

Spring Cleaning

LONG WINTERS FORCED EARLY AMERICANS INTO WEEKS AND MONTHS OF GRIMY CONFINEMENT IN CRUDE QUARTERS, MAKING THE COMING OF SPRING A CELEBRATION OF GETTING THEIR HOMES CLEAN AGAIN.

Living conditions in nearly all households in early America mandated spring cleaning. Dirt and debris piled up as winter in the middle and northern colonies confined families to their often-cramped houses for months on end. With the first days of spring's warmth, these families literally burst free and hauled their furnishings into the sunlight for a scrubbing that brightened home and spirit alike.

But beyond this simplistic scenario, the magnitude of the situation can shock modern sensibilities. In fact, most of America for its first two hundred years of European settlement comprised small, crude dwellings clumped into villages or farther flung in wooded isolation.

The overwhelming majority of early American families were by nature self-sufficient, and winter's cold winds limited their entire existence—economic, domestic, and bodily functions alike—to a single living area dominated by the hearth. These hardy folks typically functioned amidst filth, debris, and stench considered appalling by today's standards and made all the worse during winter.

Springtime, as it moved slowly northward, became the one time of

Jennifer Belvin portrays Elizabeth Maloney, a part-time laundress and seamstress hired by bachelor tradesmen to work in the Tenant House. Here she sweeps the steps of the Tenant House.



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

the year when for a few days the family's efforts turned singularly toward cleaning up the home and habitat.

SHARED SPACE

From the mid-1600s until the early 1800s, the majority of housing in America was first-generation shelter as settlers continued to push inland from the Atlantic Seaboard, slowly developing villages and towns before moving deeper into the wilderness.

Eminent historian Edmund Morgan has said that, heading into the 18th Century, a few affluent colonists built homes of brick, "but everyone else still lived in the rotting wooden affairs that lay about the landscape like so many landlocked ships. A heavy storm would knock them down or fire devour them in an instant. But no matter—sift the ashes for nails and put up more—wood was cheap."

"Most American families lived in houses that were much smaller and barer than it is easy to imagine today," wrote historian Jack Larkin in *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790-1840*. "Many homes were genuinely squalid, starkly reflective of the world of scarcity in which their owners lived."

The country's first nationwide tax assessment, compiled in 1798, documented nearly 600,000 dwellings in the United States—by 1850 there would be more than three million—with more than 40 percent valued at one hundred dollars or less. "Even in long-settled areas, the majority of houses were surprisingly small, and meanly built, and dilapidated structures were often numerous," Larkin wrote.

In the Chesapeake region and colonies farther north, winter temperatures were more frigid than the colonists knew in England, and the farther north a family lived, the deeper they burrowed into their shelter for protection against cold winds and mounting snowdrifts.

During the first century of settlement, New Englanders enjoyed a higher birth rate and lower rates of mortality for mothers and children, resulting in larger families than



Spring cleaning among the gentry undoubtedly presented a much milder face than among the rural poor, mainly because it often was performed by servants, as in this engraving, "Ladys Maid Soaping Linnen" by Philip Dawes, published in London in 1769.

their Southern counterparts, according to historian Betty Farrell in *Family: The Making of an Idea, an Institution, and a Controversy in American Culture*. That meant that an average of five to seven people spent the long winter confinement in cramped quarters.

The fireplace kept them alive. It provided hot meals, up to fourteen hours of flickering light a day, and some degree of warmth. The early hearth—prior to technologi-

cal advances in fireplaces in the late 1700s—sent most of its heat directly up the chimney.

In *Everyday Life in Early America*, author David Freeman Hawke quoted an overnight visitor to a flimsy clapboard house in New Jersey in 1679 who complained of the blaze in the fireplace, "If you are not so close to the fire as almost to burn yourself, you cannot keep warm, for the wind blows through everywhere."



COURTESY OF COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION, WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

Detail from the painting *High Life Below Stairs*, by John Collet, England, 1763.

With outside wind-chill factors occasionally plunging below zero, keeping the fire stoked became a life-or-death necessity that consumed at least a dozen cords of wood over the winter. The wood had to be accessible, so stacks of it often shared the interior living space during periods of heavy snowfall. As the fire sparked and smoldered night and day, it covered everything in the house with a gritty layer of ash and soot.

In rural areas, a particularly

brutal winter also diminished the separation between home and stall. Families frequently spread straw over their dirt or plank floors to help insulate against the cold and to sop up inevitable messes. As the snowbound weeks turned into months, inhabitants would trample the straw into an itchy and irritating dust. As each layer of straw disintegrated, they would spread a new layer as long as the supply held out. On some farms when the

temperature plunged to dangerous lows, people brought their livestock—milk cows, horses, even swine—into the house to save them from freezing.

