning the spiritual state of women, questioning whether they possessed spiritual equality with men.[28] As a proper gentry family, the Carters regularly engaged in discussions, especially at meal times, that reflected their pursuit of knowledge as a hallmark of their social standing.[29] The topic of women's souls did not escape their notice. Fithian recorded a lively family discussion during which one Carter daughter, Priscilla, remarked that women would have little need to improve their minds or maintain

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25. After being removed from his Oxford post in 1648, Allestree was eventually imprisoned in 1659 for his activities in support of the crown and the Church of England. William St. Clair and Irmgard Maasen, introduction to *Conduct Literature for Women, 1640-1720*, vol. 3 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002), 1-3.

26. Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 217.

27. Ibid., 43-44.

28. See Clive Hart, Disputatio nova contra mulieres*/ A New Argument Against Women: A Critical Translation from the Latin with Commentary, Together with the Original Latin Text of 1595* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

29. Fea, *The Way of Improvement*, 110-111.

moral purity if they lacked souls.[30] By that account, the careful attention that young ladies were to pay to conduct literature served as another testimony to their souls' pursuit of propriety.

Through education, Puritans sought to form moral, productive, and marriageable members of society. A foundational part of personal development in Puritan culture was the "breaking of the will," the responsibility of parents to curb their children's natural propensity for sin. Out of loving concern for their spiritual states, Puritan parents fostered close-knit relationships with their children that involved instruction, guidance, and chastening.[31] The discipline and moral guidance they offered were essential in the formation of their children into proper members of society. Cotton Mather's *A Family Well-Ordered* declared that "Families are the Nurseries of all Societies . . . ."[32] He held parents responsible for their children's spiritual states because of the inborn wickedness they had passed to their children. Parents were to apply the antidotes of education and spiritual instruction. As part of that instruction, children were to memorize the catechism, be able to defend the truths they affirmed, and apply the messages of sermons to their young lives with their parents' help.[33]

Mather declared schools to be essential means of forming children into productive and pious members of society. He reminded his fellow Puritans of the importance of

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30. Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 111.

31. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 98-101.

32. Cotton Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered* (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1699), 3, Early English Books Online, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id =xri:eebo:citation:16156254 (accessed February 24, 2010).

33. Ibid., 9-20.

education to the Protestant Reformation. Since Puritans thought of themselves as bearers of the Reformation to the New World, the impulse to build schools followed. He called upon ministers to champion the building of schools because the preservation of Christianity depended upon education.[34] From the Reformation, Puritans also received their concept of one's "calling" as a profession. Parents took several steps to guide their children to fulfill their stations in life. As a young teenager, a boy obtained an apprenticeship or attended college as preparation for his "calling."[35] Puritans believed that training was most effective when performed in other people's homes, where boys learned through apprenticeships and girls refined household skills. Sometimes, they sent their children away to school. Since Puritans highly valued respect for parents, children maintained a level of formality in their presence.[36] Mather advised parents to model the relationship with their children after that of God and His children in balancing due reverence and warmth.[37] Puritans had such a concern for household respect that governing authorities sometimes removed insubordinate children from their homes.[38] Through whatever means necessary, Puritans desired that their children develop the useful skills and Christian humility needed to honor God with their lives.

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34. Cotton Mather, "An address, Ad fratres in ermo," in *A Family Well-Ordered* (5 p. at end), 1-4, Early English Books Online, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:16156254 (accessed February 24, 2010).

35. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 67-70.

36. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 101.

37. Mather, *A Family Well-Ordered*, 22.

38. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 76-78.

