“I Dance; Therefore, I Am”:
Dance in a Developing American Culture

by

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Class of 2010

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“Yankee doodle keep it up,
Yankee doodle dandy.
Mind the music and the step,
And with the girls be handy!”

– Yankee Doodle, Traditional American Folk Song
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Introduction

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dance permeated British, European, and American societies. It was much more than just a means of social pleasure and entertainment; it was also a means of expression and a system on which people from all walks of life could be judged. In this work, dance will be defined as motion (usually accompanied by music) that is recognizable to a larger community and reproduced. Dance creates an opportunity for social cohesion. Precise imitation and reproduction of European dance was crucial to the creation of a comfortable and recognizable living space in the British North American Colonies. From this platform, American settlers revised and improved upon classic European trends; renaming and recreating dance would become crucial to establishing an American culture. Understanding how dance became an integral part of the different societies within the colonies, and of the broader culture in the British North American colonies, reveals the formation of a new identity among the colonies’ inhabitants that was distinguishable from that of their European predecessors.

To understand the emergence of a new identity, historians must ask important questions about dance in the colonies and in America. For example: Why is it significant that dance practices and dance manuals, instructional manuals about popular dances and proper etiquette, made their way to the colonies? What kind of impact on social life did these dances have in America? Who was participating in these social events? Did dance forms change among different geographical areas? These questions track the transition of dance from the British world of hierarchy and order to the free British North American colonies, a place that seemed to lack such
structure. The search for structure and stability was a major concern for many colonists as they sought to understand, and in many ways, create their own identity. The early colonists learned from their British predecessors that identity is created, assigned, and communicated to others. Once inwardly accepted, identity is a psychological power which can be outwardly tailored through actions to mold individuals into the structured and stable lifestyles associated with social identity.¹

Identity is a complex concept. Identity can refer to religion, gender, class, race, ethnicity, region, nationality, or some combination of any of these social markers. Most importantly, identity is defined in opposition to another identity, another group, or another individual. The British inhabitants of Early America, the focus group of this project, identified themselves in many ways, particularly in contrast to the Native American population, the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, the African population, and with various regional distinctions (New England, South Carolina, Virginia, etc). Early Americans also identified themselves in opposition to their British predecessors, and so, found their own identities to be particularly confusing. As David Waldstreicher, explains, identity in the eighteenth century became “increasingly unstable,” and young men were able to make and remake their own identities simply by changing their appearances.² At this time, dance became part of the confusion about identity. Dance styles had British and European roots, but a

different environment caused people to adapt such forms to fit their lives in Colonial America.\(^3\)

The existing literature on dance focuses on which types of dances were being practiced, who was participating, where dances were taking place, and how dancing related to the society and cultures within the colonies in different geographical areas.\(^4\)

To understand dance in any of these contexts, however, it is vital to have a keen understanding of the cultural and social norms and values of the time period. Dance during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries took on very specific forms. Ranging from the structured minuet to the highly improvisational jigs, dance played a large role in the daily lives of the early colonists of the British Americas. British dance traditions, which the colonists studied and learned, remained important within the colonies, along with the cultivation of new dance forms. These adapted dances became even more important as the colonies began to rebel and form the independent states that would eventually make up the United States. Dance, as it was practiced between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, was a product of the cultural and social environment in which it was conceived. The dances being practiced, performed, and studied during this time period catered to the needs of a society in the British North American Colonies struggling to define itself on a developing global stage.

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\(^4\) Although the specialized literature on dance in Early America is fairly limited, some of the major historians in this field are Kate Van Winkle Keller, Charles Cyril Hendrickson, Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, and William H. McNeill. I used their works as references to learn about dance and life during this time period.
Although social and cultural historians detail daily life in the British colonies, they have dealt with dance in passing and only as peripherally significant to Early American culture, largely neglecting the pervasiveness of dance. Dance, whether vehemently protested, or ardently learned, fit into this colonial culture. Protests and prohibitions of dance show how pervasive dance must have been in this society. Many individuals clearly perceived dance, and its associated culture, as a threat to an earlier standing order. This resistance, however, was not the general reaction to dance; dance was a popular, appreciated, and inclusive activity that provided a means of expression for those participating, and entertainment for those observing.5

One of the major challenges for a study like this one is how to learn about the history of an art that was not tangibly preserved through time. Dance as an art form is ephemeral; it provides no tangible artifacts to be collected and studied, so there is little physical evidence of dance in early America. Paintings can be preserved, but unlike photographs, paintings take time to produce and do not, necessarily, capture the moment and movement in a precise, accurate manner. Today, there are videos and pictures of dance that will make it easier for future generations to look at our culture and arts, but for Early American dance, the only means of recalling these trends are through dance manuals, the occasional painting or print showing a dance, or journals and newspapers that describe events. It is possible to imagine what these dances may have looked like during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but the only sources available are the accounts of dance masters, observers, participants, and the

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5 Many of the information referred to here are products of historians such as: Richard Bushman, Lawrence Levine, Bruce Daniels, Carl Bridenbaugh, Jane Carson, Rhys Isaac, Philip Alexander Bruce, and James Horn. Their works were used as historiographical background information for my project.
advertisements for such events or dance classes. The narrow channel for sources on
dance in this era limits our knowledge of this art to the experiences of a relatively
small group of people who not only participated in dance in some capacity, but who
also had the ability to write about it.

Dance masters and pamphlets still only reached a fairly small number of
inhabitants. Through theatrical performance, dance became part of the public sphere,
moving away from the exclusivity of private dance lessons under professional dance
masters. Plays utilized all different forms of dance in performances. Whether in the
play itself, as a country-dance may have appeared in a production of Romeo and
Juliet during the masquerade scene, or as interludes between acts, dances that may
have once seemed unattainable to the masses became accessible to all parts of the
community. The stage made dancing skills not just important for the genteel men and
women, but for the performer, who sought to impress the audience and build a
reputation and popularity. Advertisements for plays began to promote the dances in
the interludes just as much as they promoted the actual stage plays. This shift to the
stage made dance truly identifiable, expanding the segment of American society that
learned and recognized dance.

The rigid structure of British dance and British performance culture adapted to
a new way of life in the British North American colonies. Early American dance fell
into the category of aspiration: the colonists strove to dance like their predecessors.
Various dance forms permeated early American societies, but the imperfections that
many British elites sneered at did not translate in the same way in the British North
American colonies. Participants in the early American dance culture took British
dance forms and adapted them to fit the new social environment in America. In doing this, the inhabitants of the British American colonies created a different culture entirely: a culture based on overall performance, presentation and inclusion, not on simply adhering to social etiquette and fostering an exclusive practice.

This project is an entry into a much larger topic. The history of dance in Early America spans from the earliest arrival of Spanish conquistadors in the middle of the sixteenth century, to the rise of Jacksonian democracy in the 1820s, what I have deemed the end of the Early American Republic. This project focuses specifically on early American settlers who claimed ancestry from the British Isles. This is a limited group, and great numbers of other people from other places lived in the colonies, and eventually the United States. British settlers did not exclusively reserve the rights to dancing in Early America; other people from different backgrounds also influenced dance traditions. Native American and African populations exerted great influence on early American dance, and although I do not detail the experiences of either group in this work, the colonists, to some degree, defined themselves in opposition to both groups.

Throughout the settling of British North America, the Native American population contributed a great deal to the daily lives of the settlers and colonists. In many cases, they taught them how to survive and procure a livelihood in a new and often harsh environment. There are numerous accounts of dances witnessed and sometimes reenacted by the European colonists. In 1817, William Bell sailed for North America, where he eventually became a prominent Presbyterian minister in Perth, Canada. After traveling to North America by ship, and encountering other
colonists as well as Native Americans, he wrote a series of letters back to Edinburgh. In one letter, written in June of 1817, he describes a savage dance performed by sailors imitating the Indians of North America:

I had imbibed a strong prejudice in favour of the American character, which at this first interview with them received a severe shock. A little red lead having been accidentally spilt on the deck, one of them painted his face with it in a hideous fashion, and began to dance and shout like the Indians. He was soon joined by his companions, disguised in like manner, and we had an imitation of the war-whoop and dance…

Early American dance historian Kate Van Winkle Keller discusses Native American dances in her catalogue of early American dance practices, but she does not venture to analyze how European settlers interpreted the performances they observed. Yet it is likely that observing Native Americans’ dance was instrumental in defining the “genteel” and creating the “polite society” for which so many colonists strove. For colonists, fashioning an identity as a European settlement required locating an “other” as a distinct person, group, or society against which to compare their own. Europeans used words like “savage” and “wild” to describe Native Americans’ dance, among other characteristics. These characteristics were at odds with the urbane British dance styles to which the colonies aspired.

The African population also influenced dance culture in Early America. Africans, brought over from West Africa as slaves, came with their own history and dance practices. African slave culture utilized dance as a means of expression just as their European masters did. African-American dance and music were deeply involved in everyday life. Percussion, maintaining a low center of gravity, and a keen sense of

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syncopation distinguished African-American dance forms. European settlers came into contact with these traditions of dance on a regular basis, as in the case of a Virginian plantation owner’s children who were chided for dancing with young slaves. Dance provided a means of connecting across such racial and social lines; but dance styles also changed when people crossed racial and social divides. Jigs and hornpipes looked impressive when performed by a person of a certain status, while these same fundamental dances might be interpreted as lewd and characteristic of lower classes. For African-American populations, dance held a high religious value, whereas in European religious tradition, dance was more often a threat to Christian morality. For African American slaves, dance provided an outlet for expressing praise of religious values while also providing a means of channeling the frustration of enslaved life into dances and songs. Ultimately, African-American dance and music would become instrumental in the rise of blues, jazz, and eventually modern hip-hop and rap music and dance cultures.

The colonies grew at an alarming rate with immigration from countries all over Europe, not just the British Isles. Spanish and French populations existed in North America even before the British colonized the Atlantic coast, and these other European peoples brought their own cultural dances with them. Large populations of German immigrants lived in Pennsylvania, and the Dutch established a thriving culture in New York. The various societies that came from all corners of the world brought their own dancing traditions that fed into a larger, recognizable American

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8 An account of this encounter is described at greater length in Chapter 2.
9 Religious prohibitions on dance will be discussed at length in Chapters 2 and 3.
culture. Although different dances from different parts of the world might have 
become more popular in one locale than in another, the fact that dance was practiced 
and appreciated everywhere created a broader sense of unity, even among peoples of 
varying backgrounds. This inclusive mentality is what has come to define American 
culture. The cross-pollination of European and African-American dance forms in 
early America warrants more attention.

My thesis focuses on Anglo-American dances. The earliest settlers of British 
descent immigrated to New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the Chesapeake regions, 
and defined themselves as part of the British model – relating to British traditions and 
opposing outsiders. Yet in failing to recreate what their British forefathers had 
established in England, they created an entirely new entity – American society.

In the pages that follow, dance in Early America is traced from its origins in 
England – particularly the elite forms of dance – to the shores of the British North 
American colonies. The types of dance that came to America from England are 
introduced and described at length. Furthermore, all of the etiquette and social 
expectations associated with dance in England are detailed to show the transition of 
this formal structure to the less formal dance practiced in the British North American 
colonies. Formal events were opportunities for the genteel to put their skills to the test 
in front of their greatest critics – their peers. The introduction of dance masters and 
dance manuals to the American public reflected the rise of dance and dance culture in 
the colonies. As dance became an increasingly popular component of theatrical 
performances, the shift from private to public allowed dance to become more 
commercial, more marketable, more present, and more democratic.
Dance became part of a growing, recognizable culture springing up throughout the colonies. This culture was strongly influenced by European trends, but dance adapted to a new environment that was less rigid and less disciplined. Touching the lives of the people daily, dance was a major contributor to the social scene in the British North American colonies and in the Early American states, and played a pivotal role in the creation and rise of an American culture and identity.
Chapter 1

From the British Isles to the North American Colonies:

Origins of Dance in English Culture

With the creation and founding of the colony in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, British colonials took a firm hold in the newly declared British North American Colonies. For the next 179 years, British settlements and colonies sprouted up along the Atlantic coast of North America and took their place among the major contributors to the success and growth of the British Empire. The British Isles received raw materials produced in the American colonies, starting with sugar and tobacco, and later, cotton, rice, rum, coffee, and lumber. The factories and manufacturers in England then exported finished products back out into the Empire. This system of commerce fed the Empire’s growth and expansion, but it was not only consumer goods and manufactured products that passed from the British Isles to the American colonies.¹⁰

Cultural tendencies and traditions moved along the same routes at the same vigorous pace, as did the tangible products. A cultural shift and exchange began as thousands of English, Scottish, and Irish settlers made their way across the Atlantic to settle in the British North American Colonies. Dance practices and dance forms passed from England to the newly established colonies as part of a larger cultural exchange that took place over the 179 years of British colonization in America. These

dance styles and traditions, many of which originated in England and other European countries, contributed to cultural distinction among the inhabitants of the British Isles. To understand the impact of dance in America, dance must be traced to its origins in the British Isles.

