

HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT

Items Used:

- Quill pens
- Reproduction coins
- Book: *The Virginia Almanack, 1749*
- Writing instructions (*laminated for display and to copy & distribute if you wish*)
- Letters (*laminated for display and to copy & distribute if you wish*)
- Expenses (*laminated for display and to copy & distribute if you wish*)

Activity Suggestions:

1. Try writing with the quill pens. You must provide your own paper and ink, and clean the pens afterward; please refer to the file “Quill Instructions.”
2. Compose a letter using the 18th century letters as templates. Discussion questions:
 - a. How has letter composition changed in over 200 years?
 - b. What would someone of the 1700s think of our communication styles?
3. Examine the reproduction coins, and compare to the list of household expenses. Discussion questions:
 - a. How much cash do you think a household would have on hand?
 - b. How does this compare to today? (Remember, they did also use a system of credit in the 1700s.)
4. Read parts of the 1749 *Almanack*. This is the sort of book that many households bought each year, even if they had few other books. Discussion questions:
 - a. What can you tell about the culture based on the subjects they included?
 - b. Is this like any tool you use to manage your household?
 - c. If you were going to design an almanac for the modern day, what would it contain? You may want to take a look at *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, still in publication since 1792: <http://www.almanac.com/>



Information:

"...George Pickering came this Afternoon for the Nonassosiation¹ fine, which came to 13 pounds, which is 13/- as the Money now is exchang'd 20 for one – he took a Looking-Glass worth between 40 and 50/- 6 new Fashion'd Pewter Plates and a 3 qt. pewter Bason, little or nothing the worse for the ware..."

Elizabeth Drinker, June 15, 1779

Just as today, people in the 1700s had to balance a household budget and maintain correspondence with a variety of acquaintances. Managing a household was no easy task.

Money

English currency

Money in colonial America was not a straightforward matter. As a colony of England, it used English money as the basis for its currency. The English monetary system was based on the pound sterling. Prices were expressed in pounds, shillings, and pence. There was no coin for a pound, it was just a unit of measurement, though there was a silver shilling coin and a silver penny coin. The halfpenny and farthing (1/4 of a penny) were copper. Other coins included gold guineas and silver crowns.

English currency was not a base ten system until 1971. In the 1700s, there were 12 pence in a shilling and 20 shillings in a pound. The abbreviations were:

Pound = l. or £ (from the Latin word *libra*, meaning a pound)

Shilling = s. (from the Latin word *solidus*, a Roman coin)

Penny = d. (from the Latin word *denarius*, a Roman coin)

¹ Nonassociation fines: paid by those who refused to serve in the Pennsylvania militia. As a Quaker family, it is not surprising that the Drinkers chose not to serve in the militia. The exchange rate refers to that between paper currency, which was not worth as much as its face value, and coins.

The situation in America

England did not allow the American colonies to mint their own coins, and while there were coins that came from England, America had a chronic shortage. To compensate for the shortage of English coins, Americans used and accepted the coins from many other countries. Here is a chart showing the value of different coins as published in the *Virginia Almanack*, 1749 (reprinted by Colonial Williamsburg). The exchange rate differed between colonies and changed over time.

A Table of the Value of Gold and Silver Coins, as they now pass in PENNSYLVANIA, by Agreement.			
	l.	s.	d.
English Guineas at	1	14	0
French Guineas	1	13	6
Moidores - - - -	2	3	6
Johannes's - - - -	5	15	0
Half Johannes's - -	2	17	6
Carolines - - - -	1	14	0
Dutch or German Ducates	0	14	0
French milled Pistoles	1	6	0
Spanish Pistoles not lighter than 4 dwts. 6 gr. -	1	7	0
Arabian Chequins - -	0	13	6
Other Gold Coin, per Oz.	6	5	0
French Silver Crowns	0	7	6
Spanish milled Piece of 8.	0	7	6
Other good Coined Spanish Silver, per Ounce -	0	8	6

The Spanish dollar was a large silver coin that was often cut in half, quarters, or eighths to form smaller denominations. These coins are the "Pieces of Eight" that you might hear about in pirate stories! Each eighth of a dollar was a "bit." You can see this coin listed in the chart above as a "Spanish milled Piece of 8." (Some coins were "milled," which means the edges were ridged, as a security measure to prevent thieves from shaving bits of the precious metal off the coin.)

Literacy

Reading and writing were considered separate skills in the 1700s, and taught as such. Many people could read but not write.

Literacy in the American colonies varied based on gender, race, and socio-economic status. Literacy was generally higher in New England than the mid-Atlantic and the South, and higher in cities than in rural areas. For example, literacy among white New England men ranged from about 85-90% in the late 1700s and about 31-48% among white New England women. The strict laws prohibiting slaves from learning to read and write came later, in the 1800s. George Washington's will specified that his freed slave children be taught to read and write. Some slave owners saw teaching slaves to read the Bible as a religious obligation.

Letters

Letters were an important method of communication. For those who could read and write, it allowed them to communicate long-distance. Instructional books often included sample letters for people to copy or use as a template.

The actual letters that people wrote were not always like the ideal sample letters published in books! Handwriting varied from the impeccable to the atrocious, spelling and grammar mistakes abounded, and in general these letters serve to remind us that these were real people, not the perfected images seen in paintings and on the pages of history books.



Sources:

Crane, Elaine Forman. *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker: The Life Cycle of an Eighteenth-Century Woman*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994.

Ernst, Joseph Albert. *Currency in the Era of the American Revolution: A History of Colonial Paper Money Practices and British Monetary Policies 1764-1781*. The University of Wisconsin, Ph. D., 1962.

Lynch, Jack. "Every Man Able to Read: Literacy in Early America," *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*, Winter 2011. Accessed through <https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/Foundation/journal/Winter11/literacy.cfm>

The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, "Currency, Coinage and the Cost of Living," accessed September 30, 2022, <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/static/Coinage.jsp>.

The Royal Mint Museum, "History of the British coinage," accessed September 30, 2022, <https://www.royalmintmuseum.org.uk/journal/british-coinage/>



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