

*Words They  
Lived By*

Colonial New England Speech,

by  
Joan P. Bines

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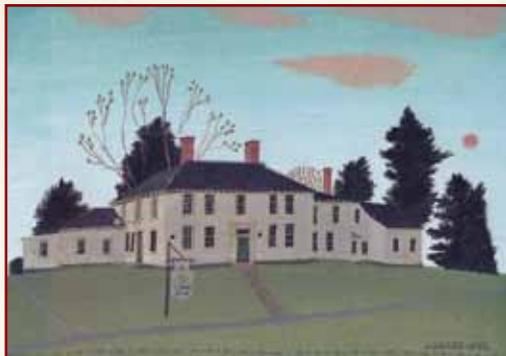
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All photos courtesy of GBT (Golden Ball Tavern) unless otherwise noted.

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*The Golden Ball Tavern. A 1992 print by Anne Bell Robb, Sherborn, Massachusetts.*

archaeological and historical museum in Weston, Massachusetts, steeped in colonial history with buildings, artifacts, archives and library that have informed every aspect of this book. I owe a debt of gratitude to Edward Maeder, world-renowned expert in textile and costume, Barbara Provest, expert in colonial weaving, and Stephanie Smith, expert in colonial dress, who generously shared their knowledge; to the Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History's Director Henry Lucas and Curator George Norton who shared a treasure of United States postage stamps, as well as their expertise; to Christopher Anderson, colonial furniture maker, who shared his knowledge of the period and allowed me to photograph his beautiful Brown Bess and British sword; and to colonial re-enactor, Simon Rubenstein, who allowed me to photograph his replica colonial hatchet.

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**Author's Note:**

Except where indicated, I photographed the illustrations in the book from the vast collection at the Golden Ball Tavern Museum where I have been fortunate to serve as the director for many, many years. The picture of the *Mayflower* and the picture of the stage-coach are from the New York Public Library's Mid-Manhattan branch which has a superb picture collection; the United States postage stamps are courtesy of the Spellman Museum of Stamps and Postal History in Weston, Massachusetts; the picture of tenterhooks is from J. Edwards; and the photographs of the Minuteman statue and the gravestone I took in Lexington, Massachusetts, a town rich in colonial history.

**Please be aware**, in colonial days the letter *s* was printed as an *f* when it came in the middle, and often at the beginning, of a printed word.

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# THE FIRST SETTLERS

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The small band of Pilgrims who settled in Plymouth Colony in the 1620s, and the more than 20,000 Puritans who crossed the ocean soon after them in the Great Migration to settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and beyond, were already steeped in the language, life ways, and customs of other



The Mayflower at Sea. *Illustration from Pioneers in the Settlement of America, 1876.*

lands, predominantly those of England. In this new world, however, they encountered a unique set of political, social, and cultural challenges as they worked to build homes, raise families, make a living, and create religious and governing organizations to serve their needs.

Their first job was to build shelters and eke out a meager subsistence for themselves and their families. Toward that end, they came remarkably well prepared. This ditty suggests that many of the men who came to New England in the great migration were skilled craftsmen:

*Tom Taylor is prepared,  
And th' Smith as black as a coal;  
Ralph Cobler too with us will go.  
For he regards his soul;  
The Weaver, honest Simon ...  
Professeth to come after.<sup>1</sup>*

And the women had successfully managed households and raised children before they sailed to New England.

## *Words They Lived By*

What bound the early settlers together and set the tone for their lives was their faith. They had left the comforts of the known to come to a wilderness where they hoped to practice their Pilgrim and Puritan religious beliefs in peace. Although some wanted to build a bible commonwealth and spread their religious convictions to the Indians, most came to practice personal piety in a community of believers. They built houses close together and close to the meetinghouse (their church). Males who met the strict religious requirements to be accepted into church membership selected their town's preacher and magistrates and helped decide the rules that the entire community lived by. Having committed a radical act by coming to New England, once here, they established a participatory, responsible, orderly, neighborly, stable way of life.