Dance in the British Isles came in many different forms. Country-dances, cotillons (French *contradanse*), reels, minuets, jigs, and hornpipes constituted the six most popular dances practiced and performed in the British Isles and eventually in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dance remained a very distinguished art form with the French minuets and the English country-dances showcasing dance as elegant and refined. Eventually, English country-dances became the most popular dances in Europe and the North American colonies.

A general understanding of the origins and physical practice of these highly specialized dances increases our appreciation of the value of dance in this time period. Understanding the performances of these dances, the involvement of individuals, and the type of etiquette expected by the performers and the spectators, can help to place dance within the social context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Between 1650 and 1850, country-dance was an important vehicle for social expression in the rising bourgeois class. Considered the most democratic among the dance forms in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, country-dances included all dancers, once individuals learned the steps. Performed in “longways progressive form,” English country-dances provided the opportunity for a potentially unlimited number of participating couples. Partners stood in two lines facing one another. The dance proceeded down the line with each pair getting an opportunity to lead the company in the dance.

The steps of country-dances became more accessible to the general public than cotillions and minuets due to the mass publication of printed manuals that detailed performing country-dances. In England, printed dance manuals circulated as early as 1651. Although country-dances did require significant practice to execute properly, many of the country-dances repeated steps over and over again, with the intention that onlookers pick up the dance after a few sets and join in. In this way, those with minimal dance training could participate in such an event, although basic understanding of dance etiquette would have kept those without such training away from the dance floor.

Less democratic, but more refined, French minuets were the cornerstone of elite dance in England and most of Europe between 1600 and 1850. Minuets maintained popularity among anyone hoping or expecting to impress a crowd. A minuet consisted of a series of arm movements, bows, and specifically regulated

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13 Ibid, 62.
motion to open and close each dance. The minuet, developed in Paris at the Royal Academy under the direct authority of Louis XIV, emphasized control and symmetry, conveying the power of the elite, specifically the king. Traditionally, minuets required learning five basic positions (the positions we now associate with modern ballet), while learning to move gracefully in and out of those positions. The minuet was a performance by a pair of dancers who moved in perfect harmony with one another, bowing to one another and to the audience at the beginning and end of the dance. The minuet presented one’s social status and grace. The dancers received criticism on their fluidity, their skill, and the overall presentation of the dance. The most important gentleman performed the first minuet with the most senior lady in attendance at such a formal event. This practice provided a means of reminding everyone present of his or her own status and place in society, as well as reinforcing the authority of the lead Gentleman and Lady. The minuet became a staple of European formal events; it also eventually became popular as part of early American ballroom social rituals.\textsuperscript{15}

Performing cotillions became popular among elite social circles, as dancers brought this form across the English Channel from France. As an English adaptation of French \textit{contradanse}, cotillion performances required four couples in a square. Although utilizing many of the same steps as county-dances, cotillions tended to be more challenging and complex, making them far less accessible to onlookers and anyone without rigorous dance instruction and practice. Cotillions often accompanied

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 11-13.
country-dances in dance manuals. Some of the more complex dances never received publication due to their complexities and improvisational nature.  

Reels, a predominantly improvisational dance form, originated from Scottish social dances. Reels included three or four people dancing in a line, weaving between one another using stepping passages and traveling passages. Unfortunately for historians, reels provided participants the freedom to utilize complex footwork and individual style, which is why only a few reel notations remain preserved. Although lower classes did perform more formal dances like cotillions and country-dances, it seems likely that the reel may have been a favorite due to the freedom it provided its performers, and the simple fact that one did not have to pay for dance manuals or a dance teacher to learn to perform a reel.  

Hornpipes and Jigs, also considered “free-form” displays of dance, provided one or two dancers an opportunity to perform alone or together. Free-form style required improvisation based on a general understanding of dance. Personal styles made this dance form popular with creative and talented people. Individuals crafted their own combinations to showcase their skills in complex floor patterns. Performances of hornpipes and jigs became common in all social settings, from the most elite gentry to the common folks. Learned more through oral traditions, hornpipes and jigs lacked specific instruction, and therefore, became more characteristic dances of the lower tiers of the social hierarchy.  

17 Ibid, 9.
18 Ibid, 14.
Through these precise procedures, attire, formations, and order, dance performances provided a means of entertainment and enjoyment, but dance also established social networks and defined social status. Each detail of the complex events and expectations of dance etiquette at these events required critical examination by the spectators who gossiped and assessed everything they saw. At every ball or formal dinner party, certain common questions and expectations made the evening about assessment and inquiry: Who partnered with whom? Who started the dance? Who ended the dance? With whom did individuals end the dance? Which dances were performed? When were individual dances performed? Who decided which dances were performed? Who looked the prettiest? Who missed the bow at the end of the minuet? All of these questions remained integral to establishing dance as a means of social hierarchy and a class determinant. The answers to these questions, whether positive or negative, implied characteristics of individuals as compared to the other participants in attendance.

Journals provide one source of information about social dances. Lady Mary Campbell Coke, daughter of John, Duke of Argyll, kept a journal, in which she detailed her experiences in the English Court and life in London for a young woman between 1766 and 1791.19 Coke befriended Princess Amelia, King George II’s daughter, resulting in her ascendance to elite life in the Georgian Court. While living among this elite company, she observed the importance of dance in understanding and placing divides between social classes:

The King of Denmark began the Ball with the Duchess of Manchester, &
dances a minuet surprising well. I think he danced a second with Lady Essex,
the Duchess of Beauford making her excuse. After many minuets Country
dances began… When the King & Princess rose from the table, we follow'd
them upstairs, & His Majesty danced one French Country dance, which
ended the Ball.²⁰

The organization and precise manner in which these social events occurred provided a
venue for the establishment of social norms and expectations. This type of structured
event, at which the King and the most important woman present began the ball with a
minuet, and also concluded the ball in a similar manner, encouraged the idea of a
hierarchical society based on the establishment of etiquette through years of
specialization of skills and decorum. The importance of order and structure at such
events served to set the precedence of social order and power. While this first dance
took place, the rest of the attendees watched and admired, potentially, the grace and
gentility of this first couple to dance. Through specific control and etiquette, this
symbolic first dance reminded everyone of the rigid class structure that dominated the
English way of life. Social dancing provided one means of expressing this control
over different groups of people in all walks of life.

Although an honor and a symbol of respect, dancing first to open a ball often
causued stress and intimidated participants, causing some to shy away from this
daunting task. It required precision and perfect command of all the dancing etiquette
and qualities. The privilege of dancing first often led to anxious couples, and some
refused the honor, shying away from the opportunity. Frances Burney d’Arblay, the
daughter of Dr. Charles Burney (a distinguished physician, musician, scholar, and

²⁰ Lady Mary Campbell Coke, “Diary of Lady Mary Campbell Coke, August, 1768,”
in The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke, vol. 2, (Edinburgh, Scotland: David
binary/asp/philo/bwld/getvolume.pl?S4482
historian of the late eighteenth century), kept a diary for ten years, starting when she was fifteen years old in 1768.\textsuperscript{21} In 1778, Lady d’Arblay began entries in her \textit{Later Journal}. She would continue this journal until her husband’s death in 1818. In 1786, Queen Charlotte chose Lady d’Arblay to be the keeper of her (the Queen’s) robes, a position Lady d’Arblay found disagreeable; yet, she opted to keep the position as it provided her with interesting and exciting opportunities to interact with some of the most prestigious names in European social circles.\textsuperscript{22} In an entry in her early diary in November of 1768, she wrote about this pressure and scrutiny concerning the etiquette of dance, particularly the first dance of a ball.

When the performance was over, \textit{Tamerlane} [the Emperor] came to me, to open the Ball! But I was frighten’d to death, and beg’d and besought him not to begin -- he said one of the members always did -- however I prevail’d, after much fuss, to put Hetty and Andrew Pringle first, and we were second. I assure you I danced \textit{like any thing} -- and called the second dance . . . . . after which, I hopp’d about with the utmost ease and cheerfulness.\textsuperscript{23}

Lady d’Arblay’s entry gives insight into the fears of young women at this time. She is confident about her dancing ability, as she assures the reader that she danced as well as anyone else and even called a dance, which means listening to the music and setting the steps for a country dance that the rest of the group will follow and perform in turn. Yet her fear of opening the ball

\texttt{http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu:7790/bios/A8036BIO.html}
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid,
\texttt{http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu:7790/bios/A8036BIO.html}
overshadowed her confidence as a dancer. The pressure on individuals to perform under the watchful and critical eyes of their peers pressured and scared even the most highly trained and well-respected members of society, like Lady d’Arblay.

Formal events, such as balls and dinner parties, provided opportunities for members of the upper echelons of society to mingle with one another, creating a very opportunistic, yet highly pressured, social dynamic. As a learned skill, dance ranked high on individuals’ lists; yet there were far more minute details observed at such events that required a dedicated commitment. Those aspiring to look the role of a Gentleman and a Lady conformed to specific “attributes of gentility.” One’s costume, manners, movement, grace, and ease became vital to functioning at social events. Individuals considered all of these attributes when preparing for and participating at a ball or social event. Looking and acting the role became vital to gain public approval and avoid humiliation; one slip-up could mean embarrassment of the family name.

People did not just come to these events to dance and mingle; as relentless critics of one another, these events showcased individuals’ genteel attributes and provided a forum where their efforts became publicly scrutinized or praised. Frances Burley d’Arblay illustrated the seriousness of this scrutiny when she herself forgot a step in one of the dances, opting to sit down from fatigue rather than finish the dance set. She describes her experience in her early diary:

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25 Ibid, 10 – 11.
I committed a fault from inattention, (chiefly owing to my extreme fatigue) which was, seating myself, after having gone down a dance, without walking it up again… however this lady took great offence at it -- for while we were seated, she came and addressed herself to Captain Bloomfield, keeping her back towards me, and affecting not to see me; and, not in the gentlest manner, she cried -- "And so you are sit down! -- you, who are such a young man give out first: -- and that after going down a dance, tho' you could not walk it up again!" This reproof I was conscious was meant for me…. "Had you been really fatigued," continued she -- "you might have shown it by sitting before you had gone down the dance -- I must say it was very ill bred! -- and I did not expect it from you, Captain Bloomfield! you, who are so polite a man!"  

Simply for sitting down in the middle of dance, her partner is rebuked on her behalf, by a woman who “took great offence” at Lady d’Arblay’s attitude. For someone so young to sit down and disrupt the flow of the dance was an inexcusable act of poor manners and contempt for her family and upbringing. The woman even commented on the Captain’s character, exclaiming how he was too “polite” for such “ill bred” manners put on display during the dance. Lady d’Arblay’s experience was not unique; this type of scrutiny became prevalent and expected by the participants in these kinds of social events between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

The stakes of such events were high. Participants performed in front of their peers at these events, where they hoped to earn respect and build their own pride. When expectations were met and one’s performance proved such coveted “genteel” status, the result often led to important networking ties and potential marital relations. Dancing and formal events set the stage for courtship, which often lead to marriage, and this tradition was vitally important to the lifeblood of the elite class. In her diary,

Lady d’Arblay sheds light on the life of an elite young woman in the late eighteenth century. She learned, first hand, the significance of a simple dance with a member of the opposite sex. After dancing with a man at a masquerade, the gentleman proceeded to press Lady d’Arblay and her family for more formal introductions. She documented her memories of this courtship experience:

[Particularly] there was a certain youth, not quite so hasty to be sure, as Mr. Barlow, but not far otherwise, who took much pains for cultivating our acquaintance. I happened to dance with him at a private masquerade . . . and he called two or three times afterwards, and wrote two notes with most pressing [requests, through a third person, that he might be introduced to my father, and to know whether] he might exist again [or not].

