Colonial Sayings Still In Use Today

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Big Wigs, Old Goats and Loose Women:

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The Rule of Thumb/ Earmarked

Women were considered the actually property of men upon their marriage. By Law, the husband was allowed to beat his wife with anything smaller than his thumb. If she could prove that she was beaten with something larger than his thumb then she could haul him into Court and press charges. The man might be sentenced to a stay in the Stocks or the Pillory and to have his ear nailed to the Pillory post. Upon release usually a piece of the ear was left behind and he was "ear marked" for life.

Sleep Tight, Don't Let the Bed Bugs Bite

Most beds of the 17th and 18th Century were mattresses stuffed with anything and everything, including more than a few creepy, crawly things. These sat atop a frame of "springs" made of woven ropes. Over time the ropes would sag and stretch from body weight, making the bed very uncomfortable. Use of a rope jack was needed to tighten the ropes back to firm support.

Pulling Your Leg

One popular meaning originated during public hangings, when a condemned person was still alive after the prop was pulled out from under them. The Jailor or hangman would have to reach up and pulled the prisoner's leg straight down to finish breaking the neck.

Big Wig

Wigs were costly and the bigger the wig, in either height or length below the shoulders determined the wealth and status of a person. The number of layers also contributed to status.

Flip Your Wig

Not much but luck and a very tight fit held a wig in place. So tight in fact that is was referred to as "the pain of security". If your headache went away then most likely you "flipped your wig". When bowing before a lady you put your "best foot forward" and bowed with a straight back and your head held high.

Pull the wool over one's eyes

Wool was another term for hair and most likely also used in the making of wigs. We thereby get the expression; "pull the wool over your eyes" to mean pulling a gentlemen's wig down over his face to either rob his pocketbook or just to tease him.

Dyed in the Wool

An English phrase dating back to the 16th Century when England depended heavily on wool as a main industry. Any yarn that was dyed while it was still wool would retain the color more firmly.

Raining Cats and Dogs

Originally the term suggested a downpour that rained "Dogs and Polecats". Such a torrential storm was usually accompanied by thunder and lighting, alluring to a cat and dog fighting. Also a holdover from a more ancient times when animals were believed to hold mystical powers. Dogs were thought to represent wind and cat the rain.

Old Goat / To Get Your Goat

Wigs in the 18th Century came in hundreds of styles and were made from almost as many different materials. Top of the line products were made of human hair. Further down the scale to suit one's pocketbook, we get to goat hair which did not need to be powdered to get the fashionable white color desired. Of course the older the goat the whiter the hair for wigs and one could be called an "old goat". If a person steals your wig then they have "got your goat".

Putting on the Dog

Nothing was thrown away in Colonial times, so even the hide of a dead dog might be recycled into a fine pair of shoes. Although most shoes were made from cow/calf/steer etc... shoes made from dog leather were more soft and supple. When those shoes became uncomfortable you would complain about how "your dogs were killing you".

?Til the Cows Came Home

Applied in the 1740s to refer to a sluggard who did not rise from his bed before the evening milking of the cows, as in; "You are so lazy you lay abed ?til the cows came home".

To Go Whole Hog

A "hog" referred to a Shilling in the 17th Century in England and represented a small extravagance when one spent a whole Shilling on an item. Twenty Shillings equaled one Pound. The average Journeyman / craftsman only earned around 25 Pounds Sterling a year, so you can see that's a large percentage of an annual salary.

To Go the Whole Nine Yards

Cloth shipped to the Colonies was packaged in bolts containing nine yards of fabric. Using the "whole nine yards" was a sign of extravagance.

Lock, Stock and Barrel / Half Cocked

The three major parts of a flintlock musket necessary to fire the weapon. You were ready to go if you had everything "lock, stock and barrel". When operating a musket you must place the safety in the half cocked position before proceeding on to the other steps of priming, loading and firing the weapon. The gun will not go off in the Half Cocked position. A "flash in the pan" occurred when the priming charge was ignited in the pan but the main charge in the barrel did not discharge the round.

Getting Up on the Wrong Side of the Bed

Colonials were very superstitious to the point of believing that everything BAD collected on the left side of the human body all GOOD resided on the right side. Smart Tavern-keepers pushed all beds to the left wall so folks could not possibly get out of bed on the wrong side.

Passing the Bar / Taking the Stand

Only Attorneys and Judges were allowed to pass beyond the barred railing ("the bar") to reach the judicial area in a Colonial Court of Law. Any person who was called upon to speak; witnesses, defendants, plaintiffs always stood to their feet to testify, hence they were "taking a stand".

