

Massachusetts Marriage Ways: The Puritan Idea of Marriage as a Contract

Marriage customs in Massachusetts were not what one might expect to find in a new country. Despite the vast abundance of land, young people did not rush to tie the knot. By comparison with other colonies, age at first marriage was remarkably advanced. After the first few years of settlement, men tended to marry at the age of 26, and women at about 23. These patterns persisted in the Puritan colonies for nearly a century.

Twenty town studies of mean age at marriage yield a normal New England pattern and three regional variations. The norm appeared in the seed towns of Congregational Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut by the second generation. Variation I in new interior towns combined a near-normal age for men and an early age for women, converging on the regional standard by the 2d or 3d generation. Variation II among Plymouth Separatists, Rhode Island Baptists and Nantucket families was marriage at a slightly earlier age for both sexes. Variation III among Boston elites and Massachusetts ministers was marriage at an advanced age for males and a near-normal age for females. Mean age at marriage was as follows:

Town	Marriage Cohort	Men	Women	Town	Marriage Cohort	Men	Women
Dedham (Lockridge)	1640-90	25.5	22.5	Ipswich (Norton)	1652-1700	27.2	21.1
Andover (Greven)	1st gen.	26.8	19.0		1701-25	26.5	23.6
	2nd gen.	26.7	22.3		1726-50	24.0	23.3
	3rd gen.	27.1	24.5	Topsfield (Norton)	1701-25	28.3	23.3
	4th gen.	25.3	23.2		1726-50	27.8	25.3
					1751-75	16.1	24.3
Rowley (O'Malley)	1st gen.	26.6	22.0	Boxford (Norton)	1701-25	26.9	22.8
	2nd gen.	26.5	24.1		1726-50	26.6	23.7
	3rd gen.	24.5	23.5		1751-75	25.5	22.8
Hingham (Smith)	1641-1700	26.8	22.6	Wenham (Norton)	1701-25	24.8	22.2
	1701-20	27.8	24.3		1726-50	24.0	23.6
	1721-40	26.3	23.3		1751-75	24.7	23.7
	1741-60	25.7	22.5	Sturbridge (Osterud and Fuller)	1730-59	24.8	19.5
Concord (Harris)	1750-70	25.1	21.1		1760-79	25.4	21.6
	1770-90	26.2	23.9	Deerfield	1741-79	n.a.	21.1
Brookline (Linzner)	1710-30	26.6	23.0				
	1731-50	26.4	23.0	Greenfield	1741-79	n.a.	18.5
Hampton, N.H. (Kilbourne)	1655-99	25.7	21.5				
	1700-1719	26.7	23.3	Shelburne	1741-79	n.a.	23.7
Windsor, Conn. (Auwers)	1640-59	26.7	n.a.				
	ca.1660-75	25.1	19.8	Nantucket (Byers)	1710-19	23.3	21.6
	ca.1670-85	25.4	20.6		1720-29	24.0	20.0
	ca.1680-95	26.4	21.8		1730-39	24.6	19.3
	ca.1690-1705	26.3	23.0		1740-49	22.6	20.0
Plymouth	1st gen.	27.0	20.6		1750-59	22.7	20.6
	2nd gen.	26.0	20.2		1760-69	23.0	21.7
	3rd gen.	25.4	21.3		1770-79	23.6	20.7
	4th gen.	24.6	22.3	Bristol, R.I.	before 1750	23.9	20.5
Boston elites	1710-20	27.7	22.2		after 1750	24.3	21.1

Sources include Kenneth Lockridge, "The Population of Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1676," *ECHR* 19 (1966), 331; Greven, *Four Generations*, 34; Smith, "Population, Family and Society in Hingham," 55; Harris, "Concord," 89; Linzner, "Brookline," 24; Nancy Osterud and John Fulton, "Family Limitation and Age at Marriage: Fertility Decline in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, 1730-1850," *PS* 30 (1976), 481-94; Susan Norton, "Population Growth in Colonial America: A Study of Ipswich, Mass.," *PS* 25 (1971), 445; Patricia O'Malley, "'Beloved Wife' and 'Inveigled Affections': Marriage Patterns in Early Rowley, Massachusetts," in Robert M. Taylor and Ralph J. Crandall, eds., *Generations and Change* (Macon, Ga., 1986), 181-202; Demos, *A Little Commonwealth*, 193; *idem*, "Families in Colonial Bristol, Rhode Island," *WMQ* 25 (1968), 55; unpublished data by Lawrence Kilbourne on Hampton, Susan Simmons on Boston elites, Edward Byers and Carol Shuchman on Nantucket.