Slops—the time-honored term for human and animal wastes, inedible food, and other garbage—inevitably piled up. High snowdrifts blocked paths to privies. Chamber pots overflowed. The cold curtailed doing laundry except in small batches that could be washed inside and hung on poles near the fire to dry. Bathing—already regarded as a health hazard by many—was postponed until warmer weather.

Confinement, whether it lasted a few weeks as in the Chesapeake region or up to three months in the more northern colonies, meant—despite the best efforts of every member of the household—a time of mounting filth and stink, ashes and dirt, and prolonged darkness.

CONQUERING DIRT

“Spring-cleaning was a major event for colonial households,” wrote Dorothy A. Mays in her 2004 book, *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World*. “The house had sustained heavy use throughout the winter, making cleaning and repair necessary. Fires had been kept burning for months, and a layer of soot and ashes would have soiled most surfaces in the home.”

For the men, the coming of spring meant sugaring, sheep shearing, and readying the fields for planting. The women used it as an opportunity to recapture their homes. With the season’s warmth they could allow the fire to go out. They raked the mashed and stinking straw from the house and scrubbed the floorboards clean of the dirt and muck that had been ground into them over the months. With children helping, they hauled furniture into the sunlight and scrubbed it down.

Drawing on the diary entries that form the basis for *Our Own Snug Fireside*, a portrayal of domestic life in New England from

1760 to 1860, author Jane Nylander compiled a list of the kinds of equipment housewives likely used in their cleaning: strong soap, scouring sand, withy brooms, corn brooms, mops homemade of woolen rags or yarn, and stiff scrubbing brushes.

No matter how hard a woman worked, however, the cleaning never ended, Nylander wrote. “Whether rooms were in active daily use or not, as soon as one was clean, dust began to accumulate, smoke curled through the air, and bugs flew in the window. No wonder women became more and more frustrated as standards of cleanliness rose and the ideal became even more elusive.”

But, according to historian Alice Morse Earle in her 1898 classic, *Home Life in Colonial Days*, the women could occasionally rely on neighbors for help. “Even those evil days of New England households—the annual house-cleaning—were robbed of some of their dismal terrors by what was known as a ‘whang,’ a gathering of a few friendly women neighbors to assist one another in that dire time, and thus speed and shorten the hours of misery.”

Spring brought another welcomed ritual to these hardy women. Ashes that had piled up on the hearth and been stored over the winter were finally put to good use. Dissolved in water from the rain barrel, they became lye. Women mixed this strong solution with pounds of rancid animal fat that had been rendered in a kettle over a hot fire. In a twist of domestic irony, the dirty ash and stinking animal fat that had accumulated over the winter produced the substance that would provide cleanliness for months to come.

Families in colonial urban centers did not endure the intense isolation of the farm families. Though far less self-sufficient than their rural counterparts, city dwellers still had access to most amenities—if they could brave the icy winds to journey

to market. Nevertheless, winter’s chill kept windows shut for months in even the most affluent homes, which usually had several fireplaces blazing for warmth. By the coming of spring, the interiors of these homes too wore a layer of soot.

As for families on the frontier, spring for city dwellers called for opening doors and windows, whitewashing or repainting walls, and cleaning furniture and floors of accumulated dirt. In the cases of the most prosperous homeowners, a bevy of servants performed the cleaning chores.

Eventually, as the nation’s economy expanded and the early waves of settlers were succeeded by larger and healthier families living in more established surroundings, people turned their attention more toward quality of life. First in the American cities and then in the countryside, between 1800 and 1840, a newfound appreciation for cleanliness took hold in both Europe and America.

In 1893, Francis Underwood wrote in *Quabbin: The Story of a Small Town with Outlooks on Puritan Life* that “a more general air of neatness in houses, dooryards, and gardens” prevailed in the early 19th Century, when people saw to it

that their houses “were painted and in good repair” and they cleaned up their “old straggling heaps of wood.” With the growth of America’s textile industry, women freed from the time-consuming “homespun industry” of spinning, weaving, and knitting instead dedicated more time to the popular urge for domestic cleanliness.

“More families also began to take up the battle against household dirt,” Larkin wrote. “Widely distributed domestic advice books appeared which vigorously invoked cleanliness and order. Lydia Maria Child’s *The American Frugal Housewife*, dedicated not to the affluent but ‘to those who are not ashamed of economy,’ was published in 1832 and was already in its twelfth edition by 1833. Readers were admonished to value ‘neatness, tastefulness’ as well as ‘good sense’ and to see ‘the true economy of housekeeping’ as the ‘art of gathering up all the fragments.’”

Child’s book, with its many tips and recipes for cleaning and scouring, was one of the first manuals to propose making spring cleaning a year-round practice. ★

An interpreter at Old Sturbridge Village washes laundry in tubs outside the 1737 Fitch House.



THOMAS NEILL/COURTESY OF OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE