



Courtship in 18th and 19th Century America

No texting, no social media? What was guy or girl to do?

By Sherry Shindelar



Courtship vs. dating:

Marriage is the end goal of courtship. The man and woman are seriously considering each other as potential life time partners, and it is anticipated that a proposal will eventually follow vs. dating which is spending time with someone who is a romantic or sexual interest.

Could you court whomever you wanted as long as they agreed?

The parents had the legal responsibility to decide who their children could court and marry. As a matter of fact, a young man could be sued for courting a young lady without her father's permission.⁴

During early colonial times, laws in New England gave parents "the care and power...for the disposing of their Children in Marriage."¹

Charm and good character often weren't enough to procure the lady's company in and of themselves. A man needed to prove he had means, a way to support a wife, before he could be considered worthy to court a daughter. The higher up the social ladder the family was, the more money and status came into play in the negotiations.



Parental power to determine their children's spouses began to wane prior to the American Revolution. During the mid to late 18th century, young men and women advocated for the right to make their own courtship and marital decisions. Ministers agreed. The laws began to change.

By 1800, most young people were making their own choices regarding who to pursue as a potential life-long partner.⁶

How you could tell if he or she was the one?

In the second half of the 18th century, affection and friendship were considered to be the best foundation for building a loving courtship and marriage. According to a 1779 treatise, "mutual esteem and friendship" were the building blocks of a successful marriage.¹

The colonials viewed romance as frivolous, immature, and a cheap imitation of real love.¹

Novel reading was considered dangerous, especially for women. It might lead them to acting upon their feelings and practicing their wiles upon men.¹

But romance was gaining ground in the last part of the 18th century.



As the 19th century developed, romantic love wove its way into the Victorian worldview. The goal of 19th century romantic love was to share one's true self with one special person. The revelation of one's self to another was the foundation and measure of one's love.

A woman and man's world were no longer centered around agriculture. More and more, men went into the work world, and women stayed in the confines of the home. Two separate spheres developed: the male living in the world, and the female (Womanhood). The woman was to be family. It was believed that she could



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Romantic love was considered to be the one force which could permeate the spheres and unite the hearts and open the minds of a man and woman with each other.

On the Road to Courtship: Making an Acquaintance

In the 18th century, the couples had often seen or known each other for years as neighbors, or part of the same village, or sitting close to each other at the meeting house, etc.

In the 19th century in middle and upper class circles, a man couldn't just go up and start a conversation with a woman he didn't know or ask her to dance. If he was interested in making her acquaintance, he needed to seek a formal introduction from a mutual societal connection.²

Men had complete control over the request to court and over the proposal. A woman had to wait to be asked. It was consider improper for a lady to pursue a man or to openly seek an introduction. She should keep her love/attraction hidden until he openly declared his affection/love for her.

What made a man or woman a good catch?

What qualities should a gentleman look for in a lady? According to Ann Haddad, historian of the Merchant's House Museum, men in the Victorian-age were advised to pursue a lady: "who was kind, patient, benevolent, peaceful, and charitable, and who enjoyed home-centered pleasures."²

Ladies were encouraged to only accept the attentions of a gentleman who showed the "ability to speak with ease, respect, and courtesy to all; a neat appearance; excellent manners and deference to all women; and his readiness to honor and defend the opposite sex."²

According to *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony*, a man should flee from a woman who: "Has the heartless buzzing of a flirt; Gives smiles to all and a heart to none; An uneven temper; Is fond of dress and eager for admiration; Is ecstatic in trifles, nonsense, and frivolities; Is weak in her duties; Is petulant, saucy, or insolent; If the holiness of religion doesn't hover like a sanctifying dove ever over her head; Is prideful, boastful, vane, or sharp rather than quiet; Gaudy."³

But *The Etiquette of Courtship and Matrimony* contained its share of warnings for the would-be bride, as well. They were cautioned to beware of a man: "Who keeps irregular hours; His studies do not form the subject of his conversation as bearing on his future prospects; Shows disrespect of any age; Laughs at things sacred; Absences himself from regular church attendance; Shows an inclination to expensive pleasures, or to low and vulgar amusements; Betrays a desire for enjoyments beyond his means or reach; Makes his dress a study; Betrays a continuous frivolity of mind."³



Let the courting commence: What to do next?

Most Unusual 18th Century Courtship Practice: Bundling. A courting couple, with parental permission, would spend a night in the same bed, at the young woman's family home. The couple was usually placed in a bundling sack.

One source describes the sack like a large "sleeping bag with a seam down the middle,"⁵ and another source says that the sacks were securely tied around the waist or neck of each participant. The sacks were often used in conjunction with a bundling board placed down the middle of the bed. (Even John Adams seemed to support the practice in an essay written during his courting days.¹) (One can wonder if this practice contributed to the increased number of weddings that took place after conception in the mid to late 18th century.)

By the late 18th century and into the 19th, couples could go to picnics, dances, church, sing-alongs, visit family and friends, go riding or walking, play parlor games, play the piano, or just visit. The young woman's parlor was the center point of many of the activities. Some couples were continually under the eyes of a chaperone, but other couples, according to diaries and letters of the time, managed to have a significant amount of alone time, including late hours in the family parlor.





Letter writing was a fundamental element in 19th century romance. Some couples wrote two or three letters a day, and many of the recipients lived for the mail. Letters were intimate missives. As the relationship developed, the emotion and self-revelation grew from a trickle to a well-spring.

Private conversations with his beloved, especially in letters, were the one place a Victorian man was permitted to share his heart completely and to fully express his emotions.⁶

According to Karen Lystra in *Searching the Heart*, romantic love “created a mutual identification between women and men that was so intense that lovers repeatedly claimed to have incorporated a part of their partner’s inner self

lovers repeatedly claimed to have incorporated a part of their partner’s inner self.”⁶

Another essential aspects to court-faults. Victorian letter writers went to great pains to describe each fault they believed they possessed and the reasons why they might not be worthy of their lover. The letter writer hoped for and usually received strong reassurance that the faults were minor or non-existent and far outweighed by many positive attributes and had no power to diminish the love of the other.



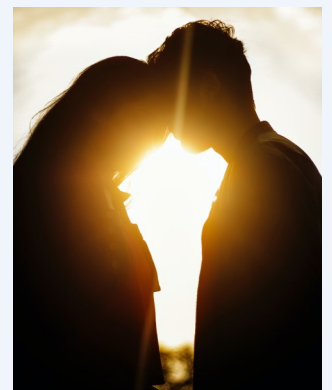
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Another key factor in 19th century courtship was the “test.” Women would construct obstacles to the relationship, and the man would need to overcome them if his suit was to continue. A lady might claim that her beau didn’t really love her, or that he was interested in other women, or that she wasn’t worthy of him, or maybe that she wasn’t convinced that he could support her, or her family didn’t approve of him, etc. Often, the end result of these tests and their successful completion was to draw the couple closer together.

In the case of John Marqui, a Union soldier, and Neeta Haile, a Southern lady with Northern sympathies, her letters encouraged him to go find another woman to fall I love with in Memphis where he was stationed. He reassured her that she was the only one for him. A couple years later, she broke off the relationship when she hadn’t received letters from him for a while. He fought with his pen to reassure her of his undying love, and eventually won her as his wife.⁵

And unlike Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, most 19th century courting couples in America ventured beyond hand-holding. Their letters are filled with the longing to kiss, cuddle, and be held.

Mary Butterfield wrote to her fiancé Champion Chase: “In fancy, my arms have been around you and myself clasped to that dear ‘home’ of mine your own loving heart, and I have kissed you again and again and felt your cheek resting against mine and your fond embrace so vividly that I could scarce believe it was not real.”¹



19th Century Lakota Courtship Ritual:

The young man would have his sister make a courting blanket for him, and he'd carry it on his arm to the tepee of the young woman, but not before he'd donned his best clothes, had his hair groomed, and painted his face with vermillion.

If she accepted his attentions, he'd wrap the blanket around them, and the couple would find a quiet place to enjoy each other's company. Some young men, also, brought along a courting flute to help with the wooing.⁷



Cherokee Courtship:

If the young man was interested in a young woman, he'd send one of his female relatives to speak with the girl's mother. If the mother gave her permission, his next step was to prepare a meal and leave at the girl's doorway. If she cooked it and invited him to eat it, his courtship was accepted. If she left it untouched outside the door, he needed to cast his glance elsewhere.⁷

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