Our Filthy Forebears

BY AMY POOLE

AMERICA'S EARLY COLONISTS BROUGHT FROM ENGLAND A DISDAIN FOR BATHING, AND TWO CENTURIES WOULD PASS BEFORE THE NEW NATION GOT A GOOD SCRUBBING.

One summer day in 1799 a venerable sixty-five-year-old Quaker woman donned a linen gown and oilcloth cap and stepped into the shower her husband had built in the backyard of their Philadelphia home. She pulled the cord and a cascade of water poured over her body. "I bore it better than I expected," Elizabeth Drinker wrote afterward in her diary, "not having been wet all over at once for 28 years past."

Like many other Americans, Drinker's prior full-body bathing had been confined to natural water sources such as rivers, lakes, and springs. She had visited nearby Bristol Springs in 1771 and, upon easing herself in the therapeutic waters, "found the shock much greater than expected" and refused to fully bathe again for nearly three decades.

Drinker's home shower marked a milestone in early American bathing because the entire country at that time was forming a new sensibility about body cleanliness. After nearly 200 years of little or no bathing, Americans were installing tubs and showers—the "shower box" fixture in Henry and Elizabeth Drinker's yard was among the country's earliest—as part of a new bathing protocol.

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Bathing trends, whether in colonial America or today, are difficult to track because cleanliness always has been simply more important to some people than to others.

Throughout recorded history, the incidence of bathing has been linked to social class, economic standing, medical theory, climate, geography, and even availability of water. Humans have always bathed—in certain epochs more often and more thoroughly than in others—with early Americans typifying the journey from dirty to well scrubbed.

For the first century of European settlement in America, bathing was nearly nonexistent, partly because of the fight for survival. Men, women, and children intent on building shelter, clearing the land, hunting, and scavenging for life's necessities lived grimy lives with only an occasional swabbing from a basin of water or a seasonal dip in a nearby river or lake.

But in fact, colonial American tolerance of dirty bodies harked back to the homeland.

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Many colonial Americans used laundry tubs and smaller wash basins for their occasional bathing, most of which was little more than swabbing faces and hands with a wet cloth. While Williamsburg blacksmith Ken Schmarz uses a bar of lye soap, most people considered homemade soaps too harsh for bathing.

DIRTY ENGLISH

Nearly every ancient culture savored a luxurious bath, as evidenced by the ruins of ornate bathhouses in Greece, Egypt, Rome, China, Japan, and Mesoamerica. Crusaders traveling to the Holy Land brought the concept of the Turkish bath back to Europe, where citizens enjoyed bathing—at least momentarily. Europe's growing Christian presence did not share a fondness for public bathing, equating it with licentiousness, lewdness, and an immoral fixation on the body.

Water itself became suspect due to the teachings of such influential men as Greek physician Galen (129-217 A.D.), who pronounced that too much water would unbalance the body's four humors and result in sickness.

By 1200, public bathing in Europe had declined dramatically—except, ironically, in remote monasteries—and the Black Death in the 1300s finally pulled the plug on it.

Throughout Europe, people viewed bathing as washing away the body's protection against the terrifying plague. For the rest of the Middle Ages, when most Europeans bathed at all they swabbed themselves here and there, perhaps once or twice a month, or took an infrequent dip in a nearby body of water.

Although bathing had practically disappeared from the land, Renaissance Europeans felt compelled to deal with bodily filth and odors. Suspicious of water's dangerous properties, their solutions were underclothes—which could be washed even if the body could not—and powerful fragrances.

"By the seventeenth century, wiping or rubbing the skin, a technique that had been part of bathhouse culture, replaced bathing as the main means for removing dirt from those parts of the body hidden by clothing," wrote historian Kathleen M. Brown in *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (2009). "Whether one deliberately buffed the skin or simply wore a linen shirt under one's outer garments, the resulting friction was believed sufficient to remove dirt and preferable to immersing the fragile body in water." White linen shirts became a wardrobe necessity for men, and linen shifts and caps for women.

Exotic perfumes evolved into social necessities during the Renaissance especially among the upper classes, who used colognes, scented powders, sachets, and pomanders to surround themselves with pleasing fragrances. Dousing themselves with such scents was an extravagance most Europeans could not afford.