Unlike their Anglican counterparts, the seventeenth-century Puritans did not believe the art of dancing a necessary skill for a young person in society. In a 1684 sermon entitled *An Arrow Against Profane and Promiscuous Dancing Drawn out of the Quiver of Scripture*, Increase Mather used quite vivid language in denouncing dances of mixed company as flagrant disobedience to God. While wealthy Virginia families regularly placed their children under the instruction of traveling dancing masters, the potential opening of a dancing school in Boston was all the impetus that was needed for Mather to compose this invective. As time passed, New Englanders developed a growing interest in dancing. Striving to maintain Puritan piety in this changing environment, Mather's son Cotton allowed for men and women to dance together but urged the faithful to consider whether the environment of such dancing edified Christian character. Throughout the eighteenth century, dancing, especially country dancing, became quite popular in New England. These group dances avoided the intimate contact feared in other forms of dance and offered a new opportunity for social interaction. While prominent New Englanders frequented balls, more common folk enjoyed dances in homes, outside, or in local public buildings.[39] As evidenced, the definition of a well-rounded New Englander changed over the years for many people; however, not all Puritans eagerly added dancing to the desirable skill set for their children.

Family as the Context for Courtship

While the societal mandate and the course of education guided young people toward marriage, their families served as the context in which a marriage was pursued.

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39. Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 110-11.

Families were actively involved before, during, and after courtship, thus making one's home the principle stage upon which the drama of courtship was performed. In both societies, the family ensured that suitors observed specific courting customs when pursuing a young lady's hand. Among the factors influencing courtship experiences were the male to female ratios and land ownership. When men outnumbered women, there was great competition among suitors as those men with fortunes having the advantage. For eligible females, this situation gave them significant sway in choosing where to give their affections. Young men and women and their families evaluated potential spouses by looking for certain qualities. Virginians and New Englanders sought to discover these desirable qualities in various venues and through an assortment of courtship practices.

Throughout the entire courtship process, young Virginians were to honor their parents above all, a practice often equated with honoring God. Before applying for a girl's affections, a young man had to receive approval from his and her father.[40] Even if he was no longer living under his parents' roof, he still remained subordinate to them when pursuing the hand of a young lady.[41] A young woman needed to heed her parents' counsel in choosing the people with whom she associated, especially potential suitors. Allestree explained that parents had "a native right" to guide their children toward matrimony so "that 'tis no less and injustice then [*sic*] disobedience [for children] to dispose of themselves without them."[42] While not forcibly governing their children's marriages, Virginia families did take active roles in determining favorable matches due to

40. Stanard, *Colonial Virginia*, 172.

41. Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 144.

42. Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 374.

the importance of supporting one's future family. Parents of prominent families justified their control over marriage choices with rightful concern for their family assets as well as reputations. In an effort to preserve their investments, Virginia parents could place stipulations on the way that their money would transfer to their child upon marriage.[43]

Violations of parental permission were grievous matters in courtship. Elite Virginia patriarch Landon Carter wrote angrily of his daughter's courtship in his diary. He was adamant in declaring his displeasure regarding the suitor, who came from a family he despised. He defended his objections by asserting his prerogative as a father to have his children married as he saw fit. In his mind, he needed no further justification for his feelings.[44] Emphasizing submission and determining that disobedience to his wishes precluded marital felicity, Carter also recorded in his diary, "Yesterday my poor offending Child Judy came for the 1st time since she was deluded away to be unhappily married against her duty, my will . . . ."[45] *The Ladies Calling* advised that it was "most agreeable to Virgin modesty, which should make marriage an act of obedience then [*sic*] their choice . . . ."[46] However, it further explained that parents were not to coerce a child to marry against his or her will.[47] Virginian Lewis Burwell demonstrated this principle by placing his daughter Lucy's interests over his own. Although a socially and financially favorable marriage to Governor Francis Nicholson appealed to Burwell, he

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43. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 283-284, Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 123.

44. Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39.

45. Isaac, *Uneasy Kingdom*, 41.

46. Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 230.

47. Ibid., 231.

did not want to "'be guilty of such a horrible piece of Cruelty (for the gain of a Kingdom) as to force my daughter to marry ag[ains]t her will the best man alive.'"[48] Submission but not compulsion determined a young person's course in courtship.

