

## *Emblem of Gaiety, Love, and Legislation: Dance in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia*

**E**IGHTEENTH-CENTURY PHILADELPHIA was not only an important city in the eyes of Americans, but it also impressed European visitors, one of whom commented that "one will not hesitate to Call it the first Town in America, but one that bids fair to rival almost any in Europe."<sup>1</sup> As Philadelphia became an increasingly cosmopolitan center of commerce, political activity, and social life in the eighteenth century, its inhabitants enjoyed dancing, along with the other arts, as an important part of both public and private life. In fact, dancing skill became one measure and mark of social achievement in Philadelphia society, and it provided a matrix for communication among the elite in matters social, commercial, political, and even military.

Social dancing occurred at public balls, private parties, and assemblies; at all times of day and evening; and for events as wide-ranging as morning teas, wedding celebrations, soldiers' wartime diversions, and the signings of peace treaties. In the eighteenth century, an emerging American gentry sought to match European models of cultivation in behavior, dress, and style of living—a trend stimulated by the large numbers of Philadelphia's professional men who had studied medicine or law abroad, or who had traveled widely for commerce or pleasure.<sup>2</sup> The founding of learned societies, the dissemination of literature and other works, and the congregation of the colonies'—and later the nation's—best minds in the establishment and direction of government lifted Philadelphia's state of refinement to a pinnacle of eighteenth-century American achievement. To accommodate aspirations toward

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Adam Gordon, quoted in Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., "Some Aspects of the Social History of Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 62 (1938), 283.

<sup>2</sup> Bell, "Some Aspects of the Social History of Pennsylvania," 289.

increased refinement of behavior and culture, Philadelphians built mansions that featured large and elegant ballrooms, where ladies and gentlemen of breeding and manners might gather, "displaying their clothing, their wit and worldly knowledge, their fine manners and physical grace."<sup>3</sup> Dancing provided the quintessential opportunity for displaying these features, and it became a standard for gentility itself, as evidenced by the satisfied comment of the new governor of Virginia in 1727 that "the gentlemen and ladies are perfectly well-bred, not an ill-dancer in my government."<sup>4</sup>

Although Philadelphia had undergone considerable evolution in the eighteenth century as the Quaker city gave way to Anglican, other western European, and even African influences, the Quakers mounted powerful campaigns against dancing and other diversions. As early as 1682, William Penn's *Body of Laws* prohibited such amusements as card-playing, gambling, stage plays, masques, cockfights, and the like. In 1716 the Quaker Yearly Meeting reiterated this prohibition, specifically citing dancing as an evil to be shunned. Quaker condemnations of "vain Sports and Pastimes" were repeated throughout the century, still maintaining some hold on the population even as the city's residents became increasingly liberal and cosmopolitan due both to the increase in the non-Quaker population and to further contact with foreigners. A Frenchman visiting in the 1790s, for example, commented that the Quakers were to blame for "the melancholy customs of this city," although he expected this to change eventually, since he noted that "Many Quaker children leave the faith."<sup>5</sup> Aside from the Quakers' influence, Philadelphians also proved susceptible, at least temporarily, to the powerful itinerant preacher, George Whitefield, who was credited by the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of May 1, 1740, with causing the doors to be shut on the city's dancing schools, assembly, and concerts, which were considered "inconsistent with the Doctrine of the Gospel." A week later, members of the assembly and concert

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bushman, "American High-Style and Vernacular Cultures," in Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole, eds., *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1984), 352.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 359.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth and Anna M. Roberts, trans. and eds., *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey (1793-98)* (Garden City, 1947), 280.

society protested in a response to that *Gazette* article, insisting that they had extracted an apology from the Whitefield follower who had presumed to intrude on their entertainment, and that their activities continued, undisturbed by this infringement, except for the fact that the dancing season had come to a close for the current year. Although the Quakers and some other religious groups continued to object to dancing, the entertainment persisted and increased, even winning grudging acceptance from John Swanwick, a leading educator of the Academy of Philadelphia in 1787, who noted that dancing "May be suffered as an agreeable substitute for the ignoble pleasures of drinking and gaming in our assemblies of grown people."<sup>6</sup>

Some of the city's leaders recognized, then, the need to establish acceptable forms of entertainment. Especially among the emerging American elite who became leaders of commerce and culture, opportunities for social display and intercourse became crucial to the establishment of power, to the attainment of a rise in class stature, and to the facilitation of political and commercial business. One sort of assembly where both young and grown people might gather was a ball, and these were held in greater numbers as Philadelphia's prominence in trade and government increased. Social dancing became both a means of displaying personal polish and of providing an occasion for conversation and coquetry. Thus, public and private balls were held for a wide variety of reasons: displaying and perfecting dance students' newly acquired skills, enjoying a social evening in select company, and celebrating political occasions.

Many of the numerous dancing masters who taught Philadelphians deportment, polite behavior, and the latest dances from Europe held regularly scheduled balls in order to allow students' parents to monitor the scholars' progress, and to allow the students to polish their skills in an actual social-dance situation, providing, thus, a way station to the balls of polite society. These practicing balls were held also by English dancing masters during this period, again indicating the close parallels between social dance behavior in England and America. As early as April 1735, dancing master William Dering advertised in the

<sup>6</sup> *Thoughts on Education, addressed to the Visitors of the Young Ladies' Academy in Philadelphia, Oct. 31, 1787, At the close of the quarterly examination, by John Swanwick, one of the Visitors of the said Academy* (Philadelphia, 1787), 9-10.

*Pennsylvania Gazette* that "every Friday Fortnight will be a publick Night, when the whole School will be together, and all Gentlemen and Ladies, desirous to see their Children or Friends dance, are welcome to come to the School." John Walsh, teaching dancing in 1763, placed a notice in the *Gazette* that he would open his dancing school in October with a public ball.

By the end of the century, as the numbers of dancing masters in the city increased to match the demand for their services, balls were a regular part of the teaching curriculum, Tuesdays and Thursdays being particularly common choices for these fortnightly events. Tickets were necessary for scholars' balls, sometimes also called practicing balls in the advertisements of such masters as M. Cenas (Feb. 1789), M. Duport (Jan. 1791), William McDougall (Feb. 1791 and Oct. 1796), M. Sicard (Sept. 1791, Feb. 1794, and Nov. 1796), M. Quesnet (Nov. 1796), M. Dozol (Nov. 1796), and the famous theatrical couple, Mr. and Mrs. Byrne (Dec. 1797). These were indeed "practicing balls" not only for the perfection of one's dancing, but more importantly for the honing of refined behavior. As one educator of the period noted:

though the well-bred woman should learn to dance, sing, recite, and draw; the end of a good education is not that they may become singers, dancers, players, or painters; its real object is, to make them good daughters, good wives, good mistresses, good members of society and good christians.<sup>7</sup>

Young men, too, were encouraged to learn dancing, as Philadelphians pursued the manners of English society through such American best-sellers as Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to His Son*. Here the student was admonished to master his dancing lessons not so that he might compete with Vestris, but rather in order to display proper breeding, manners, and bearing. At the dancing masters' balls this progress toward social polish might be displayed and admired.

Several of these scholars' balls were held at the city's finest hotels—the City Tavern, and later O'Eller's Hotel—taking the dancers into

<sup>7</sup> *Sentimental Beauties, and Moral Delineations, from the Writings of the Celebrated Dr. Blair, and other much Admired Authors: Selected with a View to Refine the Taste, Rectify the Judgment, and Mould the Heart to Virtue* (Philadelphia, 1792), as quoted in Joseph E. Marks, III, *America Learns to Dance* (New York, 1957), 47.

the heart of Philadelphia society's most prestigious gathering places. One such ball, held by M. Duport in January 1791, was also the occasion for the master's son to show the full flowering of his father's teaching when the younger Duport danced "the Shepherds Canniton dance," and "a Harlequin dance" for the assembled company. Since no further advertisements of this nature have come to light, it seems that such virtuoso displays were not typical of these balls, which were typically restricted to the students' performances of the dances they had learned.

A bit about the important role and the expected model of the dancing master at practicing balls can be gleaned from a description by Charles Durang of Mr. Francis, a popular Philadelphia actor, choreographer, dancer, and teacher in the 1790s:

On his ball nights, the pupils and visitors were delighted to see Mr. Francis standing at the head of the ball-room, as master of ceremonies, ushering all to places with his airy and amusing suavity. In dress, he was neatness personified. . . . [He] secured decorum and pleasure to the votaries of terpsichore.<sup>8</sup>

Mr. Francis organized places for his scholars, perhaps noting their social rank as much or more than their dancing skill in his choice of placement. His own person established the precedent for decorum that his lessons, culminating in these social occasions, were intended to refine. Those gentlemen teaching dancing in Philadelphia were careful to proclaim their British or French training in their newspaper notices, thus informing the public that European standards of behavior and dance technique could be attained through study with the advertised master.

Having entered Philadelphia society, with their dancing lessons shaping their carriage and even conversation, young ladies and gentlemen found no shortage of opportunities for putting their dancing skills to use. For example, in the early 1780s, the Major General of the French army, the Marquis de Chastellux, remarked on drinking after-

<sup>8</sup> Charles Durang, "History of the Philadelphia Stage between the Years of 1749 and 1853" (*Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch*, beginning May 7, 1854), XXI, 34 (Library Company of Philadelphia [hereafter, LCP]). On the practicing balls of English dancing masters, see Philip J.S. Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England* (London, 1960), 40-41.



Mr. Francis in a theatrical role as Sir George Thunder.  
Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

noon tea with some of Philadelphia's elite, when an impromptu music concert by the guests occurred.<sup>9</sup> "Music naturally leads to dancing," the author noted, and in fact, a violin was soon produced and the young ladies danced while their mothers sat and chatted. This French observer commented that more of such an "easy and gay" society, which had learned "to accept of pleasure when it presents itself, without a formal invitation," would make the United States the equal of any place in Europe. Perhaps Chastellux observed that formal public occasions, rather than those of a more spontaneous and private nature, provided the main opportunities for dancing in Pennsylvania. In 1744, for example, dancing was considered appropriate for an important political occasion that occurred at Lancaster when the signing of a

<sup>9</sup> Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781, and 1782* (2 vols., Dublin, 1787), 1:293.

treaty with the Indians was concluded with food, wine, and dancing by both parties to the agreement.<sup>10</sup> Of this event, however, a sidelight notifies us that perhaps further inland than Philadelphia the colonists were not so concerned with refinement; apparently, one of the British negotiators was appalled at the colonists' rustic manners, commenting that some of the ladies present "danced wilder time than any Indians." It may have been this sort of behavior that continued to prompt some dancing masters to publish lists warning aspirants against such offenses as "throwing things instead of handing them" and "swinging the arms," as one New England teacher felt obliged to do.<sup>11</sup> While these rules of behavior clearly addressed a more bucolic audience than that served by other early American and contemporary English handbooks, it is certain that these pointers were intended to erase at least the most blatantly offensive behaviors of the population, as judged by teachers immersed in refined European manners. It is likely that similar lists of rules might have been just as necessary for rustic populations in England itself.

Other public political occasions provided more elegant circumstances for dancing than that offered in Lancaster. The governor of Pennsylvania, James Hamilton, gave a ball in Philadelphia on November 9, 1752, inviting the best of the city's society to celebrate "his Majesty's health" with dinner at the governor's mansion, and dancing afterward at the State House.<sup>12</sup> Also, a musical concert series given by local and visiting artists sometimes also included a post-performance ball—most convenient, since the concerts were often held in the assembly room, a site designed for dancing.<sup>13</sup>

The architecture of the city's most elite taverns and hotels indicates the importance of dancing, and the formal occasions for its practice.

<sup>10</sup> M. Luther Heisey, "The Indian Treaty of 1744," *Lancaster County Historical Society Papers* (hereafter, *LCHSP*) 48 (1944), 60. For a general discussion of the social and political uses of drinking in eighteenth-century Philadelphia, see Peter Thompson, "The Friendly Glass: Drink and Gentility in Colonial Philadelphia," *PMHB* 113 (1989), 549-73.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Van Winkle Keller, discussing John Griffiths's "Instances of Ill Manners to be avoided by Youth of Both Sexes," in *Early American Dance and Music: JOHN GRIFFITHS, Eighteenth-Century Dancing Master* (Sandy Hook, 1989), 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> J. Francis Fisher Section, Box 10, Cadwalader Collection (Historical Society of Pennsylvania [hereafter, HSP]).

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Gerson, *Music in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1940), 18.

The finest such buildings contained special dancing halls called assembly rooms where a variety of dances might be held, including private celebrations, public balls with admission by ticket only, and dancing assemblies, which were regularly occurring subscription events.<sup>14</sup> Philadelphia's City Dancing Assembly was a particularly elegant one, with a history beginning in 1748 and stretching into the twentieth century. The wealthiest and most distinguished of Philadelphia's citizens were founders, managers, and subscribers to the Assembly, and it occupied the finest halls in town for its weekly or fortnightly meetings. Assemblies had been established in the early to mid-eighteenth century in such fashionable English towns as Bath, Hampstead, and Epsom, where the gentry gathered to partake of the healthy waters, gamble, and dance. Dancing assemblies were soon also established in English cities, with several functioning simultaneously in London. The English assemblies were ruled by strict masters of ceremonies who maintained an almost tyrannical control over admission to and organization of the gatherings. Only gentry and nobility were permitted to attend—and only when properly dressed and comported—and partnering was firmly arranged by choice of master of ceremony. In England, as in Philadelphia, the dancing assembly became an important institution for providing regular social contact between members, who danced, chatted, and partook of light refreshments at each meeting. The men who founded the City Dancing Assembly in Philadelphia, and those on subscription lists throughout the eighteenth century, formed the vanguard of the city's commercial and political affairs, highlighting a group of civic leaders distinctly independent of the old Quaker ethos proscribing social entertainment. A number of prominent merchants were managers or subscribers to the Assembly, including John Swift, John Inglis, and John Wallace. Some of these business leaders, and other members of the Assembly, also participated in the city's government or courts: Swift, Inglis, and Joseph Shippen were city councilmen; Lynford Lardner was a justice of the peace; Charles Willing served as Philadelphia's mayor, as did Thomas Willing. With membership by subscription only and with a group of managers to oversee the

<sup>14</sup> See also Kym Rice, *Early American Taverns: For the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers* (New York, 1983), 108; and Richardson, *The Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England*, 20-28.



assemblies, this social dance event raised participants to a plane of achievement and visibility that acceptance into the Assembly's company guaranteed.<sup>15</sup> As was befitting this select company, the Assembly's meetings were held at the city's finest meeting places: the City Tavern, and then at O'Eller's Hotel. For most dances held at taverns, including that of the Dancing Assembly, the innkeeper generally provided the refreshments; for a ball in 1784 at the City Tavern the fare included tea, coffee, chocolate, biscuits, and toast, served close to midnight.

During the American Revolution, festivities, balls, and theatre continued, despite attempts by the struggling nation's leaders, in October 1774, to halt "every species of extravagance and dissipation," including all sorts of "expensive diversions and entertainments."<sup>16</sup> A second resolution was passed a few weeks later, urging "the suppression of Theatrical Entertainments, horseracing, gaming, and other diversions, which are commonly productive of Idleness, dissipation & general depravity of principles and manners."<sup>17</sup> Yet, dancing's promise of diversion and opportunities for conversation and discussion proved indispensable in this difficult period. A French diplomat wrote to a compatriot about the Philadelphia newspapers' publication of these resolutions, and he specifically named dances as among the entertainments interdicted.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, he reported that the very next day after the publication, the governor of Pennsylvania gave a ball, which was "numerously attended." Indeed, among those prominent in the Revolutionary movement, men such as Washington and Rochambeau were able, eager dancers—as their status as military officers would demand—and they continued to organize balls for the entertainment and encouragement of their officers and retinues. As the evidence suggests, these social occasions were vital not only for relaxation, but for communication and exchange between officers, diplomats, financiers, and other national leaders. At Valley Forge, the American

<sup>15</sup> Lynn Matluck Brooks, "The Philadelphia Dancing Assembly in the Eighteenth Century," *Dance Research Journal* 21 (1989), 1-6.

<sup>16</sup> Worthington C. Ford, et al., eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (34 vols., Washington, 1904-1937), 1:76.

<sup>17</sup> "Council to Assembly," Nov. 9, 1778, *Pennsylvania Archives* (119 vols., Philadelphia and Harrisburg, 1852-1935), Series 1, 7:77.

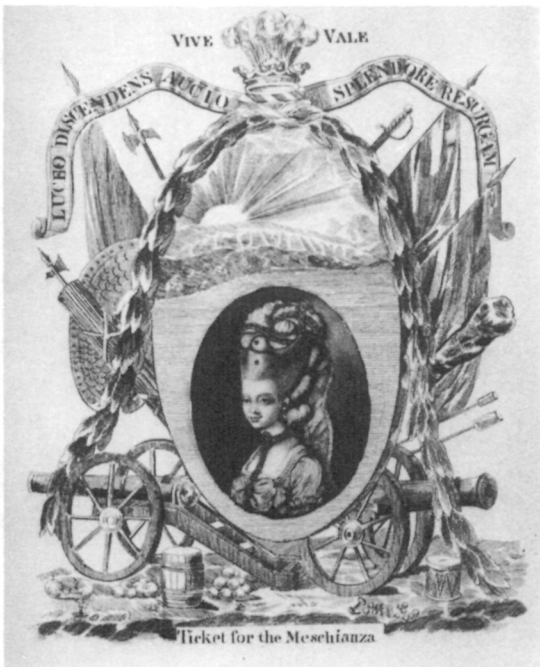
<sup>18</sup> Paul L. Ford, *Washington and the Theatre* (New York, 1899), 27-28.

officers hired a dancing master to give daily lessons to the hospital staff, perhaps to give them a bit of psychological relief and physical exercise.

During the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1777-1778, the city's social life blossomed. Now the model, rather than the copy, of elite behavior reigned in the city as the British officers took their places at the head of society. Balls, concerts, and assemblies kept the officers and American loyalists busy evening after evening. A regular Thursday ball was held by officers at Smith's Tavern throughout that winter and spring, and the musical concerts sponsored by the army's officers were often followed by dancing.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, the major social event of the season was the grand pageant and ball known as the "Meschianza," [sometimes spelled "Mischianza"], organized by the elegant and notorious Major John Andre. The title of the event was said to be derived from the Italian words *mescolare* [to mix] and *mischiare* [to mingle]. It must be noted, however, that Andre's account of the affair, from which most other accounts are drawn, may well have been written *before* the event, since some of the information he presents clearly does not tally with known occurrences, such as the actual whereabouts of several of the reputed guests.<sup>20</sup> The festivities, to which over 400 people were invited, were in honor of Sir William Howe, the British commander, and were held on Monday, May 18, 1778. The design and production of events pointed backward toward the period of grand monarchism in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, when Catherine de Medici waged political and religious diplomacy through her elaborate court entertainments.

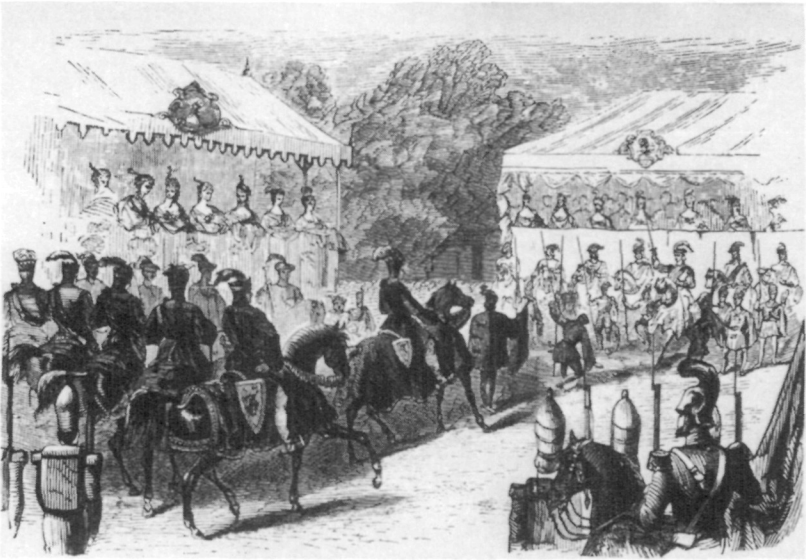
<sup>19</sup> Darlene E. Fisher, "Social Life in Philadelphia during the British Occupation," *Pennsylvania History* 37 (1970), 246, 253.

<sup>20</sup> Information on this event is drawn from the following sources: *Major Andre's Story of the "Mischianza"* from the unpublished manuscript, by Sophie Howard Ward (LCP); "Some Accounts of the Meschianza, by one of the Company," *Commonplace Book*, Am. 005 "Accounts of Tory Entertainments" (HSP); "Account of the Meschianza," Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Misc. Section, Box 43 (HSP); "Account of the Meschianza," Society's Miscellaneous Collection (HSP); "Particulars of the Mischianza in America," *Gentleman's Magazine* 52 (Aug. 1778), 353-57; *Pennsylvania Ledger*, May 23, 1778; John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Times . . .* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1854), 3:471.



Ticket for the Meschianza. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The Meschianza opened with a two-hour regatta of naval ships, bearing officers, their ladies, and musicians, which the guests viewed from richly festooned galleys and flat boats. The party landed at a mansion near the river, and proceeded through decorative archways, flags, and military guards to an amphitheatre where a tournament was held. The ladies, divided between “the black Champions” and “the white,” were the most reportedly beautiful and fashionable in Philadelphia society at the time, and they wore “fancy dress,” including turbans, veils, sashes, and bows. The “Knights,” both black and white, were, significantly, attired in dress from the time of Henry IV of France. They paraded, charged, circled, and fought in a highly choreographed manner, with a peaceful and musical outcome to the tourney. After this event, tea was served indoors, and then a grand ball began in a hall painted blue and pink, decorated with mirrors and garlands of flowers. First, only the ladies and knights danced, then the ladies danced with the squires, and then the entire company joined in, until about 10:00 p.m. After an interlude of stunning fireworks, another



The Meschianza in Philadelphia.

From John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia, and Pennsylvania* . . . (1854).

period of dancing ensued, followed by a sumptuous supper and numerous toasts to the health of the King, the officers, and the ladies. Then, according to Major Andre, "Freighted with new Strength and Spirits the whole repaired again to the Ball room and day Light overtook them in all the festive Mirth with which a youthfull band could be animated."

Not all those who knew of the Meschianza were enthusiastic about it. Hannah Griffiths, a Quaker, decried the affair as: "A shameful scene of dissipation, / The death of sense and reputation."<sup>21</sup> In another verse, Griffiths described the Meschianza as: "The song of victory complete / Loudly re-echoed from—Defeat / The Fair of Vanity profound / A madman's dance, a Comus round." An old Scotsman,

<sup>21</sup> "Letters and Communications addressed to John F. Watson on the subject of his *Annals of Philadelphia*," 1:29 (HSP).

an officer quartered with an American family, was indignant at the conduct of General Howe, "who he said had deserted the Society of his former companions in Arms, for the Fops and Fools of Army," and wondered what would happen if the American troops should attack while the British forces were about their festivities.<sup>22</sup>

Anti-British sentiment was stirred by this affair. One of the American belles of the Meschianza wrote to a friend that "the Committee of *real* Whigs met in the afternoon and . . . went round to all the ladies that meant to go to desire they'd stay at home."<sup>23</sup> The young lady added, however, that these Whigs "had no thoughts of molesting any, being all of their own kidney." The issue of the American ladies who attended the Meschianza was a sensitive one, for they represented the very best families of Philadelphia: Smiths, Bonds, Franks, and Redmans among them. The political alliances of these families varied from definitely loyalist (the Bonds, for example) to moderately patriot (the Smiths), while other families attempted simply to remain afloat in an occupied city.<sup>24</sup>

When the Americans recaptured Philadelphia, social life continued for the elite in much the same manner—if on a more modest scale—as it had before the war and then under the British occupation. For example, immediately upon regaining the city, the Americans planned a grand ball for their officers and those of the French army. The question of whether to invite the Meschianza ladies was debated, but they were at last included because the organizers "found they could not make up their company without them." It seems that the perennial shortage of ladies saved the Meschianza attendees. The author of that report went on to comment that lots were drawn for the dancing partners at this latter ball, and soon all the company was so intermixed

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 29v.

<sup>23</sup> B. Franks to Miss Shippen, Autumn 1778, T. Balch Collection, vol. 2, Shippen Papers (HSP).

<sup>24</sup> See Richard A. Ryerson, *The Revolution is Now Begun: The Radical Committees of Philadelphia, 1765-1776* (Philadelphia, 1978), 167; Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York, 1982), 199; J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1884), 1:332; Edwin Wolf, 2nd and Maxwell Whiteman, *A History of the Jews in Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1957), 86-93.

that "conversation ensued as if nothing of jealousy had ever existed, and all umbrage was forgotten."<sup>25</sup>

Other entertainments lightened the days of the fighting men and their ladies after the Americans regained Philadelphia. One such affair had a naval flavor, though much toned down from that of the Meschianza, for it featured an elegant supper and brilliant ball aboard a richly illuminated ship, sponsored by one Captain Hammond for 172 guests. As the war drew on, General Washington continued to give entertainments for his men, as one of his colonels reported in October 1779. After the officers had all dined with their commander, an Indian-style ball was gotten up, when the participants, wearing some sort of "Sachem" headgear, "danc'd to the Music which was a rattle, a knife, and a pipe, which the Sachem continued clashing together and singing Indian the whole time. At the end of every Dance the Indian whoop was set up by the whole."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Native American influences were occasionally present at these festivities, thereby distinguishing them from their European counterparts. Another wartime ball was reported by Lieutenant Enos Reeves, this time stationed in Reading, Pennsylvania, where "all the ladies and gentlemen of the town" were invited to join the officers for the festivities. The dances done were minuets, country dances, and cotillions, which occupied the company until 2:00 a.m.<sup>27</sup> American army officers continued to enjoy balls, dancing schools, the company of fine ladies, and "Galanting the Girls" as the war dragged on.<sup>28</sup>

Philadelphia was, then, a lively city for dancing and socializing during the Revolutionary war, despite the attempts by the Continental Congress to impose austerity. Indeed, well-to-do citizens shared in the pleasures. Their presence was essential for the continuity of political and commercial life, and for the forging of a new American leadership.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, 2:293.

<sup>26</sup> On the Hammond ball, see Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia*, 2:293. On Washington's entertainment, see John W. Jordan, "Adam Hubley, Jr., Lt. Col. Commandant 11th Penna. Regt., His Journal, Commencing at Wyoming, July 30th, 1779," *PMHB* 33 (1909), 420.

<sup>27</sup> John B. Reeves, "Extracts from the Letter-Books of Lieutenant Enos Reeves, of the Pennsylvania Line," *PMHB* 21 (1897), 83-84.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph M. Beatty, Jr., ed., "Letters from Continental Officers to Doctor Reading Beatty, 1781-1788," *ibid.*, 54 (1930), 167; Judge Yeates to Col. Burd, March 26, 1783, T. Balch Collection, vol. 5, Shippen Papers.

Elias Boudinot sent a gently chiding letter to his daughter Susan, a visitor to Philadelphia in the winter of 1780-1781, noting that perhaps she had no time for writing because she was "entering so fully into the Pleasures of the City, that nothing goes down but Balls & Routs; and that among those the most dissipated are your choice." But Boudinot did appreciate the value that these balls might hold for young Susan, for he added:

But joking aside—I can assure my dear Daughter that her Parents do not in the least begrudge her any or all the Pleasures of the City, provided they tend to her real advantage—If they are made the means of teaching her the extreme Vanity of the best of earthly good. . . . Keep in mind the design with which you went from home, that is the Improvement of your Mind, as well as the Health of your Body, and no Company, no Entertainment, no Party of Pleasure can be unprofitable to you.<sup>29</sup>

Here, then, was another distinctly American note in elite social attitudes: worldly pleasures are important, in part, for what they teach us, and for the appreciation they can give us of higher duties, to which they stand in contrast. Nevertheless, other voices indicate that worldly allure was all too gripping during this period, and that Philadelphia society was growing increasingly fashion-conscious and expensive to maintain. Charles Shippen, a member of one of Pennsylvania's leading families, complained to his father living in Lancaster that although daily expenses in Philadelphia might not be so much higher than in Lancaster, "the style of life my fashionable daughters have introduced into my family, and their dress, will, I fear, before long, oblige me to change the scene."<sup>30</sup> Contact with the French during the war helped to make all things French the rage in America, and stylish dress was patterned on French models. An outstanding example of the sort of social highlight which may have cost Shippen so dearly was the memorable celebration held by the French diplomat, the Chevalier de la Luzerne, in July 1782 in honor of the birth of the Dauphin. George Washington was among those attending the concert, fireworks, ball, and supper.

<sup>29</sup> Elias Boudinot to Susan Boudinot, Dec. 29, 1780, Wallace Papers, vol. 1 (HSP).

<sup>30</sup> Charles Shippen to Joseph Shippen, Dec. 21, 1778, T. Balch Collection, vol. 5, Shippen Papers.

