



# Miss in Her Teens

## The Lives of Gentry Girls

BY CATHY HELLIER

**H**IGH SCHOOL, CELL PHONES, driver's license, texting, BFFs, boyfriends, clothes, manicures. These words conjure up the image of the twenty-first-century American teenage girl. The eighteenth-century teen girl? In the words of my adolescent daughter, "Not so much." Yet, although the technology was different, the gentleman's daughter of colonial days had some of the same "issues": school, guys, parents, and independence.

We don't know much about the teen experience of the daughters of tradesmen and small shopkeepers before the American Revolution, and we know less about how poor girls passed their teen years. Their slender education and lack of leisure prevented them from leaving us much written evidence. Gentry girls left us more. From their letters, diaries, and the observations of their friends and families, we learn what teen life was like in the gentry household in Virginia, at the fringes of the empire, and in England, at the center of it, just before independence.

**G**IRLS IN ENGLAND were more likely to be shuffled off to boarding school, sometimes as young as age five, but many English teens learned their lessons at home from a master or governess. Before the Revolution, there was hardly a boarding school to be found in Virginia. Some gentlemen sent their daughters to co-ed day schools taught by a minister. Men and women set themselves up in Virginia towns as teachers for girls. A few plantation misses had governesses, but the tutor who schooled their brothers educated many young gentlewomen. A minority of parents on both sides of the Atlantic taught their daughters themselves.

A Virginia girl's formal education began when she was five or six and proceeded at a leisurely pace for ten years or so. Her goals were modest: reading, writing, simple arithmetic, and, perhaps, French.

Tutor Philip Fithian's descriptions of the progress of the daughters of Councilor Robert Carter of Nomini Hall on the Potomac River provide some idea of the academic expectations for young gentry girls in the 1770s. Harriet Carter, at five, said all her letters for the first time. Nancy Carter, at eleven, was reading out of the spelling book, none too well, and beginning to write—presumably with a pen, having already learned to use a slate. Priscilla Carter, at thirteen, was reading the *Spectator* and learning multiplication and division. Before the proliferation of academies after the Revolution, most Virginia girls were literate, but not literary.

Beside the basics, the curriculum at the better English schools could include grammar, literature, geography, penmanship, and even history and natural philosophy, as they called science. English girls were expected to be able to converse intelligently on such subjects.

A Virginia girl's daily use of time was carefully monitored. Maria Carter wrote about her home-schooling schedule, which she said, with some exaggeration, was the same three hundred sixty-five days a year:

I am awakened out of a sound Sleep . . .



Dave Doody

A tutor oversees his teenage charges in the Wythe House. Interpreter Brian David Murray supervises the studies of Anneliese Marty, left, and Amy Gibbens.

then up I get, huddle on my cloaths & down to Book, then to Breakfast, then to School again, & may be I have an Hour to my self before Dinner, then the Same Story over again until twi-light, & then a small portion of time before I go to rest, and so you must expect nothing from me. . . .

Perhaps Maria's grandmother, Maria Byrd, with whom she lived at the James River plantation Westover, was stricter about such schedules than the Robert Carters. Although

their daily routine was much the same, Fithian's female charges missed school to take music and dance lessons, to pay short visits to neighbors, because of illness, and to prepare for balls and other special occasions.

During the play hours before dinner, the girls rode on horseback for exercise with family or with their tutor, walked, or in bad weather, stayed inside and did such things as needlework. After supper, the family often gathered for conversation, music, or games. The schoolgirls, during school time and leisure, were almost always in the company of a parent or tutor and were closely supervised. Like the misses at English boarding schools, they had little personal

freedom. We know little about the schedules at day schools in Virginia or at English boarding schools except that they were regimented.

**E**ARLY teen years were the prime time for learning the housewifely arts and social graces. Gentlemen's daughters could expect to have servants or slaves to help with the household labor after marriage, so labor management was an important part of their informal education.

Plain and fancy sewing, cooking, baking, pickling, cleaning, and the making of home remedies were essential to a girl's training on both sides of the water.