On the other hand, their motivation for transporting themselves to the New World was to live in pursuit of religious purity, to incorporate their religious and moral beliefs into every aspect of their daily lives. For many years, then, they lived in a theocracy that brooked little dissent. They were superstitious, rigid, and intolerant. They burned witches; they whipped and publicly humiliated those judged to have violated their strict moral rules; and they persecuted Quakers and expelled dissenters such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. They had Negro and Indian slaves and participated in the slave trade. While they accepted women into church membership, they denied them any participation in church or town governance.

The rigidity and intolerance was not unusual in civilized societies in those days, but the New England Puritan belief in and promotion of education was unusual. In 1647, believing that ignorance of the Bible benefited "that old deluder, Satan," Massachusetts legislated that every town of fifty families establish and keep a common school, and, for towns of more than 100, a Latin school—Boston Latin School was established in 1635—to prepare young men to attend college—Harvard College was established in 1636—where they were to study to become ministers. It became the duty of the towns to teach children to read, an act that in turn became an important dynamic promoting progress.

The great majority of men and women who came after the Puritans settled into the ordered existence that they found in place in New England. Over time, laws were allowed to adapt, gradually becoming more secular and enabling the community to prosper. By the time of the Revolutionary War, the colonists had succeeded in creating functioning institutions, a thriving

economy, and a vibrant social, political, and religious life that would contribute greatly to the founding of the new republic.

Just as their society and government evolved, so too did their language. The colonists brought words with them but subtly changed or adapted their meanings. They incorporated words from other countries and peoples. They created words. And all were aimed at giving voice to what was happening around them. By focusing on words and phrases they used then—words and phrases that we still use today—we can peek into their lives and watch as Goodwife Jones, or “Goody” Jones as she would have been called, went about the daily chores of wife and mother. We can see her yeoman farmer husband, Goodman Jones, clear the land, plant the crops, and perhaps visit the local tavern to imbibe a tankard of ale, visit, and share conversation over the latest news brought by a traveler or post rider staying at the inn. We can become more acquainted with how their society developed and changed, and we can enjoy knowing the early history of words we currently use.

Share with me these words that served in colonial days and that, evolving in time, continue to serve.

## THE FIRST SETTLERS

### Chapter Notes:

- 1 Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 30.



# MEN AND WORK

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In the 1840s Henry David Thoreau wrote this evocative description of the colonists' labor:

*Some spring the white man came, built him a house, and made a clearing here, letting in the sun, dried up a farm, piled up the old grey stones in fences, cut down the pines around his dwelling, planted orchard seeds brought from the old country, and persuaded the civil appletree to blossom next to the wild pine and juniper, shedding its perfume in the wilderness. Their old stocks still remain. He culled the graceful elm from out the woods and from the river-side, and so refined and smoothed his village plot. He rudely bridged the stream, and drove his team afield into the river meadows, cut the wild grass, and laid bare the homes of beaver, otter, muskrat, and with the whetting of his scythe scared off the deer and bear. He set up a mill, and fields of English grain sprang in the virgin soil. And with his grain he scattered the seeds of the dandelion and the wild trefoil over the meadows, mingling his English flowers with the wild native ones. The bristling burdock, the sweet-scented catnip, and the humble yarrow planted themselves along his woodland road, they too seeking "freedom to worship God" in their way. And thus he plants a town.<sup>1</sup>*

In addition to the endless demands of farming, men participated in religious and political life, and served in the local militia. They engaged in a wide variety of occupations from blacksmithing to baking, from silversmithing to tailoring, from tavern keeping to store keeping, from cabinetmaking to cordwaining (shoemaking), from barbering to lawyering, from shipbuilding to fishing, from wigmaking to schoolteaching.



# Gentleman

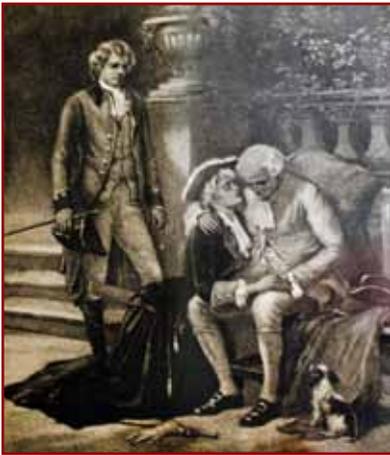
Then

Although colonial society eschewed noble titles and coats of arms, it did make social distinctions, as John Adams noted:

*Perhaps it may be said in America we have no distinctions of ranks ... but have we not laborers, yeomen, gentlemen, esquires, honorable gentlemen, and excellent gentlemen?*<sup>2</sup>

New Englanders took these distinctions seriously showing great respect for **gentlemen**, whom they considered their betters.

