

# SEXUALITY IN NORTH AMERICA

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### NORTH AMERICA IN THE COLONIAL ERA

The entry of French and British colonists into North America bore many similarities to what was happening to the south, particularly in terms of moral critique of native practices. But interbreeding was more limited in the north, in part because the indigenous populations were smaller, and while there were undoubtedly cases of sexual exploitation the longer-term legacy was limited. At the same time, along the Atlantic coast, British colonists established communities that replicated many of the patterns that had been taking shape in Western Europe, including a version of the European-style family and an intense Protestant sexual morality.

**Indigenous contacts.** Among some early colonists, particularly trappers and traders who moved into the interior, liaisons with native women were common. One Englishman wrote that “the English traders are seldom without an Indian female for his Bedfellow, alleging these Reasons as sufficient...First...that it preserve their Friendship with the Heathens...and this Correspondence makes them learn the Indian Tongue much the sooner.” A French missionary lamented that his colleagues who had relations with local women “all became libertines”, regarding indigenous women as fair game.

Some of these relationships were surely forced. But some indigenous leaders gave women as gifts to the intruders. Some women simply complied out of hopes for gain or from genuine attachment. But many native Americans were truly shocked by Europeans’ aggressive sexual behavior, which made European moralism seem all the more strange and inappropriate. Again, these complexities closely resembled those in Latin America, with the key difference that the numbers of Europeans and indigenous people involved was much smaller, and the demographic impact therefore far less great.

**Critiques.** Moral condemnations also paralleled patterns to the south. French missionaries played a leading role in attacking indigenous acceptance of a “Third Sex”, again assuming that this was simply homosexuality, and deeply wrong. Styles of dress were a problem, though in colder latitudes the issue loomed less large. Other commentators deplored what they saw as widespread premarital sex among the indigenous peoples: “a most evil custom among the savages.” Perceived differences in sexual behavior contributed to the general sense of native peoples as inferior and suspect.

In the British colonies, however, missionary interest and activity were far lower than in Latin America (or French Canada), so active efforts to interfere with indigenous customs loomed less large. In many cases, the populations tried to avoid too much contact. Interference would become a greater issue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when United States and Canadian authorities took it upon themselves to impose “civilization” on native peoples through compulsory schooling and other means.

**Colonial families.** Along with colonial-indigenous interaction, the formation of larger communities of Europeans in the English colonies along the Atlantic coast began to import sexual values and behaviors that set the basis for a well-defined sexual culture that would generate a significant legacy for American and Canadian culture going forward. Here was where the importation of patterns established across the ocean had the most lasting impact in North America.

In the first place, the colonists assumed that the family patterns in which they had grown up continued to make sense in the new locale. The European-style family was widely reproduced, with one modification: marriage age, particularly for women, could be lowered a bit (probably to an average of about 23), simply because, with more abundant land, the need to guard against too many children was less pressing. And indeed, American families into the later 18<sup>th</sup> century had somewhat higher birth rates than their European counterparts, and the emphasis on the importance of reproduction certainly ran high – among other things because, in the new society, children’s labor was so important. Only in the later 18<sup>th</sup> century, with greater crowding along the seaboard, was this pattern reconsidered.

**American Protestantism.** Protestant sexual morality was the other leading import. New England Puritans, bringing over the British version of Calvinism, issued the most severe warnings about sexual morality, that would ultimately resonate well beyond their region. To be sure, Puritan severity has often been exaggerated: like Protestants generally, Puritans had no compunctions about sexual pleasure within marriage, at least in moderation and usually in association with efforts at reproduction. It is also important to note that other coastal regions, less touched by Puritanism, developed other approaches. Southern planters, mainly Anglican, felt freer to indulge in sex, at least with women below their social class – including enslaved people. The scion of one leading Virginia family thus wrote in his diary that he had abused a maid but that, after brief regret, he forgave himself.

**Punishments.** Puritans unquestionably established vigorous efforts to regulate sex outside of marriage, combining dire moral preachments with legal penalties – most obviously for adultery, but also premarital sex and other acts. Adulterers could be placed in stocks for public shaming, and required to wear an identifying scarlet letter for some time (A for adulterer, more commonly F for fornicator), to denote their offense. But young people were also urged to keep their impulses in check. Courting couples were closely watched, and though for convenience they might sleep together when visiting, they were supposed to remain fully clothed, with the notorious “bundling board” placed between them to assure continence.

**Behaviors.** Along with striking rules and penalties, the noteworthy aspect of the Puritan hold was the infrequency with which penalties had to be levied. Of course in some cases this surely reflected successful concealment; but community members kept a careful eye on each other, so in all probability the low level reflected widespread self-discipline and compliance. This, after all, was what shame was for, to prevent more than to punish. Thus imposition of the dreaded adultery letter was actually quite rare.

Few punishments were levied for homosexuality, suggesting perhaps a level of informal tolerance for discreet behavior. Bestiality was another matter. In 1677 a Massachusetts man was executed for having sex with a horse, and there were scattered other examples. On a milder note, in 1660 one Samuel Stearns of Cambridge, Massachusetts, was charged because he “had Sarah Bronson on his lap and did kiss her,” though he was later released. Overall, the big deterrent was shaming (directed particularly but not exclusively at women both before and during marriage), and it was probably effective in most cases.

Puritanism also encouraged a fairly restrained public culture, beginning with deliberately somber dress. While informal materials about sex did circulate, the overall tone was controlled.

**Validity of desire.** Again, however, Puritanism was open to the importance of sex and passion within marriage; the most extreme stereotypes are off the mark. They spoke of a “duty to desire”, and while this certainly included the importance of reproduction it extended to satisfaction as well. Some people in New England were actually censured by their church for having deprived their partners of sex for three months or more. And even some of the sternest leaders could write love letters to their wives with phrases like “being filled with the joy of thy love” (John Winthrop, 1618). As in Europe in the same early modern period, the pattern – in terms both of values and behaviors – was complex.

Finally, during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, some Americans began to participate in the same kind of sexual revolution that was occurring in Europe. In a society that was becoming more urban and commercial, some of the old controls loosened, and some young people began to indulge in sex at a somewhat earlier age, and in advance of marriage.

*Study questions:*

1. What were some of the common criticisms of native American sexual habits?
2. Why might indigenous women partner with European colonists?
3. What were the differences between sexual patterns in the Atlantic colonies from those in Western Europe?
4. Why could shaming prove widely effective?
5. What were the main differences, in sexual patterns, between most of North America and Latin America during the colonial period?

*Further reading:*

*Sexual Revolution in Early America.* By Richard Godbeer (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

*Intimate Matters: a history of sexuality in America,* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. By John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

*The Protestant Temperament: patterns of child-rearing, religious experience and the self in early America.* By Philip Greven (University of Chicago Press, 1977).