Just how crucial the role of dancing was in weaving a durable social fabric for the new nation is indicated by a comment about such a ball that the Marquis de Chastellux, visiting Philadelphia in the early 1780s, wrote in his journal:

There were near twenty women, twelve or fourteen of whom were dancers; each of them having her partner, as is the custom in America. Dancing is said to be at once the emblem of gaiety and of love; here it seems to be the emblem of legislation, and of marriage; of legislation, inasmuch as places are marked out, the country dances named, and every proceeding provided for, calculated, and submitted to regulation; of marriage, as it furnishes each lady with a partner, with whom she dances the whole evening without being allowed to take another. . . . Strangers have generally the privilege of being complimented with the handsomest women. . . . The ball was suspended towards midnight, by a supper served in the manner of coffee, on several different tables.<sup>31</sup>

Chastellux noted that the ball lasted until two in the morning. He further observed that the foreign visitors far outshone the Americans in dancing skill and grace, although particular Americans were notably "more lively" than the Frenchmen. The rules demonstrated at the ball the Marquis observed were designed to effect a particular type of society: one that was guaranteed to be orderly and, in some senses, fairly democratic—at least for those chosen to participate. The marking out of places for participants, the schedule of dances performed, the enforcement of rules about partnering are all instances of social regulation through the dance: leading citizens are identified by their placement, hierarchies of social behavior are mirrored in the order of dances performed, and choice marriage alliances are highlighted by partnering arrangements. This was not yet a society sufficiently comfortable with itself to relax often into spontaneity, and this the Frenchman Chastellux keenly felt as a fact worthy of special comment.

After the conclusion of the war, with social trends encouraging the continuation of such activities as balls and theatrical entertainments, Philadelphia's Quaker community led the fight to retain restrictions on diversions and entertainments which had been passed—and much ignored—at the start of hostilities. One prominent Quaker citizen,

<sup>31</sup> Chastellux, *Travels in North America*, 276-78.



James Pemberton, wrote in despair to his brother in 1783 that "Extravagance in dress has been at no time more obvious among our youth than the present, and lightness, and airyness of deportment is also apparent in many."<sup>32</sup> The popularity of French styles of dress, behavior, and dancing in this period no doubt contributed to Pemberton's displeasure.

During the last decade of the eighteenth century, when Philadelphia served as the nation's capital, social life reached its apex, with entertainments for and by federal officials and foreign diplomats. Conscientious Quaker objections could scarcely be heard above flourishing musical concerts, dancing assemblies, and stage entertainments. The theatre and other cultural institutions developed to the point that the city provided "a cultural milieu without an equal in America."<sup>33</sup> Dancing played an important role in social intercourse. In fact, the enthusiasm of Americans for dancing was remarked on by one French traveller, Moreau de St. Méry, who noted that "All American girls or women are fond of dancing, which is one of their greatest pleasures. The men like it almost as much." This French visitor, a merchant, saw a slightly different side of American social life than the nobleman Chastellux had seen a decade earlier. The intervening decade had brought change to Philadelphia society. Moreau de St. Méry commented:

I believe I have already said elsewhere that dancing, for the inhabitants of this United States, is less a matter of self-display than it is of true enjoyment. At the same dance you will see a grandfather, his son and his grandson, but more often still the grandmother, her daughter, and her granddaughter. If a Frenchman comments upon this with surprise, he is told that each one dances for his own amusement, and not because it's the thing to do.<sup>34</sup>

Moreau, whose visit occurred in the 1790s, encountered a somewhat more developed social scene in Philadelphia. On the one hand, his comments suggest that, compared to a decade earlier, individuals seemed to have gained enough composure to relax their ruled behavior

<sup>32</sup> James Pemberton to John Pemberton, Nov. 8, 1783, Pemberton Papers, XXXIX, 156 (HSP).

<sup>33</sup> Edward M. Riley, "Philadelphia, the Nation's Capital, 1790-1800," *Pennsylvania History* 20 (1953), 363.

<sup>34</sup> Roberts, eds., *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey*, 290, 333.

and truly enjoy themselves. On the other hand, he noted the snobbery and sharply drawn class lines that were in evidence at the city's balls where "no one is admitted unless his professional standing is up to a certain mark." Once again, the achievement of social status was marked by admission to dancing events. Moreau himself was denied tickets to a ball in honor of Washington's birthday because he was "a store-keeper" and thus was told that he "could not aspire to this honor." Balls among the émigré community might also become scenes of contention, for Moreau remarked on a French ball of 1795 at which animosities between two émigrés resulted in violence. He also reported on a brawl between two women, one the wife of a small jeweler and the other the wife of a hairdresser. It may well have been this very scene that inspired a poem satirizing social aspiration, "The Ball, a Ballad in three Cantos," of which two verses from the first Canto follow:

There was a ball in Chesnut [*sic*] Street,  
As in the news we find;  
Where belles and beaus in crouds [*sic*] did meet,  
And left their cares behind.

The beaus were all of high degree,  
The belles were nobly born;  
Some shew'd it by their modesty,  
And others by their scorn.

The verses go on to tell of the snobbery of one "noble dame," who is slyly noted to have been once "a maid to Mrs. A.," and who, in a near faint at the ball on "Chesnut Street," informed one Captain B. about another guest:

"I shall have fits, and loose my wits,  
"What impudence is there!  
"How very rude! thus to intrude—  
"That man, did dress my hair."

"Did he! did he!" says captain B;  
"I'll let the rascal know;  
"By all my tars, sails, masts, and spars,  
"Out quickly he shall go."