The simple act of dancing with a member of the opposite sex created a tension among the young men and women of the late eighteenth century. Expectations became so high that any potential opportunities for courtship and marriage were taken very seriously. After a single dance with Lady d’Arblay, this gentleman from the masquerade tried to get the approval of her father and secure a wife and potentially a life with a woman of elite status. The stakes of these events were high because the rewards were so important. A successful showing at a dance, and making a good impression on the right person, meant the difference between a life of love and ease and a life of loneliness and potentially the burden of a family’s disgrace.

This undercurrent of love, courtship, and romance supplemented the rigid structure and social compartmentalization of dance in the British Isles. Beneath the

hard exterior of etiquette and decorum, people sought companionship and love at these events. Mary Campbell Coke’s diary details what she witnessed at a ball in January 1767, pertaining to this undercurrent of love and courtship:

I told her of my having Observed her Son [the Duke of Buccleugh] dancing with Lady Bell: Stanhope & leading her down to supper, & tho' one cou'd not say that her alliance wou'd be any disgrace, yet I wish'd he wou'd make a general acquaintance among all those Ladys who were proper for him to marry, & then make his choice. She agreed with me, & said She wou'd desire him at the Ball at Court of the Queen's birthday to dance with Lady Betty Montagu…

Lady Coke, a bystander at the ball, comments on a man’s choice of dance partner as not an adequate or acceptable choice of a wife because she believes that he can find someone more “proper.” Clearly, the act of dancing and choosing a dance partner held a very important role in the lives of the young men and women in finding a suitable mate, as Lady Coke makes the seamless jump from dancing partner to “Ladys who were proper for him to marry.” That is not to say that every time a man chose to dance with a woman, it meant that they were locked in to an engagement. Dancing was not a marital contract, but it could be the first step in that direction.

The sequence of events was important at balls, especially when considering interest in the opposite sex. A man signified interest and intent with the choice of his last dance partner for the evening. Lady Coke did not react to the fact that the Duke danced with Lady Bell Stanhope, but rather that he danced with her last: “I was glad that the two young Ladys that were with me got partners: one Danced with the Duke of Buccleugh & the other with Mr Howard. But I observed the Duke danced his last

dance with Lady Bell: Stanhope & led her down to supper. This interaction
displays the depths of the scrutiny, gossip, and criticism taken from a single dance, or
choice of dance partner at any social event. Life was a theater, filled with props,
actors, a stage, a backdrop, and an audience. Performances of eighteenth century
dance satisfied the audience just as much as the participants. This sentiment created
the rigid and pressured environment surrounding British social performance culture,
in which these interactions took place.

Being born into the elite social class in the British Isles afforded many
advantages for that select minority, and dance provided a means to flaunt and test
one’s birthright. Noble birth did not absolutely guarantee respect, fortune, or
prosperity; these advantages often required some form of rite of passage, earned
through one’s display of grace and refinement. Without these qualities, no one
respected the family name or title. In December of 1785, Lady d’Arblay describes
dance’s significance in daily life in the English court. She wrote in her diary about
King George III’s opinion of dance and music as it pertained to noble status and how
strange it seemed, to him, that some people not of a certain social stature could not
appreciate the intricacies of dance and music that remained so important to the
refined and “genteel” culture to which he and his court subscribed:

‘To me,’ said he, ‘it appears quite as strange to meet with people who have
no ear for music, and cannot distinguish one air from another, as to meet with
people who are dumb. Lady Bell Finch once told me that she had heard there
was some difference between a psalm, a minuet, and a country-dance, but she

29 Lady Mary Campbell Coke, “Diary of Lady Mary Campbell Coke, January, 1767,”
in The Letters and Journals of Lady Mary Coke, vol. 1. (Edinburgh, Scotland: David
30 Kate Van Winkle Keller and Charles Cyril Hendrickson, George Washington: A
declared they all sounded alike to her! There are people who have no eye for
difference of colour. The Duke of Marlborough actually cannot tell scarlet
from green!31

It is clear from his condescending tone that King George III regards the
understanding of music and recognition of dance as a sign of gentility and a
distinguishing feature of one’s character. His disregard aimed at people who have no
rhythm, no musical ear, or cannot distinguish between colors, like the Duke of
Marlborough, helps to establish these “attributes of gentility” that permeated the
social landscape at this time. Dance in England established standards that people had
to adhere to in order to fit into the rigid social system.

Those aspiring to claim this social status were forced to meet these arbitrary
requirements and standards to be considered “genteel,” and worthy of such
prestigious company. The men and women in the elite classes learned at a young age
to appreciate dance and the positive characteristics that dancing taught. Being a good
dancer required balance, rhythm, grace, fluidity, and a keen awareness of one’s
surroundings. These traits corresponded with people of a certain monetary and social
background. Miss Mary Berry observed these distinguishing qualities of dance in her
daily life. According to Miss Mary Berry, the writer, and her contemporaries, by
looking at someone else’s posture, or the manner in which he or she moved, that
person’s family lineage could have been determined, along with that person’s societal
worth. Not every person of noble status, however, received automatic recognition as a

31 Frances Burney D’Arblay, “Diary of Frances Burney D’Arblay, December, 1785,”
ed. Charlotte Frances Barrett in Diary and Letters of Madame D’Arblay, vol. 2: 1781-
http://solomon.bwld.alexanderstreet.com/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bwld/getvolume.pl?S4274
person of refinement, no matter how much training and practice he or she had; that depended on the implementation of their attributes and etiquette at formal events.

This confining art form, although rigid for the members of the upper class, found more versatility in the other social classes. Some men and women of the lower classes attempted to learn to dance like the nobility. Although they tried to dance with these elite forms, the ‘commoners’ did not adhere to the same rigid social expectations as the elites. Their family names were not at stake. As a result they were able to adapt and mold the dances to fit into their own lifestyles. Other ‘common folk’ adapted the upper classes’ dance styles and imitated them in a free-lance and simple style of their own.32

On Sunday October 10, 1790, Miss Berry documented an afternoon of watching more “common folk” dance. She wrote, “In the park, just without the garden, there was a large sort of temporary building, where not less than three or four hundred of the common people were dancing away most merrily, both French and English country dances; and though without much grace…”33 Miss Berry notes that she observed commoners, and then she described their dance as lacking “grace,” presumably the grace that only a person of nobility, only a person learned in the art of dancing, could possibly convey and perform adequately. Her attitude mirrors that of

King George towards people who do not fit the mold of the ideal gentrified elite. Miss Berry’s prejudices and assumptions about dancing outside the elite circles go further:

I expected that the peasant men and women dancing the dances of the country, mixed together with the servants of the house, would have pleased me more [compared to the rigid dances of the court]; but they have no grace whatever, nor the men even any choice with whom they dance, provided they could run about and make themselves hot in executing a thousand steps of a ‘reel;’ it seems perfectly indifferent to them who is their vis-à-vis, and the spectators are only occupied in looking and watching the moment when they could join in it themselves.  

Miss Berry is again compelled to comment on the peasants’ lack of grace in performing their reels. Rather than appreciating the different skill set it takes these men and women to perform such dances, she scoffs at their attempts. Not only was there a hierarchy within dances themselves – who dances first, who leads the dance, who begins the steps for each set, etc – but there was also a discernable hierarchy among the types of dances. Miss Berry refers to the performing of the reels as “running about.” Her lack of respect for the different dance form, purely based on class, reveals the nature of the rigid social hierarchy in England. Even as a dancer in her own right, she cannot appreciate the skill involved in the reel. She is blinded by her self-image of nobility and the “genteel” form of dance. Although these dances became popular at the same time, and often in the same regions, Miss Berry’s attitude is representative of the undeniable separation of social classes based on dance forms. It was not enough to know how to perform any one dance, but rather there was a hierarchy within the dance culture of England: a presentation of appropriate etiquette and a proper display of one’s “attributes of gentility” defined a successful genteel performance.

34 Ibid, 549.
Neither the nobility, the Dukes, the Archbishops, nor the Princes of the British Isles went on to populate the North American Atlantic coast, yet many of the dances and formalities of those elite groups still found their way across the ocean. The bourgeoisie and common folk who populated the colonies modeled their dances on British practices, but found them transformed by the new environment in which they were performed. Different agents brought dance to the British North American colonies, and in this less rigid society, dance adapted to a growing American culture that valued dance as performance: focusing on overall presentation and inclusive qualities, rather than an emphasis on dance as adherent to exclusive social etiquette norms.
Chapter 2

The Dance Master: Cultural Agents in America

All over the world, the holdings of the British Empire changed and adapted to this ideal of “polite society” at the same time. There were “new modes of speech, dress, body carriage, and manners” that outfitted the rising American gentry with a new set of tools to distinguish themselves. Because a distinct upper class gentry did not exist in the colonies, the elite society became referred to as “polite society.” Though integral to English culture and ideals, the wilderness of the American Colonies made it impossible to uphold the standards of “genteel” and “polite” society. Without the rigid structure that held the social fabric of English society together, the colonies grew and evolved in a much different way than their English forbearers intended.

As a performing art, dance could only be preserved through oral tradition. Due to this limitation, dance masters played a vital role in ensuring the continued existence of cultural trends. Dance masters became agents and conveyors of culture. By filling this void, dance masters became the link in the chain, providing the extra push that dance needed to take a firm footing in the colonies. The presence of dance masters suggests not only that there was a population that wanted to learn how to dance, but also that interest in dance was so significant that it supported dance masters as a profession. There are accounts of numerous dance masters coming to America for the purpose of teaching dance and all of the polite manners associated

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with it. The success of dance masters shows an initial expectation of European genteel society becoming a standard in the British North American Colonies. Manuals and books that detailed social dancing were printed in London and arrived in America with the ascendance of dance masters as an occupational group. The eventual success of these manuals made it clear that there was a market for dance in the colonies, and dance instructors readily reaped the benefits. With such promising prospects awaiting dance masters and entrepreneurs in America, dance masters, dance forms, and dancing culture sank its roots into the colonial world.

With the publication of the first printed collection of country-dances, John Playford revolutionized dance as an art form in 1651. By printing and mass-producing a common notation of dance movements that people from different locales could recognize, Playford brought dancing to the people in a way never done before. Playford had a keen understanding of the needs of the middle class, made up of a rising merchant class. He saw the need to teach refinement and etiquette to anyone who desired such knowledge, while capitalizing on this demand when he published self-tutors for various musical instruments and collections of country-dances. His major printed work, *The English Dancing Master*, described country-dances and appropriate etiquette for aspiring dancers attending formal events. The printing of country-dances in pamphlets, books, and manuals made them accessible to the general public, at least for anyone with money to purchase these commodities.

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37 This book was one of the first of its kind. This manual brought dance forms to a much larger audience: John Playford, *The English Dancing Master*, (London: John Playford, 1651).
Following the success of Playford’s collections, new manuals emerged on the market. In 1718 and 1719, John Walsh published two volumes of *Compleat Country Dancing Master* in London. His works, though popular, fed into a market that craved more. As participants of the trans-Atlantic world would soon discover, these early manuals began a series of efforts to capture this intangible art form in a written notation.

In the centers of cultural innovation, dancers and dance masters in London and Paris invented and produced new dance techniques and notations at an astonishing rate (for those with access to the manuals). Kellom Tomlinson’s *The Art of Dancing*, published in 1735, took a detailed look at the technique and application of the newest dance notation. Tomlinson’s book used language based on Raoul-Augur Feuillet’s system of dance notation. Feuillet published this notation from the French Royal Academy (of the Performing Arts). Some years later, also in London, Nicholas Dukes, a prominent dancing master in London in the mid-eighteenth century, published yet another compilation of country-dance directions. Published in 1752, *A Conscise and Easy Method of Learning the Figuring of Country Dances by way of Characters* arrived in the British North American colonies. Although not the first to document and notate dance, Duke’s method of characterizing the dance steps made the work of the dance masters and the dancers much easier.

