# New Year's Superstitions

COLONISTS BROUGHT WITH THEM DOZENS OF EUROPEAN BELIEFS ABOUT HOW JANUARY 1 WOULD DETERMINE THEIR FATE FOR THE COMING YEAR.

If superstitions were true, no mother's back would be unbroken. Like those cracks that lure your footsteps, there's something compelling about superstitions—that maybe just this one time they might hold true, and you'll find that pot of gold or ward off the vile curse thrust upon you when you thought an adequate tip was 5 percent.

No time of year is so surrounded with superstition as New Year's Day, especially in early America. In homes throughout the colonies and young nation, the first day of the year often was a time of trepidation because superstitions held that nearly everything heaped on your hearth, served at the table, or stepping past your threshold might set your family's fortunes—or misfortunes—for the entire year.

Our great melting pot of a nation brewed together the supernatural beliefs of most of the world. The Dutch brought their superstitions to early Manhattan, Germans took their trolls to Pennsylvania, Scots brought the banshee to the Carolinas, the Scots-Irish filled the Appalachian hills with faeries, Swedes brought elves to Delaware, the French found ogres in Louisiana, and English Puritans were haunted by witches and Catholics everywhere.

Because most superstitions are folk knowledge, passed by memory from generation to generation, they grow, change, and blend with one another, so determining who actually believed what in early America is elusive, even when you limit your search only to New Year's superstitions. Certainly not every Virginia colonist with roots in Ulster believed that nothing made of iron should leave her house on New Year's Day, but some did. Not every

COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

**A woman as a home's first visitor of the New Year brought bad luck, according to an age-old superstition. Less dire, another superstition popular with farmers held that a woman as the first visitor meant hens would dominate the year's poultry production.**

English immigrant in Rhode Island arranged for male kinfolk to visit his home early on New Year's Day to avoid the calamity of a woman appearing as the first visitor of the new year, but some did.

Folklorists agree that attempting to identify any superstition's origins usually is as futile as finding the end of a rainbow. Daniel Lindsey Thomas, a professor and founder of the Kentucky branch of the American Folklore Society, summed it up well in his 1920 book *Kentucky Superstitions*, "In as much as the beginnings of folklore lie in nearly all instances far back in the most primitive periods of the human race, conjecture is often the only means of seeking them. The results of research have therefore been marred by uncertainty and guesswork, and scholars have frequently not arrived at agreement."

Even the iron walls of class and education fail to separate believers and unbelievers in superstitions. "One reason why superstition has not yet died out among intelligent people is because it is contagious," wrote Astra Cielo in her 1918 compendium *Signs, Omens, and Superstitions*.

"In colonial days in Salem even the learned professors and lawyers believed in witchcraft. It was in the very air. Children brought up in an atmosphere of credulity rarely rise above it. It is the hardest thing to shake off superstitious prejudices. They become a sort of religion, semi-sacred in their appeal. No wonder that the lower classes cannot abandon them and that even men of intellect cling to them."

**This cover of *The Illustrated London News* for December 30, 1882, shows the Scottish tradition of "first foot," when the appearance of a tall, dark stranger as the first visitor of the new year brings good fortune to the household. The weekly illustrated magazine began publishing in 1842, offering "a historic social record of British and world events up to the present day."**

## STEPPING IN

We all know to put our best foot forward, but for early Americans it mattered more who was first to put their foot over your threshold when the year began. Few superstitions were so widespread and consequential. Grouped in a category called "first foot," these assorted beliefs slipped across the Atlantic with thousands of colonists from Britain, Germany, and the Low Countries. And like many other doctrines of the era, "first foot" was especially hard on women.

For example, on New Year's Day should a man enter your home before a woman, members of the household would have a good year; but if a woman entered first, misfortune would fill the year. The best luck of all came when a dark-haired man was your first visitor. A fair-haired man was next best, and a dark-haired woman third-best. Woe unto you if a red-haired man or woman was your first visitor.

Your first visitor can affect more than your luck—your chickens take their cue from who crosses your threshold (even if they are not there to see). A woman visitor meant hens would dominate for the year, and a male visitor meant roosters would rule. A large or small visitor inspired your chickens to grow likewise—so you might want to invite a fat lady to New Year's tea. Careful, however. Among early Kentucky settlers a woman as the year's first visitor doomed your coop for the entire year.

