Introduction

There is a hobby -- one bordering on obsession for some of us -- that involves researching the past and recreating bits of it to get a sense of what life was like in another time. Some enthusiasts focus on military history whereas others prefer to examine civilian life. Although the public may be most familiar with those who depict the history of the Civil War era, there are groups gathering to interpret nearly any time period and any western culture imaginable, from ancient Rome to World War II. Some refer to themselves as "reenactors" or "living history interpreters." But while focus and terminology may differ, participants in this hobby share one common goal: to help the public learn about past ways of life. If we understand some of the history and cultural attributes that shaped our past, we gain a better understanding of where we stand now, and perhaps where we should be headed in the future.

This guide shares some of what I have learned from various sources about "how they did things" during the 18th Century in Maryland, the setting of my books *Restitution* and *Langley's Choice*. Some of the information in this brief guide may be incomplete or even inaccurate. We are all learning, re-learning, and readjusting hypotheses as new facts come to light. History may be a study of the past, but it is very much a living and changing field.

Hygiene

Many people think that our ancestors lived dirty, smelly lives in dirty, smelly surroundings. This is true, but only to a certain extent. We must remember that future generations may well look on us the same way. Consider, for example, the abundance of signs in public restrooms urging people to wash their hands. When archaeologists in future generations uncover these signs, they may well conclude that people in the 21st Century rarely bathed and had to be required by law to wash even their hands. And while we do not see a lot of horse dung on the streets in 21st Century Maryland, we do have exhaust fumes from cars, trucks, and buses that pollute the air and leave gritty black deposits. I think you get the picture.

Yes, the 18th Century streets smelled like animal dung, but people were used to it. That's not to say however, that if a gentleman came across the contents of a chamber pot that someone had just emptied out the window, he would not take care to step around the muck.

And that leads to the first topic: the absence of toilets. Although the water closet can be traced back 4000 years to ancient Minoan culture, this technology still hadn't caught on by the 1700s in Maryland. When people needed to relieve themselves, most of them retreated to the relative privacy of what we now call an "outhouse," a small, enclosed wooden structure built some distance from the house. This was often referred to as the "necessary" or "privy" by well-bred members of society. Those of lesser social status used a variety of nicknames including "the jakes," the "bog house" and a host of far more colorful terms that I am too well bred to repeat here.[1]

Those in less populated regions might often forgo the privy entirely and simply take cover behind the nearest tree. Archaeological study of early Maryland houses often reveals no evidence of a privy at all.

At night, most people would relieve themselves in a chamber pot or commode chair placed in the bed chamber. The servants would empty these in the morning. Of course, not everyone had a servant.

It is perhaps worth noting that "The Servants Directory" by Hannah Glass -- which includes detailed instructions for cleaning boards, tables, stairs, pictures, picture frames, oilcloths, damask furniture, hearths, andirons, pewter, tin, and copper -- makes no mention of cleaning and disinfecting chamber pots.

Toilet paper is also conspicuously absent from 18th Century documentation, and the Sears catalog will not come into existence until 1894. However, there are occasional references to "bum fodder," pieces of paper or cloth consigned to use in the privy.

Of course, the toilet was not the only hygienic device missing from colonial homes. No running water meant no sinks for washing faces or brushing teeth.

[1] For a listing of these impolite terms, see *Anicah Sparrow's Bedside Companion* by Lucia St. Clair Robson or the *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* by Capt. Frances Grose.

But evidence indicates that people nevertheless did accomplish both feats with regularity. Water could be brought inside, and those fortunate enough had theirs heated and served in a pitcher ready to be poured into a ceramic wash basin. Those with fewer servants and less time could simply splash their faces with water from the bucket outside. Historians disagree as to whether people used soap to wash their skin at this time, with some advocating that they used only water. However, the fact that hard soap was made and scented cake soap was sold would indicate that at least some people washed themselves with it. There would have been no need to use imported cake soap to do laundry or wash dishes, and there are actually separate recipes for creating a soft laundry soap. The other, harder soap must have been used for something.

