

LIFE IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY



If you were sent back in time to the 18th century, would you feel like a fish out of water? In some ways, probably! People's clothing, food, tools, relationships, and communities are probably different than those you know and recognize today. But on the other hand, people still bathed, got dressed, ate, worked, relaxed, and slept – all things you are probably familiar with. So, how different was the 18th century? What was life like for those who lived in it?

GETTING WORK DONE

The thing that defined most people's lives in the 18th century was work. On the eve of the American Revolution, there were almost 2.5 million people in British North America. There were doctors, lawyers, printers, upholsterers, seamstresses, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, miners, merchants, sailors, dance instructors, tanners, religious leaders, caterers and bakers, inn- and tavern-keepers, and more. But the work that most people did was farming. This was especially true away from the coastline of the Atlantic Ocean, where sea-faring trades like fishing, whaling and trading were more common. Free, enslaved or indentured, men, women and children – farmers made up much of the workforce.

Crops – whether for eating or other uses – needed to be planted, cared for and harvested, then turned into their final products. Grains might be milled and turned into flour, vegetables might be picked and pickled in jars. Animals needed to be fed, sheltered, tended, and healed when sick. If they were meant to be eaten, they needed to be killed, butchered, and cooked or preserved for safe eating later. Tools needed to be made, repaired, or repurposed. The day often started with the sunrise and continued – inside homes and barns – after the sun set.

The work was plentiful, the hours were long, and the labor physically demanding. For these reasons, women and children were necessary to keep the farms and households running. Women managed the household, gardened, and cared for children, and might help with the crops and animals as well. Children were put to work as soon as they were able.

READING, WRITING AND ARITHMETIC

Public schools as we know them did not exist in the 18th century. Schooling was a luxury that was not guaranteed to everyone. For many enslaved people, even learning to read was forbidden. Children in wealthy families might have a tutor to teach them reading and writing, foreign languages, mathematics, philosophy, religion, music and drawing. Families with less money might be able to send their students to a private school several days a week. Others might teach their children the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic at home, and either they or a local pastor might offer religious instruction. And for many families, the greatest need was for their children to learn a skill that would allow them to earn money – the children might be apprenticed to someone skilled in a trade in order to learn from them, or might simply work around the farm or family business. Children's education in the 18th century was the result of a complex mix of their families' social and economic standing, geographic location, race, and religious beliefs, and their own gender and status of freedom.

FUN AND GAMES

While work defined many children's lives, especially those with less money, they still found time to play. They might compete against each other in daily tasks and chores: Who could carry the most wood, card the most wool, or carry the most eggs without breaking them? They might take common household goods and leftover materials and turning them into toys. Dolls could be made from rags, corn husks, wood, ceramics, or wax. A buzzer toy, which spun like a sideways yo-yo, could be made with an old coin or a small piece of wood. Jump rope, scotch-hopper, tag and more were also played by colonial children. So, too, were games like jacks, Nine Men's Morris (a strategy game similar to checkers), and bowling.

COOKING AND EATING

Colonial America was a melting pot of tastes and cuisines. This reflected the diversity of peoples who lived there and had for generations, including the English, French, Germans, Native Americans, Dutch, Africans, Swedish and Scottish. While many people grew their own fruit and vegetables, they also bartered for or purchased foods they did not grow or raise themselves. There were markets, taverns and coffee houses where people could buy fresh, preserved and cooked foods, including items that had traveled from around the world.

Because there were no refrigerators or freezers during the 18th century, food had to be preserved or eaten quickly. An ice house or cellar might keep some foods fresh for a short while – or perhaps even for a winter – but most foods needed to be salted, smoked, pickled or eaten quickly. Still, depending on where one lived, and one's ability to pay, it was possible to eat well and often in the 18th century.

GETTING DRESSED

Men and women alike started with a base layer called a shift or shirt, a long white shirt that fell just above the knee, with sleeves that reached to the elbow or wrist. For men, a waistcoat or vest, was worn over the shirt, and a jacket or coat was worn over this. For his bottom half, the average man wore breeches, which went from waist to knee, stockings which went from knee to foot, and leather shoes to protect the feet. A neckcloth and hat would complete his outfit.

The average woman would pull on long socks called stockings, and tie them with ribbons or strips of fabric called garters. If dressing herself, she might then put on and tie her leather shoes. Then she would be laced, or lace herself into, a structured support for her torso called a stay. Stays helped her body appear as though it had the fashionable shape of the era, and forced her to display upright posture. At her waist, she would then layer on one or more petticoats, or skirts, on top of her shift, falling from waist to ankle. She might also tie on a pocket to store her belongings. Next, she would put on a gown, which looked like a jacket and skirt sewn together. She would tuck a kerchief around her neck, covering the top of her bodice, then tuck her hair into a simple white cap, and, if she were going out, pin a hat on top of the cap.

Until about the age of five, both boys and girls wore simple gowns. Once they reached the appropriate age, between five or seven, boys were given their first pair of breeches. After this, boys and girls were dressed like small adults, wearing clothes in the same styles as grown men and women.

MOVING PEOPLE AND INFORMATION

People in the 18th century moved around using many different means. Walking short distances was common, as was riding a horse or taking a wagon or carriage. But while using a horse and a vehicle with wheels would have seemed fast to them, it might not seem fast to us today: To travel from Philadelphia to New York City, with a stop in Prince Town (Princeton), New Jersey, you could take a coach called the “Flying Machine,” but it took 2 days! Taking a ship was also a possibility, and people sailed to and from coastal cities like Charleston, South Carolina, New Haven, Connecticut, and ports in the Caribbean, South America, Africa, and Europe. Smaller ships were also used on rivers to get further inland, beyond the coastal ports.

As people traveled, so did their ideas. Colonists in the late 18th century had access to printing presses. This meant that they could print newspapers, pamphlets, posters called broadsides, and other materials to be distributed and easily read. They also had access to ink and feather quills, or pens made from the feathers of birds including ducks and geese. They could write letters and important documents at home or while they were traveling. And while there was no official postal service yet, colonists could send their mail to and from inns and taverns, or simply pass it from friend to friend and acquaintance to acquaintance until it arrived at its destination.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Mail was not the only thing to be passed around in the 18th century. In a time before germs, bacteria and viruses were well-understood, many people believed that illnesses were caused by miasma, or bad air. Doctors and surgeons did not know that they needed to wash their hands or medical instruments before or in-between treating patients. They did the best they could, but diseases like smallpox, dysentery, yellow fever and influenza spread quickly and easily. Surgery and amputations were often performed without anesthesia – especially near the battlefield – and many patients did not survive, either due to the surgery itself or an infection that set in afterwards.

However, doctors were learning. For example, doctors knew that people who had already had smallpox were not likely to get it again. During the Revolutionary War, doctors used this knowledge to introduce smallpox to Continental Army soldiers in a controlled fashion, in relatively small groups and on a schedule, so that a massive wave of sickness did not spread among the soldiers unexpectedly. Civilians took advantage of this inoculation process as well, even though it was experimental. Military medical progress became progress for everyone.