Unlike in England, a man could advance from the social level of yeoman (one who owned his property outright) or artisan or merchant to that of gentleman with a favorable change in fortune if he possessed the other requisite qualities. A gentleman was presumed to have manners, refinement, intelligence, education, and moral character. He and his fellow gentlemen held themselves to a high standard of both social and civic behavior. He also had the disposition, and the duty as a gentleman, to assume public responsibilities. In the mid-1700s, Paul Revere worked as a mechanic—a silversmith—but was socially accorded the title of gentleman by his fellow Bostonians. By his own definition, a gentleman was a man of character, a man who “respects his own credit.”<sup>3</sup>



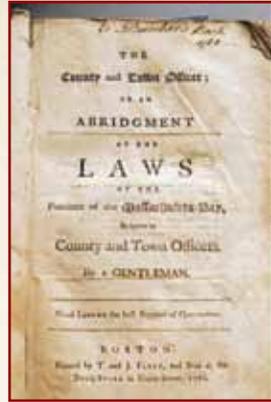
A colonial gentleman and his family. Detail from a colonial revival (late 1800s) etching entitled *Forgiven* by Charles Steele.

In the early days, only gentlemen and their families were entitled to special considerations, such as permission to wear lace or other refinements of dress. People of lesser rank were expected to curtsy or bow to them. They alone received exemption from the most common form of punishment. A 1641 Massachusetts decree held:

*Nor shall any true gentleman nor any man equal to a gentleman be punished by whipping.*<sup>4</sup>

This was a prized dispensation. One Boston student wrote in 1771 of the public punishment of wrongdoers:

*The large whipping-post painted red stood conspicuously and prominently in the most public street in the town. It was placed in State Street directly under the windows of a great writing school which I frequented, and from them the scholars were indulged in the spectacle of all kinds of punishment suited to harden their hearts and brutalize their feelings.*<sup>5</sup>



*The work of a gentleman.*

Through the years, though the habit of deference did not totally disappear, it certainly declined. During the American Revolution, British soldier Thomas Anburey stopped at a tavern with some of his fellow soldiers, one of whom was a nobleman. There he encountered a group of women who begged to meet the aristocrat. Having done so, and having been singularly unimpressed, one of the women lifted up her hands and eyes to heaven, and with great astonishment exclaimed, "Well, for my part, if that be a Lord, I never desire to see any other Lord but the Lord Jehovah," and promptly left the room.<sup>6</sup>

## Now

---

A **gentleman** is a man whose conduct in his social dealings is presumed to embody ethical and personal standards of behavior, and the degree to which the word conveys honor is determined as much by the dignity of the speaker as by the conduct of the object.

## Huckster

## Then

**H**ucksters, hawkers, and peddlers were entrepreneurial young men who sold their goods on foot or from carts pulled along town streets, back roads, and rural trails and byways. Loaded down with his goods, the peddler sold, among other things, pots and pans, needles and thread, pins and buttons, axes and nails, lace and ribbon, and even spices and books.

## *Words They Lived By*

These were items much needed or wanted by the townspeople, farmers, and housewives who welcomed the itinerant peddlers as much for the gossip, news, and details of the latest fashions as for the goods and they brought.

At times the hucksters got together to set up a number of booths or stalls in open fields—called huxter shops—to display their wares. Some hucksters, hoping to expand their business, also sold medicines and entertainment, evidenced by a 1773 Connecticut law that prohibited these dispensers of medical treatments from

*publicly advertising and giving notice of their skill and ability to cure diseases, and the erecting publick stages and places from whence to declaim and harangue the people on the virtue and efficacy of their medicines, or to exhibit by themselves or their dependents any plays, tricks, juggling or unprofitable feats of uncommon dexterity and agility of body, [which] tends to draw together great numbers of people, to the corruption of manners, promoting of idleness, and the determinant [sic] of good order and religion ...* <sup>7</sup>

## *Now*

---

A **huckster** is a person who tries to use his charms and salesmanship to sell someone something that the buyer does not need or something of inferior quality. The word has taken on a singularly pejorative meaning. We can see a shift in the connotation of the word even in the colonial period.