Matches in Virginia were made on a mixture of material and romantic grounds; however, if thoughts of love took precedence over familial duty, such a match would not be tolerated. Julia Cherry Spruill explained that, "It was generally asserted that those matches were happiest which were made on grounds such as the suitableness of character, rank, and fortune, rather than on mere personal liking or passion."[49] *The Ladies Calling* warned that literary concepts of love led young people astray by compelling them to worship "Love" as a god and to throw caution aside.[50] Thus, more than simply a warm feeling or violent passion was necessary for a match to endure. Far more practically minded, Virginians intended the education in academics, artistic expression, and practical administration to equip them with the proper qualities to make a good spouse.

Whether by material wealth or education, people in Virginia fit into various stations in life in which they mingled and were generally expected to marry. Fithian remarked to a friend that having a Princeton degree made one worth ten thousand pounds, granting the ability to "come, & go, & converse, & keep company, according to this value . . . ." However, in order to be a man of society in Virginia, Fithian observed that "any young Gentlemen travelling through the Colony . . . is presum'd to be acquainted

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48. Evans, *A "Topping People,"* 123.

49. Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 153.

50. Allestree, *The Ladies Calling*, 229.

with Dancing, Boxing, playing the Fiddle, & Small-Sword, & Cards."[51] Wealth and social skills determined a man's status. In financial terms, a woman contributed her marriage portion of such things as land, slaves, and money to her newly established relationship.[52] Members of Virginia gentry were expected to marry within their class to fellow prominent families, forming a highly interconnected web of family relationships. In 1696, governing officials even passed "An act for the prevention of clandestine marriages" to help avoid the great injury incurred to the person and families affected by matches made between people in different social strata.[53] Taking into consideration these important material concerns, the passage from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century saw greater value placed upon "mutual attraction" in making a match.[54] Even from an Anglican pulpit, William Dunlap of Stratton Major parish called "the tender Passion of love . . . a necessary Requisite in Courtship and Marriage" as he honored a newly married couple in a sermon.[55]

The disparity in the number of men and women in the founding of Virginia notably influenced the colony's courtship customs. The large population of colonial males had to exercise great effort in vying with each other for the hands, hearts, and customarily the wealth of desirable young women. Far fewer in number than males, women generally had no difficulty finding husbands, but men needed much to

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51. Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 212.

52. Evans, *A "Topping People,"* 124-125.

53. Ibid., 121-122.

54. Ibid., 125.

55. John K. Nelson, *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 203.

recommend themselves in order to secure a wife.[56] Since families typically lived far distances from the people and places they liked to visit, socializing was usually a multi-day event. Visiting family members, friends, and suitors usually required lodging.[57] Central to Virginia courtship, social dancing was the activity through which hopeful suitors worked diligently to establish their reputations with eligible young ladies and their families.[58] Enamored young men remained ardent in their pursuit by also using their pens to unabashedly declare their affections in creative acrostics and flattering verses printed in such papers as the *Virginia Gazette*.[59] To instruct young ladies in the proper responses to the amorous appeals of young men, courtship protocol advised them to keep their suitors waiting in suspense before bestowing upon them their good favor. Spruill explained, "The polite code of courtship required the lady to affect not only surprise but even disapproval of her suitor's first declaration." [60] Attesting to the ability of wealthy young ladies to captivate and trifle with young men's attention, Anne Blair's 1768 letter about her time in Hampton Roads in the company of British soldiers noted that "indeed to be people of consequence is vastly clever."[61] Overall, the affluent female's position in colonial Virginian society allowed her to keep suppliant young men at her mercy and ensure that they recognized the high value of her affections.

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56. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 286; Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 154-55.

57. Evans, *A "Topping People,"* 125.

58. The jig, a common dance in Virginia, featured movements that symbolized a young man's pursuit of his mate. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 86-87; Stanard, *Colonial Virginia*, 174.

59. Stanard, *Colonial Virginia*, 177.

60. Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, 149.