Even before the publication of these major manuals, dance masters took their skills and traveled to America. In 1703 Anthony Aston, known for his acting, dancing, and entrepreneurship, moved to Charlestown, South Carolina to teach. At

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the same time, George Brownell moved to the colonies to teach writing and dancing first in Charleston, and then in Boston. Aston and Brownell were among the earliest dance masters in America, and they had great success in finding pupils who craved the newest English dances. These early dance masters primarily taught the children (and sometimes the adults) of wealthy families in the colonial urban centers.39

Not long after Brownell and Aston, Edward Enstone gained popularity as a dance master in Boston. Originally recruited to Boston as an organist, he opened a school in 1716. In an attempt to increase his revenue, the renowned musician began teaching dance and music classes.40 In 1720 Enstone placed an advertisement for his dance lessons in a local newspaper. His ad read:

This is to acquaint all Gentlemen and others, that Edward Enstone Dancing Master is removed to a Large House in King Street Boston, where young Ladies may be Accommodated with Boarding, and taught all sorts of Needle work with Musick and Dancing. N.B. Dancing Days are Monday, Thursday, and Saturday in the afternoons. Thursdays being Publick for all Gentlemen and Ladies that please to come and see the performance.41

This advertisement shows dance as equivalent to learning needlework and music, two fundamental, important skills to know and appreciate as a member of the “polite [English] society.”

Dance quickly became a staple in the daily lives of those who wished to better their social standings. Dance masters like Enstone became increasingly popular and available for those who pursued dance as a part of daily life. Only thirty years before Enstone’s efforts, dance schools and dance masters struggled to survive in the hostile

Puritan New England environment, but by 1720, Enstone’s school persevered as one of eight to be functioning and successful in New England.42

Dance masters rose to prominence in the colonies. Over the next one hundred years, the profession of a dance master became a respected position in society, and some of the foremost masters bettered their social status and became active members of the polite society. Dance masters maintained a valuable role in society because they interpreted British cultural trends and attempted to pass them along to the next generation of British subjects. Dance needed interpreting, as did all of the etiquette and cultural structures that surrounded dance.43

Within a hundred years, dance masters created a successful occupational field in the British North American colonies. The increased presence of dance masters in Boston and in the other colonies is proof of the rise in popularity and significance of dance in the colonies. Starting in the mid-eighteenth century, the Brownell family and eventually the Turner family, became prominent dance masters in Boston. The Turner family produced three generations of dance masters and they supported themselves with this skill, and succeeded in elevating their social status to part of polite society.44 During this time, dance masters became a respected profession that created

an opportunity for social mobility. Being a dance master provided a steady income that allowed these professionals time and money to attend higher-class events. The occupation of “dance master,” with its particular skills, became recognized and appreciated as these individuals moved into a higher social echelon.

In the 1730s, George Brownell’s nephew, Thomas Brownell, established an official writing and dancing school. Brownell’s establishment equipped children of wealthy families with the proper tools to become gentlemen. Ephraim Turner (1708/9 – 1765) took over this school in 1765 after Thomas unexpectedly died. Unknowingly, Turner stepped into the role as a dance teacher, and his name survived in association with this profession for the next one hundred and fifty years. Over the next three generations, the Turner family produced prominent dance teachers who all worked and had success in Boston.45

The famous Turner family began its ascendance towards Bostonian elite society when William Turner (1745 – 1792) took over his father’s dancing school in 1769. By the time William Turner was teaching dance in Boston, not only was dance an important element of living among Massachusetts gentry, but it was a talent and skill that Turner felt should be flaunted. As noted by Anna Green Winslow, a girl going to school in Boston at the time, “the students of his [Turner’s] school marched through Boston’s streets, to the music of the fiddle played by ‘Black Henry,’ to Concert Hall, corner Tremont and Bromfield streets, to practice dancing; and that Mr.

Turner walked at the head of the school.” According to this account, Turner demanded respect for his profession. This is clear from his actions: in spectacular fashion, he marched down a street in Puritan Boston, leading a procession of dancing students. Dance had infiltrated and strengthened its roots in American society in a way it had never done before; just fifty years earlier, dance had been prohibited in Boston. The dance masters conveyed this cultural trend in a way that fit into the lives of the colonists, allowing dance to become popular, even in Boston.

Although there was definitely some dancing innovation in America, dance was primarily imported. William Turner traveled to London in 1773 and returned in 1774, bringing back with him a new kind of dance for his dancers: The French Cotillion. This great effort by Turner to keep up-to-date with current popular dances in Europe is significant. The inhabitants of the colonies were not ignorant to the advancements and achievements in Europe. Colonists persistently maintained interest in learning the newest fashions, technologies, and intricate details of European lifestyles. That included dance. Popularity and intrigue about dance propelled dance masters to seek out the most updated manuals and the newest forms coming out of Europe. John Durang, who trained under Turner, became famous for his hornpipe, skilled improvisational dance, and performance. Finally, in 1791, William Turner, Jr. (1769 – 1828) took over his father’s dance school as the primary dance master when his father returned to England.

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Dance was also significant in defining gender roles during this period. Both genders utilized dance as a means of expressing their “attributes of gentility.” A comparison of the types of schooling and learning that men and women received provides insight into cultural values. For example, dance master Edward Enstone advertised for his school by promoting the teaching of needlework and music to accompany the training in dancing.\(^{48}\) Although men learned dancing in the same manner as women, a man’s education may have stressed literary training rather than learning trades that would make them successful husbands and fathers. Women trained to be domestic, while men trained to be scholars. Both sexes learned dance, but it may be presumed that these lessons remained gendered like the rest of society.

Just as dance masters often taught etiquette and manners for formal events and gendered roles in society, dance manuals tended to focus on molding the manners and lifestyles of their readers, as well as teaching dance forms. Many of the dancing manuals had sections about “rules for conversation,” “employing one’s time,” “choosing a companion,” and “behavior in company.”\(^{49}\) Dancing was not just a means to learn a social skill, but it was a means towards refining and improving one’s way of living. In 1800, *A Collection of the Newest Cotillions and Country Dances* was published anonymously in Worcester, Massachusetts. After nearly thirty pages of


\(^{49}\) Saltator, *A Treatise on Dancing and on Various Other Matters, Which are Connected With That Accomplishment and Which are Requests to Make Youth Well Received and Regulate Their Behavior in Company. Together With a Full Description of Dancing in General – Lessons, Steps, Figures, &c.*, (Boston: The Commercial Gazette, 1802), pp. 5 - 95.
detailed instructions for the most basic country-dances to complex cotillions, the
author proceeds to educate the reader on “rules of conversation.” The author begins
with, “Having your future happiness in view, I now solicit your attention to a few
observations calculated to make you well received in the best companies…”\(^{50}\) This
manual claims that not only can it teach proper dance movement and etiquette, but it
will improve the student’s life to know these things. By acknowledging that the
student’s life would potentially be better off down the road by mastering the dance
and decorum in this manual, the manual strongly suggests that dance represented
more than simply a social event in the new Republic.

Although there are no statistics showing the percentages of manuals sold in
each geographic area, it is clear that the mass publication of Playford’s and others’
dance manuals brought dance forms and polite etiquette to the masses. Also, the fact
that these manuals came to the American Colonies shows just how important they
were to individuals hoping to sustain British cultural trends through these dances and
behaviors. The dance manuals provided a means for the dance masters to keep in
contact with new dance forms coming out of Europe, while also providing notation
and clarity to students learning to dance and present themselves according to British
cultural trends.

Dance masters and dance manuals, the aforementioned agents of dance, had
varying influence and success depending on the geographical region. Dance varied by
region and settlement. The earliest accounts of dance in this period of American
history come from the first major settlements in the New England and Chesapeake

\(^{50}\) “Rules for Conversation” in *A Collection of the Newest Cotillions and Country
Dances*, (Worcester, Massachusetts, July 1800), pp. 29.
regions. These two societies differed from one another in many ways: New England was founded on religious morals with the hopes of creating a colony centered around the idea of purity of the Church. The Chesapeake colonies were not founded on religious principles, but rather as true outposts of the Empire: colonies that produced abundant raw materials and shipped them to the mother country for production. Although these differences caused dance to be perceived in various ways, dance was still a medium of expression, exercise, and entertainment. To some, dance also remained a distinguisher of class and individual social worth. New England and the Chesapeake serve as two case studies that took drastically different routes as dance, dance masters, and the culture that dance created, infiltrated life in the American Colonies.

The Puritan society of New England maintained a very distinct social structure that differed greatly from that of the Planter society and lifestyle in the Chesapeake region. Puritan New England was not a community known for promoting and fostering dance. Yet dance was not always excluded or prohibited from the social scene in New England. In this highly religious and orderly society, dances and events at which dancing occurred were not unequivocally prohibited. Because no finite prohibition was made in the Scripture, even the strictest of interpretations of the Puritan Code of Morality would agree that dance could not be completely prohibited. 51 Emphasizing morality, maintaining an orderly society, abiding by strict

laws, and submitting to religious and political authority remained central to the daily life of a good Puritan.\textsuperscript{52}

Puritan society stressed hard work and diligence in everyday life. If individuals worked exceptionally hard, putting all of their mental, physical, and emotional energy into what Cotton Mather, a prominent Puritan minister in Boston in the late seventeenth century, referred to as “a Calling,” it would prevent a deterioration of moral conduct and a falling into a life of sin. Puritans were highly motivated workers due to fear of their own passions. Furthermore, the religious leaders of Puritan society promoted and insisted that society live in fear of these feelings and remain pious to combat such fears.\textsuperscript{53} Puritan ideals revolved around this idea of hard work put into the right aspects of one’s life. Family, public works, and piety were the major areas of responsibilities for individuals in Puritan society. Protecting the order and structure of these responsibilities was a major concern not just for each individual, but also for the heads of the churches. It was this fear of the unpredictable that brought about the precarious relationship that Puritans had with dance in their society.

Dancing made many Puritan moralists uncomfortable. Although Puritan leaders advocated for healthy and enjoyable physical activities, dance irked many Puritans on a deeper level than a simple physical activity. Done properly, dancing was innocent, required minimal resources, and provided participants with a physical exercise that promoted a healthy lifestyle. But even with all of these redeeming


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 23.
values, dance was considered an odious threat to the Puritan way of life. The Puritans were suspicious of dancing, and instead of focusing on its positive attributes, they feared that this healthy and natural activity would lead to temptations that would promote sin and sloth.\textsuperscript{54}

Even these rigid, pious, and traditional values, however, did not stop individuals within this Puritan community from dancing. Even in such a hostile environment, dance became a prevalent activity and form of social expression. By 1730, there were eight dance schools in Boston, which became the dancing nucleus of New England by the mid-eighteenth century.

Only fifty years earlier, Bostonians had made every excuse and every effort to stifle dance within their society: three dance schools had been swiftly closed in the late seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{55} In New England, dance remained very closely monitored, regardless of its moderate success. Dancing had become popular among the upper echelons of Boston’s social stratum as early as the 1690s, as a direct result of the royalization of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.\textsuperscript{56} As royal governors arrived in New England, a new social stratification came to Boston. English dances received much greater support and participation than ever before as a direct result of the royal governors and merchants who were tied to English cultural trends. The importation of these royal officials brought the importation of English “genteel” culture to Boston.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, 112.
This culture held dance in great esteem as the formal events provided a forum for this royal culture to be put on display in a grand fashion.

Moralists opposed dance because it brought together men and women in impious and suggestive ways. Lascivious dancing, defined as any dancing that permitted the touching and holding of men and women, was therefore forbidden in Puritan society.\(^57\) In the early years of Puritan settlement, very rarely did any organized dances or any mixed-sex dances take place. Jigs, hornpipes, and other forms of dance that lacked structure and relied on the improvisational skills of the performer were not popular because they provoked behavior that was disagreeable to the ideals of the emotionally controlled and well-mannered lives of Puritans. Puritan New England, however, also had negative opinions of the minuet, the most refined and structured French dance style that was extremely popular in mid-eighteenth-century high society. The minuet opened formal occasions and emphasized the social strata within a community. But the minuet was exclusively a couple’s dance. It required dancing intimately with a member of the opposite sex, and the Puritan critics found this to be as unacceptable as the raunchy jig.\(^58\) These negative attitudes towards the practice could only keep dance away from the mainstream New England society for so long. Luckily, new dance styles provided second and third generation Puritans with some acceptable dances. Country-dances and the French version, contra-dances, provided Puritans little with which to argue. Country-dances promoted group unity and moving fluidly together, which fit nicely into Puritan social

\(^{58}\) Ibid, 112, 113, 115.
constructs. The emphasis of dance as a communal activity was front and center in country-dances. Even more agreeable to Puritan beliefs was the minimal intimate interaction of couples. Although most country-dances required partners, most dances were performed in circles, sets, or lines, providing fewer opportunities for immoral and sensual contact between the sexes within the dances.\textsuperscript{59}

Though resistant at times, Puritan society created a niche for dance. Life in New England was fairly rigid, but dance became a part of the social landscape, altering the way the society operated. Dance provided an outlet for expression and it promoted exercise. It created a means of leveling and distinguishing social classes as well. While dance slowly became an acceptable social activity in this fairly hostile environment of New England, it flourished and grew deep roots in the Plantation society of Chesapeake.

The acceptance of dance into society certainly differed from region to region, but dance styles varied as well. Philip Fithian, a tutor for a Planter family in Northern Neck, Virginia, during the late eighteenth century, kept a journal of his experience in Virginia, where he attended balls and other formal events; he comments on the different dance styles that were performed best in the South as opposed to the North. As a man who went to school at Princeton and was originally from New Jersey, his accounts of life in Virginia are particularly interesting, as he experienced a clear sense of culture shock. He observed the difference between this northern preference for country-dances, stressing the separation of sexes and a southern preference for the

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 114. For more in depth looks at the different dance forms during this time period, see Kate Van Winkle Keller’s “If the Company Can do it”: Technique in Eighteenth Century American Social Dance and her book, Dance and its Music in America.
minuet and the jig."\(^{60}\) In his journal, Fithian wrote, "Virginians are of genuine Blood – They will dance or die!"\(^{61}\) Fithian did not learn to dance via his formal education, whereas anyone wishing to participate in Chesapeake society learned to dance at a young age. New Englanders focused on rigid guidelines around dance, while Southerners liked the refined, challenging dances, even though these included couples dancing together. Through the reverence of the jig as an acceptable dance style, Chesapeake society also valued improvisational skills as a talent. Similar to Fithian, Baron von Closen also noticed and commented on this taste for differing dances according to geographical location. While stationed with Rochambeau in North America during the American Revolution, Baron von Closen kept a journal, and on December 15, 1781, he wrote about these geographical dancing preferences, a noticeable phenomenon in America:

…M. de Rochambeau gave a large dinner for the leading residents of Williamsburg, and a ball to which all the Ladies were invited; everyone was very pleased with it.

The fair sex in this city like minuets very much. It is true that some of them dance them rather well, and infinitely better than those up in the North; to make amends for this, the latter dance the Scottish [reels] better. All of them like our French quadrilles, and in general, they find French manners to their taste. That is all I will take the liberty of saying on this subject.\(^ {62}\)

Baron Von Closen picks up the differing dance trends associated with the geographical regions in the Colonies. This difference was noticeable, even to an


outsider, but what is also important to note is that the Baron experienced dancing in both regions. After discussing the dance of both regions, the Baron writes, “All of them like our French quadrilles,” which shows the appreciation and recognition of dance in all regions. Dance may have been different in the two separate areas, but people throughout the Colonies enjoyed dance.

The inhabitants of the Chesapeake Colonies, unlike their neighbors to the North, placed a high value on dance and its impact on daily life. As a form of expression, dance remained an overall positive contributor to society. Assemblies and dancing were at the heart of Chesapeake social interactions. Dance was at the center of the action, considered one of the most meaningful ways of expressing the soul of the people. Dance was a way of life in this region. Individuals approached dance with serious and proud attitudes; it was competitive. It was understood that individual performances on the dance floor provided an opportunity for members of Chesapeake society to be observed and critiqued by their peers, just as the elites in England were.

In the Chesapeake area, dancing also provided a means to courtship. Dancing was the selling point for any young man trying to catch the eye of a young woman. Because this society revolved around Plantations, large tracts of land separating neighbors from one another, interactions and contact among different families remained less frequent than in the north. As a result of this limited interaction, relationships among neighbors in the seventeenth century Chesapeake area often grew

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64 Ibid, 81.
tense due to the increased pressure to find a spouse with every interaction. People were often confined to about a dozen plantations within a few miles of their own homes. Everyone hoped for visits from their neighbors, regardless of social status. Possible meetings and social gatherings like an assembly or dance caused excitement, though these gatherings were fairly infrequent. Escaping the monotonous daily routine caused the enthusiastic men and women to drink, smoke, and even dance when the opportunities arose. In Virginia, at these balls and social gatherings that took place among neighbors, men and women were center stage, hoping for success in proving their grace and genteel manners that would win over a potential spouse of the social stratum that suited such an individual. The pressure to perform was great; in fact, some travelers passing through Virginia commented on courtship being “the principal business in Virginia.” The stakes were high. Young men and women had a lifetime of happiness to gain, and their family’s respectable name to lose. Dance was at the epicenter of Chesapeake society because dance represented an understanding and personal harnessing of the genteel way of life.

Dance also provided a means of social mixing. Though emphasis on and support of dance came from the elite society, dance remained recognizable and enjoyable to people from all walks of life. Fithian recalls a moment in which the children whom he tutored, the children of white Planters, participated in a dance with

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66 Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling, eds., *Quebec to Carolina in 1785–1786: Being the Travel Diary and Observations of Robert Hunter, Jr., a Young Merchant of London*, (San Marino, California, 1943), pp. 231. As found in Rhys Isaac’s *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790*, (Williamsburg, Virginia: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 86.
the slaves on the plantation. Fithian describes one of the slaves playing a fiddle and
Fithian then observed two young white boys dance a jig with the slaves. Naturally,
Fithian immediately dispersed the boys.\textsuperscript{67} The simple fact that the slave’s fiddle
playing induced the white boys to dance with the slaves is significant in
understanding the culture and society of the Chesapeake area, not only in racial terms,
but also in terms of social class. Not only was it an issue that the boys were dancing
with slaves, but also that they were dancing jigs. The white children dancing with the
black slaves in this manner seems like “slumming,” or “hanging out,” as it might be
termed today, and participating in the practices of a lower class. Dance could be more
than just an activity and more than a means of social comparison and display of
gentility: for a brief moment, dance bonded two groups of people from opposing ends
of the social and racial spectrum.\textsuperscript{68}

The men and women who lived around the Chesapeake were also religious,
and they struggled to have dance fit into their pious lives in an appropriate manner,
just like their Puritan counterparts. Some found dancing impious and did not
participate, yet the refined and more expressive lifestyles of the inhabitants of the
Chesapeake region, particularly the Virginians, did not always cater to the pious, as
was the case in New England. Sometimes, Virginians danced on the Sabbath, a
practice that would have been blasphemous and not permissible in Puritan New
England. Although dancing did happen on the Sabbath at times, the Church did try to
show its disdain for such practices: “When Mr. Teakle returned home a few days
afterwards, and was informed of the desecration of his house by a dance on the

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid, 84-85.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 85.
Sabbath day, even during the hour when services at church were in progress, he was greatly scandalized.\textsuperscript{69} The willingness of young Virginians of both sexes who cast aside the piety and order of their elders to indulge in the secular and impulsive amusements of dancing and courtship shows how pervasive dance was in this society. Bruce goes on to explain that dancing on a Sunday was fairly common, but it never went unpunished. This type of behavior was not necessarily a sign of disrespect for religious expectations of the time period, but rather it was evidence of the “survival of the old English customs” which allowed the participation in amusements after Church services were over.\textsuperscript{70} In the Chesapeake region, dance was engrained in the culture enough that these types of actions were tolerated and often promoted, even if sometimes frowned upon.

Although dance affected societies within colonies of various geographic locations differently, the inclusion of dance within these societies created a larger culture in the Colonies. The common acceptance of dance eventually led the United States to appreciate and recognize dance as a distinct part of its own culture. Dance was recognizable throughout the colonies. This recognition and appreciation of dance helped to foster a new way for the inhabitants of the colonies to identify themselves. The sentiment conveyed by Fithian about Virginians - “They will dance or die!”\textsuperscript{71} – may not have been quite as fervent with New Englanders, but they would have recognized, and eventually come to appreciate, the dance as a means of finding

\textsuperscript{69} Philip Alexander Bruce, \textit{The Social Life of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century}, (Richmond, Virginia: Whittet & Shepperson Printers, 1907), pp. 183.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 183.
similarities among different individuals from any Colony or State. Everyone danced in some way, at some point; dance was universal and inevitable, regardless of its variations. Although dance masters operated in different ways depending on the geographical region, the emergence and establishment of the dance master as a profession led to the integration of dance as a permanent institution within early American culture and brought a form of stability to these early Americans as they defined themselves in a constantly changing environment.

By the late eighteenth century, dance had transcended being a simple amusement. Dance established a means of building community, and as a discipline and art form, dance gained respect as a profession. Just like any other art form or activity, however, dance had its critics and skeptics. Although defined by specific 2/4 meter, the hornpipe and jig were extremely free form and increasingly undefinable. This loose definition of hornpipes and jigs often led to a diminished view of dance’s integrity as a skill, profession, and medium of expression. This sentiment may have caused a local Connecticut newspaper to publish an essay in 1797 that, in fact, captured the nature of the influence of dance in the early Republic:

What New Step is that?
Dancing has of late become one of the most fashionable accomplishments, that the people are or need to be possessed of. So fond are some of its votaries, in paying homage to the accomplishment, …[that] some new step… is daily introduced…
When a leather apron man, driving a team loaded with hoop pools, who never heard a stringed instrument sweetly vociferate Money Musk, walks

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through the streets, rather awkwardly, many are fond of enquiring “What new step is that?”

When a person who has not been taught to “turn toes out,” or “hold the head up,” visits a friend who is acquainted with all those arts; first enters the room, it frequently occurs that the accomplished person, ask “What new step is that?”

If there happens to be a ball, & amongst the company there are some who are not used to the words “gentlemen take places for a Country Dance,” and who deliberately leads up a young Lady to Dance; those present… are very uneasy until they enquire “What new step is that?”

Cash has become so amazingly scarce lately that some people know better how to dance than handle it. A few days since… as I was paying away some money, one of the sect of Dancers stood by, and whispered me thus, “What new step is that?”

A man not long since, who had peeped too deep in the Glass, was walking through the streets, after the fashion of the votaries to Bacchus when some of the “accomplished,” give their approbation of his method of walking, and stood at a distance eyeing him ‘till he made a false step and fell into the mire, when one of them ran up, and thus accosted him: -- “Friend, what new step is that?”

Norwich Packet, Nov. 15, 1797

This satirical article shows a confused society that was once dependent on its mother nation for such cultural intricacies as dance; Americans were striving to find their own identity within the mess of defining all the aspects of daily life in a new, distinct way. This satire shows that these newly self-proclaimed Americans challenged their previously held notions of dance, according to English definitions.

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73 “What new step is that?” Norwich Packet, (November 15, 1797), as found in Kate Van Winkle Keller, “If the Company Can do It!” Technique in Eighteenth Century American Social Dance, (Sandy Hook, Connecticut: The Hendrickson Group, 1991), pp. 25.
The article’s main point describes dance as a popular and fashionable activity and form of entertainment. The author begins by declaring that, “Dancing has of late become one of the most fashionable accomplishments, that the people are or need to be possessed of. So fond are some of its votaries, in paying homage to the accomplishment, […] some new step… is daily introduced…” The author bluntly states how integral dance has become to the daily life of Americans: new dance steps are introduced daily, and clearly people make note of them and implement them into their dance repertoire, which must grow for one to remain “fashionable.” The author, however, goes on to satirize this phenomenon. He describes people innately not trying to dance and making missteps. The so-called “sect of dancers,” who represent the people in the greater community trained in the art of dance, observe this and call every mishap a new dance step.74

The author goes on to describe and focus on the leather man who moves awkwardly, and the drunken man’s tumble into the gutter. In both instances, the movements are ridiculed and mocked as being new dance steps. The author is satirizing the extent to which American dance forms emphasize improvisation. These pathetic and embarrassing missteps show a dance culture that has fallen far from its once aspiring “polite society.” Originally modeled on the refined British dance forms, dance in America, according to this author, no longer maintained such a dignified shape.

Dance was not just a means to social interactions and amusements; dance served as a metaphor for social behavior. Dance represented a means to perform and

74 “What New Step is That?” Norwich Packet, (November 15, 1797).
negotiate social status in an environment where social rules were not clearly defined. The author also acknowledges the hierarchy of the dancers. He alludes to people who stumbled with the proper positions, unsure what second position and pas de bourée meant. The author is commenting on the elitist view that those who can dance hold over those who cannot dance. Rather than embarrassing the individuals who cannot dance (which is what would have happened at a formal event if someone did not know the steps), the author comments on the arbitrary creation of dance moves by asking “what new step is that?” when in reality, the issue revolved around an individual’s ignorance of the proper step. A nasty tone from “the accomplished person” can be derived from this response as the reader observes the less-learned individual fail to perform. This clear satire, although exaggerated and humorous, makes a statement about the influence of dance on Americans at this time. Also, the satirist inadvertently points out two important American qualities: curiosity and ambition. Early Americans curiously embraced new ideas, trends, and fashions in their daily lives. Early Americas also exhibited an opportunistic and optimistic desire to get ahead, in this case by learning that “new step.” If someone is taking the time to write about the outrageous movements that are accepted as dance “these days,” then there must be quite a lot of dancing happening to which people can relate.

Obviously, dance was not quite so unstructured and it certainly did not take the movements of drunken men and publish manuals on those tumbles and shuffles. This piece makes it clear that understanding dance – the written notation of dance, the music, and the physical language of dance – was a skill that became part of daily life in early America. The exaggerated tone that the author takes in this satire presents
dance as a major aspect of society in the Early Republic. Although country-dances and minuets remained popular throughout the colonies and states, the general public confronted hornpipes and jigs more often in everyday life. This free-form dance style is what this satire is all about: Calling all sorts of movements a new dance step may have occurred often in this environment. The dancing models of the past that adhered to certain guidelines - the rigid structures of dance among the British elite, the conformity that kept men and women in lines during a country dance, the conformity that kept men’s backs straight and women’s toes pointed - slowly crumbled and were molded into something different. The European model could not run quite as smoothly in the colonies as it did in Europe. The newly forming American culture took this European style and adapted it to adjust dance forms to life in America. Citizens of the United States of America defined themselves as best they could, and dance provided an outlet and a means of expressing themselves, improvising on the old methods.

The Puritans of New England and the planters and farmers of the southern colonies accepted dance into their respective societies in different ways. But dance was accepted and utilized in these societies. Every day dance influenced the lives of the men, women, and children living in the colonies. Whether through following a dance master’s instruction, reading a manual, or simply by striking up a jig as a neighbor played a fiddle, people accepted dance as a part of a greater American culture. In 1800, a renowned professor of dance from Paris, Pierre Landrin Duport, compiled and composed a dance manual entitled *United States Country Dances*. There were different dances (hops, jigs, country dances, hornpipes, and cotillions)
with titles of the thirteen states. Duport’s title signifies the emergence of dance as an art form with “American” roots and history. The dances, although rich with European tradition, were re-claimed and renamed as “American.”

Prior to Duport’s manual, dance had never been named as an American form. Although the dances themselves did not differ in any major way from the European forms, Duport’s book title shows a shift in thinking. *United States Country Dances* implies that the dances come from the United States, and that these dances are, in essence, American. It would have been different if Duport had just been cataloguing dancing in the United States and had named his manual “Country Dances in the United States.” Not only does this show that a Frenchman, a foreigner to America, thought of these dances as belonging to the United States, but it shows a new means of self-identification. With the significant help of dance masters, between 1790 and 1825, Americans renamed dance as a part of their own culture. This ability to compartmentalize American dance as separate from European dances (not in form, but in name) shows a progression and shift as the United States and the American people began to carve out their own niche in the world.

Although Americans were not producing new dances and dance forms en masse, their ability to recreate and reproduce what was classically European became important to the endurance of the young nation. Even with differences among geographical areas, particularly during the post-revolutionary era, this ability to

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recreate is what became “American.” American identity and culture came from reproducing and perfecting what worked in Europe; the colonist came armed with the knowledge of thousands of years of trial and error in Europe. America was the reproduction and implementation of the systems that had worked. Dance had deep roots in the colonies, and therefore when the post-Revolutionary inhabitants sought to express their ambiguous Euro-American identity, they had generations of dance forms and practices upon which to call. Colonists from all walks of life reproduced and adapted British dances. Although dance had many guidelines and rules that any dance master or dance manual explained and enforced, dance remained accessible to anyone with a body and space to move.

Patriotic Americans gloried in having expelled a tyrannical European power and having established its place as a republic that gave rights to the people, while holding the government accountable for its actions. Promoters of dance celebrated it as a democratic and inclusive activity. Although performed with some regional variation, through dance, newly deemed American citizens performed their visions of what it meant to be American.

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Chapter 3

Setting the Stage: Dance and Theater in Early America

In many cases, dance masters found their skills best suited for a life away from balls, assemblies, and other formal events; dance masters found their skills much needed and admired on the stage. Theater was one of the major contributors to shaping Americans’ sense of identity.\(^{77}\) The theater was a means of representing any and all of the various characters that made up the early United States of America, but the stage also served other purposes. Like dance, theater was the target of hostility and opposition. Theater in America became pivotal to the spreading and importance of all kinds of performance, including singing, instrumental music, and dance. As theaters sprang up from county to county, and from colony to colony, the availability of these performances to the public also increased with more exposure. Stage plays allowed talented actors, actresses, vocalists, musicians, and dancers to put their gifts on display in a new, receptive, and energetic environment, beyond the critical eyes of the banquet halls. It was on these stages that dance, in particular, became more available and more pervasive in a newly forming American culture, as it reached the inhabitants of America as it had never done before.

The earliest recorded construction of an actual theater occurred in the summer of 1716 when William Levingston and Charles Stagg, a merchant and dancing master, respectively, decided to build one in Williamsburg, Virginia.\(^ {78}\) The duo operated a


dancing school and built the theater in hopes of putting on plays for the entertainment of the other colonists. The playhouse was completed by July, 1718. As other prospering towns and counties erected theaters, new theatrical companies started performing in an effort to take advantage of increasing interest in entertainment among the growing population. For example, Walter Murray and Thomas Kean established the Murray-Kean Company in 1749, the first traveling theatrical company in America.\textsuperscript{79} Even with the rise of new and competing companies, the early years of theater in America were not easy. Although supporters of dance and theater struggled to gain recognition in the British North American colonies, American entertainment provided a level of social inclusiveness that was different from the British mold.\textsuperscript{80}

Theatrical performances were crucial to the introduction of dance as a mainstream activity that could be practiced and appreciated by anyone. Stage managers preferred actors and actresses who were multi-talented as that provided them the opportunities to make their shows more eclectic. In 1752, William Hulett, a young ambitious stage performer, arrived in Annapolis, Maryland, bringing with him Mr. and Mrs. Charles Love. Mrs. Love served as Hulett’s dance partner, while Charles opened a school teaching music (violin, viola, oboe, bassoon, French horn, and flute). The manager of the newly formed theater company, Lewis Hallam, observed crowds react favorably to singing and dancing between acts. This led Hallam to recruit and promote performers on the stage to take up roles other than just

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 30.
\textsuperscript{80} Lawrence Levine, \textit{Highbrow/lowbrow}: (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990). The separation of society is a much later development in the nineteenth century – early national culture was a mixed and democratic. For example, everyone watched Shakespeare.
acting in the stage play being performed. Hallam’s prized example, Charles Hulett, performed in some minor roles, but his dancing between the acts was usually the most prominent entertainment. Although Hulett’s exposure was limited to these in between acts, he became a well-respected dance master. Hulett posted advertisements in the local newspapers for his privately owned and operated school for “Dancing in General.” Dance was an important component in the spectacle of theater. Dance masters, as an occupational group, found themselves with many significant roles at this time. In many cases, these were the people operating theaters and also performing most often on stage. Their talents were in high demand: their skills and perseverance made them excellent managers of theaters (and great at finding talent), while they also remained the most talented and versatile performers in the individual companies.

Many performances were often capped off with larger dancing productions which included the whole cast; sometimes even major dancing numbers, like a large Country Dance, would be performed between acts. This type of a production, involving the whole cast in a dance, became popular and the general fashion of popular theater at the time. More musical numbers, more singing, and more dancing led to larger crowds.

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81 Hugh F. Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 63 – 64. This section in Rankin’s book is very detailed and does not cite sources clearly to explain from where he got much of the information. I used some of his details about Mr. Hulett, Mr. and Mrs. Love, and Mr. Hallam loosely as I could not determine from what sources he derived his information. See pages 209 – 210 in *The Theater in Colonial America* for Rankin’s notes.
82 Ibid, 64.
83 Ibid, 128.
In a publication in the *New York Mercury*, a local newspaper in 1762, an advertisement promoted the plays *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet*, both by Shakespeare, and both to be performed at the Beekman Street Theater, known then as the Chapel Street Theater. As seen in Figure 1 at the end of the chapter, the advertisement for the production of *Romeo and Juliet* described a scene during which Mr. Hallam was to perform a dance. “In the Masquerade scene, Mr. Hallam will perform a Comic Dance.”\(^{84}\) This simple advertisement of Mr. Hallam’s dance, within the greater performance, shows the weight given to dance as another mode of entertainment and another way to draw a crowd to a performance.

As theatrical dance appeared more and more within staged performances, theater operators were able to advertise for these performances as well as the larger stage play. This phenomenon of including dance in the advertisements for theatrical productions occurred less in England at this time. British theater lacked this emphasis on dance as one of its primary selling points. In 1820, a pamphlet promoting a production of *The Queen and the Mogul* circulated in London. The advertisement read: “The Queen and the Mogul; a Play, in Two Acts, Adapted for Theatrical Representation, as Performed at a Theatre-Royal”\(^{85}\) (see Figure 2). Although this is a pamphlet and not a broadside, this British advertisement gives no weight to any other performances within the greater production.


Contrary to the British emphasis on the stage plays, dance became a commodity that could be promoted and sold as a part of American productions. The theater operators knew this and used print culture (newspapers, fliers, pamphlets, etc) to promote their shows and their skilled performers. These advertisements were emblematic of the beginning of an American society that would revolve around a commercial and consumer culture. An advertisement released in the summer of 1822 (see Figure 3) read:

On Friday Evening, July 5, 1822 Will be presented, the Melo Dramatic Romance of the Hero of the North… after which, Mr. Cowell will sing the favourite Comic Song of Chit Chat & Repartee… To which will be added, for the 2d time in America, the grand Serious Ballet, in 3 acts, of The French Deserter… the piece concludes with A General Dance.  

This advertisement shows that the actual plays were hardly the only attraction, but rather, one event within an evening of entertainment. There were performers singing, dancing, and captivating the audience in multiple ways other than just the dramatic theater. The stage had become the vehicle for promoting talent. At a given performance, sprinkled between the acts, a song performed by Stephen Woolls might entertain the audience before the second act; Henrietta Osborne, a beautiful and accomplished actress and dancer, might dance a hornpipe while arousing the crowds as she took the stage as one of the earliest Burlesque queens.

86 “Theater,” no. 1 Murray Street, (New York: Printed by Benjamin Young, 1822), pp. 1 – 2. http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/ HistArchive/?p_product=ABEA&p_theme=abea&p_nbidx=U58J53JPMTI2 ODA3NDU1Ni4zNzQ6MToxNToxMjkuMTMzLjE5Mi4xNDE&p_action=doc&p_docnum=5&p_queryname=5&p_docref=v2:0F2B1FCB879B099B@ABEA-
10F453D044EBD3A0@2682-@1
The theater provided a forum for entertainment, but not just for stage plays, which did not appeal to everyone. Short yet compelling dances and other types of musical interludes designed to impress the audiences and keep them engaged were often woven into and between the acts of a performance. The combination of spoken drama, music, and dancing gave those seeking entertainment a truly well-rounded experience. Even before the American Revolution, America had become a dance-conscious country, and theatrical dancing grew to become central to an increasing sense of a patriotic society. As dance and theater became more popular, however, a heated debated arose between two factions: early supporters of theater who hoped to use it as a means of upholding the connection with “polite” British culture and those who rejected theater for religious purposes.