Girls in the English countryside and on the Virginia plantation became proficient at supervising the kitchen garden, poultry yard, and dairy. They were also acquiring the social graces. Dance, music, tea service, conversation, visiting, and etiquette, and, in England, drawing, singing, and painting.

In England, at fifteen or sixteen, girls could appear at public places and were on the marriage market. They were "coming out," ready to mix in society. Most relished the freedom from the schoolroom and being the center of attention—not to mention the fashionable new wardrobe.

Today's teens begin dating at about the same time, but modern dating is not equivalent to eighteenth-



Dave Doody

From left, Carolyn A. Wilson as a mother chaperones a get-together of teenagers: Amy Gibbens, Bradley Turner, Anneliese Marty, and Robert Panasuk.

century courtship. The usual goals of teen dating now are to have fun and to gain experience in relationships. The object then was to find a suitable husband, and to do it before too much time passed.

In England, it was essential that the young woman enter the wider world for a social season to attract a larger pool of suitors of appropriate family and fortune. At the very least, she should spend a season in the principal city of her region, but a season in Bath or London was essential for an ambitious match. Generally accompanied by her mother or another matron, the young lady was escorted to public balls and assemblies, the theater or opera, pleasure gardens, and public walks. As Mary Wollstonecraft wrote, "coming out in the fashionable world" meant "to bring to market a marriageable miss, whose person is taken from one public place to another, richly caparisoned." The girls seem to have had a less-jaundiced view. Their diaries and letters attest to the thrill of the metropolis and gadding about after the relative seclusion of their upbringing.

In England and America, girls were escorted to an event or public place not by their beaux but by their parents, or some other mature relative or close friend. Courting couples danced under the chaperone's watchful eye. In Virginia, a devoted swain

*“I did indeed endeavour to behave to her with indifference; but . . .”*

might see the young lady home, but the novels of the period illustrate the dangers to an English girl's person and reputation if she were to ride alone with a man in his coach.

In Virginia, public places were few. Williamsburg, the capital, at times boasted public balls and a theater, and girls whose fathers were burgesses or councilors might experience a ball at the Palace or Capitol. But in the words of one British visitor, Williamsburg was like a “good Country Town” in England, not equivalent to a regional city.

What was a Virginia girl to do? Why, go a-visiting.

**V**ISITING WAS PART OF SOCIAL LIFE in England and Virginia. Ladies spent agreeable time at each other's houses for a morning visit or a dish of tea, and families entertained one another at Sunday dinners or for more extended stays.

In Virginia, however, long stays with relatives were essential to courtship. Having apprenticed in visiting during their early teens, young ladies were ready for long visits when they left the schoolroom. These social sojourns could last a month or more in the home of a married sibling, aunt, or cousin; sometimes they consisted of a series of short stays in the homes of relatives.

Because the idea behind these visits was mostly social, families saw to it that the girls enjoyed the company of a house full of hosts, fellow long-term visitors, and drop-in neighbors. Lucinda Lee wrote in her journal that at Bushfield, “we found the house pretty full.” She said other young ladies were visiting, and neighbors and young men dropped in. Among many similar entries, she wrote:

It is in the evening. There are two Beaus just come. Mrs. Pinkard tels me I must go and let her introduce them to me. The first I am acquainted with: he is homely, but a mighty worthy Man. The second I never saw before—he is tolerably clever. Nancy and I are going to pore out tea.

A whirl of formal social activities, such as balls and entertainments, brought young men and women together. During Robert Bolling's courtship of Anne Miller, she and a group of young people moved from one relation's house to another. Bob

Walker prepared an entertainment for these friends, and Bolling said, “The Sun arose on our Mirth.” Young Virginia gentlewomen had freedom of movement and many formal and informal contacts with young men.

After the close supervision of their younger years, courting couples in the colony were not always chaperoned. Some girls didn't need it. Some did. Bolling described an encounter with his sweetheart at his mother's home:

I did indeed endeavour to behave to her with indifference; but, coming by Accident into a Chamber, where she was sitting, extremely pensive, on a *Bed*: I cou'd no longer withhold, but overcome by an Excess of Passion, I threw myself *thereon*, and pressed her to my Bosom, with a Rapture, which can scarce be conceived. . . . While we were together on the Bed I overlaid and broke a Fan of hers: a Necklace too had already fallen a Sacrifice to my Caresses.

Evidently there was some hanky-panky at the George Wythe House in Williamsburg as well. Richard Randolph, rather ungallantly, boasted that the Wythes' niece Elizabeth Talliaferro had invited him to her bed when she was visiting her aunt and uncle. Elizabeth Carrington told her sister, based upon her own experience, “Relations however amiable and respectable generally are either too much engaged or too negligent to have charge of thoughtless girls.”

Many of the young men with whom the girls consorted were blood relatives. These extended visits by young women in the homes of their relations facilitated the widespread practice among the Virginia gentry of marriage between cousins. Robert Bolling described how he had fallen in love with his distant cousin Anne Miller:

The great intimacy, between Relations in this Colony, permitting many Freedoms; I found it impossible to have this Lady in my Arms for Hours together, without feeling such Emotions, as are the unavoidable Consequence of much Familiarity between the Sexes.

In other words, familiarity bred romance.

Unlike the English, the Virginia gentry seldom discouraged marriages between cousins. After all, there weren't as many families of suitable rank to

choose from as in England, and by the mid-eighteenth century, most of those families had intermarried many times.

Besides greasing the wheels of courtship, these rounds of visits seem to have saved parents and girls from some of the thornier issues of parental control during adolescence. A teen was allowed a period of freedom away from home, and her courtship was supervised by the relatives with whom she was staying. Although parents reserved the right of refusal if they did not approve of the prospective bridegroom, they seldom vetoed the daughter's choice. Relation-

found someone acceptable to marry, just as did English parents half a world away. Their baby girl had grown up. ▲

*Cathy Hellier is a historian in The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's department of historical research. This is her first contribution to the journal.*

Suggestions for further reading:

Robert Bolling, "A Circumstantial Account of Certain Transactions . . . terminated at Flower-de-Hundred, on the sixteenth of September, 1760, as such juvenile



Dave Doody

Away from adult eyes, adolescent ardor heats up as Robert Panasuk tries to force an embrace on the reluctant Anneliese Marty.

ships between parents and daughters remained close. In England, mama usually accompanied her daughter during her season, and supervised her courtship, if possible. The opportunity for parent-child conflict was greater and formed the plot of many a play and novel.

Virginia parents experienced that sensation of mild panic that modern parents feel when their daughter first drives, or moves into a college dorm or first apartment. Separation was difficult. Loss of control was, too. Parents hoped their daughters wouldn't marry someone too far away from the home place. They got miffed when their girls didn't write. They worried about their health and safety. They breathed a sigh of relief when their daughter

Transactions do frequently to the Satisfaction of Nobody," in J. A. Leo Lemay, ed., *Robert Bolling Woos Anne Miller: Love and Courtship in Colonial Virginia, 1760* (Charlottesville, VA, 1990).

Cathleene B. Hellier, "The Adolescence of Gentry Girls in Late Eighteenth-Century Virginia," [http://research.history.org/Historical\\_Research/Research\\_Themes/ThemeFamily/GentryGirls.cfm](http://research.history.org/Historical_Research/Research_Themes/ThemeFamily/GentryGirls.cfm)

Linda Rowe, "Women and Education in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," [http://research.history.org/Historical\\_Research/Research\\_Themes/ThemeFamily/WomenEducation.cfm](http://research.history.org/Historical_Research/Research_Themes/ThemeFamily/WomenEducation.cfm)

Susan Skedd, "Women Teachers and the Expansion of Girls' Schooling in England, c. 1760–1820," in Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, eds., *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities* (London, 1997).

Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT, 1998).