

Fact or Fiction

Indicate to the right of each statement below which you believe to be fact or fiction.



1. Needlework fire screens were put between a woman and the fireplace to prevent the heat from melting her wax makeup. Fact Fiction
2. A nice silver item made during the colonial period and stamped “coin” would have been made from melting down silver coins. Fact Fiction
3. Beds were shorter in those days because people were shorter. Fact Fiction



4. When men smoked, they often shared the same white clay pipe. For sanitary reasons, they would break off the tip of the long stem before passing on the pipe. Fact Fiction
5. Houses didn't have closets in colonial days because people wanted to avoid paying the closet tax. Fact Fiction
6. Men posed with one hand inside their vest to save money because portrait painters gave a discount if they didn't have to paint fingers which are difficult to paint correctly. Fact Fiction



7. Some pieces of furniture produced in the late 1700s and early 1800s have doors with thirteen panes of glass to represent the original thirteen states. Fact Fiction
8. Burning to death from their long petticoats' catching fire was the second leading cause of death for colonial-era women; childbirth was the first. Fact Fiction



9. The term “Spooning” comes from the 18th-century when young men would whittle spoons to keep their hands occupied while courting. The gesture subtly indicated intentions toward marriage. Fact Fiction

10. The colonists were so religious that they put HL hinges on their doors, which stood for Holy Lord Fact Fiction

11. The term “Sleep tight” goes back to rope beds that needed to be tightened with a special tool. Fact Fiction



12. From the era of the ancient Greeks to the 18th century, pineapples have been a symbol of hospitality, which is why they were frequently served to guests at meals and used as a decorative motif. Fact Fiction

13. Hat makers often appeared to be driven to insanity from making hats. Fact Fiction

Answers to Fact or Fiction

- 1. Fire screens were NOT put between a woman and the fireplace to prevent the heat from melting her wax makeup.** Colonial American women wore little or no makeup. An examination of eighteenth-century recipes for skin care reveals a few concoctions, but these are more skin treatment, intended to be applied and washed off. None of them call for wax. Studies of inventories—lists of household possessions made after a person’s death for legal purposes—show few fire screens in American homes. An expensive accessory, they often were decorated with needlework and placed near the fire for use by men and women to shield them from direct heat, but no one’s face was in danger of melting.
- 2. A nice silver item made during the colonial period and stamped “coin” was an indication of the silver content.** Occasionally coins were used as a source for silver. Curators point to the example of Washington having a dozen small silver camp cups made from sixteen silver dollars. But the word “coin” stamped onto silver objects usually means that the silver was the same proportion as that used for coinage, or 900 parts per 1,000 as opposed to the higher 925 parts per 1,000 for the sterling standard. The remaining portion was usually copper, to strengthen the otherwise too-soft pure silver. When the colonies belonged to England, they followed English laws for marking silver, but after independence, standards varied. In 1837, Congress passed a law that established 900/1000 as the official standard for coin silver. Most silver objects stamped “coin” were not made from melted coins.
- 3. Beds were NOT shorter in those days because people were shorter.** 18th-century beds were made individually; there was no standard size. Some beds are shorter than today’s and some are longer. Some people may have slept propped up on pillows, but beds were not made shorter because of that. Guests are often surprised when the guide takes a measuring tape to a “short” bed and they find it is as long as or longer than today’s standard seventy-five-inch double bed. Curators think that the high bedposts, fabric hangings, canopy, and pillows make beds appear shorter than they are. 18th-century people were not dramatically shorter than the twenty-first’s. The average heights of white male soldiers during the Revolutionary War in the 1770s and those serving in the United States Army in the 1950s differ by about two-thirds of an inch. The average height of American males does seem to have been significantly greater—up to two inches—than the average height of European males of the same time, a result ascribed to better nutrition and healthier living conditions in the New World than in the Old.
- 4. When men smoked, they often shared the same white clay pipe, but they did NOT break off the tip of the long stem sanitary reasons.** It makes sense to us today, with our knowledge of germs and communicable disease that if they were going to share a pipe they eliminate contact with someone else’s body fluids. But colonists didn’t know about germs and could not more than suspect that sharing a pipe or cup was unsanitary. Yet this myth has survived for decades, probably because someone applied modern logic to understand why historical archaeologists were unearthing thousands of bits of broken pipe stems. The long slender stems of white clay pipes are fragile, as anyone who has handled a reproduction carelessly can attest. They had to be long so that the heat from burning tobacco in the bowl of the pipe would not be conducted as far as the lips.
- 5. Houses DID HAVE closets in colonial days and there was no closet tax.** People didn’t have as much stuff in those days and didn’t need as much storage space. Even a well-to-do colonial woman would have had just a few dresses. Clothing was usually kept in such furniture as a chest, a clothespress, or a chest of drawers, not hung on hangers in a closet. When people today think of a closet, they are thinking of a clothes closet, so when they come across a closet in the dining room, they call it a cupboard. Inventories and floor plans of the period show that many houses had closets. Typically found on either side of a fireplace, they were used for general storage. The myth regarding the closet tax, “probably results from a misunderstanding of how closets were used in the 18th century, and the fact that they were not always located in every bedroom, as they are today.” Taxes varied colony to colony, but research has turned up no examples of a tax on closets in any of the thirteen colonies. The myth of the second story tax is a variation on the closet tax story. The claim is that people in the eighteenth century built story-and-a-half houses to avoid the tax on the second story. Historians are aware of no building taxes in, for example, Virginia, where during the colonial period story-and-a-half houses were common. The story-and-a-half house with dormers was simply a popular style.
- 6. Men DID NOT pose with one hand inside their vest to save money or because fingers are difficult to paint.** This myth is a variation of the “arm and a leg” myth: that the expression about something costing an arm and a leg came about because portrait painters charged more if they had to paint the subject’s arms or legs. There is no historical verification for either tale. Standing with one hand tucked inside a vest or jacket was a popular, dignified pose for gentlemen of the era. It is not likely that Napoleon, King George III, or George Washington were concerned about getting a