And, in fact, the “barber,” as he is later referred to scornfully by other members of the party, is most rudely expelled from that select company. The poem concludes by mocking this “noble” and “grovelling” society.<sup>35</sup>

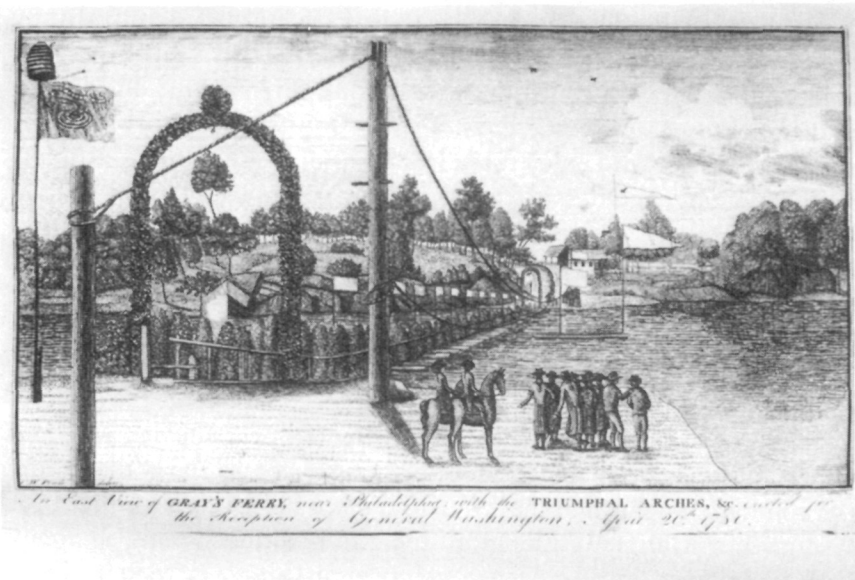
“High” society did enjoy the celebrations of Washington’s birthday. Without a king, and despite the apparently genuine modesty of Washington himself, Americans needed a hero around whom to organize celebrations. George Washington was honored with this role, and his birthday became the occasion for much pomp and partying during the latter part of the eighteenth century, much as the birthday of the English king had been before the American Revolution. In 1797, for example, the citizens of Philadelphia held a grand ball at the site of a well-known circus in town, which was floored over for dancing, and joined to the adjacent hotel by an opening made in the wall, so that the company might dine there.<sup>36</sup> Although a special dais was built for George and Martha Washington, the two reportedly mingled freely with those attending—citizens, members of Congress, foreign diplomats, and other notables. During his term as president, the Washingtons frequently held receptions and dinners. One evening a week, Martha Washington and her granddaughter received guests in their drawing room, with the president often in attendance. A writer recalling these events wrote that:

the drawing rooms were closed at an early hour and only sometimes when the older company had gone, the grand daughters would ask the President’s permission to dance, which was of course accorded. My friend Mrs. Gibson, who was very intimate with Nelly Custis, and often at the President’s, says he has danced with her and the other children, seemingly with great enjoyment, but both she and my Uncle and Aunt Harrison have said expressly that they never heard of his dancing at any public or private Ball, while filling the distinguished office of the head of the State—altho’ the honour of being his partner in a Menuet or Country Dance has been claimed for some of the ladies of that time by their descendants.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> “The Ball: A Ballad in Three Cantos,” Abs n.d.-32, Miscellaneous Manuscripts (HSP).

<sup>36</sup> William Sullivan, *The Public Men of the Revolution, 1783-1815* (Philadelphia, 1847), 116; see also Marks, *America Learns to Dance*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Box 11, J. Francis Fisher Section, George Harrison folder, n.d., Cadwalader Collection (HSP).



"The Triumphal Arches Erected for the Reception of General Washington, April 20th, 1780."  
 Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

It is interesting to ponder Washington's behavior in social circumstances from these few suggestions. Sensitive to avoiding the appearance of emulating monarchy, Washington was careful to step down from his dais and to mingle—literally—on a level with the other guests. Perhaps also because he did not wish to follow the social patterns of European aristocracy, Washington chose not to dance at all during his presidency, thus avoiding the issue of social rank which determined the order and placement of dancers at the balls of European nobility. His avoidance of dancing—suggested by the above quotation—also avoided offense to the Quaker community, still a force to reckon with in the nation's new capital. The members of the City Dancing Assembly, on the other hand, sought rather to distinguish themselves from the city's Quaker past, and to demonstrate their cosmopolitan stature in the increasingly international city, where foreign delegations met and dealt with American businessmen and political leaders.

The document quoted above mentions a few of the kinds of dances performed in polite society in this period. Minuets, country dances, and cotillions were the most frequent sorts of dances taught by Philadelphia's dancing masters and reported on by guests at dancing assemblies. The typical ball would open with a minuet, followed by English and French country dances and cotillions. Hornpipes and Scotch reels were also taught by some masters. The minuet, a French court dance identifying that nation's developed sense of the "noble style" in movement, remained important in eighteenth-century America, as it was also in England. Indeed, dancing the minuet was an opportunity for the participants' individual display of dancing skill and refined physical behavior, for the sole dancing couple became the visual focus on the ballroom floor for the entire observant company. In the English assemblies, each ball was opened with a minuet performed by the two guests of highest distinction, with the partners then rotating until the entire company had been presented on the floor.<sup>38</sup> Only after this lengthy procedure had been accomplished might the company engage in the more relaxed country dances. The minuet's "ceremonial attitude, so characteristic of feudal society with its stress on dignity," became in its homeland "the passport to enter the higher and well-to-do society."<sup>39</sup> This function seems to have been exported, along with the minuet steps and figures, to the New World. On the other hand, the longways type of country dance was much in evidence in Philadelphia's late eighteenth-century balls, for the democratic nature of a dance where each couple had its turn to lead the figure was in keeping with the new nation's spirit, and the steps were simpler to grasp and to perform passably well than were the minuet figures. The long and narrow shape of the assembly rooms favored such a configuration of dancers.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Richardson, *Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England*, 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Sorell, *Dance in its Time* (New York, 1986), 137; see also Richardson, *Social Dances of the Nineteenth Century in England*, 35-50. Contemporary texts which described and illustrated the minuet include: Pierre Rameau, *Maître à Danser* (1725), translated into English by London dancing master John Essex in 1728; and Kellom Tomlinson's *The Art of Dancing* (1735).

<sup>40</sup> See also Rice, *Early American Taverns*, 108; and Joy Van Cleef, *Rural Felicity: Social Dance in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* [*Dance Perspectives* no. 65] (1976), 16-17, 26, 32.