A clergyman arriving as your first visitor is a good omen indeed—a priest might be especially good. A bachelor as your first visi-

WINFIELD ROSS

**Keeping the hearth fire burning was crucial for warmth and sustenance in winter, but never more so than on New Year's Day. Some soothsayers used the hearth's ashes to read the household's fortune.**

tor brought luck to your home, but a widower was highly unlucky for the household.

The shape of the first foot shaped your fortune, too. In northern England a flat-footed person as the home's first visitor brought woe, but if his instep was high your luck would be good. Even better, if your first-footer brought a gift of cake or bread, your household would prosper throughout the year.

"Because his or her identity was an omen for good or ill over the coming year, the visit of a neighbor or a friend was often arranged in advance so as to avoid the bad surprises that blind luck might otherwise bring," noted Christian Roy in his 2005 book, *Traditional Festivals: A Multicultural Encyclopedia.*

Should you be short of friends and long on superstitious beliefs, back in England—and perhaps in colonial America as well—you could arrange for one of a band of men and boys who held themselves for hire to show up at a home at dawn to ensure that your first visitor was male.

## FIERY OMENS

Colonial homes and home life centered around the hearth, and the most enduring New Year's superstitions concerned the hearth fire. Here fact intrudes on our flights of fancy—a colonial family suffered real and immediate misfortune if their fire went out—especially during the first night of the often-brutal January cold in the northern climes.

"Remarkable precautions were taken to ensure that there was no chance of the fire going out in their homes on New Year's Eve," wrote Edwin Radford in his 1949 *Encyclopedia of Superstitions*—speaking specifically about England, but the same situation surely applied to early America—"Because, if the calamity happened, it was impossible for them to obtain a light from any neighbor."

In the days when new fire was often fetched from a neighbor, New Year's Day brought an additional challenge—any neighbor who took fire from his or her own hearth was condemned to a year of bad luck.

Similarly, if the family whose fire needed replenishing decided to steal fire from a neighbor's hearth, their own luck would be badly tainted for the year—and they might suffer more immediate punishment if they were caught sneaking into the neighbor's house or cabin.

A 16th-Century Swiss theologian, Rudolph Hospinian, traced the New Year's hearth-fire superstitions back as far as ancient Rome, where no one would remove fire from a home on New Year's Day without risking the wrath of the gods.

You'll find a more morbid version in the 1880 volume *The Mysteries of All Nations: Rise and Progress of Superstition, Laws Against*

*and Trials of Witches, Ancient and Modern Delusions, Together with Strange Customs, Fables, and Tales*, compiled by British archaeologist James Grant: "If the kitchen fire burns down on New Year's morning or Christmas eve, it is thought, some person belonging to the house will die before these seasons come round again."

Hearths also offered opportunities for soothsaying, Grant noted. "Old women who wish to have a peep into futurity are accustomed to cover over with ashes the smoldering embers of their fires on the last night of the year," he wrote. "If a death is to happen in the house before 12 months expire, the footmarks of the doomed individual will be imprinted in the ashes; but if no such event is to happen, the ashes will remain with a smooth surface and the embers kindled below." Watch your step, Santa Claus.

## GOING OUT, COMING IN

The foundation of many New Year's superstitions is an analogy, often stretched beyond all reason. Just as one year goes away as a new one comes in, what leaves your home and what comes in can set the course of the new year. Radford explained that in both England and Scotland for centuries "no iron, no light, and nothing else" should leave a home on New Year's Day without taking good fortune away with it.