discount from their portrait painters. Portraits of women and children from that time often show fingers.

7. **No evidence exists of furniture produced in the late 1700s and early 1800s having doors with thirteen panes of glass to represent the original thirteen states.** Objects were designed to represent the thirteen states, such as the American flag and the dollar bill, but glass-paned doors are probably not another example. Some furniture made in England and France in the Chinese style had doors with thirteen glass panes, and they weren't celebrating America's independence. The furniture design book of Thomas Chippendale, published 23 years before the American Revolution, shows case pieces with doors that have thirteen panes of glass. It's a nice story but unsupported by fact.
8. **Burning to death from their long petticoats' catching fire was RARE and NOT a leading cause of death for colonial-era women.** Historians who have studied death records have determined that the leading cause of death for colonial men and women was disease. Childbirth took a shocking toll on women by today's standards, but only an unfortunate few died when their clothing caught fire. The "death by petticoat" myth is an exaggeration. Colonial clothing was made of natural fibers that would more likely smoke than burst into flame. Girls learned early how to work around fires in their petticoats. If someone's petticoat did catch fire perhaps "the horrific nature of the accident may have made the rare incidents more famous and memorable, making them stick in people's minds and seeming more common."
9. **The term "Spooning" DOES NOT come from the 18th-century and young men were not known to whittle spoons to keep their hands occupied while courting.** The term came into use in the 1870s and probably had nothing to do with whittling spoons.
10. **Some colonists were very religious, but they put HL hinges on their doors because they were stronger, better able to hold the heavy doors,** An extension of this story—that the Holy Lord hinges protected the house from witches—regularly makes the rounds, even in hardware stores. These two tales are related to a third, about the paneled doors having been styled to resemble an open Bible, or a cross, or in the form of two H's to stand for Heaven and Hell, again because of the colonists' fervent religious beliefs. HL hinges are a

stronger version of simple symmetrical H hinges. They are useful for supporting the weight of a heavy wooden door. The key is the extra supporting arm that fastens to the door. This piece can be on top, in which case it would look like an HL, or on the bottom, where it resembles HG. Or it can be mounted on the other side as the mirror image of the two. Many colonists had little or no interest in religion, and no documentation supports the belief that their hardware or door panels had symbolic value.

11. **The term "Sleep tight" DOES NOT date back to rope beds.** Many visitors to historic sites have been told that "sleep tight" derives from tightening the ropes on which mattresses rested 250 years ago. It makes a good story, but it's not true. "Tight," as an adverb, means "soundly," "snugly," or "closely," so the expression means "sleep well." This use has lasted into our times, as anyone knows who has seen *The Wizard of Oz*, Glinda the Good Witch tells Dorothy to "keep tight" inside her ruby slippers. And who hasn't responded to a telephone caller asking for help by saying, "Sit tight; I'll be right over."
12. **The colonists did not use pineapples as a symbol of hospitality.** The myth of the pineapple as a symbol of hospitality is powerful. The usual story goes that the pineapple was served to guests as an expression of hospitality because it was so rare. Rare it was, and relatively expensive, coming from the West Indian tropics to American colonial ports—the pineapple would have been a treat on any colonial table. But there is no evidence that anyone at the time thought of the fruit as a symbol of hospitality. The English referred to pine cones as the fruit of the pine or the "pine-apple." Since classical times, the pinecone has symbolized fertility and regeneration and has been used as a decorative motif. It is the pinecone that the colonists were using in their decorative arts, evoking the classical symbolism that they, educated in the classics, would have understood well.
13. **Hat makers REALLY DID often appear to be driven to insanity from making hats.** The term "Mad as a Hatter" comes from the results of hatters being poisoned by the mercury they used in making hats from furs. The symptoms—hallucinations, tremors, and twitching – looked like insanity to people of the eighteenth century and the phrase "mad as a hatter" came about.

Many Myths continue to be told in historic settings for a variety of reasons. Some of the myths make better stories than truth, and we humans often prefer to hang on to that which they prefer to believe is truth. Some myths are based on bits of truth but exaggerated. Often misunderstandings exist because meanings to the words we use today have changed since olden days. Current logic can quickly take us down paths of conjecture. Researching the meanings of words and phrases from earlier times can make truth more interesting.

Resource: The above info came from back issues online of the Colonial Williamsburg Journal.