The supporters of many religious factions were united against theater and dance, taking issue with the culture that surrounded such activities. The early years of theater made the religious community anxious about the moral standards of people involved with theater and dance and the people who spent their time around the playhouses. This sentiment is captured by Sir John Hawkins, an English ship builder, navigator, and explorer, famous for being the first English slave-trader and as the designer of the faster, more modern ships that defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588. His statement about the dangerous effect of plays was included in a collection

of works, *Representing the Evils and Pernicious Effects of Stage Plays*, by Lindley Murray. Hawkins wrote, “a Play House, and the regions about it, are the very hot beds of vice; how else comes it to pass that no sooner is a Play house opened in any part of the Kingdom, than it becomes a Halo (or Circle) of Brothels.”

Lindley Murray, the author, editor, and compiler of this pamphlet, also observed the sinful undertones of stage plays. He wrote, “Those, then, who represent a passion, must be in some measure touched with it whilst they represent it… Thus, *plays* are, even in their nature, a school and an exercise of vice, since it is an art, in which one must necessarily excite in himself vicious passions… they have scarce anything in their minds but these follies.” Murray, speaking on behalf of his religious duty, explained that by acting, people are forced to experience a range of emotions, including, but not limited to, “Hatred, Anger, Ambition, Revenge… and Love” that are not sincere. This impure excitement of one’s emotions causes individuals to distance themselves from religion. They feel less connected to their emotions that should be reserved for connecting with God, and not expressed just for the pleasure of an audience.

In 1687, Increase Mather, a fiery Boston preacher, condemned theater as a “danger to the souls of men,” because it conflicted with the Puritan ideas of social identity: an individual’s moral character was known through his behavior.

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92 Lindley Murray, *Extracts from the Writings of Divers Eminent Authors of Different Religious Denominations; and at the Various Periods of Time, Representing the Evils and Pernicious Effects of Stage Plays, and other Amusements*, (Philadelphia: Joseph James in Chesnut-Street, 1789), pp. 4.

93 Ibid, 3.
individuals presented themselves under public scrutiny was extremely important; it is no wonder that the concept of acting in the theater was such a threatening notion to Mather, and to the greater Puritan society prevalent in New England.  

The early religious settlers of Puritan New England were not the only ones to be upset and threatened by the emerging theaters, the Players, and their followers. In Charleston, South Carolina, Reverend Oliver Hart published a sermon explaining why dancing consisted of sinful movements and impious actions. In his preface, Hart attributes the coming of dances, assemblies, Balls, and playhouses to an untimely fire that damaged much of the city early in 1778:

> It will hardly be credited, that the fire was scarce extinguished in Charlestown, before we had Balls, Assemblies, and Dances in every quarter: and even in some of these houses which miraculously escaped the flames. And who can believe that our youth are now taught to act plays publickly on the stage, while the theatre is crowded with spectators? Is it thus we requite the Lord for our Deliverance?  

Reverend Hart’s sermon explains that people danced and attended balls and assemblies too soon after the fire in Charlestown. He claims that before the fires were put out, people engaged in sinful acts and that this was no way to thank God for saving them from the fire. He explains that even though God gave them a sign to change their ways, the theaters were packed with crowds and spectators as soon as the fire diminished. His sermon is meant to appeal to the people participating in such

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95 Oliver Hart, *Dancing Exploded: A Sermon, Shewing the Unlawfulness, Sinfulness, and bad Consequences of Balls, Assemblies and Dances in General* (Delivered in Charlestown, South Carolina, March 22, 1778: Printed by David Bruce), pp. 3.
sinful activities and attending such superfluous events and to make them feel guilty about these forms of entertainment.

Although the elites supported theater, the religious communities often associated the dregs of society with the theater experience. The theater was entertainment available to even the poorest people, since a ticket for “The Pit” cost “5s” or less. It was this community that frightened the religious leaders; they feared moral deprivation for the less well-off masses who attended these performances rather than going to Church and spending time learning to better themselves through piety. The elites, however, were making money by providing these entertainments. As a response to this changing social dynamic, Reverend Hart gave a sermon on March 22, 1778 to inform his congregants about the nature of dancing. Hart knew he was up against an extremely influential and powerful group of people; he knew that by attacking dance, he would be risking upsetting the gentry of Charleston. Because dancing and theater were tightly interwoven with the notion of creating “polite culture,” a culture that imitated and replicated British elite culture, an attack on dance and theater became an attack on the gentry.

In his sermon, delivered on March 22, 1778, Hart said, “To oppose it [dance], will be to incur the censure of all the gay gentry; and, with them however, to forfeit all pretensions to polite breeding and good manners. I am willing to riske greater consequences than these, that I may maintain conscience void offence, towards God.

and towards man.” He acknowledges the risk he takes by attacking dance in his sermon, but he is more fearful of a greater consequence – losing God’s favor and not upholding the Church’s standards and will. He goes on to explain in his sermon, how learning to dance was not only a waste of time, but also a waste of money:

Can it with truth be said, that the time which is spent at balls, assemblies, and dances is redeemed? No such thing. It is squandered away – it is murdered – it is consumed on our lusts; and how our dancers will be able to answer to God, for all the time they have thus shamefully misimproved, another day will determine…. It [dancing] occasions an extravagant waste of money; with which great good might be done. After enough hath been thrown away upon a child, at the dancing school, to have educated two or three poor children… or cloath half a dozen orphan children.

According to Hart, the men and women who send their children to be schooled in dance and learn to perform or to observe theater are sinning against God and doing their children a disservice because their time should be spent glorifying God, as that is the chief goal of man: Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. I Cor. X. 3 1. Hart argues that if glorifying God is not the central aim in everything done on a daily basis, then that which one does is sinful.

In 1801, Reverend William Lyman, pastor of the Church in New London, Connecticut, printed his sermon titled, Modern Refinement: the art of dancing, as taught and practiced at the present day, considered in reference to its moral tendencies, in which he looks for some redeeming value of dance while adding his moral reservations towards the practice. Reverend William Lyman agreed with Hart’s sentiment. In his work, he notes as his first argument against dancing that it causes

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97 Oliver Hart, Dancing Exploded: A Sermon, Shewing the Unlawfulness, Sinfulness, and bad Consequences of Balls, Assemblies and Dances in General, (Delivered in Charlestown, South Carolina, March 22, 1778: Printed by David Bruce), pp. 9 – 10.
98 Ibid, pp. 15 – 16.
people to become less serious, causing individuals to lose their sense of the divine presence of God. He goes on to explain that religious thoughts “clog the way of enjoyment” by keeping God present in all activities one might participate in. Dance, he argues, pushes God out of people’s thoughts and hearts, making the act of dancing dangerous, as one’s thoughts can become completely impious and dulled towards God.\footnote{William Lyman, A.M., Modern Refinement: the art of dancing, as taught and practiced at the present day, considered in reference to its moral tendencies, (New London, Connecticut: Printed by Samuel Green, 1801), pp. 7.}

The religious community viewed this dance and theater-going culture as a threat. Hart’s published sermon, Dancing Exploded: A Sermon, Shewing the Unlawfulness, Sinfulness, and bad Consequences of Balls, Assemblies and Dances in General, is a four-point attempt to explain the follies of dancing. He acknowledges the Bible’s references to dance in his “scriptural definition” of dance: “Dancing… is expressive of the inward spiritual joy of the heart, which was commonly manifested by a comely motion of the body: --- attended with songs of praise to God, for some deliverance obtained, or mercy received.” Hart’s definition is important to understanding the Church’s position on dance in the eighteenth century. From Charleston to Puritan New England, the Church was not diametrically opposed to dancing. As Hart explained, in the Bible David danced before the ark, and Miriam danced after the Lord destroyed Pharaoh and his army; dancing was considered good and healthy when the activity was pure and well intentioned – dancing to praise God. Hart goes on to say, “Such kind of dancing was lawful and holy, and by no means to
be condemned.” 101 When performed according to the “scriptural definition,” dance was considered appropriate; this idea survived in the clerical psyche.

In his pamphlet, Moral Refinement, Reverend Lyman takes Reverend Hart’s arguments further. Lyman explains his perception of dance: “The exercise of dancing, I do not consider as, of all evils, the greatest: nor would I undertake to say that it is, in itself, a moral evil. It is the use or rather the abuse of this exercise which I mean to condemn.” 102 Lyman agrees with Hart that there is a time for dancing, and that dancing can be a good and virtuous exercise when practiced correctly.

In 1825, a Presbyterian clergyman and avid supporter of the revivalist tradition, 103 Lyman Beecher, wrote a response to a letter from a congregant of his Church who was concerned with the morality and appropriateness of dancing. Like Reverend Hart and Reverend Lyman, Beecher considered dancing sinful and dangerous to the population; yet it is important to note that Beecher’s piece is called, A Time to Dance. He explains that one may dance, but in a “scriptural manner at a scriptural time.” 104 The idea of dancing in a “scriptural manner” is important to understanding that the clergy did not condemn all dancing, nor was dancing out-right banned in most places. It was the manner in which people danced and the time at

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101 Oliver Hart, Dancing Exploded: A Sermon, Shewing the Unlawfulness, Sinfulness, and bad Consequences of Balls, Assemblies and Dances in General (Delivered in Charlestown, South Carolina, March 22, 1778: Printed by David Bruce), pp. 11, 12. For Biblical references see Sam. VI. 16 and Exod. Xv. 20, 21.
102 William Lyman, A.M., Modern Refinement: the art of dancing, as taught and practiced at the present day, considered in reference to its moral tendencies, (New London, Connecticut: Printed by Samuel Green, 1801), pp. 7.
which they danced that were controversial. Theatrical dancing did not fall into the category of “scriptural dancing.” The theater was not a church, and people were dancing and performing for the entertainment of others, not in praise of God.

Theater and dance were also popular in Puritan New England, where a surprisingly receptive community awaited the arrival of promoters of dance and theater. In the early-eighteenth century, a rising merchant class in Boston began to establish these institutions of “polite society.” Even in an environment known for its hostility towards such entertainments as dances, dancing schools, assemblies, and playhouses, these very expressions of British elite culture found a home in New England up until 1750. Theater was spurred forward by the royalization of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1690s. With the introduction of British royal officials to the social scene of Boston, these entertainments found an audience. \(^\text{105}\)

The success of theater and dance only persisted for the early part of the eighteenth century, as the religious elites remained very influential in the local governments of New England. Local theater companies survived marginally in Boston until 1750, when religious leaders unified to prohibit such activities. When the Murray-Kean acting company traveled to Boston in 1750, the hype and excitement of the city caused the religious elites to feel even more threatened by this entertainment. As a result of this threat, a law was passed prohibiting all theatrical activities in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. \(^\text{106}\) In effect, the Massachusetts General Court denied one


of Britain’s major cultural exports – theater. Because the merchants and the royal officials propagated and encouraged the theater industry, the early Congress of the United States passed anti-theatrical legislation as a way to distinguish themselves from their British predecessors. There was a general suspicion among legislators that the theater was a serious threat to economic development. As the merchants and royal officials shared the closest ties with the British (in affairs and by holding on to British cultural trends), the local and national governments did not support the theaters for the first two decades of independence.  

Some people, like John Hancock, believed that theater existed as a remaining connection to British culture and the ban lasted for about forty years, but people continued to attend theatrical performances and dance throughout Massachusetts. Following the death of Governor Hancock, the theater’s most avid opponent in 1793, the Massachusetts General Assembly lifted the bans on theater and dancing. Bans on dance and theater had not become widespread during this time period, and once the bans were lifted, theater continued to evolve in America and became something different from what it had been in England.