From the Renaissance into the Enlightenment, Germans earned a reputation for cleanliness in body, home, farm, and village. The rest of continental Europe was considered fair to middling, while the British Isles were notorious for scorning the wash basin.

"In the mid-sixteenth century, and in subsequent voyages to North America, English people made poor emissaries for European cleanliness," Brown wrote. "The condition of their houses, their bodies, and their capital city had earned them the reputation of being the dirtiest people in Europe."

English colonists imparted this legacy to the New World.

OPPOSITE By virtue of their small size, children took more baths than adults in early America. Still, many parents feared exposing their children to excessive water would wash away the body's protection against disease. At Colonial Williamsburg, interpreters bathe a child on Market Square.

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While most English considered regular bathing to be harmful, others flocked to spas such as the one in Bath, where they believed the therapeutic waters would restore their health. Thomas Rowlandson's 1810 satirical print shows the infirm racing to Bath once winter had passed.

FACE AND HANDS ONLY

Like their countrymen in the homeland, America's early colonists were wary of water. "Colonists seldom drank water, which contained germs and infected people with illnesses," wrote Victoria Sherrow in her 2001 book, *For Appearance' Sake*. "For the same reason, they feared bathing, believing that it would give them pneumonia, colds, cholera, and other diseases."

At Virginia's Jamestown settlement in the early 1600s, colonists confronted starvation, hostile Indians, and enormous difficulty in establishing their new home. Although located on the banks of the James River, the colonists spent little time bathing. In fact, the evidence points to considerable grime, at least during the battles against Indian warriors.

"There was also the question of the odor of unwashed, unanointed English bodies, covered in layers of clothing," Brown noted. "When Native Americans killed an Englishman, they often stripped him of his outerwear but left his shirt behind. Why? Did this garment, worn next to the skin and rarely washed, smell too much to be worn by indigenous men?"

Brown also commented on another misconception regarding early settlement: the myth of the filthy savage. "The clean, nude skins of Indians had long caught the attention and captured the imaginations of European observers," she wrote. "No matter what they claimed about Native American manners or their failure to exploit natural resources, Europeans could not deny that Native Americans had smoother, cleaner skin that most Europeans. Accounts of Native Americans from the late fifteenth and the sixteenth century thus oscillated between discourses of slavery, containing pejorative comments about filthiness and beastliness, and descriptions of well-formed, graceful bodies with the smoothest, cleanest skin Europeans had ever seen."

In New England, bathing held no more allure than in Tidewater Virginia. Pilgrim and Puritan colonists displayed much religious piety but held in disdain both water and the bodily attention that bathing involved. North or South, most bathing in the early colonies involved a basin of water and a piece of cloth to scrub the face and hands. The harsh, lye-based soaps of the period were reserved for laundry, and soap would not become a popular component of American bathing until the mid-1800s.

"Wooden tubs were common in colonial households but were used primarily for laundry or storage," observed Dorothy Mays in *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World* (2004). "Such tubs could be used to bathe a child or possibly provide a cramped and uncomfortable bath for an adult. Tubs specially made for

bathing did not make their appearance in America until the end of the eighteenth century. In most cases, full-body bathing in tubs occurred in the kitchen, for this is where the facilities for heating water would have been. It was also usually the warmest room in the house."

FILTH AS THE ENEMY

Wartime is a traditional enemy of cleanliness, and bathing took a particularly hard beating during America's colonial conflicts.

At the time of the French and Indian War (1754-63), neither England nor its American colonies had developed hygienic habits, but British army officers from England's upper class still were appalled at the colonists who fought alongside the red-coated regulars. British General James Wolfe called New England's soldiers "the dirtiest, most contemptible, cowardly dogs you can conceive."

British Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Burton in 1756 said colonial troops at Fort William Henry on the shore of New York's Lake George were "extremely indolent and dirty to a degree that the fort stinks enough to cause an infection."

Twenty years later as the colonies battled the British for independence, the American army faced additional formidable foes in the form of dirt and disease. At a time when people relied on linen to keep themselves clean, colonial soldiers marched shoeless in soiled and tattered shirts and uniforms. At Valley Forge in the winter of 1777, General George Washington's army desperately huddled—ragged, starving, and dirty—in cramped huts that became breeding grounds for the dysentery, jaundice, pneumonia, and typhoid that killed 2,500 of Washington's troops during the encampment. The situation created a horror of filth few would forget.