Face the Music

Referred to the soldier who was dishonorably discharged from service, such a person was "drummed out" of camp facing the music.

To Rake Over the Coals

In the 16th Century, one who was accused of heresy, denouncing ones faith or witchcraft was either burned at the stake or literally dragged over hot coals. In the 18th Century, one raked hot coals from the fireplace out onto the hearth to make a controllable coal fire for cooking.

Turning the Tables

A table board would be brought out from a corner and placed on top of a barrel or chair to save floor space. In payment for lodging, the table board would be turned over from the crumby, dirty, crusted side to the shiny clean side.

Chairman

In most Colonial families furniture was scarce, so when a family actually owned a chair, the head of the household was treated to the honor of occupying the valuable piece at the table.

Know the ropes

Originally a nautical term denoting a person who was extremely familiar with the vast array of different ropes and lines attached to the sails and rigging of a sailing vessel. Such a person literally "knew the ropes".

A Big Shot

This phrase comes from the English custom to shoot off big guns or cannons and to illuminate the windows of the town whenever a VIP arrived.

Bar and Grill

Taverns were equipped with a wooden grill above the bar in the taproom that would be pulled down to signal the cessation of drinking or to provide protection for the bartender when customers had too much to drink and became rowdy to the point of throwing things.

Mind Your P's and Q's

Two possible histories for this term: (1) Tavern Keepers and Tavern Wenches (female servers) reminded their customers to watch their Pints and Quarts of Ale when they judged that they might have had too much to drink.

(2) Printers (a profession known for taking in the drink) would instruct their Journeymen and Apprentices to watch the lowercase pieces of type, especially the p's and q's.

Here's Lookin' at ya

Drinking mugs in Taverns were likely to have a glass bottom so that when the drinker downed a mug of ale he could raise it in the air to survey the room through the bottom, thus determining friend and foes easily without directly raising suspicion.

Take you Down a Peg or Two

Some large Tavern mugs would have a series of five to eight protruding pegs evenly spaced inside. The usual Tavern drinking custom was the pass the mug with your friends and each would drink down to the next peg and pass it along. There was always a braggart around however who challenged a companion that he could "take you down a peg or two". He would then proceed to down the rest of the mug of ale with great flourish.

Caught with Your Hand in the Till

Taverns rigged up a contrivance for Pence and Shillings paid at the Tavern bar that would catch the hand of anyone who chose to try and rob the wooden till. The person suffered a sharp blow that would leave them "red handed".

Not Playing with a Full Deck

Card players had to pay a special tariff (tax) for the Ace in the 18th Century to obtain a full deck of cards. You'd be crazy to try and play a game without a full deck!

In the Nick of Time

This oft-used expression in centuries old and originally was a short version; "in the nick". A nick is a sharp notch or groove made with a sharp knife such as when a "v" notch is made in a stick. In the 18th Century was added the latter part; "of time" to express precision and accuracy when measuring time. Many colonials placed a strategic "noon nick" in the center of their door jam and used this as a sundial.

King Pin

In the 18th Century game of Skittles, (bowling) the lead pin was painted with a likeness of King George III and players to vent their revolutionary anger on the head or King Pin.

Straight Laced or Loose Women

To be known as a "loose woman" in the 18th Century meant that one went out in public not wearing her stays or French corset that was stiffened with wooden or whalebone stays. To wear your stays meant

that you were "straight laced" into the cone-shaped corset to give the erect posture necessary to good breeding and the illusion of a tiny waist.

Left Holding the Bag

Term used to pertain to a slave or servant who ran away taking the Master's cash and leaving him with an empty pocketbook. A "pocketbook" was used by men early on for it literally was a leather book used to slip money and important papers into, folded over and tied, then slipped into a gentlemen's enormous pocket of his coat or waistcoat.

Getting the Cold Shoulder

Guests who had overstayed their welcome were usually served a cold shoulder of meat when the host wished them to depart, thus signaling the end of his usual hospitality of rounds and rounds of many piping hot courses. It should be noted that sometimes guests came to stay many days at a time and were welcomed at the remote farms for they brought news, gossip and vital social links.

From Soup to Nuts

The first course of an elegant colonial meal usually began with cream of turtle soup or some other equally rich soup. This was followed by selected meat and vegetable dishes, followed by exquisite desserts. Last served were the fruit and nuts imported from the West Indies.

Taken from the booklet: Big Wigs, Old Goats and Loose Women

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