

The Social Practice of Bundling

CLIMBING INTO BED TOGETHER AS A PHASE OF COURTSHIP WAS EARLY AMERICA'S PRACTICAL ANSWER TO LONG DISTANCES AND THE NEED TO SAVE FIREWOOD AND CANDLES. IT ALSO HAD ITS CONSEQUENCES.

What better way for a young woman in colonial America to get to know her boyfriend than to crawl into bed with him for the night?

True, the image doesn't mesh with the usual concept of courtship in early America—a place so saturated with propriety that a young man failing to ask a father's permission to court his daughter could be hauled into court—yet couples practiced “bundling” frequently in New England and the Mid-Atlantic regions at least through the Revolutionary era. As a popular ballad of the 1780s put it:

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

Nineteenth-Century historians of bundling relied on anecdote, folklore, and a few scurrilous poems. Most were apologists for the ritual, characterizing it as quaintly rural. Some contemporary historians—quoting directly from private journals—depict a much more sexual practice, often as torrid as any of today's one-night stands.

The most extensive discussion is a small book titled *A History of Bundling: Its Origin, Progress and Decline in America*, by the antiquarian Henry Reed Stiles. Although remarkably tame in its discussion of anything sexual, it was banned in Boston three years after its publication in 1869. More recent first-hand accounts are from Pennsylvania German families who continued bundling well into the 20th Century, portraying it as innocent as a first kiss.



COURTESY OF THE PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN SOCIETY, KUTZTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

This portrayal of bundling is taken from A. Monroe Aurand Jr.'s pamphlet *Little Known Facts About Bundling in the New World*, published in 1938.

A PRACTICAL ARRANGEMENT

Most early histories characterize bundling as charming, socially acceptable, and—wink, wink—a little racy. Writers such as Stiles went to great length to give bundling moral legitimacy going back to the biblical *Book of Ruth* and courtship rituals in England, Ireland, Wales, and Holland.

But bundling in the colonies can be understood only by appreciating the remoteness and primitive modes of travel. Distances often were too great to be conveniently covered in a day, so travelers—at an inn, stage-coach stop, or family home—frequently shared beds with strangers. This nightly bed-sharing was also called “bundling,” though it was a far cry from the courtship practice.

Above all, bundling as a stage of courtship was practical—it allowed young people to become familiar with each other in hopes of making their marriage more compatible without squandering time,

firewood, or candles.

Historian Dana Doten in 1938 portrayed the socially acceptable image of bundling. “The young woman and her admirer, who might or might not be her betrothed, simply went to bed also, shortly after the others,” he wrote. “In certain cases they bedded in the same room with the rest of the family, but more often the daughter had a room apart.”

Doten continued, “Comfortably snuggled down into one of the enormous feather beds of the period, the lovers were at last in a position, literally and figuratively, to carry on uninterrupted those fascinatingly, endless, intimate conversations which have been a prerequisite of enamored youth from the beginning of time.”

Discussing bundling in his 2002 book, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, historian Richard Godbeer wrote, “Most eighteenth century commentators who mentioned bundling portrayed the custom as pre-



In the Benjamin Powell House at Colonial Williamsburg, Alex Jakubow and Maggie McDonald re-enact the 18th-Century practice of bundling.

dominantly rural and used primarily by ‘the lower people.’”

European travelers to New England occasionally mentioned bundling in their journals. In 1783, Johann Schoepf noted that bundling was not performed “by stealth” or only by couples “actually betrothed.” “On the contrary,” he wrote, “the parents are advised, and these meetings happen when the pair is enamored and merely wish to know each other better.” He emphasized that “the young woman’s name was in no ways impaired” by her participation.

TRIALS OF COURTSHIP

Bundling predictably bore the stigmas long associated with human mating—jealousy, gossip, and unexpected pregnancies. One of the most unadorned descriptions comes from the journal of a young New Hampshire farmer named Abner Sanger in the late 1700s. Cited by Godbeer, the young man discussed bundling using the terms “girling of it” and simply “staying with.”

“Some of these meetings took place in the context of an ongoing courtship that led to marriage,” Godbeer said of Sanger’s descriptions, “but others seem to have been casual or perhaps a preliminary exploration of intimacy that might or might not lead to more serious involvement.”

One afternoon in July 1780, for

example, Sanger recorded how Joseph Reed and Zadock Dodge were plowing a cornfield when three young women arrived to pick currants. Reed and Dodge turned to flirting and soon left to spend the night with two of the women, Grate Willard and Hephzibah Crossfield. The next day, Sanger recorded that Reed gave him “an account of his and Dodge’s girling of it at Major Willard’s and of Dodge’s being overcome by the fatigue of the night with Hephzibah.” Sanger noted that Reed was “dumpish” all day and Dodge “fell asleep” instead of plowing.

Godbeer noted that Sanger “watched with resentful fascination as more successful suitors paraded quite openly in and out of nearby bedchambers, in some cases ‘staying with’ the women he had been pursuing.” Sanger paid particularly close attention to the bundlings of two of his peers, Ebenezer Bragg and Prentice Willard, likely envious of their frequent couplings. He referred in his journal to Bragg as “Unction,” and Willard as “Lord Debauche” and “Lord Bugger.”

Sanger felt the sting of rebuke in August 1782 when Esther Scovill reprimanded him for “staying with” two women that summer. “But

A bundling board is placed down the center of a bed to determine a couple’s compatibility and chastity before marriage.

whether Scovill was ‘mad’ because Sanger visited two women at once, or because she disapproved of the practice altogether, or because she wanted him to ‘stay with’ her is not clear,” Godbeer wrote.

Journals of the era depict bundling as far less innocent than polite historians would characterize it. “The degree of intimacy enjoyed during these nocturnal meetings must have varied from one couple to the next,” Godbeer concluded. “Given the premarital pregnancy rate of between 30 and 40 percent for late-eighteenth-century New England, at least some ‘girling of it’ must have involved sexual intercourse.”

BUNDLING’S PARAPHENALIA

Bundling would have raised even more hackles had the outside world known of any sexual contact, so to preclude potential licentiousness, parents employed safeguards, most notably the “bundling bag,” “bundling bolster,” and the formidable “bundling board.” More evidence supports their use among 19th-Century Pennsylvania Germans than among earlier colonists.

The “bag” was a shift-like gown designed to protect the woman from physical contact. Based on various descriptions, it sometimes featured drawstrings at the throat and ankles. In extreme examples, the woman was literally sewn into the bag—with only her head emerging—to en-





sure no assault on her chastity. The “bolster” was a large pillow that extended the length of the bed, high enough to keep the couple separated. Then there was the “board.”

“To divide a bed in half, so that each party would have an allotted space, a board was placed as a divider,” wrote Patricia L. Cummings in a 2007 essay, *Bundling: A Courtship Ritual with Ancient Roots*. “Some bundling boards were sturdy, high and difficult to remove. Others were just a reminder not to cross the barrier.”

A detailed account comes from A. Monroe Aurand Jr.’s pamphlet *Little Known Facts About Bundling in the New World*, published in 1938. In it, he relates the tale of a young man invited to spend the night with a young woman near Lewistown, Pennsylvania. As with much bundling lore, the young man is startled when the girl suddenly joins him in the bedroom. She assures him that bundling “is a custom among her people to allow the young folks certain privileges; that she trusted him in everything, and that he need have no fear to be with her, even in bed!”

When they are under the covers, he asks her about a recessed slot he noticed in the headboard. “The young lady told him that formerly her people erected a barrier which consisted of a wide board, running the full length of the bed, over which, she told him, none ventured far, except in fear of being beaten up by members of the family who would respond at the least sign of trouble,” Aurand explained.

RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION

Bundling never sat well with most members of early America’s clergy, several of whom railed against it from their pulpits. In his 1827 *History of Dedham, Massachusetts*, author Erastus Worthington relates the 1781 rant of Reverend Jason Haven against unlawful cohabitation. “He attributed the frequent recurrence of the fault to the custom, then prevalent, of females admitting young men to their beds, who sought their company with intentions of marriage.”

Reverend Haven was so upset that he pointed his finger and named names. “The females blushed and hung down their heads,” Worthing-

Third verse of “The Bundling Bag” in *Little Known Facts About Bundling in the New World* (1938) reads, “The bundling bag was just the thing for young folks ‘on the go;’ it made matters safe, for man and maid; old folks retired, quite unafraid. All these things are truly so.”

ton recalled. “The men, too, hung down their heads, and now and then looked out from under their fallen eyebrows, to observe how others supported the attack.”

Scattered throughout the bundling folklore are stories of Puritan preachers confronting villagers as they called for an end to the practice.

“In 1776, a clergyman from one of the polite towns went into the country and preached against the unchristian custom of young men and maidens lying together on a bed,” Stiles wrote. “He was no sooner out of the church, when attacked by a shoal of good old women with, ‘Sir, do you think we and our daughters are naughty, because we allow bundling?’ ‘You lead yourselves into temptation by it,’ he replied. They all replied at once, ‘Sir, have you been told thus, or has experience taught it you?’”

It seems girls and their mothers paid the preachers little heed, as indicated by a verse from popular song of the 1700s:

*It shan’t 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 or shame,
For we, your mothers, did the same.*

The practice eventually declined, but when varies with location, local customs, and degree of geographic isolation. “In the 1750s and 1770s, some New England towns tried to outlaw the custom, but were met with resistance by families who approved of the practice,” wrote Dorothy A. Mays in *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World*. “The custom appeared to have subsided on its own, sometime in the early 19th century. Its association with the lower classes and occasional premarital pregnancy caused it to fall out of favor.” ★

Amy Poole writes on early American historical and domestic topics.