Courtship and Sexual Freedom in Eighteenth-Century America

It was not unusual for courting couples in late eighteenth-century New England to spend the night with each other—often in their parents’ homes and with their parents’ permission. Andrew Burnaby, a young Englishman who was traveling through the North American colonies in 1759-1760, reported as follows: “At their usual time the old couple retire to bed, leaving the young ones to settle matters as they can, who after having sat up as long as they think proper, get into bed also, but without pulling off their undergarments, in order to prevent scandal” (1) Other visitors from abroad noted with astonishment that parents generally knew about and condoned these overnight visits. The young couples in question were not necessarily even betrothed—they had sometimes known each other for only a brief time. Some parents did require that the young people remain partially clothed—bundle, in contemporary parlance. This was an attempt to prevent the couple from engaging in sexual intercourse, though the high incidence of premarital pregnancy suggests that this strategy was not entirely effective. By the late eighteenth century, between 30 and 40 percent of New England brides were pregnant (2).

Stereotypic images of sexual culture in early New England, which owe much to The Scarlet Letter (1850) and other writings by Nathaniel Hawthorne, focus on the Puritans’ exacting moral code. That caricature provokes strong reactions even today, whether vilified as a repressive ideology from which Americans still struggle to free themselves or eulogized as an expression of moral integrity from which modern American society has sadly degenerated. Yet the reality was much more complex and ambiguous than either of these perspectives allow. Though Puritan leaders did condemn sexual relations outside marriage, they encouraged and celebrated sex between husband and wife as a God-ordained expression of their love. And even though ministers and lawmakers did their best to ensure that official values became social practice, sexual attitudes in Puritan New England were always much more diverse and contested than persistent stereotypes would suggest. New England’s sexual culture was, furthermore, anything but static: by the mid-eighteenth century, a series of factors had combined to bring about a much less constrained atmosphere than existed in the seventeenth century. Contemporaries were well aware of that transformation and debated its implications, especially in the context of courtship (3).

The point at which sex became acceptable within a relationship was the topic of widespread controversy in England on the eve of colonization in North America and remained controversial throughout the colonial period in British America. That debate took the form of a struggle between official codes of conduct and alternative popular customs. Religious doctrine and the law insisted that sex should take place only once a couple was formally married. But many people on both sides of the Atlantic believed that sex became morally and socially acceptable once a couple committed to each other. Roughly one-fifth of English brides in the late 1500s and early 1600s were pregnant by the time they married. Though the religious and legal authorities saw sex prior to marriage as immoral, most of those who engaged in premarital intercourse were not rejecting morality so much as following a time-honored popular moral code that distinguished between premarital and casual sex.
Even in Puritan New England, many settlers—including some church members—saw nothing wrong with having sex once they were betrothed. Over one hundred fifty couples in Essex County, Massachusetts, were convicted between 1640 and 1685 for producing a child well within nine months of their marriage. New England laws made no distinction between premarital sex and casual fornication. But when Samuel Hoskins and Elizabeth Cleverly of New Haven Colony were prosecuted for this offense in 1642, they defended themselves by pointing out that they had “entered into contract” before beginning to have sexual relations, in their eyes a mitigating factor (4).

Throughout the seventeenth century, court officials, ministers, and godly parents in New England sought to ensure that young adults abided by official codes of conduct and abstained from sex until they were formally wed. But not all children of godly settlers were as committed to religious orthodoxy as their parents and it was by no means impossible for young people to find opportunities for sexual intimacy, despite the efforts of parents and neighbors to prevent them from doing so. The challenge of imposing an official ban on premarital sex grew with each passing decade, as the population became more diverse and less dominated by those who identified with Puritan values. In New Haven County, Connecticut, 10 percent of brides in the 1690s were already pregnant; in earlier decades the percentage had been in single digits (5).

By the mid-eighteenth century, a series of social, ideological, legal, and economic developments had loosened many of the constraints that previously shaped sexual culture. Parental control of adult offspring and their sexual behavior had depended on a combination of practical dependence and traditions of deference. As the land in densely settled communities was divided and subdivided from generation to generation, it became increasingly difficult for parents to provide their grown children with adequate lots on which to settle and farm. That removed an important form of leverage: parental authority based on control of land was undermined by population growth. Meanwhile, new approaches to parenthood and authority in general lessened emphasis on unconditional obedience and more on the rights of the individual. Enlightenment writings stressed the importance of personal happiness over tradition and duty.

As New Englanders moved away from tightly clustered communities to raise their families in more scattered patterns of settlement, it became more difficult for neighbors to keep watch over each other so as to exercise mutual stewardship. As market towns and seaports such as Boston grew in size, an increasingly anonymous population either inhabited or passed through these urban centers to sell their goods or labor. These men and women were able to gratify their sexual urges outside the bounds of marriage with a measure of freedom that would have been inconceivable in a small rural community. The disruption and large-scale mobility that accompanied the Seven Years’ War and the Revolutionary War accentuated these trends.

Concurrent with this loosening of parental and community control, eighteenth-century courts shifted their attention away from moral surveillance toward the regulation of financial and commercial issues. The number of prosecutions for premarital sex declined rapidly during the second quarter of the century. By the latter half of the century, courts paid attention to fornication only if it resulted in an out-of-wedlock birth and so had economic implications: in such cases officials would compel the father to provide support for the unwed mother and child, if he could be identified and tracked down. But whereas most seventeenth-century courts had been willing to accept a woman’s word when she claimed that a particular man had fathered her child, stricter standards of evidence by the early eighteenth century meant that court officials wanted corroborative testimony in support of the mother’s allegation, which could be difficult to procure.

Eighteenth-century New Englanders were well aware that restraints on sexual activity outside marriage were much looser than they had been and that many young men and women now felt free to act on their sexual urges prior to marriage. Indeed, with a biracial pregnancy rate of roughly one third, it was difficult not to notice. Some contemporaries dwelt in grim tones upon the decline in authority and morality that had apparently brought about this state of affairs. But the primary focus of concern was the increased vulnerability of young women to unwed pregnancy and abandonment in an atmosphere of greater sexual freedom. Given that a woman’s uncorroborated allegation was no longer sufficient to establish paternity in court, how could families ensure that young men took responsibility for the results of their sexual liaisons and so protect young women from abandonment and social disgrace? Contemporaries responded to this challenge in two ways: one practical and predominantly rural in its setting, the other ideological and primarily urban.

The first strategy involved allowing young adults who were dating to spend the night together under the parental roof. This seemingly permissive custom, which became common in New England by the second half of the eighteenth century, helped to ensure that unwed fathers could be held accountable. If a courting couple had sex in secret and the young woman became pregnant, there would be no witness to sexual relations having taken place. But if a couple spent the night together in the home of one or other of their families, there would be abundant witnesses to verify that intimacy had occurred, should the young man prove reluctant to take responsibility for his actions. By threatening legal action and the humiliation of public prosecution, families often succeeded in pressuring unwed fathers either to marry a pregnant daughter or to provide a financial settlement. The latter at least acknowledged that the young woman deserved to be treated with respect and so ensured that her reputation remained more or less intact as she resumed her place in the marriage market. It was abandonment that spelled social disaster.

Opponents of overnight courtship attacked it as irreligious and immoral. But apologists pointed out that scripture did not contain any explicit condemnation of the custom:

In Genesis no knowledge is of this thing to be got,
Whether young men did bundle then, or whether they did not.
The sacred book says wives they took, it don’t say how they courted,
Whether they in bed did lay, or by the fire courted.
Critics of bundling also argued that it was ineffective in preventing sexual intercourse from taking place: “unruly horses” could still “push the fence.” Its advocates responded by pointing out that bundling couples were no more likely to have sex than those forbidden to spend the night together. As one author declared, not all “bastards” were “got in feather beds” (6). The fundamental issue was whether parents should attempt to prevent physical intimacy between courting couples, because it might result in sexual intercourse, or accept that such intimacies were going to take place anyway and opt to monitor them closely. The latter course of action was not necessarily intended to promote sex before marriage, but it did enable more effective protection of young women from abandonment by irresponsible male lovers, should they become pregnant. Parents could lessen the dangers for women inherent in an atmosphere of greater sexual freedom by allowing adult children to court overnight within the family home.

But such precautions could not protect all young women who became sexually active prior to marriage. If a male lover promised marriage and then absconded after sex had taken place, tracking him down might prove extremely difficult, especially if the relationship had taken place in an urban setting. Many young people came to work in seaports on their own—not only unfettered, but also unprotected by the presence of their families. The mobility and anonymity of urban populations made regulation of sexual behavior, whether formally by officials or informally by relatives and neighbors, much more challenging than in a small rural community. Widespread anxiety about the growing vulnerability of young women led to a new genre of didactic writings published in newspapers, magazines, and almanacs during the latter part of the eighteenth century. These writings were intended to educate women in the dangers of premarital sex.

Earlier publications had often including items on sex, courtship, and marriage that were bawdy, satirical, and misogynist in tone, portraying women as lustful and morally untrustworthy. But during the second half of the century, a dramatic shift occurred as writings on sex and courtship became increasingly serious in spirit and sympathetic toward women. In thousands of essays and poems that dwelt on the dire consequences of seduction and abandonment by unscrupulous suitors, authors sought to protect women from disaster. They argued that whereas men were morally weak and enslaved to their sexual appetites, women had a natural capacity for selfrestraint and so must take responsibility for their own safety during courtship. Chastity, these writings insisted, was a young woman’s best bet because men were so untrustworthy.

Though these writings condemned men for seducing and abandoning women, they often declared that because men were by nature morally unreliable, women must assume the mantle of moral stewardship, protecting men as well as themselves from the consequences of male frailty. This depiction of women as the guardians of virtue, which contrasted dramatically with earlier stereotypes of female lust, was ostensibly sympathetic and yet had insidious implications. Many of these essays and poems addressed women specifically, but hardly any addressed men. They reacted to the peril implicit in an atmosphere of greater sexual freedom by constraining women’s freedom of expression, not men’s. By stressing female moral capacity, they made women responsible for their own fate, should they be seduced and abandoned by a duplicitous rake. “Let the fair ever remember,” declared one author, “that their peace, dignity, and character chiefly depend on themselves.” “It will then,” warned another, “be your own fault if you are not happy” (7).

These two responses to greater sexual freedom were strikingly different in character. First, courtship and bundling expressed a continued commitment to community surveillance, moral stewardship, and familial responsibility; the objective was to hold men responsible for their actions. Second, didactic literature and its depiction of women as the guardians of moral virtue stressed individual responsibility, focusing for the most part on the responsibilities of women, providing men with an implicit alibi for sexual irresponsibility. Both strategies sought to protect women from the potential dangers of a more permissive sexual climate. But the former was collective and collaborative in its conception of social identity. The latter was much more individualistic and isolating: a woman, it taught, could not rely on others for her safety; in the final analysis she could rely only on herself.

Endnotes
3. For a fuller version of the argument that follows, see Richard Godbeer, Sexual Revolution in Early America (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), especially chapters seven, eight, and nine.

A New Bundling Song

Or a reproof to those Young Country Women, who follow that reproachful Practice, and to their Mothers for upholding them therein.

Anonymous

S
ince bundling very much abounds,
In many parts of country towns,
No doubt but some will spurn
my song,
And say I'd better hold my tongue;
But none I'm sure will take offence,
Or deem my song impertinence,
But only those who guilty be,
And plainly here their pictures see.
Some maidens say, if through the nation,
Bundling should quite go out of fashion,
Courtship would lose its sweets; and they
Could have no fun till wedding day.
It shant be so, they rage and storm,
And country girls in clusters swarm,
And fly and buzz, like angry bees,
And vow they'll bundle when they please.
Some mothers too, will plead their cause,
And give their daughters great applause,
And tell them, 'tis no sin nor shame,
For we, your mothers, did the same;
We hope the custom ne'er will alter,
But wish its enemies a halter.
Dissatisfaction great appear'd,
In several places where they've heard
Their preacher's bold, aloud disdain
That bundling be a burning shame;
This too was cause of direful rout
And talk'd and told of, all about,
That ministers should disapprove
Sparks courting in a bed of love,
So justified the custom more,
Than e'er was heard or known before.
The pulp't then it seems must yield,
And female valor take the field,
In places where their custom long
Increasing strength has grown so strong:
When mothers herein bear a sway,
And daughters joyfully obey.
And young men highly pleased too,
Good Lord! what can't the devil do.
Can this vile practice ne'er be broke?
Is there no way to give a stroke,
To wound it or to strike it dead,
And girls with sparks not go to bed. 'Twill strike them more than preacher's tongue.

To let the world know what they've done,
And let it be in common fame,
Held up to view a noted shame.
Young miss if this your practice be,
I'll teach you now yourself to see:
You plead you're honest, modest too,
But such a plea will never do;
For how can modesty consist,
With shameful practice such as this?
I'll give your answer to the life:
"You don't undress, like man and wife."
That is your plea, I'll freely own,
But whose your bondsmen when alone,
That further rules you will not break,
And marriage liberties partake?
Some really do, I suppose,
Upon design keep on some clothes,
And yet in truth I'm not afraid
For to describe a bundling maid;
She'll sometimes say when she lies down,
She can't be cumber'd with a gown,
And that the weather is so warm,
To take it off can be no harm:
The girl it seems had been at shrift;
For widest bosom to her shift,
She gounless, when the bed they're in,
The spark, nought feels but naked skin.
But she is modest, also chaste,
While only bare from neck to waist,
And he of boasted freedom sings,
Of all above her apron strings.
And where such freedoms great are sh'd
And further freedoms feebly bar'd,
I leave for others to relate,
How long she'll keep her virgin state.
Another pretty lass we'll scan,
That loves to bundle with a man,
For many different ways they take,
Through modest rules they all will break.
Some clothes I'll keep on, she will say,
For that has always been my way,
Nor would I be quite naked found,
With spark in bed, for thousand pound.
But petticoats, I've always said,
Were never made to wear in bed,
I'll take them off, keep on my gown,
And then I dare defy the town,
To charge me with immodesty.

While I so ever cautious be.
The spark was pleased with his maid,
Of apprehension quick he said,
Her witty scheme was keen he swore,
Lying in gown open before.
Another maid when in the dark,
Going to bed with her dear spark,
She'll tell him that 'tis rather shocking,
To bundle in with shoes and stockings.
Nor scrupling but she's quite discreet,
Lying with naked legs and feet,
With petticoat so thin and short,
That she is scarce the better for't;
But you will say that I'm unfair,
That some who bundle take more care,
For some we may with truth suppose,
Bundling in bed with all their clothes.
But bundler's clothes are no defence,
Unruly horses push the fence;
A certain fact I now relate,
That's tru indeed without debate.
A bundling couple went to bed,
With all their clothes from foot to head,
That the defence might seem complete,
Each one was wrapped in a sheet.
But O! this bundling's such a witch,
The man of her did catch the itch,
And so provoked was the wretch,
That she of him a bastard catch'd.
Ye bundle misses don't you blush,
You hang your heads and bid me hush.
If you won't tell me how you feel,
I'll ask your sparks, they best can tell.
But it is custom you will say,
And custom always bears the sway,
If I won't take my sparks to bed,
A laughing stock I shall be made;
A vulgar custom 'tis I own,
Admir'd by many a slut and clown,
But 'tis a method of proceeding.
As much abhor'd by those of breeding,
You're welcome to the lines I've penn'd,
For they were written by a friend,
Who'll think himself quite well rewarded.
If this vile practice is discarded.
The Whore on the Snow Crust
(Also known as "A New Song in Favour of Courting," printed by Nathaniel Coverly, Boston, ca. 1786.)

1. Adam at first was formed of dust,
   As we find on record;
   And did receive a wife call'd Eve, 
   By a creative word.

2. From Adam's side a crooked bride,
   We find complete in form;
   Ordained that they in bed might lay 
   And keep each other warm.

3. To court indeed they had no need, 
   She was his wife at first,
   And she was made to be his aid, 
   Whose origin was dust.

4. This new made pair full happy were, 
   And happy might remained,
   If his helpmeet had never eat 
   The fruit that was restrained.

5. Tho' Adam's wife destroyed his life
   In manner that is awful;
   Yet marriage now we all allow 
   To be both just and lawful.

6. And now a days there is two ways, 
   Which of the two is right:
   To lie between the sheets sweet and clean 
   Or sit up all the night.

7. But some suppose bundling in clothes
   The good and wise doth vex;
   Then let me know which way to go 
   To court the fairer sex.

8. Whether they must be hugg'd and buss'd
   When sitting up all night;
   Or whether in bed may lay, 
   Which doth reason invite?

9. Nature's request is, give me rest,
   Our bodies seek repose;
   Night is the time, and 'tis no crime 
   To bundle in our clothes.

10. Since in a bed a man and maid
    May bundle and be chaste;
    It doth no good to burn up wood 
    It is a needless waste.

11. Let coat and shift be turned adrift,
    And breeches take their flight,
    An honest man and virgin can 
    Lie quiet all the night.

12. But if there be dishonesty
    Implanted in the mind,
    Breeches nor smocks, nor scarce padlocks 
    The rage of lust can bind.

13. Kate, Nance and Sue proved just and true,
    Tho' bundling did practise;
    But Ruth beguil'd and proved with child. 
    Who bundling did despise.

14. Whores will be whores, and on the floor
    Where many has been laid,
    To sit and smoke and ashes poke, 
    Won't keep awake a maid.

15. Bastards are not at all times got
    In feather beds we know;
    The strumpet's oath convinces both 
    Oft times it is not so.

16. One whomish dame, I fear to name
    Lest I should give offence,
    But in this town she was took down 
    Not more than eight months since.

17. She was the first, that on snow crust,
    I ever knew to gender
    I'll hint no more about this whore 
    For fear I should offend her.

18. 'Twas on the snow when Sol was low,
    And was in Capricorn,
    A child was got, and it will not 
    Be long ere it is born.

19. Now unto those that do oppose 
    The bundling trade, I say
    Perhaps there's more got on the floor, 
    Than any other way.

20. In ancient books no knowledge is
    Of these things to be got;
    Whether young men did bundle then, 
    Or whether they did not.

21. Since ancient book says wife they took,
    It don't say how they courted;
    Whether young men did bundle then, 
    Or by the fire sported.

[But some do hold in times of old,
    That those about to wed,
    Spent not the night, nor yet the light, 
    By fire, or in bed.]

22. They only meant to say they sent
    A man to choose a bride;
    Issac was so, but let me know, 
    If any one beside.

23. Men don't pretend to trust a friend
    To choose him sheep or cows;
    Much more a wife whom all his life 
    He does expect to house.

24. Since it doth stand each one in hand
    To happy his life;
    I would advise each to be wise, 
    And choose a prudent wife.

25. Since bundling is not a thing
    That judgement will procure;
    Go on young men and bundle then, 
    But keep your bodies pure.