

Music, Dance and Deportment

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Music: Music during colonial times was a part of everyday life. Colonists aspired to the fashions and dance of people living in London, England. Musical instruments also reflected their desire to simulate the Mother Country.

The Reverend Hugh Jones, historian, wrote in 1724, "They live in the same neat Manner, dress after the same Modes, and behave themselves exactly as the Gentry in London." It is not surprising to search the inventories of these early citizens and find listed among their effects spinets, flutes, guitars, violins, violin-cellos, fifes, French horns, drums, harpsichords, organs, harmonicas and pianofortes (pianos) in addition to numerous "parcels of musick." ¹

However, sometimes colonists living in small towns were very limited by availability of instruments and concert performers. A colony might get lucky if they had an above average music instructor, a talented group of amateur musicians, or servants or slaves that were skilled in the art form. The colonists strived to obtain the latest music and newest instruments from London as well.

Dance: Parents taught their children to dance the latest dances, or dance instructors taught the children of the wealthy. Dancing manuals were available for purchase both in the colonies and in London, and those who could afford it would hire a tutor to instruct them in the latest dances. A young lady would increase her chances for marriage through the demonstration of the social graces, and one would exhibit proper breeding by the gentility of their dance steps. Being an accomplished dancer was a highly desirable and much sought-after skill. All eyes were on the dancers and the audience was quick to gossip if you were not a learned dancer. Lucy Lee Orr wrote in her journal on October 19, 1787, "*I don't think I ever laugh't so much in my life as I did last night at Captain Grigg's minuet. I wish you could see him. It is really the most ludicrous thing I ever saw; and what makes it more so is, he thinks he dances a most delightful one...*"

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A school master of the Carter family, Phillip Fithian, often wrote of such social occasions. In one of his journals he wrote, "Virginians are of genuine blood, they will dance or die!"

Slaves sometimes were asked to join the party toward the end of the evening or held their own dances as was the occasion on May 29, 1774, "...went to a Negro ball. Sundays being the holy days [they] have to themselves with Dancing to the Banjo... a Gourd... with only four strings..."

Footnote:

¹Hunter Dickson Farish, ed., *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, 1773-1774* (Charlottesville, Va., 1983), p. 177.

Deportment: In the eighteenth century, people acknowledged one another with the proper courtesies. Males would bow and females would curtsy. Both would offer a formal greeting, such as "Good evening, my lady." Dance partners would also honor one another with the proper courtesy at the beginning of each dance.

Directions: Teach the students about the importance of dancing during colonial times. Instruct them in the proper way to greet dance partners and to end a dance. Using the Instructions for English Country Dances, teach students an English country dance. All instructions and music can be found on the Colonial Williamsburg Education Resource Library. <https://resourcelibrary.history.org/>