Another anomaly appeared in the proportion of young people who never married at all. In most societies where age at marriage is advanced, the proportion never marrying tends to be high. This pattern did not appear in New England. Marriage was delayed ten years beyond puberty but nearly everyone married---94 percent of women, and 98 percent of New England men.

This pattern which seems natural to us today was very different from western Europe in the mid-seventeenth century. In that rigid and rank-bound society, many young men and women were never able to marry at any age. As many as 27 percent of England's adult population reached maturity without marrying.

From the start, things were different in the Puritan colonies. In the town of Rowley, Massachusetts, historian Patricia O'Malley concludes from close research that "almost every child who reached adulthood" in the seventeenth century found a marriage partner. In the first generation, there was only one old bachelor in the town. The marriage imperative was strong in this culture. Women who did not find a partner by the age of thirty were called "thornbacks" in Massachusetts---as they had been in England. Worse, Puritans suspected that failure to marry was a sign of God's ill favor. There was a New England proverb that stated "women dying maids lead apes in hell."

Behind these demographic patterns was a cultural idea of marriage that was unique to the Puritan colonies. The Church of England had taught that matrimony was a sacred union that must be solemnized by a priest. Anglicans also insisted that after the sacred knot was firmly tied, it could never be "put asunder" by mortal hands. Exceptions were allowed for monarchs and great lords, but for ordinary English men and women there was virtually no possibility of divorce in the seventeenth century.

The Puritans of New England rejected all of these Anglican ideas. They believed that marriage was not a religious ceremony but a civil contract. They required that this covenant must be "agreed" or "executed" (not "performed" or "solemnized") before a magistrate, and not a minister. They also insisted that if the terms of the marriage covenant were broken, then the union could be ended by divorce. These attitudes became the basis of regional marriage customs throughout New England. But they were not invented in America, or even in England. William Bradford noted that they were established "according to the laudable custom of the low countries," with which East Anglian Congregationalists were in close communication. They were also briefly introduced in England by Oliver Cromwell's Civil Marriage Act of 1653.

The Puritans required in most cases that both parents and children must give their free consent to marriage. Massachusetts courts fined children for an offense called "self-marriage," which meant marrying without the consent of parents or magistrates. But parents were forbidden to withhold their approval arbitrarily; in some cases, children successfully sued fathers and mothers for refusing permission to marry.

"The proportion of women who remained single among Andover's third generation was 7.4%; among Hingham women before 1700 it was 5.3%. Bachelorhood was less common below 2.6% in Hingham; Greven, *Four Generations*, 121; Smith, "Population, Family and Society in Hingham," 12.

The process of a covenanted marriage began with complex rituals of courtship that were strictly regulated by law and custom. Diaries kept by Samuel Sewall in Massachusetts and Ralph Josselin in East Anglia described these rituals in very much the same way. By and large, Puritan parents did not arrange the marriages of their children.

Suitors carefully sought the consent of parents before beginning a courtship, and sent small presents to ease the way. A suitor of Samuel Sewall's daughter Judith sent the mother "a present of oranges and a shattuck [a grapefruit, a rare treat in Boston], and to my daughter Judith a Stone-Ring and a Fan."

Puritan males made awkward suitors. When Samuel Sewall was courting Katherine Brattle Winthrop, she asked him to help her "draw off" her glove. He bluntly refused, and made a clumsy joke that "twas great odds between handling a dead goat and a living lady." This specimen of Puritan *savoir faire* suggests something of the hostility in this culture to the arts of courtship that flourished in cavalier circles.