Musical scores, most frequently for country dances, are found in the collections of several Philadelphia research centers, many providing not only the names and tunes to be danced, but also the dancers' starting configuration, and brief descriptions of the dance steps to be done. For example, *Twenty-four American Country Dances* (London, 1785), contains reels, waltzes, strathspeys, and cotillions "with their proper figures as danced at the Court of St. James's, Bath & other polite Assemblies," while the Philadelphia music publisher G. Willig offered his own *Willig's Collection of Popular Country Dances arranged for the Piano Forte, Violin, &c., with their proper figures*.<sup>41</sup> These collections show that in Philadelphia, as elsewhere in the new nation, English sources dominated social dancing to the point that even newly created dances, with titles bearing references to local places or personages, followed English styles, with some additional French influence also discernible.<sup>42</sup> The steps mentioned in these texts include casting off, footing it, leading down the center, hands 4, balancez, chassez, poussette, promenade, almande, and gallop, with configurations for square and longways dances most typically featured. The music for the dances might range from a lone violinist to a full orchestra, depending on the nature of the occasion. Philadelphia music master John Beals advertised in March 28, 1749, in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, that he taught violin, hautboy, German flute, common flute, and dulcimer, and he was also happy to provide music for balls. During wartime, military bands might include fifes, flutes, violins, woodwinds, and even a harpsichord. The City Tavern had a special platform at one end of the Long Room used for dancing assemblies, where the orchestra could be seated.

While documentation exists to provide some idea of the dances of polite society and of the theatre, little record remains of the dances enjoyed by the rest of the population. One chronicler, however, does speak of the time,

when the slaves were allowed the last days of the fairs for their jubilee, which they employed ('light hearted wretch!') in dancing the whole

<sup>41</sup> For the former collection, see the Library Company of Philadelphia; for the latter, see the Music Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

<sup>42</sup> Keller, *Early American Dance and Music*, 9, 13-16, and 18 (n.37).

afternoon in the present Washington Square, then a general burying ground—the blacks joyful above, while the sleeping dead reposed below! In that field could be seen at once more than one thousand of both sexes, divided into numerous little squads, dancing and singing, ‘each in their own tongue,’ after the customs of their several nations in Africa.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately, no specific date is mentioned by this author, although it is likely that it occurred in the eighteenth century, when Philadelphia was still a slaveholding city.

Records from areas beyond Philadelphia indicate that dancing was a popular pastime outside as well as in the city, and that in these more rural settings both leading citizens and prosperous farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers had their balls and their dancing masters.<sup>44</sup> Lancaster, to which the nation’s capital moved very briefly during troubled political times, established its own dancing assembly in 1780, counting among its members military officers, barristers, political figures, doctors, and leading merchants. Records of balls held in Lancaster precede this date, suggesting that the founding of an assembly occurred at a point when sufficient civic power coalesced to warrant establishment of an identifying social institution. Reading and Maytown are among other outlying Pennsylvania towns for which some documentation of social dancing exists. While little detail emerges about the nature of this dancing, a few reports by individuals familiar with both Philadelphia society and that in the outlying towns are available from soldiers and from such prominent social leaders as the Shippen family, which moved between Philadelphia and Lancaster fairly frequently. Although it seems that earlier in the century rural dancing was notably “wilder” than that in the city, by the late eighteenth century this seems to have changed; in fact, the dances in the smaller towns were

<sup>43</sup> Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia* 2:265.

<sup>44</sup> D. McN. Stauffer, “The Lancaster Assembly of 1780,” *PMHB* 10 (1886), 413-17; William Bradford to Susan Bradford, May 22, 1786, Wallace Papers, 1:161. See also Raymond W. Albright, *Two Centuries of Reading, Pennsylvania: 1748-1948* (Reading, 1948), 128; M. Luther Heisey, “Cotillions of the Lancaster Assembly,” *LCHSP* 67 (1963), 44; W.U. Hensel, “Lancaster in 1777-80,” *ibid.*, 3 (1904), 230-33; Elizabeth Clarke Kieffer, “Social Life in Lancaster Borough,” *ibid.*, 45 (1941), 113; William Riddle, *The Story of Lancaster: Old and New* (Lancaster, 1917), 56-57; Daniel I. Rupp, *History of Lancaster County* (Lancaster, 1844), 349; Rhamanthus M. Stocker, *Centennial History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (1887, rpt., Baltimore, 1974), 183; and William Frederick Worner, “George Washington in Lancaster,” *LCHSP* 37 (1933), 218.

apparently not markedly different in style, steps, or form from those encountered ordinarily in the metropolis. Thus, it appears that as Philadelphia society took form, it served as a model for those smaller communities in contact with that city.

Dancing, then, as this review of its history has indicated, became an important index of social achievement, marking and distinguishing the well-bred, educated Philadelphian who might comfortably mingle and do business with European leaders of government, business, and society. Americans were judged by visitors from abroad, as they were by one another, in part on their physical behavior, including their abilities as dancers; if they did not always get the highest marks for dance technique, they were well rated for enthusiasm. Like the American stage, long retaining its close connection to the British theatre, American dancing did not immediately separate itself from that of the former mother country; rather, it extended its range to embrace styles of other admired nations, such as those of France. Cultural exchange between Britain and France was also fluid, so that Continental influences were strongly felt in English dance and theatre. At the end of the eighteenth century, no distinctly American aspects of the dances of high society were distinguishable, although new versions of familiar dance forms, bearing American titles, were created and popularized in the new nation. The special ethnic blend which was to forge an American style of dancing was prophesied by the few occasions when some elements of Native American dancing were introduced, as well as by the presence of African slaves dancing at regulated times in the city squares.<sup>45</sup> Yet American gentry behavior on the dance floor was still firmly modeled on British fashions. Dancing for the upper classes of Philadelphia society provided opportunities for education in the fine arts of social intercourse, for physical exercise, for fashionable display, for contacts in business or politics, and, of course, for personal relaxation and pleasure. As the Marquis de

<sup>45</sup> On the African Americans' use of public space for dancing and other public displays, see Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, 1988); and Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1986).



Chastellux observed, dancing served as the emblem of gaiety, love, and legislation in a city just emerging into international prominence.

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