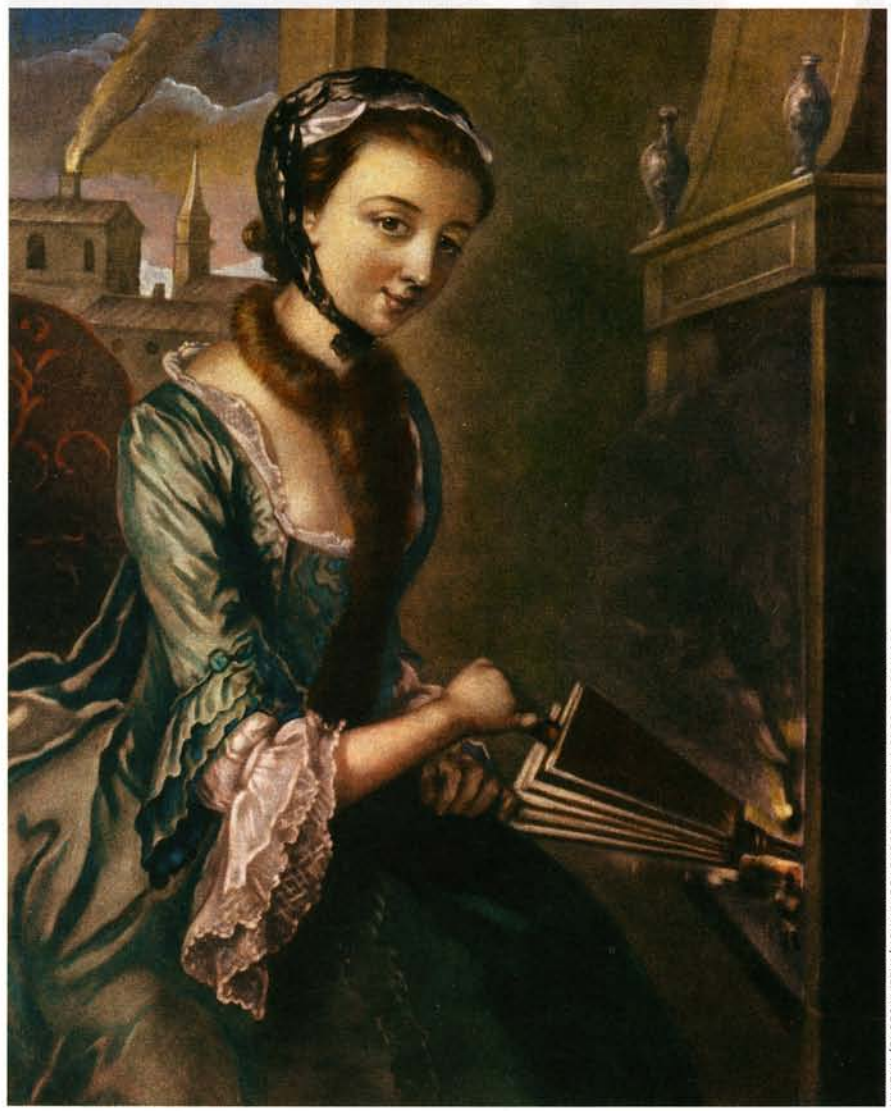
"It would seem that the anxiety over the incomings and outgoings of the coming year was at the root of the superstition since anything might be brought into the house, but not taken out," Radford wrote of English adherence to the belief. "Thus even the fire ashes of the night, and the waste of vegetables, etc., were kept indoors until 2nd January. And that was as late as 1870."

A related superstition popular in Europe and doubtlessly carried to the American colonies was that nothing should be washed on New Year's Day or else a family member would be "washed away" through absence or death during the year—one more reason for delaying that bath another day (or year). Besides, you could not throw out old wash water on New Year's Day without risking adversity.

A twist on that superstition was that it was unlucky to remove anything from a home on New Year's until something had been brought in, which helped give impetus to neighbors giving gifts to each other early on New Year's Day, a tradition that was particularly popular with Dutch colonists in early Manhattan.