61. Stanard, *Colonial Virginia*, 175-76.

As in Virginia, the permission granted by parents and the approval given by friends in the Puritan communities of New England served as an important indicators of future success in the relationship. Romantic interest and parental input together guided the courtship process.[62] A parent considered the opinions of trustworthy friends in drawing their own conclusions. A 1658 letter from John Winthrop, Jr., to his son Fitz-John urged him to look more favorably on his sister's suitor. Although Fitz-John had not cared for the suitor, Mr. Newman, John testified to Newman's good reputation in the community and the support given by friends. Ultimately, he asked that his son not reject Newman altogether but rather, yield to the Lord's wisdom as the deciding factor.[63] The writings of Samuel Sewall offered fitting illustrations of Puritan parental involvement in children's romantic lives. Desiring to court Sewall's daughter Mary, Samuel Gerrish first had his father write to Sewall. Receiving the letter from the suitor's father, Sewall invited him to discuss the potential courtship. Finally, Sewall extended to Samuel Gerrish an invitation to dine with his family.[64]

Requiring that a suitor declare his romantic interest to his own parents and those of his intended before beginning a courtship, Massachusetts Puritans even had laws by which they could prosecute a man who neglected this crucial step.[65] As within Anglican

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62. Lisa Wilson, Ye *Heart of Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven: Yale, 1999), 58.

63. John Winthrop, Jr., "Letter of John Winthrop, Jr., to Fitz-John Winthrop, September 9, 1658," in *Remarkable Providences: Readings in Early American History*, Rev. ed., ed. John Demos (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991), 163-167.

64. Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729.* 2 vols., ed. Milton Halsey Thomas. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 615.

65. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 78; Carl Holliday. *Woman's Life in Colonial Days* (Williamstown: Corner House, 1968), 247-49.

culture, young Puritan men who circumvented the channel of parental consent were deemed the same as men who had committed robbery and rightfully faced penalties.[66] Like their Anglican counterparts, Puritans did not force unions upon unwilling children. Zechariah Tuthill's failed courtship of Sewall's daughter, Elizabeth, aptly illustrated this point. His daughter's dislike for the suitor was clear when she went into hiding upon his arrival. Thus, Sewall wrote in his diary that he turned away the suitor in order to better understand his daughter's wishes.[67] His actions mirrored Cotton's advice that parents ought to recognize God's providence in marriages and not allow their own preferences to hinder their children.[68] Females in Massachusetts held similar power to those in Virginia. Although "the male had the power of choosing whom to court (or who was to court his daughter) . . . the female may have had control of the relationship through the threatened, or actual withholding of affection and through 'playing the coquette.'"[69]

A young lady's home served as the primary venue for courtship in Massachusetts. There, a young man visited with his intended and her family with the hope of winning her heart. Since their children's romantic lives unfolded within their own home, Puritan parents had some share in their children's joys and distresses. A suitor's failure to make an expected visit did not escape the family's notice.[70] Massachusetts Puritans employed

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66. Wilson, *Ye Heart of Man*, 59.

67. Sewall, *Diary*, 406.

68. Cotton, *Meet Help*, 17-18.

69. Herman R. Lantz, Raymond Schmitt, Margaret Britton, Eloise C. Snyder. "Pre-Industrial Patterns in the Colonial Family in America: A Content Analysis of Colonial Magazines." *American Sociological Review* 33, no.3 (1968): 418.

70. Sewall, *Diary*, 615.

two unique courtship practices that encouraged remarkable intimacy but still retained elements of family regulation. Young lovers in Massachusetts could share in intimate conversation while in the presence of other people by using courting sticks. In describing a courting stick, Alice Morse Earle writes, "It is a hollow tube eight feet in length, through which lovers, in the presence of an assembled family, could whisper tender nothings to each other."[71]

The far more intimate practice of bundling actually developed from the colonial spirit of hospitality toward travelers. In keeping with the necessity for members of a family to share their beds with guests regardless of gender, Massachusetts families naturally allowed suitors to spend time with their daughters in bed.[72] In his work simply titled *Bundling*, Henry Stiles wrote, "The ceremony was . . . considered as an indispensable preliminary to matrimony . . . by which means they acquired, that intimate acquaintance with each other's good qualities before marriage, which has been pronounced by philosophers the sure basis of a happy union."[73] By placing a board between the couple or securing the young lady's legs together, parents placed a limit on the extent to which their daughter and her suitor could get to know each other.

