EXCERPTS FROM “COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY”

TOPIC AREA 1: COURTING

Courting [in the 1700s] allowed young men and women to meet and socialize largely unchaperoned, at a variety of entertainments. Although William Drew and Hannah Powell were of different social stations (he of the gentry and she of the upper-middling sort), they still met often at church, balls, parties, public entertainments, and neighbors’ homes. They were part of a small group of well-off, unmarried, young people living in the small city of Williamsburg. When men and women did meet, they obviously enjoyed each other’s company . . .

. . . Young white men began courting in their late teens. The average man in Virginia married in his mid-twenties. William Drew was in his twenties and already established as the clerk of the Court of Berkeley County when he began courting Hanna Powell. In doing so, he was similar to most men of his time who waited until they had completed their education and attained some financial security before proposing marriage. Marriage was the next logical step in life as they sought marriage partners who could support their economic efforts while running their households and raising children.

Young white women approached courtship and marriage differently. After completing their domestic training, they enjoyed late adolescence as a special phase in life. Since they were not yet responsible for running household or raising children, women had more freedom during these years than they would ever have again. Courting gave women power; it was their decision whether to accept or reject a suitor . . .

. . . While women might begin courting as early as fifteen or sixteen years of age, most—like Hanna Powell—deferred marriage until their early twenties . . . Others married quickly for fear that waiting too long might eliminate the availability or choice of husbands. The choice of a husband was very important since, once made, only death could undo a marriage. Marriage for women was a complete life change. It meant leaving childhood behind, taking on adult responsibilities, and forming a new family. [A wife lost virtually all rights. She could not legally own any property, had no rights over her children, and could not sue in court. Marriage gave the husband absolute power over their wives.]
TOPIC AREA 2: PARENTS’ PARTICIPATION

In November 1776, Benjamin and Annabelle Powell of Williamsburg married their elder daughter, Hanna, to William Drew of Isle of Wight County. The wedding was the culmination of years of planning, preparation, and effort. Benjamin and Annabelle raised their daughter to be a good housewife and respected member of society; to fulfill her destiny, Hanna did her best to find the most eligible young man to marry...

... While parents expected to be consulted and offered advice or criticism freely, men and women chose their own marriage partners, and parents usually accepted their children’s choices. Parents could control their children’s ability to marry before the age of twenty-one. Those who disliked their children’s choices might withhold permission or, if the children were of age, leave them out of the will. This did not happen often. Young people rarely courted far from their social class, and respected parental pinions most of the time... The choice of a marriage partner was very important, however, as marriage was a combination of families and should strengthen the family’s social position...

... Women’s dowries consisted of linens and household goods they had accumulated and any money or property their fathers could afford to give the couple. The groom’s father was also expected to contribute something. Settling the question of where a couple would live and what they would take with them affected others, especially if salves were part of the dowry.
TOPIC AREA 3: THE WEDDING CEREMONY

The time and place of a wedding were largely determined by convenience. November, December, and January were the most popular months in which to marry . . . Farm obligations were less pressing than during the summer. A couple issued verbal invitations to family and friends, who gathered in the morning at the minister’s home or the bride’s parlor; few weddings occurred in churches . . . Whatever the location or time, however, the ceremony was the same. The ceremony was a ritualized affirmation of family. Everyone had an obligation to support and nurture the new family unit.

The ceremony began with a procession. The minister led the group down the aisle of the church or family parlor, followed by the bride and groom in their finest clothes, the parents, and the bridesmaids and bridesmen. Favors, like gloves, fans, or had bands, were sometimes given to the attendants.

Guests witnessed the father give his daughter away, the groom pledge himself with a ring, the couple exchange vows, and the bride promise to obey her husband in all things. The ceremony bonds the couple forever in the eyes of the community as well in the eyes of God.
TOPIC AREA 4: THE WEDDING PARTY

After the ceremony, the wedding party celebrated at the home of the bride’s parents. (In the middling and lower middling circles, the male guests would often race each other to the house where the winner received a bottle of alcohol.) The family might decorate a table with white paper chains and lay out white foods for a collation [meal]. It included two white cakes. The guests consumed the groom’s cake and sometimes left the bride’s cake untouched for the couple to save (in a tin of alcohol) to eat on each wedding anniversary. The party would last a few hours or several days. In 1785, Robert Hunter, Jr., wrote:

“The wedding festivities often began with eating, drinking, and toasting, continued with games and dancing, and ended with the couple’s exit from the bride’s house. After dinner we danced cotillions, minuets, Virginia and Scotch reels, country dances, jigs, etc. till ten o’clock. I had the pleasure of Miss McCall for a partner. She was a fine, sensible, accomplished young girl, and by far the best dancer in the room . . . The bride and bridegroom led off the different country dances . . . After supper, which was as elegant as the dinner . . . we continued dancing till twelve”

Various wedding customs might have taken place during the party. Young men might try to steal the bride’s slipper from her foot. If one was successful, he could ransom it back to its owner for the forfeit of a kiss. When the couple retired, their friends followed them to the bed to throw the stocking. Each woman threw a balled-yup stocking over her shoulder at the bride. Each man did the same to the groom. Whoever hit the target would be the next to marry. When the bride and groom left her parents; house, they traveled in a carriage perhaps with a boot tied to the back, a symbol of a long and happy marriage. They began their married life by visiting relatives and friends before settling down to their new home.