## *Logrolling*

---

## *Then*

**A** **logrolling** was a community get-together for mutual assistance, a chance for generous cooperation. When a new settler came, he had to build a home for his family. The men of the community would come together to help him clear his building site of trees. They might also join together for stump-pullings, house or barn raisings, and stone pilings. At the end of these endeavors, neighbors would socialize and share the meal prepared by wives and sweethearts.

## Now

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**Logrolling** is the exchange of favors or votes by politicians so that each gets his or her pet project funded. The term is also used for an act of mutual assistance, or mutual back scratching.

## Lot

---

### Then

The term **lot** for a piece of land may have come from the Pilgrims' and Puritans' practice of drawing lots to determine the parcel of land granted each family in the colony. At first, the Plymouth settlers tried to farm the land communally. Finding this system demoralizing rather than productive, they chose to divide the common land and cattle among the families, with each being given an allotted portion. It has been suggested, most likely apocryphally, that, following the New Testament example of choosing the twelfth apostle by lot, Puritan families' names were drawn in the same way, and each family selected its "lot" of land as its name was drawn.<sup>8</sup> More likely, the term derived from the fact that in the towns in New England in the early years, each of the eligible inhabitants was allotted his share of the common meadow and upland, thus receiving his lot. The word also signified a large quantity of something.

## Now

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A **lot** is a piece of land with set boundaries as well as any large quantity of something. It also is a term for a person's portion or "lot" in life.

## Macaroni

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### Then

In the mid to late 1700s, **macaroni** was the name given to a dandy, a man excessively interested in his clothing and appearance and therefore thought of as vain. It was also a slang term for a fancy wig or something in high fashion. The term derived from the name of a social club in England. The club's members, who had made the "grand tour" of the Continent, put

## Words They Lived By

on the airs and mannerisms of Europeans. Since macaroni was a pasta eaten in Italy but not well known in England, the members elected to call their association The Macaroni Club thereby showing off their cosmopolitan refinement.



A “macaroni” gentleman depicted in a reverse-painting-on-glass courting mirror. Notice the feather in his cap.

William Ellery, a member of the Continental Congress from Rhode Island, noted in his diary in November 1777, that at one tavern, he and his fellow travelers enjoyed

*the Musick of the Spinning Wheel, and Wool-Cards and the Sounds of the Shoemaker’s Hammer ... that might be disagreeable to your delicate Macaroni Gentry ...*<sup>9</sup>

From the days of the French and Indian War (1754-1763), the British had mocked the colonial New Englanders, nicknamed Yankees, as *doodles*—rubes and bumpkins—making fun of their pretension to refinement. They sang:

*Yankee Doodle went to town  
A-riding on a pony,  
Stuck a feather in his cap  
And called it macaroni.*

But at the start of the Revolutionary War the tables were turned. Thomas Anburey, in his *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution*, wrote in November 1777 of the name Yankee and of the song “Yankee Doodle”:

*The name has been more prevalent since the commencement of hostilities; the [British] soldiery at Boston used it as a term of reproach; but after the affair of Bunker’s Hill, the Americans gloried in it. Yankee-doodle, is now their pœan, a favorite of favorites, played in their army, esteemed as warlike as the Grenadier’s March—it is the lover’s spell, the nurse’s lullaby. After*

*our [the British] rapid successes, we held the Yankees in great contempt; but it was not a little mortifying to hear them play this tune, when their army marched down to our surrender.<sup>10</sup>*

## Now

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**Macaroni** is a form of pasta commonly eaten with butter or cheese (or both). The word no longer has any association with fashion or vanity. Indeed, when used metaphorically, it implies that the object is common, not fashionable.

## Manure

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## Then

The verb **manure** derived from the French word *mainouverer* meaning *worked by hand*. In colonial days, to manure meant to work the field to receive the fertilizer, or to fertilize. Timothy Dwight, a minister and later president of Yale, observed during his travels in New England:

*Fields manured with the whitefish have yielded wheat, universally, in great abundance, and with almost absolute certainty.<sup>11</sup>*

## Now

---

**Manure** refers to the organic fertilizer itself and has almost entirely taken on the meaning of the most common organic fertilizer, dung from horses or cattle.

## Mechanic

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## Then

In colonial days, a **mechanic** was a man who made things with his hands. Just as sellers of many different goods were called merchants, skilled craftsmen—silversmiths, goldsmiths, shipbuilders, cabinetmakers, furniture makers, and blacksmiths—were called mechanics and were as well respected for their skills as for their products. Mechanics and freemen, both somewhat lower in the social scale than gentlemen, nevertheless were important

participants in the political as well as the commercial life of their communities. Paul Revere wrote:

*In the Fall of 1774 and Winter of 1775 I was one of upwards of thirty, chiefly mechanics, who formed ourselves into a committee for the purpose of watching the movements of the British soldiers, and gaining every intelligence of the movements of the Tories.<sup>12</sup>*

The term mechanic connoted a lesser level of education and social standing than that of gentleman. One Loyalist in Concord in the 1770s was amazed to hear a Whig furniture-maker speak eloquently in debate with the leading Loyalist lawyer. Demanding to know the identity of the speaker, the Loyalist listener was told that the speaker was a mechanic named Joseph Hosmer. How then was the man able to speak “such pure English,” the Loyalist wondered?<sup>13</sup>



## *Now*

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The term is less general, excluding those expert in crafts. A **mechanic** is one skilled with machines and tools—making, using, and repairing them. Today’s mechanics work on cars, planes, and small engines such as lawnmowers and air conditioners. The implication respecting their command of English expression yet persists.

## *Plantation*

---

*Then*

**A** **plantation** in colonial days in New England meant a settlement or a planted area, hence the name Plymouth Plantation. A 1635 law of the Massachusetts Bay Colony required that

*no dwelling house shall be built above half a mile from the meeting house in any new plantation ... without leave from the*

*Court, except mill houses & farm houses of such as have their dwelling houses in some town.*<sup>14</sup>

To preserve the peace of the community, Dorchester enacted a ruling in 1634:

*No man within the Plantation shall sell his house or lott to any man without the Plantation whome they shall dislike of.*<sup>15</sup>

## Now

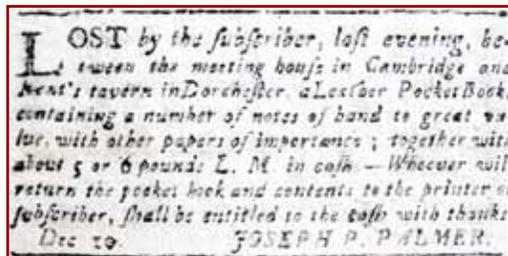
A **plantation** is a large estate on which the owner grows cash crops such as sugar cane, indigo, rice, cotton, or tobacco for market using the labor of hired workers or, before the abolition of slavery, slaves. Particularly in the colonial South, use of the word lost its communal connotation. In New England and the Northeast, as industrialization displaced agriculture and large tracts of land close to towns were no longer farmed as they had been, the historic use of the word lost its utility. Because of the association of the word plantation with antebellum slavery, use of this word, especially as an adjective, has long carried, and still carries disdain, if not outright disapproval.

## Pocketbook

## Then

In colonial days, a **pocketbook** was a case, carried in a man's pocket, containing two hinged compartments; when it was opened, it resembled a book. The pocketbook served a practical purpose: to carry the paper money of the day along with important documents and bills.

During the Revolutionary War, Thomas Anburey wrote movingly of a mother in deep distress who asked some passing British soldiers if they had seen her missing son:



Advertisement for a lost pocketbook in the Boston Gazette and Country Journal, December 18, 1775.

## Words They Lived By

*She then enquired about his pocket-book, and if any of his papers were safe, as some related to his estates, and if any of the soldiers had got his watch; if she could but obtain that in remembrance of her dear, dear son, she should be happy.*<sup>16</sup>

Frequently covered in elaborate needlework, a pocketbook also served an aesthetic purpose as a status symbol showing off the level of sewing skill and artistry that a man's wife had attained and could lavish on him. Additionally, men could purchase pocketbooks as shown by this advertisement in the *Boston Gazette*, June 13, 1763:

*Just Imported from London, and to be sold by John Perkins, at his shop in Union Street, nearly opposite to Deacon Grant's ... All kinds of stationary ware, writing, printing, ... Spanish pocket-books, pocket ivory memorandum books ...*<sup>17</sup>

## Now

Today's **pocketbook** is a purse carried mainly by women (though becoming more popular among urban men) to hold their wallets, combs, lipsticks, and other necessities.

## Tinker

**I**n the 1700s when imported tin began to be used for making candlesticks, basins, plates, lanterns, pots, and such, the **tinkers'** trade was born in the colonies. Tinware was popular because it was cheaper than silverware. The tinker was a traveling workman who mended tinware and tin pots. In 1742, the master of a runaway indentured servant advertised, "He had also a spoon and Dial Mould and other Tinker's Tools."<sup>18</sup>



Tin lantern.

## Then

## Now

---

**Tinker** is a verb meaning to use spare time to play or work with or repair machine parts or mechanical objects. One can also tinker in the sense of fine tuning, as in tinkering with a plan to improve it or make it better fit its objectives.

## Tinker's damn (or dam) *Then*

---

**T**he itinerant colonial tinker had a reputation for using profane language. The cursing was so frequent that people became immune to its effect, hence the meaninglessness of a **tinker's damn**. Another possible origin of the phrase has it that the tinker used a tiny rolled up ball of bread or clay, a dam, to hold the flowing solder in place in the tinware he was mending. When the solder had set, the tinker discarded the worthless tinker's dam.

## Now

---

A **tinker's dam** is a meaningless amount. If you don't give a tinker's dam, you don't care in the least.

## Truck

---

**T**he word **truck** referred to an exchange of wares or any goods used for trade, such as furs, cloth, knives, scissors, pots and pans, butter, cheeses, and even bullets. Since coin was scarce in the colonies, truck was commonly used as payment for goods and services. One woman advertised in 1751 that she would sell her goods "for cash or truck that will answer ..."<sup>19</sup> From the 1780s on, truck included the vegetables grown in gardens by farmers and their wives and taken for sale to the local markets. The truck farm provided the farmer and his family with goods to barter for necessities and luxuries the farm did not produce.

Long before the automotive truck was invented, truck was also the word for a type of low carriage having a single axel that rolled upon circular pieces of

wood called trucks. These trucks carried heavy loads and were pulled by two horses harnessed in tandem.

The Town of Boston adopted a bylaw in 1727 prohibiting trucks “whose Sides exceed the length of Sixteen Feet” or that was pulled by “more than Two Horses at a Time” from being driven through the lanes or streets of the city.<sup>20</sup> In 1873 in *Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston*, Samuel Adams Drake lamented the disappearance of the colonial trucks for with them went

*that distinctive body of men, the ‘Boston Truckmen,’ who once formed a leading and attractive feature of our public processions, with their white frocks and black hats, mounted with their magnificent truck-horses.*<sup>21</sup>

Trucks, tumbrels, carts, wheelbarrows, and handbarrows were all used for carrying goods and materials.

## *Now*

---

A **truck** is a heavy vehicle built to haul goods. A truck farm is a farm that produces vegetables to be sold at a nearby market or perhaps even from the farmer’s truck.

## *Wallet*

## *Then*

**A** **wallet** was the colonial term for a type of knapsack used to hold food, clothing, and such provisions as might be needed for a trip. On September 2, 1774, the morning after commander of British forces in America, General Thomas Gage sent soldiers to capture the patriot ammunition stored in the provincial powder house near Boston, a traveler named McNeil wrote of the people’s response:

*All along [the road] were armed men rushing forward—some on foot, some on horseback. At every house women and children [were] making cartridges, running bullets, making wallets, baking biscuits, crying and bemoaning and at the same time animating their husbands and sons to fight for their liberties, though not knowing whether they should ever see them again.*<sup>22</sup>

## Now

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Today's **wallet** is a billfold, a small folded case for a pocket or purse, usually made of leather or fabric in which money, pictures, and cards are kept.