Although theater grew in popularity in the newly formed United States, it was extremely difficult to combat the religious communities’ accusations of questionable morality on the part of players, theater-goers, and dancers. In some cases dance

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masters created their own pamphlets, arguing for dance’s redeeming values. J. Williams (first name unknown) published such a pamphlet, emphasizing dance’s positive social and individual qualities. Williams was a dance master in Boston in 1818 when he published his twelve-page pamphlet called, *Youth’s Virtuous Guide*. Williams acknowledged the Church’s claims and stance against dancing as “sinful,” but he argues for dance’s redeeming values: “It [dancing] gives delight, and is no way pointed against good morals; and acquirements which give propriety of behavior not only in amusements, but in general occurrences of life are, in the highest degree, commendable.”\(^{109}\) He is an avid supporter of dance as a discipline and he promotes dance as a part of everyone’s education:

> While he is teaching his pupils in the pleasing harmony of motion, he neglects not to teach them the elements of all the moral, lovely and virtuous movements, which adds beauty and elegance to both mind and body.…
>
> A man who has paid no regard to gesture in any part of his education will find himself unable to act with freedom before new company. It is for the advancement and the pleasure which we receive in being agreeable to each other in ordinary life, that raises the desire for having dancing in its purity…”\(^{110}\)

Dance masters were not teaching the art of dancing as a means of achieving immorality or as a means of substitution for faith in God. Dance masters were teaching life lessons, good morals, and how to be comfortable and confident around other people. Williams believed that dancing was a manner of expressing freedom and pleasure, a chance to use one’s time productively to learn morality through the “harmony of motion,” not a waste of time and money, as Oliver Hart claimed.

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\(^{109}\) J. Williams, *Youth’s Virtuous Guide: A Treatise on Dancing, and on Various Other Matters which are Connected with that Accomplishment*, (Boston: Printed For J. Williams, 1818), pp. 3.

\(^{110}\) Ibid, 5 – 6.
The negative image of theater and dance, from the religious perspective, however, was not the only moving piece in the elaborate puzzle that was helping to establish a culture in the New World of British North America. Originally, the elite who supported the theater did so as a way to preserve their link to the elite British culture. As a result, activities such as dancing and theatrical performances became associated with leisurely, wasteful, and sinful practices that the British, and those closely tied to the British (merchants in particular) supported.

Through the medium of theatrical performance, dance became a more conventional and socially acceptable activity in America. Not only were the hornpipes and less refined dances of the time being performed on stage, but also more formal Country Dances, and even the occasional minuet, were performed for audiences during the productions of plays.\textsuperscript{111} Although dance had come to this country through the practice of English models, and within the English social structures, theater was changing the audience. The rising popularity of print culture made it possible for men like Charles Hulett to advertise for their dance school in newspapers within the advertisements for their theater companies and stage performances. This new exposure and ability to use the theater as a means of displaying the dances that had once been reserved for “polite society” promoted the learning of such dances to everyone. Very subtly, dance created a niche for itself within a growing American culture, and theater was the vehicle that brought dance to

\textsuperscript{111} Hugh F. Rankin, \textit{The Theater in Colonial America}, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 144. Ranklin describes Osborn performing a minuet on stage. He goes on to give examples of other popular dancers of the time possible performing hornpipes. A few times he mentions that ballet numbers were popular entertainment between acts as well.
the general public. It did not take long for theatrical entertainment to become popular among inhabitants of the colonies from all different social and financial backgrounds.\(^{112}\)

The dances being performed had not changed. The same manuals circulated, and dance masters taught the same steps. The context in which these dances were received and performed, however, had changed. A new performance culture emerged in America that was different from England’s. Audiences viewed dance through a critical lens, but they critiqued the entertainment, not the dancer’s societal worth. British dance prioritized etiquette, while American dance became about the performance value. American dance became an activity that everyone could take part in, either physically or as a spectator. It was a democratic art form.

Through spectatorship, the audience learned to appreciate dance; people were not judging the dancers as they did at balls and at dinner parties in Britain, but rather, they were enjoying the spectacle of the performance as a whole. Dance in the theater paved the way for dance as a respectable discipline of study, critiqued and valued for its intricacies, not for the manners and decorum that overwhelmed so many young men and women at formal events in England between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

In contrast to this pressure on individuals in the upper classes of English society when they danced, American culture revolved around a more democratic and inclusive environment. British elites understood their identity because it was defined by their society – people were expected to live up to the social etiquette standards

already in place; this process caused stress. In America, social classes were far less
determined and class identity barely existed. People did not feel stress to the same
degree when learning dance steps, nor were they expected to adhere to detailed
etiquette. Americans purely focused on dancing. Yet this freedom may have caused
some sort of anxiety. Although early Americans retained freedom to define
themselves, the lack of a specific social definition may have been unsettling. Some
people emphasized religion to fill this void, but for many, theater served as a
mechanism to find representations of American identity on the stage. Theatrical
performances, which included dance segments during, before, and after the stage
plays, provided the general public with a way of accessing dance. Without a rigid
class structure in place, and with theater rapidly becoming available to everyone,
dance became a central part of the growing commercialized culture in America.

In America, the theater and dance played an integral role in the struggle to
represent a national identity. Even more difficult than just presenting these
representations was how to share them with an audience that was made up of
individuals who may not have known where their own identity stood. English-based,
institutionalized theatrical forms adjusted and molded to new American ways of life,
but this was by no means an easy transition. Particularly in the post-Revolutionary
years, theater provided audiences with a validation of their own solidarity as a
community and as a nation. American theater was an imitation of the better-known
British model. The experience of going to the theater became in itself patriotic and American.¹¹³

Dance was an art form that people recognized; dance was an art form with which people identified, as can be seen in the excess of advertisements for dance numbers in stage plays (see Figures 1 and 3). Dance had become part of the way people were beginning to understand themselves. Watching a man on stage perform a “comic dance,” or seeing the cast of a show perform a country-dance allowed people to connect what they were seeing on stage with what was going on in daily life. Rather than “promoting” brothels and sinning against God, dance eventually became an accepted means of expression and a respected skill within the entertainment and performance culture in America.

Figure 1: Advertisements for Richard III and Romeo and Juliet as seen in the New York Mercury Newspaper in 1762. The advertisement promotes the plays as well as dances and songs performed between the acts and as a part of the shows.\footnote{Advertisements for King Richard III and Romeo and Juliet, 1762 in \textit{Annals of the New York Stage, vol. 1: To 1798}, (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1927), pp. 496. \url{http://asp6new.alexanderstreet.com/atho/atho.result.epages.aspx?code=S10017140-D000005.001}}
Figure 2: An 1820 advertisement for a theatrical production of *The Queen and the Mogul* in London. This advertisement is very straightforward. There are no references to any additional performances or interludes. It simply advertises for the stage play.\footnote{\textit{"The Queen and the Mogul,"} \textit{Bristol Selected Pamphlets}, (London: W. Benbow, 1820). \url{http://www.jstor.org/stable/60228828}}
Figure. 3: 1822 advertisement for a theatrical event during which there would be multiple performances of various kinds: stage play of “Hero of the North,” songs by “Dulce Domum,” and the serious ballet of “The French Deserted.” These entertainments were all to be followed by a General Dance and more singing.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{116}“Theater,” no. 1 Murray Street, (New York: Printed by Benjamin Young, 1822), pp. 1 – 2. \url{http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive/}
Conclusion

In early America, dance practices met with disapproval and caused confrontation. Throughout the United States, official prohibitions of theater and dance ended in the nineteenth century, as dance became part of the national culture. Locally, however, some areas struggled to progress, and some still continue to struggle with the religious morality and appropriateness of dance within mainstream American culture. In the 1984 film Footloose, a small religious community is confronted with the issue of dance as a form of expression that corrupts morals and causes young people to act lasciviously towards the opposite sex, suggesting that even in American towns in the twentieth century, leaders in religious communities struggled to maintain what they perceive as “moral behavior” and “appropriate activities.” As Oliver Hart defined it in 1778, “scriptural dancing” became harder and harder to preserve as American consumer culture and American popular culture pressed secular ideas about dancing and theater into the mainstream.

In Early America dance was an activity that was socially inclusive. People were able to see dancing on the American stage, and that accessibility allowed dance to reach people on a daily basis. Dance culture, as a popular entertainment, became, and remains today, one of the most democratizing functions of our society. Even though dance initially struggled to place itself within an environment that stressed its religious and secular communities simultaneously, it remained persistent and pervasive in a national American culture. Societies differed from colony to colony, but through these local communities, a broader culture focused on performance, and the mass consumption of dance as an appreciated art form, grew and evolved. The
theater reflected social norms as a presentation, and dance played a central role in that performance. Dance was a part of public life in a way that allowed everyone in a community to participate.

Within this framework, dance was able to thrive. It became a major part of the American consciousness. Not only were some of the more elite families, like the one Philip Fithian taught in Virginia, continuing to send their children to dancing schools to learn to become members of “polite society,” but people from all walks of life were being exposed to the different types of dance that had come over from the British Isles. Dances ranging from hornpipes, to jigs, to country-dances, to cotillions, and even to minuets, were performed on stage and became an integral part of American performance culture. Although the dances themselves never changed in a significant way, the context in which they were performed and the reception they received changed as this American performance culture came to fruition.

Because dance was not a part of elite social identity in America, as it was in England, a different means to accessing the public was necessary, and theater provided this avenue. Dance in the theater was not an American revelation; dance had been in British dramas too, but the emphasis on dance is what made a difference on the American stage. Dances were not simply performed within the context of plays, but rather they were interspersed between acts and after the actual productions of the stage plays. Theater operators promoted these dances heavily, which advertised the work of the dance masters and performers. In this way, the theater provided the public a way to observe dancing, to learn how to perform dance steps, and at the same time, a means for the dance masters to advertise their trade. The lack of rigid social
divisions allowed these dances to become part of everyday life in America. Through this commercialization of dance as a part of theatrical performances, dance cemented its pervasive influence on American culture.

Although dancing varied by region, it created a way for people to negotiate and to communicate with different communities. Philip Fithian, the tutor from New Jersey, observed dance and dance culture in Virginia. Although the community he grew up in differed greatly from that of Northern Neck, Virginia, he saw dance and related to it and commented on it in a way that did not separate his own upbringing from this new environment, but rather embraced it as part of a greater cultural trend. This trend is an example of a growing American culture, and shows people struggling with their own sense of identity as unique and independent within this culture. Everyone danced, or at least recognized dance as a cohesive cultural norm within their society. The universal consistency of dance provided metaphorical social glue, an important tool in the development of the United States of America.

Performance is a means of expression. In the various communities in the British Isles and in early America, performance culture held different meanings. According to the British model, life was a theater, and every day people performed in the parlor, while eating lunch, and at formal events with their peers. In Britain, dance was associated with the pressure of proving and maintaining one’s worth and social status. When this culture, built on etiquette and daily performance, was transplanted to America, the same rules that once applied could no longer be enforced. Life as a theater was no longer applicable with so many fewer people observing and critiquing one’s every move. In America, the British model became reversed: in most cases, life
was no longer a performance, and Americans were freed of the pressure to “perform” socially. Instead, theatrical performances reflected daily life. The aristocratic model became less applicable because, in early America, the limited audience of the British class-based performance culture expanded through the theater to include the masses.

This shift in the locus from private to public spheres is what made this emerging culture so unique. Dance was an authentic performance medium that helped to bridge the gap of this transition. In early American society, dance’s significance was no longer constricted to the social etiquette and the refined mannerisms that distinguished the dance of their British predecessors. Advocates of dance in America created an environment that changed how the audience received dance. As cultural agents, dance masters and dance manuals brought dance into a society that could not support dance in the same way that British society did. As a result, dance masters looked to the stage. Through this medium, dance became a product of mass consumer culture. Theater operators advertised for dance performances within their larger productions, making dance accessible to more people. As people were exposed to dance on a larger scale than ever before, regional distinctions crumbled as a more universally appreciated art form became apparent and recognizable. As the United States of America came into existence, so too did performances of dance create a medium capable of expressing the democratic values of the new Republic. Dance existed in a public sphere, accessible and recognizable to the new citizens of America.

The question of identity in Early America has no definite answer. There is no set list of values and standards that make up an American identity, but rather this
period is defined by many factors working together, against one another, and independently, as a new culture emerged and grew in America. It is even hard to argue that dance in America was unique, as dance was clearly derived and in most cases an imitation of European styles. What can be said is that dance existed at this time period and it was recognizable to the inhabitants of America. Dance became part of a growing culture in America and helped to connect people from various regions of a very large, diverse community with a common vocabulary and respect for an art form and entertainment.

Dance was deeply engrained in American society as this young country came into its own. From the preservation of dance forms from England to the promotion of dance on the American stage, dance found its place in early America as an art form, as entertainment, and as a social event. A common vocabulary to discuss dance provided a nation-wide appreciation for an art form that exceeded regional distinctions. Dance provided a medium of expression for Americans, a means of identifying with not only the people in their immediate communities, but also with the emerging United States of America.
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