As for teeth, they were brushed. Discarded, worn-out toothbrushes litter 18th Century archeological sites, and one determined historian even studied the regularity of spacing between the holes drilled for bristles in brushes found at Maryland sites.[2] Most toothbrush handles were made of ivory or wood, and the bristles were made of, well, bristle. That is, short, stiff hairs, usually from a pig. Nevertheless, even with toothbrushes and tooth powder made from abrasives such as brick dust and cuttlefish, bad teeth were the rule rather than the exception. Think of it this way: even with the tartar-control toothpaste, dental floss, and fluoridated water of the 21st Century, my daughter still amassed a total of seven cavities by the age of six. Multiply that by a few years -- with no fillings -- and you've got a mouth full of decay. Tooth decay eventually leads to infection, and infection to a lost tooth or even a serious illness. At least one historian insists that the number one cause of death in the 18th Century was actually tooth decay.

[2] See Paul Shackel's *Personal Discipline and Material Culture: An Archaeology of Annapolis Maryland, 1695-1870* for in- depth analysis of toothbrush holes, the diameters of dinner plates and other articles.

If nothing else, we can assume that most people had stained or missing teeth, many had a difficult time chewing hard foods, toothaches were common, and bad breath may have rivaled the messes in the street for olfactory pollution. Dentists could do little more than pull teeth and make dentures.[3] So, inhabitants of the 18th Century may have brushed, but it was probably genetics more than hygiene that determined who managed to keep their teeth.

One reason we tend to assume that people were dirty and smelly in the 18th Century is that European colonists rarely took full immersion baths. (Many Native American tribes, on the other hand, bathed frequently in rivers and streams.) The aversion to bathing was partly due to practical reasons. Who wants to jump into an ice-cold stream in January? It is equally unappealing to haul buckets of water into the house, heat it, undress to bare skin in a freezing room, and immerse part of your body in a tub while circulation is lost in the other parts.

[3] Contrary to what we learned in childhood, George Washington's false teeth were made of ivory, not wood. One pair is on display at the National Museum of Dentistry in Baltimore.

Another reason that full immersion bathing was avoided is that many people thought the practice of soaking in a vat of water, as the ancient Romans had done, was immorally decadent. But just because they did not often completely immerse themselves in water, we cannot assume that people did not at least make some attempt to keep themselves clean. There is that soap to account for. Of course, Benjamin Franklin, who many consider to be a genius, insisted that he could keep himself clean by sitting around naked, thereby taking an "air bath."

Did they wash their hair?

Historians have found 18th Century Army regulations requiring soldiers to wash their hair daily. That doesn't mean they necessarily complied, but it does indicate that clean hair was more common than we used to think. Nevertheless, it can be safely assumed that hair was not washed as often as it is today. I have found no references to recipes for anything resembling shampoo. Current speculation is that hair was washed with plain water to preserve the natural oils, or with soap followed by a vinegar rinse. [4]

Some gentlemen did not need to wash their hair because they shaved their heads. This enabled wigs to fit evenly and made it easier to keep the scalp free of lice. When they weren't wearing their wigs, gentlemen would often wear a turban to keep their

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[4] Due to the pH imbalance, hair washed with soap alone becomes dry and sticky. If you don't think it's possible for a substance to exhibit both of those properties at once, try washing your hair with soap and see what happens.

bare heads warm – and perhaps to avoid resembling a billiard ball. Ladies of the upper classes also wore wigs at various periods throughout the century.

Wigs were styled with fatty pomades and powdered with starch to make them uniformly white. This hair treatment differentiated the "better sort" from the "lesser sort," who had no time for such elaborate coiffures, no money to waste putting food in their hair, and perhaps sense enough not to turn their heads into a feeding trough for bugs and mice. Those upper class slaves to fashion who favored elaborate wigs were said to have slept with cages on their heads to keep out the mice, but this probably only happened once and the story was repeated so often that it sounds more common than it was. Mice might, however, be tempted to nest in wigs that were left unused on a stand for several days at a stretch. There are also stories of enormous wigs bedecked with model ships and other ridiculous decorations. These creations really did exist, but they were likely as rare as the mice cages. Elaborate wigs were not common in Maryland, or any other colony for that matter. The colonial ladies and gentlemen of fashion rarely came close to keeping up with the fashions in Europe.

Women did generally wear their hair pinned up and covered with a cap, which kept it cleaner, out of the way, and out of the fire.

Soap was imported from Europe, made by a local chandler, or made at home. Simply a combination of lye and some type of fat, soap could be made relatively inexpensively with some advance