The filth his soldiers experienced especially troubled Washington, who respected cleanliness. "While you halt," he ordered Colonel Elias Dayton in August 1777, "you will take every measure for refreshing your Men and rendering them as comfortable as you can. Bathing themselves moderately and washing their cloathes are of infinite service."

Washington's mandate mirrored a growing awareness on both sides of the Atlantic that dirt—not water—could lead to illness. Especially among the educated classes during the late 1700s, cleanliness became linked with manners and morality.

NOBILITY OF DIRT

It has been said that farmers and the sons of farmers won the American Revolution. Farmers as a rule get dirty, and thus a schism developed in the new nation between the gentility—Northern merchants and Southern planters alike—and the rural population.

"While not the lone source of

This c. 1720 brick bathhouse at the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg was a favorite summer retreat for the colony's last royal governor, John Murray, Earl of Dunmore. A Scotsman, he hated Virginia's steamy summers and would sit naked in the bathhouse while servants doused him in cold water, not for bathing, but to keep cool.

COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

shifts in attitudes toward cleanliness—one can find examples of many of these ideas about cleanliness in England and France—the American reaction against genteel habits became an expression of patriotism and incipient national identity that competed with the interest in gentility," Brown explained. "Pride in honest and wholesome rural ways, which were idealized as quintessentially American during the early republic, suffused the critiques of urban artifice, including the fussy manners and fastidiousness of city dwellers."

American authors and social critics lampooned bathing and body care as effete and self-indulgent—fops and macaronis paid excessive attention to grooming and clothing, not the noble and brave men who fought to create the United States.

"Men," Brown wrote, "were expected to get a little grimy as they pursued farming and public life. In this version of the American Revolution, hardy sons of the soil returned to their labors in the fields after the conclusion of the war, sustained by the same virtue—in this case, dirt accumulated through honest toil—that had enabled them to triumph over the British enemy."

Women, on the other hand, were expected to maintain clean bodies and households. "If they did not," Brown said, "they might be branded as sluts or slovens."

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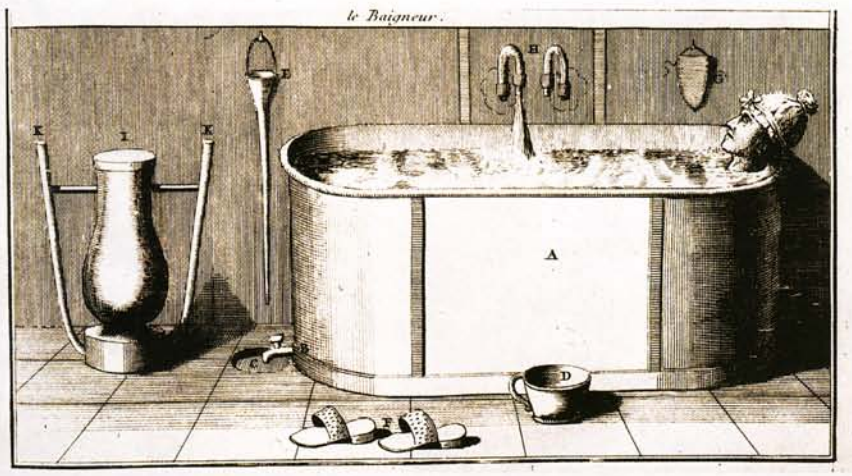
Nosegays of fragrant flowers, such as the one Colonial Williamsburg interpreter Brooke Barrows holds, masked the unpleasant odors of unwashed bodies. Expensive colognes, powders, and sachets served the same purpose.

While most Americans in the 1790s still sponged themselves at washstands and immersed themselves in full baths only once or twice a year, the urban merchant class—people like Henry and Elizabeth Drinker—busily installed tubs and showers.

A 1788 inventory of the home of Philadelphia merchant John Penn Jr. listed an early tin shower bath. Another merchant, John Carson, in 1790 added a shower bath in his Philadelphia home. Maryland Governor Thomas Johnson installed bathtubs in his Rose Hill Manor in 1794. In Williamsburg, Virginia, resident St. George Tucker in 1796 installed a copper bathtub, the first in the city. Back in Philadelphia, in 1799, the new Pennsylvania Hospital built a shower bath to help keep patients clean.

"As republican citizens, many Americans, especially among the middling sort, became ever more anxious about acquiring gentility," historian Gordon S. Wood wrote in *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic 1789-1815* (2009). "People, even gentry, who during their entire lives had never been wet all over now engaged in occasional bathing. In the 1790s public bathhouses were erected in some American cities as people began responding to the appeals for more cleanliness contained in scores of conduct manuals."



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"Le Baigneur" from *Art du Perruquier*, by Francois A. de Garsault (Paris, 1767), shows a bathtub several years ahead of its time in Europe and even more so in America. The French, regarded as cleaner than the British, especially among the wealthier class, willingly invested in lavish bathing facilities.

WATER FINALLY PREVAILS

Advances in medical science helped drive the urge for bathing among America's educated populace.

"Bathing was performed more for health than for cleaning in early America," Kay Moss wrote in her 1999 book, *Southern Folk Medicine, 1750-1820*. "Some people enjoyed bathing, while others simply endured it, but many believed a bath to be therapeutic for a variety of ills. These baths were not of the scrubbing-with-soap kind. Exposing oneself to being wet all over was not common practice. Washing the whole body evidently was still a progressive idea in 1817, when (Dr.

Thomas) Ewell wrote in his *Letters to Ladies*, 'The females of the southern states, who frequently bathe during the summer, derive great benefit from the operation. The advantages derived from visiting the water places unquestionably depend more on the washing of the skin than on any medicinal qualities in the water'."

Influential thinkers such as Philadelphia's famed artist and naturalist Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) encouraged whole-body bathing—even without a bathtub—in his 1803 *Epistle to a Friend on the Means of Preserving Health*. "When I was exposed to the infection of yellow fever, it was my practice to take a pail of cold water to my bedroom and wash from head to foot either in the morning or evening," Peale wrote. He encouraged "taking the precaution to begin with washing and rubbing the hands and feet: and after completely cleaning the whole frame, to rub till perfectly dry with a coarse linen towel."

As late at the mid-19th Century, American bathing habits remained varied, still determined mostly by education and economic class. Boston, for example, had 178,000 residents but only 4,000 bathtubs, and health reformer William Alcott in 1850 contended that a quarter of New England's population immersed their bodies in a tub of water less than once a year. Still, the urban middle class had by then determined that cleanliness was in fact next to godliness, and nearly every bedroom in America's towns and cities was equipped with pitcher and wash basin.

Author Lucy Larcom in her 1889 book, *A New England Girlhood, Outlined from Memory*, described the habit of her older sister, Emilie, around 1835: "Her custom was, for instance, to take a full cold bath every morning before she went to her work, even though the water was chiefly broken ice; and we did the same whenever we could be resolute enough. It required both nerve and will to do this at five o'clock on a zero morning, in a room without a fire; but it helped us to harden ourselves while we formed a good habit." ★

Amy Poole writes on a range of historical topics concerning social and domestic matters.

Hey, rub-a-dub, ho, rub-a-dub, three maids in a tub.
And who do you think were there?
The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker,
And all of them gone to the fair.

Was this unreserved ogling by 14th-Century tradespeople? Or an early salubrious spa experience? Licentious or luxurious, immersing in a tub of warm soapy water for a good scrub is a little vacation to love, and at the heart of the sensory experience is a fragrant sudsy soap.

Although we might think of our forebears laboring over simmering stewpots of ashes and animal fats, vegetable oils, particularly olive oil, were preferred for bathing. A seemingly simple chemical product of fats and alkalis, soap has been fussed over and refined since its discovery, and the innovation of vegetable oil soap in the Middle East before the 7th Century greatly improved bath-time pleasures. Liquid or solid, it was perfumed and tinted solely to please the senses.

The harder soaps were imported into Europe, and by the Middle Ages, semi-industrialized production there was supplying the entire continent and later its colonies. Soon colonial American small-scale production was competing with European imports and supplying those here who enjoyed the bathing experience.

Today many of those early recipes are being reproduced by small artisanal makers, and you too can enjoy a little bit of the colonial bathing experience—we hope just a little more often than they did.

WINFIELD ROSS

For a bit of indulgence, handmade soaps offer delightful, natural fragrances and add color to your soap dish. These examples are from Country Lane Baskets and Herbal Soaps, www.countrylaneonline.com