But in their bluff and awkward way, the Puritans cherished true love, and insisted that it was a prerequisite of a happy marriage. The Puritans used the expression "falling in love." They believed that love should normally precede marriage. Their courtship rituals were designed to promote this order of events. East Anglian Puritan Mary Josselin refused a suitor partly on the ground that he was "not loving," and her father acquiesced, even though he strongly favored the match:

Mary quitted Mr. Rhea [Rev. Ambrose Rhea, rector of Wakes Colne, Essex]. Her exceptions were his age, being 14 years older, she might be left a widow with children. She checked at his estate being not suitable to her portion ... [and] he seemed to her not loving. It was no small grief to me, but I could not desire it, when she said it would make both their lives miserable.

Customs of courtship in New England were carefully designed to allow young people privacy enough to discover if they loved one another, at the same time that parents maintained close supervision. This was the purpose of "bundling," a European custom which became widespread in New England. The courting couple were put to bed together, "tarrying" all night with a "bundling board" between them. Sometimes the young woman's legs were bound together in a "bundling stocking" which fitted her body like a glove.

Another regional custom was the "courting stick," a hollow pole six or eight feet long, with an earpiece at one end and a mouthpiece at the other. The courting couple whispered quietly to one another through this tube, while members of the family remained in the room nearby.

Bundling boards and courting sticks were not merely pieces of amuse trivia. These two ingenious folk-inventions were instruments of an important cultural purpose. They were designed to reconcile two requirements of New England courtship---the free consent of the young, and strict supervision by their elders. Both of these elements were thought necessary to a covenanted marriage.

After the courtship was complete, the ritual of the wedding in Massachusetts began with a betrothal ceremony which was called the "precontract" in Plymouth and the "contraction" in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Cotton Mather explained: "There was maintained a solemnity called a Contraction a little before the consummation of a marriage was allowed of. A Pastor was usually employed and a sermon was preached on this occasion." This custom was also called the "walking out," or the "coming out." It was a great event in a small New England town. The intended bride was commonly invited to choose the text for the minister's sermon with all the care and attention that a young woman in the twentieth century would select her bridesmaids' matching dresses and shoes.

Betrothed couples were also required to post their "banns" (a public announcement) at the meeting house on at least three lecture days. Those who failed to do so risked punishment for "dis-

orderly marriage." If no impediment was found, the wedding was arranged, commonly for a date in November which was the favorite season in Puritan New England.

The wedding was performed at home by a magistrate in a simple civil ceremony. There were no holy vows or wedding rings---which the Puritans disapproved. A single question was addressed to the bride and groom; when they freely answered in the affirmative, the event was over. The couple was required to register their marriage in a civil book kept by the town clerk. Then a small celebration followed---not a great feast, but a modest wedding dinner with bridal cakes and a cup of sack posset. The sober settlers of Massachusetts did not approve of wild wedding parties.

The clergy condemned extravagant display as "vain marriage." The most important part of the dinner was the singing of a psalm. Dancing was sternly forbidden; so also were excessive dining and drinking.

On the wedding night, the bride dressed in a special gown, and was put to bed by friends who accompanied the couple into the chamber, and then gave them a joyous charivari with much banging and bell-ringing outside the chamber. This custom was commonly kept throughout Christian Europe---both the "chambering" and the charivari. But the marriage ways of Massachusetts in their totality were a unique amalgam of Puritan ideas and East Anglian practices. As we shall see, they differed in many important ways from other regional folkways in British America.

Divorce customs also differed from other English-speaking cultures. The Puritans recognized many grounds for divorce that were consistent with their conception of marriage. The statutes of Connecticut allowed divorce for adultery, fraudulent contract, willful desertion and total neglect for three years, and "providential absence" for seven years. Massachusetts granted divorces in the seventeenth century for adultery, desertion, cruelty, and "failure to provide." Physical violence was also recognized as a ground for divorce. Husbands and wives were forbidden to strike one another in Massachusetts; there was no such thing as "moderate correction" in the laws of this colony. The courts often intervened in cases of wife-beating, and sometimes of husband - beating too.

These various grounds for divorce also defined the idea of marriage in Massachusetts. It was to be a close and companionate relationship, a union of love and harmony, an act of sexual fulfillment, and an institution with a firm economic base. All of these requirements were part of the Puritan idea of the marriage covenant, which could be dissolved if any of its major terms were not kept. These Puritan marriage ways were unique to New England in the seventeenth century.

Virginia Marriage Ways:

The Anglican Idea of Marriage as a Sacred Union

Marriage in Virginia was a social condition which everyone was expected to achieve. Bachelors and spinsters were condemned as unnatural and even dangerous to society. When William Byrd II was slow to remarry after the death of his wife, his female relatives urged him forward in no uncertain way. "At night," he wrote, "the girls put a drawn sword and common prayer book open at the matrimony on my bed."

Virginia and New England were alike in their ideas of universal marriage; both rejected the ideal of celibacy which was so strong in Catholic countries. But these two Protestant cultures of British America also differed in many ways as to their ideas of marriage, and their matrimonial institutions. In Massachusetts, as we have seen, marriage was thought to be a covenant which could be terminated when its terms were not fulfilled. In Virginia, matrimony was regarded as an indissoluble union---a sacred knot that could never be untied by mortal hands. Divorce in the modern sense did not exist. Only permanent separation and maintenance could be obtained, and even that release was rarely granted. In 1681 the Virginia lawyer William Fitzhugh wrote that his colony had allowed no divorces and only a single permanent separation during the previous sixty years. The sole exception was a decree given to the wife of Giles Brent after acts of physical cruelty so extreme that her life was thought in danger.

Social rituals of matrimony reflected these ideas of marriage. Virginians followed the Church of England's elaborate five-step process of espousal, publication of banns, religious ceremony, marriage feast, and sexual consummation. The clergy of Virginia were forbidden to conduct any marriage without the prior publication of banns. In order to marry, children under age were compelled to obtain the written permission of parents or guardians. Clandestine marriages were punished by imprisonment.

The favored periods of marriage in Virginia were early November and late December after Christmas. In the Church of England, vows could not be exchanged during Lent (the forty weekdays from Ash Wednesday to Easter), or Advent (the four Sundays before Christmas), or the three weeks prior to the Feast of St. John. These customs were generally kept in the Chesapeake colonies.

The bride and groom in Virginia were often united in two ceremonies---both of which were condemned in Puritan New England. The first was a Christian ceremony, which was solemnized sometimes in a church or more often in the bride's home, but always by a minister according to the laws of the Anglican Church and the Book of Common Prayer. The other ceremony was an ancient pagan practice in which the bride and groom were made to jump over a broomstick. This ritual had long been observed throughout Britain and much of Western Europe, and especially in the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. The custom of the broomstick marriage came to be widely practiced by white families throughout the southern colonies in addition to the Christian ceremony. For black slaves, it was the only type of marriage ceremony that was permitted, and rapidly acquired a special meaning in Afro-American culture.

Archibald Barnett of Maryland (1688) married an eleven-year-old heiress without permission of her guardian, and landed in jail. *Archives of Maryland VIII*, 32-34; for a clandestine child marriage in Northampton County, Va., where the bride was under the age of twelve, see Bruce, *Social Life in Virginia*, 224, 233.

The marriage ceremony was followed by a feast, which among the great planters included a fancy ball and a house party that went on for days. Expensive gifts were given by the groom to his guests. At one marriage in Devon, six dozen guests received watches and silver ribbons as "favors." Families of yeoman farmers celebrated on a smaller scale, but their customs were much the same. They appeared in Virginia during the mid-seventeenth century and persisted to the nineteenth and early twentieth. In the year 1686, the French traveler Durand was invited to a wedding feast in Gloucester County, Virginia:

There were at least a hundred guests, many of social standing & handsome, well-dressed ladies. Although it was November, we ate under the trees. The day was perfect. We were twenty-four at the first table. They served us so copiously with meats of all kinds that I am sure there would have been enough for a regiment of five hundred soldiers, even entirely made up of men from Languedoc.... It is the custom to take only one meal upon such occasions, at two o'clock in the afternoon.... they caroused all night long & when it was day ... I did not see one who could stand straight.

Before the marriage ceremony took place, espousal was also a complex social ritual which involved many people in addition to the intending couple. Amongst landed families, marriage was regarded as a union of properties as well as persons, and the destinies of entire families were at stake. One English gentleman advised another to "marry thy daughters betimes, lest they marry themselves."

Love was not thought to be a necessary precondition for these unions. Moralists insisted that love should follow marriage, but they did not believe that it would normally precede it. An English gentleman recommended that one should "take a wife thou canst love." He did not think in terms of marrying a woman whom one loved already. Love was not thought to be special or exclusive bond between two unique personalities---a romantic idea that did not develop until a later era. The prevailing male attitude in the seventeenth century was summarized by Sir John Oglander, who believed that "any woman may be won, and almost *by any* man ... importunity and opportunity overcometh all women. *Experientia docet* [Experience teaches]."

The parents had an active role in the marriage decision. Many Virginians owned an English marriage manual which commented, "Children are so much the goods, the possessions of their parents that they cannot without a kind of theft, give away themselves without the allowance of those that have the right in them." These ideas were carried into practice. Children who defied their parents were denied dowries and inheritance. Children were rarely made to marry against their will, but neither were they left to decide the question for themselves. Parents and guardians entered into complex negotiations to settle the size of the marriage portion or "dot" which a couple needed to make its way in the world. Written prenuptial agreements of high complexity were

The Whole Duty Of Man (London, 1684); quoted in Smith, *Inside the Big House*, 140; Smith describes an episode when William Byrd's daughter Evelyn wished to marry a British baronet of whom he disapproved. The angry father ordered his daughter "never more to greet, speak or write to that gentleman"; and if she refused to obey she was warned "not to look for one brass farthing.... Figure then to yourself my dear child how wretched you will be with a provoked father and a disappointed husband.

common not only among members of the gentry but also among yeomen and husbandmen. Many people were sometimes involved in these agreements. One English marriage agreement in the county of Hampshire (1676) was executed among six sets of parties---the bride, the bride's relatives, the groom, the groom's kinfolk, and the tenants of lands that were given to the couple. Agreements in Virginia were similar in every important way.

In both England and Virginia, many of these unions were cousin-marriages that had been arranged by elders. In England, for example, Francis Carew sent a letter to his kinsman Sir Nicholas Carew:

I have a daughter who for handsomeness, education, and competency of portion, shall be a wife for any Gentleman in England. ..you propose to marry a young woman, I shall be willing to treat with you therein & shall wish good success thereto.

The marriage of first cousins was condemned by New England Puritans as violating the law of consanguinity. But many an Anglican lady "changed her condition but not her name." The same custom was common in Virginia, and fundamentally important to the cohesion of the tidewater elite. The culture of New England created a different set of matrimonial priorities.

One consequence of these customs appeared in the pattern of age at marriage. Male Virginians married at nearly the same age as in New England, twenty-five or twenty-six on the average. But brides in the Chesapeake colonies were much younger than in Puritan Massachusetts. Before 1700, most Virginia girls found a husband by the age of seventeen. Mean age at marriage was a little higher-eighteen to twenty-but below the Massachusetts average.

Another consequence was a large difference in the ages of husbands and wives. In Virginia's Middlesex County before 1670, grooms tended to be nearly ten years older than brides: 28.4 against 18.7. That disparity diminished to about five years in the mid-eighteenth century, but it remained much greater than in Massachusetts, where only a year or two separated the average ages of men and women at first marriage.

¹⁴Mean age at first marriage in the Chesapeake colonies was as follows:
Place Population Cohort

Males

Females

Charles Co., Md.	native whites	1640-79b	24.1(0 = 40)	17.8 (15)
Somerset Co., Md.	native whites	1648-69b	23.1(30)	16.5 (44)
	native whites	1670-1711b	22.8(25)	17.0 (32)
	native whites	1710-40b	24.1(25)	19.0 (13)
Prince George's Co., Western Shore	native whites	1680-99b	23.1(48)	18.2 (29) \ld. and Lower
		1710-19b	23.7(72)	18.5 (72)
		1720-49b	25.9(100)	21.4 (64)
Southern Maryland	slaves (age at	1725-34		17.8 1st conception)
		1735-47		17.3
		1748-57		18.1
		1758-67		18.5
Middlesex County,	former servants	thru 1669b	29.5(70)	22.8 (21) Va.
		1670-79b	28.9(21)	23.9 (6)
		1680-89b	27.2(22)	22.9 (8)
	all others thru 1669b	28.4(105)	18.7 (86)	1670-79b 26.7(53) 18.8 (59) 1680-89b 25.2(92) 20.3 (97) 1690-99b
		24.7(90)	19.6 (94)	1700-09b 25.0(108) 20.6 (118) 1710-19b 24.4(109) 20.5 (119) 1720-29b 25.0(48) 20.9 (53)
Virginia elites	1725-34b	27.0	18.3	1735-44m
		28.2	19.8	1745-54m
		30.1		19.5

Sources include Russell R. Menard, "Immigrants and Their Increase ...," in Aubrey Land, Lois Barr and Edward Papenfuss, eds., *Law, Society and Politics in Early Maryland* (Baltimore, 1977), 100; "The Demography of Somerset County, Maryland: A Preliminary Report"; Lorna S. Walsh, "Charles County, Maryland, 1658-1705: A Study of Chesapeake Social and Political Structure" (thesis, Michigan State Univ.), ch. 2; Michael J. Kelly, "Fancily Reconstitution of Stepney Parish, Somerset County, Maryland" (thesis, Univ. of Md., 1971), 18-25; Kulikoff, "tobacco and Slaves," chap. 3; Rutman and Rutman, *A Place in Time, Explicatus*, 65; Susan Simmons, unpublished research on Virginia elites; R. B. Outhwaite, "Age at Marriage in England from the Late Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century," *RHST* 23 (1973), 55-70; Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England*, 46-54; Michael W. Flinn, *The European Demographic System, 1500-1820* (Baltimore, 1981), 19-29.

Other inequalities appeared in the proportion of Virginians who married at all. Though the ideal was universal marriage, the reality was very different in seventeenth-century Virginia, because so few immigrants were females. Nearly all women were able to marry, but for men the pattern was very different. One study of estate-inventories in southern Maryland from 1658 to 1708 finds that one-quarter of men died without ever marrying. A man's chances of finding a wife were a function of his social rank. He was yet another system of inequality in this hierarchical society.

The Virginia pattern developed within a culture where marriage was regarded as something to be arranged between families, something that did not require love as a precondition, something that could never be dissolved, and something that joined husband and wife in an organic and patriarchal hierarchy. Given such an idea of matrimony, it seemed right and fitting in this culture that a typical Virginia marriage in the seventeenth century should join a man of maturity to a miss in her teens. These Virginia customs were very different from the marriage ways of Massachusetts.

Delaware Marriage Ways:
The Quaker Idea of Marriage as "Loving Agreement"

The Quakers also brought to America a strict set of marriage customs, which specified who one might marry, how and when and where and why. These questions were urgently important to the Society of Friends---so much so that its founder, George Fox, wrote no fewer than sixty epistles about marriage. Other leaders frequently addressed the same themes.

On the question of marriage partners, Quakers strongly condemned what they called "mongrel marriages" to "unbelievers." Outmarriage caused many disciplinary proceedings by Quaker meetings. In 1706, for example, one English meeting recorded the disownment of a member named Bartholemew Mastin:

[He] hath gone and joynd himself in marriage with one that is not one of our profession and that we are altogether strangers to ... according to the holy writ that believers should not marry with unbelievers ... we do deny and disown the said Bartholemew.

This Quaker rule against outmarriage was strictly enforced in America. For nearly two centuries, half of all the disciplinary proceedings among Pennsylvania Quakers were about problems of courtship, and marriage with "unbelievers." The frequency of these cases increased with time.

The rule against outmarriage was grounded not merely in a negative principle of sectarian exclusion, but in the positive idea that marriages should be founded in true Christian love. To the Quakers, love did not mean romantic attraction, sexual passion or even domestic affection. Their idea of "pure and true love" was not the Greek *eros* or Roman *amor* but the Christian *caritas* and *pietas* which were thought to be attainable only between true believers.

Quakers insisted that marriage should not be for lust. One Friend wrote in his Commonplace Book:

If thou resolute [*sic*] to change a single life
And hast a purpose to become a wife,
Then chuse thy husband not for worldly gain,
Nor for his comely shape or beauty vain.
If money make the match or Lust impure
Both bride and bridegroom too shall weep be sure.

But Quaker moralists demanded that love must be a part of every marriage. They believed that marriage should be a union of "sweethearts," a word which they often used. Further, they insisted that love should precede marriage, and not merely follow it. But this was to be the pure and undefiled love between Christians, and not a carnal appetite for the flesh.