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71. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 79-81; Alice Morse Earle. "Old-Time Marriage Customs in New England." *The Journal of American Folklore* 6, no. 21 (1893): 101.

72. A desire to conserve precious fuel kept colonists from permitting their courting children to stay up late with their suitors; however, since they were keenly interested in encouraging romantic relationships, they allowed them to spend time in the dark in bed. Although this may sound as though parents' gave their children a scandalous amount of privacy, one must bear in mind that a daughter typically slept in the same room as her parents. Henry Reed Stiles, *Bundling* (New York: Book Collectors Association, Inc., 1934), 66-73.

73. Stiles, *Bundling*, 51.

New England courtship also demonstrated a pursuit of the pragmatic and the preferential as Puritans were not without their material concerns. They believed that a couple ought to have sufficient means to support themselves in their life together. Discussion took place between the two families as to what each of their children would bring to the marriage, and they worked to persuade each other to give certain amounts.[74] Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, women were most often praised for their inward moral qualities. However, nearing the end of the eighteenth century, men transitioned in their emphasis by showing greater interest in outward appearance, social circumstance, and intellect. At that time, the population had shifted in such a way that there were more women than men. Additionally, a land scarcity prevented parents from using property inheritance as readily as an incentive for heeding their marital advice. Thus, with an expanded field and less reason to bow to their parents' wishes, men showed more personal preference in marriage choices. Men, even clergymen, showed less hesitation in expressing the desire for an attractive wife. Many also acknowledged the material need for a future wife to bring a level of financial security to the marriage. It seemed that no characteristic was overlooked. Beauty aided by outward adornment, proper carriage of oneself, and good companionship through intelligence and conversation often proved necessary to attract and hold a young man's attention.[75]

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74. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 81-83.

75. Wilson, *Ye Heart of Man*, 45-55.

Wedding Ceremony as a Religious Expression

Guided toward marriage by their society's expectations, their own education, and their family life, couples finally assumed their roles as husband and wife at the wedding ceremony. The Anglican and Puritan churches established their own definitions of marriage as well as appropriate wedding day ceremonies. While the Anglican Church defined marriage as an indivisible bond, the Puritan Church understood marriage as a contract. As a result, the two societies held notably divergent views on divorce. According to the Anglican Church, a couple in Virginia could not divorce for any reason and could separate only under special circumstances.[76] On the other hand, Puritans made the fulfillment of duty in marriage a condition for continuance in the marriage state. In his *Apologie of the Churches of New England*, Richard Mather declared that both the man and the woman entered marriage of their own free will, that God held them equally responsible for breaches in their "voluntary covenant," and that they could leave the marriage in the case of a breach of that contract.[77] Seeing marriage as a covenant composed of terms agreed upon by the marriage partners, Puritans justified divorce if one refused to discharge the terms. Since Puritans based marriage upon the partners' agreement to abide by certain conditions, Massachusetts colonists could obtain divorces for unfaithfulness, neglect, and abuse.[78]

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76. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 281.

77. Elizabeth Dale, "The Marriage Metaphor in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts," in *Women and Freedom in Early America*, ed. by Larry D. Elbridge (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 237-41.

78. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 78- 82.

For Anglicans in Virginia, their established church reminded them of their English heritage. Likewise, their observance of marriage customs in the New World harkened to days in the mother country. However, their New World experience gave rise to practices that were unique to Virginians. *The Book of Common Prayer* guided every aspect of Anglican religious observance, articulating the church's regard for marriage as "signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church."[79] Anglican ministers performed all weddings, even for dissenters.[80] Rarely Anglican ministers offered to marry Christian slaves; however, most slaves did not receive official marriage ceremonies.[81] Church and governing authorities shared interest in the formation of favorable unions for the welfare of society. Virginians could seek a marriage license from the county clerk or post banns through the parish. Banns were read each Sunday for three weeks.[82] *The Book of Common Prayer* specifically noted the time between the Communion preparations and the sermon as the occasion for making announcements, including legal items, days of observance, and marriage banns. By preference, parishes often saved announcements until the congregation filed outside so as not to interfere with the service.[83] Regardless of when the banns were announced, their purpose was to

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79. *The Book of Common Prayer, And Administration of the Sacraments, and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Church of England: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, Pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches*, 1662 ed. (London: John Baskerville, 1762), 176, Society of Archbishop Justus, http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1662/baskerville.htm (accessed February 6, 2010).

80. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 222.

81. Evans, *A "Topping People,"* 142.

82. Receiving a marriage license was an expedited process, but it was also quite costly. Publishing banns was more reasonable for most people and only required the payment of a fee to the parson or clerk. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 222.

83. Ibid., 194.

apprise the community of a forthcoming marriage and to give them opportunity to voice any objections.[84] Only after the couple completed these necessary steps could they arrive at their wedding day.

On the day of the ceremony, the parish priest made this familiar announcement to those in attendance: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony . . . ."[85] As the rural landscape made one's home the heart of a Virginian's life, the lady's home was frequently the desired location for Virginia weddings. This demonstrated a modification of the prescribed practice of conducting the ceremony in a church.[86] In 1724, English minister Hugh Jones remarked, "In Houses also they most commonly marry, without Regard to the Time of the Day or Season of the Year."[87] By holding the marriage ceremony within one's home, Virginians drew a close connection between spiritual and public life. Rhys Isaac explained that "Sacred significance attached to these rites, being no longer confined within the church, was transferred to the home and was there associated with the gathering of neighbors to share in the event."[88] During the ceremony, the couple promised to live together as husband and wife in support of one another throughout all of life's adversities, and then they committed to one another their "troth." Following this pledge of their faithfulness to one another, the man slipped a ring

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84. If the man and woman were members of different parishes, banns had to be published in both places. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 176.

85. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 176.

86. Nelson, *A Blessed Company*, 222-223.

87. Hugh Jones, *The Present State of Virginia*, reprinted ed. (New York: J. Sabin, 1865), 68.

88. Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 69.

onto the woman's hand, declaring "With this ring I thee wed . . . ."[89] The couple then knelt for the priest to pray over their union, after which he announced their marriage to the congregation.[90] Thus, only the woman received a wedding band according to the Book of Common Prayer. After conducting the traditional Anglican ceremony, a Virginia couple declared their marriage vows by hopping over a broom together.[91] Although many people have attributed broom jumping to African culture, the custom most likely began in Europe as gypsies illustrated married love's power over wickedness.[92] While rich with spiritual meaning, marriage ceremonies in Virginia also had a place for a bit of folklore.

Guests to Virginia weddings welcomed such events as joyous holidays from the wearisome duties of plantation life. Attending a wedding usually involved a great commitment of time and energy due to the many miles separating families in colonial Virginia; therefore, the wedding's hosts traditionally planned a long celebration for their guests to enjoy.[93] In the spirit of hospitality, the family hosting the wedding offered their guests an abundance of food, gifts of appreciation, and an occasion to dance.[94] This kind of celebration came as no surprise within Virginia culture about which Fithian exclaimed,

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89. *The Book of Common Prayer*, 177.

90. Ibid., 177.

91. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 282; Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*, 68-71.

92. Alan Dundes, "'Jumping the Broom': On the Origin and Meaning of an African American Wedding Custom." *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 433 (1996), 324-29.

93. Philip Alexander Bruce, *Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (Lynchburg: J.P. Bell, 1927), 241-42.

94. Dancing at Virginia weddings featured a harmony of the restraint of their English culture and free expression of their African slaves' culture. Ibid., 80-87; Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 282; Isaac, 71.