### MEN AND WORK

#### Chapter Notes:

- 1 Thoreau, 56-57.
- 2 Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 179.
- 3 Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 17.
- 4 Lederer, Jr., *Colonial American English*, 102.
- 5 *Diary of Anna Green Winslow*, 111.
- 6 Anburey, *Travels*, vol. 2, 52-53.
- 7 Benes, "Itinerant Entertainers," 119.
- 8 De Vere, *Americanism*, 182. Devere continues: "the firm belief of the Puritans in a special providence watching over them and their interests made them continually resort to this manner of distributing lands or other articles of value, held heretofore in common, and thus the term *lots* soon came to designate any great quantity."
- 9 Ellery, 323.
- 10 Anburey, *Travels*, vol. 2, 50-51.
- 11 Dwight, *Travel*, vol. II, 237.
- 12 Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 51.
- 13 Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 205-6.
- 14 Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 181.
- 15 Earle, *Home Life*, 157.
- 16 Anburey, *Travels*, vol. 2, 209.
- 17 Dow, *Arts and Crafts*, 282.
- 18 Dow, *Arts and Crafts*, 195.
- 19 Dexter, 32.
- 20 Dow, *Arts and Crafts*, 286.
- 21 Dow, *Every Day Life*, 65.
- 22 Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 46.



# WOMEN AND WORK

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Most colonial women worked from sunup to sundown, bearing and raising children, carding wool, combing flax, spinning, knitting, sewing, quilting, cooking, baking, butchering, washing, gardening, and making cider, cheeses, butter, candles, and soap. They were the midwives, the herbalists, the nurses. Even unmarried women, though rare in a society that valued marriage and home above all, played their role in performing these tasks for the family.

Women had to do the daily magic of turning raw material into food for the table, clothing and linens for the family, beer and cider for the mugs. The wife of a Dover, New Hampshire, minister only slightly exaggerated when she wrote:

*Up in the morning I must rise  
Before I've time to rub my eyes.  
With half-pin'd gown, unbuckled shoe,  
I hast to milk my lowing cow.  
But, Oh! It makes my heart to ake,  
I have no bread till I can bake,  
And then, alas! It makes me sputter,  
For I must churn or have no butter.  
The hogs with swill too I must serve;  
For hogs must eat or men will starve ... .  
Corn must be husk'd, and pork be kill'd,  
The house with all confusion fill'd.  
O could you see the grand display  
Upon our annual butchering day,—  
See me look like ten thousand sluts,  
My kitchen spread with grease & guts ... <sup>1</sup>*

It fell to the women to make sure that there was fire in the great fireplace to cook meals. A young Watertown girl remembered her mother getting up one morning early, coming into the kitchen and finding her fire gone out. Her daughter described it thus:

*Our custom then was to rake up the fire carefully at night under the ashes so as to preserve it in case of sickness in the night or convenience for kindling the fire in the morning. Lucifer matches were not yet invented, and, to save herself the trouble of striking fire in a tinderbox, she awoke little George, gave him a pair of small light tongs and bid him run to the next neighbor's house in sight, and get a coal of fire ... .<sup>2</sup>*

Despite the importance of their contributions, wives were clearly believed to be subservient to their husbands. In May 1776, Abigail Adams spoke candidly to her husband, John, about the risks of this attitude:

*I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary [sic] power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken—and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural and legal authority at our feet ... .<sup>3</sup>*

Still, though they could not vote or hold office, women were admitted to full church membership and were generally protected by the Puritan belief in family, in loving partnership between a man and a woman, and in spiritual equality, as well as by laws that helped safeguard them from the tyranny of their husbands, including the right to divorce. Trying to reconcile the apparent discrepancy in the relations between man and wife, one minister wrote somewhat convolutedly:

*Of all the orders which are unequals, these do come nearest to an Equality, and in several respects they stand upon an even ground. These two do make a pair, which infers so far a parity.<sup>4</sup>*

Despite the endless work and the inequalities, the majority of women led lives like those of their husbands, full and busy, productive and necessary to the wellbeing of their families and their community.