Quakers also condemned dynastic marriages which were made for material gain. They forbade first-cousin marriages which were commonplace in Virginia. During the eighteenth century, many Quaker meetings even discouraged unions between second cousins---a major restriction in small rural communities, and an exceptionally difficult problem for the Delaware elite. They insisted that a marriage must be acceptable to the family, the meeting and the entire community of Friends. The formal consent of all parents was required; without it permission to marry was refused. The approval of a large part of the community was also sought. One Quaker marriage certificate in England (1735) was signed by no fewer than twenty-three supporting witnesses. The marriage of William Penn and Gulielma Springett (1672) was supported by forty-six witnesses, who testified that the couple had "first obtained the good will and consent of their nearest friends and relations." These customs were also kept in America. Members of the Delaware elite had as many as fifty witnesses; ordinary country folk often had twenty or thirty.

These various rules were strictly enforced by the Society of Friends. One result was that

marriage came late among both English Quakers and German Pietists. Mean age at first marriage was higher than among Anglicans.

Another consequence was that many Quakers never married at all. One study of the Society of Friends in New Jersey during the eighteenth century found that 16 percent of women were still single at the age of fifty. By comparison with other colonies, these numbers of spinsters were large. In New England and Virginia, 95 to 98 percent of women married during the same period. The difference cannot be explained in terms of sex ratios. It was caused by different cultural ideas of marriage.

Quaker ideas of marriage were also expressed in wedding rituals, which differed in many curious details from matrimonial customs in Puritan Massachusetts and Anglican Virginia. These practices changed very little during the period of American colonization. A leading authority writes, "The Society of Friends had established its marriage customs in England and ... the practices were transferred intact to the New World." The rituals of marriage within the Society of Friends developed in reaction to the complexities of Episcopal and Congregational observances. But Quaker marriages became so fantastically elaborate that Puritan and Anglican practices seemed simplicity itself.

A proper Quaker wedding had no fewer than sixteen stages. When a man and woman agreed to marry, their first formal step was to consult their parents, which sometimes they did even before settling the question among themselves. When Pennsylvania Quaker Benjamin Ferris decided to marry, he asked his own parents first, then his future wife, and then her parents—a common sequence.

If all agreed, the couple jointly announced their intention to marry before the women's meeting. After an interval which gave the community time to digest the news, a female Friend formally sent a notice to the men's meeting. The intending couple then presented themselves before the men's meeting and announced that "with the Lord's permission and Friends' approbation they intend to take each other in marriage." Thereafter, the men's meeting consulted the parents of both partners. Unless approval was given in writing a marriage could not proceed. If either partner came from another meeting, the men's meeting also solicited "certificates of cleanliness," from that body. This process required a second session of the men's meeting, so that overseers could report on their inquiries.

At this stage a waiting period was imposed—often two meetings in duration—while others were given time to make objections. After the prescribed period had passed, the men's meeting formally considered the question, and agreed either to approve or forbid the union. This was called "passing the meeting," and was a great event.

The wedding could now proceed. Another stage followed in which the formal preparations were made. A supper was organized for the families and close friends. Then, invitations were sent for the wedding itself, and the date and hour of the wedding were made known. Without this formal announcement, the wedding could not occur. On the appointed day, the marriage at last took place. It proceeded very much like a meeting for worship. People entered quietly and sat in silence, sometimes for very long periods. Those who wished to speak could rise and say what they wished, and some were moved to speak at length. Then, almost as an anticlimax, the intended couple quietly declared their agreement to marry, and spoke promises to one another in words of their own invention. After this exchange, everyone sat silently for a while, and quietly went home.

The newly married couple went to the house of the bride's father, and lived there commonly for two weeks, receiving visitors every day. After that period had passed, the newly married couple settled in their own home, which was often built for them by friends and neighbors. Then a long period followed in which the newly married couple returned such visits as they wished. This visiting process was conducted with great care, for by returning a visit the couple announced they wished to have a continuing association. By not doing so, associations came to an end.

The actual Quaker wedding "ceremony" was very plain, but the entire process of marriage

became exceptionally complex. It was an agreement not merely between a man and a woman, but between a couple and a community.