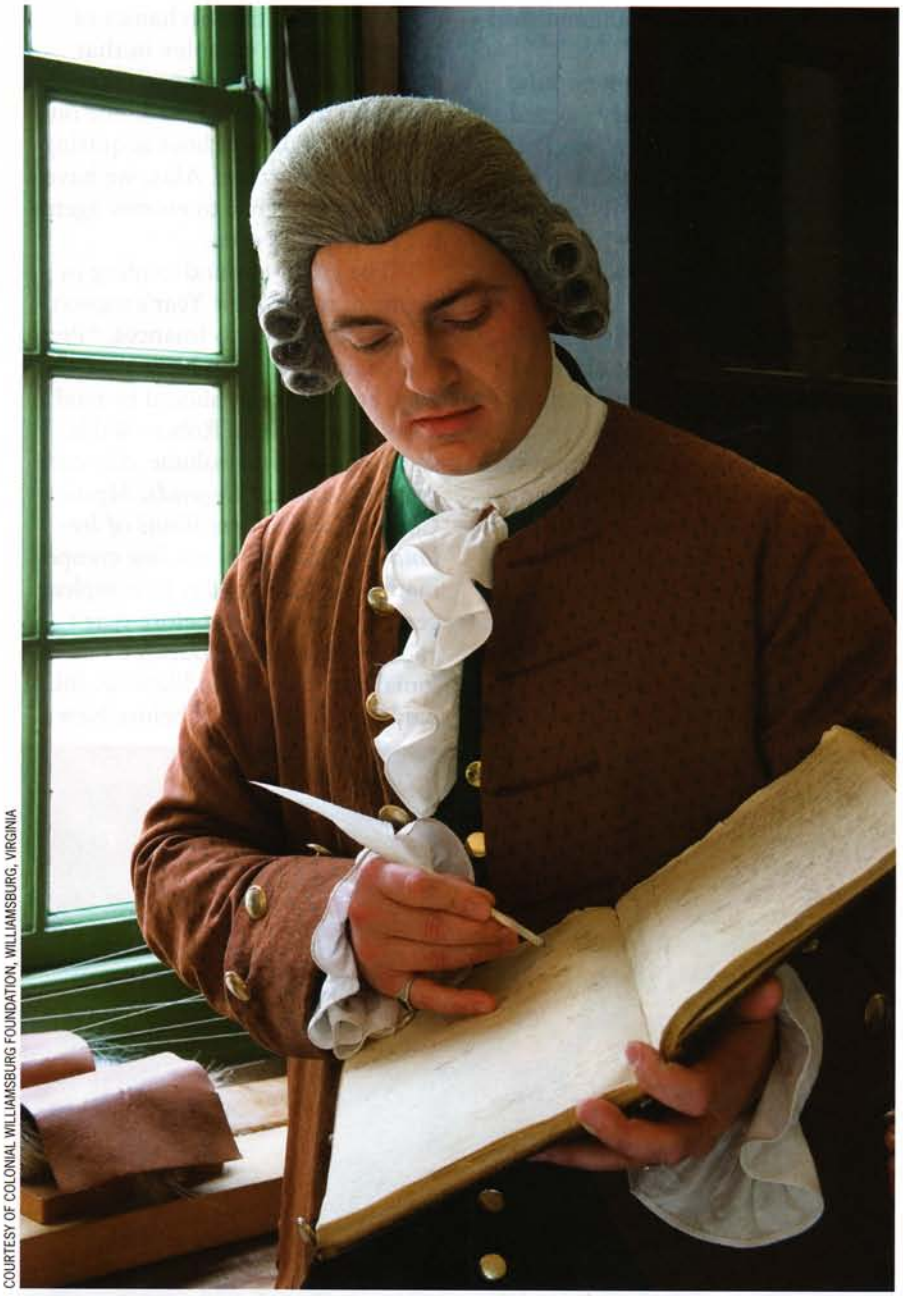
Of course, the mechanics of such gifting are complex in that your benefactor could not take your gift-to-be out of his home on New Year's Day without acquiring his own misfortune. Alas, we have found no reference to escrow agents for New Year's gifts.

The going-out-and-coming-in theme of many New Year's superstitions also applied to finances. "Presents may be given on New Year's Day, but no money should be paid away," Sir William Robert Wilde stated in his multi-volume 1887 compilation, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland*. Just as federal tax law compels many Americans today to complete certain transactions before year's end, superstition encouraged our colonial ancestors to do likewise. Bills paid and debts settled before New



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

**A young woman fans the hearth flames with bellows in this print titled *Fire*, published in London on October 1, 1760. Failure to keep the fireplace lit on New Year's Day might signal an impending death in the house that year, according to a superstition dating to Roman times. Even a well-meaning neighbor could offer no assistance without risking bad luck for his or her own household by allowing embers to leave the house.**



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

**Money played a major role in New Year's superstitions, which encouraged that all bills be paid and debts settled before the beginning of the year. Accordingly, people could receive presents on New Year's Day, but spending money would sentence a household to a full year of outgoing cash.**

Year's Day avoided a year plagued with deficit, and many colonists considered it unlucky to borrow or lend on either Christmas or New Year's Day. Meanwhile, empty pockets or empty cupboards on New Year's Eve foretold a year of poverty.

