

Courtship & Romance in the Colony

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What's Love Got to Do with It?

*Your hand in my hand, my soul inspired,
my heart in bliss, because we go together.*

I could probably convince you these words are the lyrics to a current Coldplay song, or a verse from a 17th-century poet, but they're not. They were scribed in Egypt some 3,000 years ago. To some extent, poems and songs, letters and diaries reflect the society and culture of the era they were authored. At the same time, they suggest emotions like our own have remained somewhat constant through time.

Cut adrift from the influence of relatives and society, Maryland's colonists had an incredible opportunity to reinvent themselves, create their own rules, imagine their own social order. Nonetheless, it's likely that where possible they carried on the mores, morals, customs, and traditions they knew at home. In the arena of love and romance, where down and dirty biology meets the strictures of society; life on the new frontier of Maryland seems to have encouraged some short cuts. We don't have love letters or romantic poems from the early years of the colony but we can make inferences from what we know about customs that prevailed in the Mother Country, period publications, and court cases, which most often signaled love gone wrong.

In 17th-century England, individuals in their late teens had the independence and opportunities to form relationships with the opposite sex. This freedom was tempered by the interests of family and friends, who were actively involved in matchmaking. The formality involved in forming a relationship was loosely proportionate to the status of the families involved. Courtship, especially for the monied set, followed a set of unwritten rules and was expected to lead to marriage. Discrete inquiries might lead to viewing from a distance, walking out, gift giving, and love letters. If the couple was well-pleased with each other and suitable economic terms could be negotiated a betrothing or contracting might follow. This ceremony, which involved oaths, hand holding, kissing, drinking and the ritual exchange of rings in front of witnesses and an officiant, was falling out of favor through 1600s. The Ladies Dictionary complained, "Marriage without a...contract looks so odd, that it appears more like the coupling of irrational than rational creatures." In some instances, couples decided betrothing was good enough and skipped the marrying.

Despite the formality of courtship and the calculation of material advantages, romantic love seems to have been common and expected--even in arranged, typically high-class, marriages. Parents then, as today, employed their children's sense of duty, familial love bonds, and inheritance prospects to encourage or discourage—but children were not forced to obey. Usually youngsters deferred to elder's opinions, and relied on them to screen suitors and draw up agreements on their behalf. The drama surrounding matchmaking is well-illustrated in period drama and literature.

In England, strong social and religious pressure discouraged cohabitation. But it may be that contracting, and the anticipation of marriage loosened the bonds of chastity. While the illegitimate birth rate in 17th-century England was 2-4%, studies of parish registers suggest that between 20-30% of all brides gave birth within the first eight months of marriage.

In the popular expressions of the time we can find prevailing wisdom behind the making of a good match. "Like blood, like good, and like age make the happiest marriage." "Love should make marriage, not marriage love." "Better wed over the fence than over the moor (better to marry a neighbor than a stranger)." Society generally encouraged suitors to choose a partner based on character, rather than material advantage or passion but one proverb suggests a different tactic, "He who marries for love and no money, hath good nights but sorry days."

In early Maryland, a number of factors conspired to interfere with the neat trajectories of Cupid's arrows. While those with the means were likely to carry on as in the mother land, a vast majority of the population were indentured servants who could not marry until their indentures were fulfilled, four or more years after immigrating—unless they were able to buy out their contract. Further, the number of Romeos far surpassed the number of Juliets through the 17th century. George Alsop wrote in 1666, "The Women that go over to the Province as Servants, have the best luck here as in any place in the world besides; for they are no sooner on Shoar, but they are courted." Alsop stated that these same ladies would have been left to mold elsewhere. Women were much desired, as much for the work they could accomplish on the plantation as anything else.

Alsop went on to describe less formal courtship and more practical rituals in the colony. "... he that intends to Court a Mary-Land Girle, must have something more than the Tautologies of a long-winded speech to cary on his design..." High mortality through the 17th century further disrupted the archetype. The ratio of May/December marriages, comprised of young girls and old men, flew in the face of "like age" logic. One author suggests the volume of land parcels with names that include the word "cuckold" suggests what happens next.

The first generation of immigrants was unlikely to have a father or brother present to monitor their choice of suitor or their behavior. There is evidence that there was a freedom in courtship not customary in England. Statistics show the rate of pregnant brides far surpassed that in England.

Common law marriages were fairly common in the province. There simply weren't ministers to minister to the majority Protestant population. As long as the couple had a verbal contract in front of witnesses and lived together in the community they were generally recognized as man and wife. Their offspring were legitimate and they were able to distribute property as married folks did. The lack of formality in forming relationships was described in court hearings from 1658 that challenged one wedding. Robert Holt, a cooper from St. Georges Hundred, had married Christian Bonnefeild despite the fact that both were already married to others. The marrying official, William Wilkinson, counseled the couple they were free to marry, as all involved had taken mutual discharge of the previous relationships and Holt's former wife had two children by another man.

Shortly after the founding, the Assembly began taking steps to formalize hitching up. Perhaps the volume of family issues that came before the court was an inspiration. These laws institutionalized English civil practices in the colony. In 1640, a law prescribed that intentions to marry be posted in a public place. In 1666, another act spelled out how weddings should proceed: "hold hands before at least two witnesses and repeat: "I ___doe take thee ___to my wedded (husband or wife) To have and to hould" and so on. In 1702, while under control of the crown, it was decreed that marriages must follow rules of the Church of England and laymen were forbidden to perform marriage where a minister was available.

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values, character, intellect, sense of humor, spiritual beliefs, passion, and up to 24 other dimensions." In the 17th century, a variety of publications gave literate lovers a competitive edge in wooing. *Cupid's Schoole*, published in 1642, was a source of "new, witty, amorous compliments." "Your breath is as sweet, as if you fed only on Pinkes and Perfumes." reads one Pearl of Eloquence offered in another publication, *The Academy of Complements*.



Love potions could be used to promote amorous feelings. A fragrant sachet of marigold, dill, and lemon balm worn around the neck, tucked in gloves, or used to powder the hair was recommended to attract suitors but in early Maryland, the most expedient route to finding a mate was to be born female.

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