"They will dance or die!—"[95] Prominent Virginians set the example for celebrating a wedding ceremony in grand style. Although unable to achieve the same opulence, members of the lower class observed limited versions of the same customs.[96]

The highly structured course that Massachusetts colonists followed to the altar began with the young man's well-received appeal to the young woman's parents, continued through the determination of love's presence in the match, and finally received validation from the church and the local authorities. Once the couple declared betrothal, the church recognized their short distance from marriage by allowing the bride to choose a Scripture passage for the preacher to use in his upcoming sermon that would announce their union.[97] After declaring to the community their intention to marry at three consecutive assemblies or after posting a notice for a period of two weeks at the meetinghouse, a Puritan couple could proceed with their marriage.[98]

Colonists in Massachusetts were chiefly concerned that marriages took place in an appropriate setting before the proper authorities. Although Puritans have a reputation for unifying church and government in creating a pious society, it is interesting that they emphasized marriage as a specifically legal arrangement in reaction against the sacramental view of Catholicism.[99] Believing marriage to be a conditional civic

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95. Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 232.

96. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 282.

97. Ibid., 81; Holliday, *Woman's Life*, 247-49.

98. Puritan authorities continued their involvement even after the marriage by threatening to charge a husband who did not notify them of his marriage a month after the ceremony. Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 31-32.

99. Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, 118.

agreement, Puritans carefully restricted the role of the church in the marriage ceremony. Although they never forbade a churchman to speak at marriage ceremony, Puritan clergymen were not to conduct weddings but could honor espoused couples through dedicatory sermons. Puritan governing officials actually presided over the ceremonies. They maintained the distinctly municipal nature of weddings until forced to yield to Anglican influences when Massachusetts became part of the Dominion of New England in 1686. After having had their Massachusetts Bay Company charter revoked in 1684, the Puritans faced outright assaults on their social order under Joseph Dudley and Sir Edmund Andros in 1686. Anglican religious observances, including wedding customs, appeared under Dudley. However, Andros' ascension to the governorship in 1686 ushered in Anglican predominance, which saw Congregational church buildings wrested from the hands of their Puritan owners for Anglican services. In that year, Massachusetts colonists were required to permit clergymen to conduct wedding ceremonies. The Dominion of New England dissolved in 1689, but the legacy of the Puritan's civic ceremonies continues to the present day. Americans typically conceive of marriage as a contract before the government with the church merely celebrating the union with the families.[100]

During the seventeenth century, Puritans celebrated espousal and marriage with banquets but avoided any boisterous merrymaking such as dancing.[101] Although the

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100. Although original charters had permitted the colonies a notable degree of autonomy, King James II sought greater central control, which he hoped to gain in establishing the Dominion of New England. Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Lebanon: University Press of New England, 1995), 174-176; Calhoun, *A Social History*, 60-64; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 32-33.

101. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 81-82; Morgan, *Puritan Family*, 33-34.

Puritan sense of propriety did not afford the wedding party the pleasure of dancing, it did allow them to escort the bride and groom to their wedding chamber after the ceremony.[102] As many customs changed between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so New England wedding celebrations became livelier and more elaborate. Just as Virginian weddings were multi-day affairs, New Englanders began to take the opportunity to feast, dance, play games, and socialize sometimes for three or four days.[103] Hardly fitting the image of cold formality traditionally attributed to them, Puritans increasingly viewed weddings as celebratory occasions and shared in the same amusements as Anglicans.

Modern-day Americans are inheritors of a rich and varied history. Among their ancestors are two religious groups who spent the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries learning what it meant to live in this New World. While Massachusetts settlers sought to flee the old country to create a new, holier way of life, the Virginia gentry desired to bring the refinements of English culture with them. The timing of their settlement, their population, and the development of their societies shaped the environments in which a young person had to find his place in the world. Life as a Puritan youth differed from that of an Anglican in various ways; however, religious duty guided the lives of both. Clergymen, parents, teachers, and community officials all voiced their guidance in how one should become a proper member of society. Since the only proper members were the married ones, navigating the course toward matrimony was of chief importance. Societal expectations, education, family involvement, and wedding day ceremonies worked

102. Calhoun, *A Social History*, 64.

103. Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, 117-119.

together to create Christian husbands and wives. Thus, the whole course of a person's life was preparation for the day that two would unite as one in marriage to the honor of God, to the stability of society, and to the mutual benefit of one another.

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