Other superstitions regarding New Year's and money were more appetizing. Two surfaced in early Kentucky: eating cabbage on New Year's Day ensured that the consumer would have money throughout the year, and eating white beans would likewise guarantee prosperity.

But neither cabbage nor beans reached the level of acclaim accorded to black-eyed peas, which, due to their swelling as they cook, became associated with prosperity in ancient times.

Eating black-eyed peas as a New Year's Day tradition is tied to the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana, as far back as 500 A.D. Jewish immigrants brought the custom of welcoming the new year with peas to Georgia in the 1730s and it soon spread to non-Jewish southern Americans who embellished the peas, ironically, with bacon, hog jowls, fatback, and other forms of pork, which is a violation of Jewish dietary law.

While frequently said to originate during the Civil War, many food historians contend that eating black-eyed peas and pork had become a New Year's tradition in the South decades before the war.

Similarly, Pennsylvania Germans brought to America their traditions of eating pork and sauerkraut on New Year's Day for bringing good luck, as would devouring herring at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve.

And speaking of midnight, another popular superstition of the colonial period advised opening all of a home's windows at that hour to allow old spirits to leave and the year's new spirits to enter.

## SOUND AND FURY

Several nationalities settling early America watched for New Year's Day to portend the weather for the coming year. "The Germans held that if New Year's Day fell on Sunday, a mild winter and pleasant spring lay ahead and 'all manner of good things shall abound'," historian David Freeman Hawke wrote in *Everyday Life in Early America* (1988). This belief explains the dour German outlook—they could expect only about one year in seven to be pleasant.

An English prognostication of long standing spoke of "calends," the Old English term for the first day of the month. "If the calends of January be smiling and gay,/You'll have wintry weather till the calends of May." Perhaps that's where the groundhog gets his advance information.

A superstition Radford found in England and Scotland and that well could have crossed the Atlantic to downeast Maine in America's early years pertained to the wind on New Year's Eve:

If New Year Eve night wind
blow south,
It betokeneth warmth and growth.
If west, much milk and fish in
the sea.
If north, much cold and storms
there will be.
If east, the trees will bear
much fruit.
If northeast, flee it, man and brute.

Another superstition going back many centuries in many places—and which held considerable appeal for many early Americans—was of welcoming New Year's Day with loud noise to drive away the bad spirits from the past year, thus securing a new year free of evil.

"For a long time, the New Year was ushered in, in country towns, with great noise as well as rejoicing," historian Alice Morse Earle wrote in 1896 in *Colonial Days in Old New York*. "All through the day, groups of men would go from house to house firing salutes, and gathering gradually into large parties by recruits from each house until the end of the day was spent in firing at a mark."

Shooting away the bad spirits became so popular and so noisy that New York's colonial legislature tried to stop it in March 1773, noting that "great damages are frequently done on the eve of the last day of December and on the first and second days of January by persons going from house to house with guns and other firearms."

The colony's moratorium might have worked for a while, but in post-Revolution New York, the legislature in 1785 had to pass a second act to again outlaw the deafening gunplay.

In continuing to practice the New Year's superstitions of their homelands—even though America was ostensibly an opportunity for new vision and reformed ideals—colonists were acting true to their human nature. After spending years studying the origin and nature of superstitions that had taken root in early Kentucky, the academician and folklorist Thomas summarized his findings.

"The origin of all superstition may probably be traced to the desire of mankind to propitiate fate, to avert evil, and to dispel the mystery of life and of the universe," he wrote. "The reasons for the survival of superstition from a more primitive age into our own are that people are slow to surrender beliefs that they have inherited, that many of them are still ignorant and timorous, and that in spite of the explanations of both science and religion, they continue to find life and the universe largely inexplicable."★

**Amy Poole writes about historical topics concerning social and domestic matters.**

**A belief brought over from the Old Country suggested that loud noises would drive away the spirits of the old year and help welcome in new spirits, so roving bands of colonial men and boys accommodated with considerable musket fire. The gunfire grew so disruptive that New York's colonial legislature outlawed the practice in 1773 and again in 1785.**

COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA