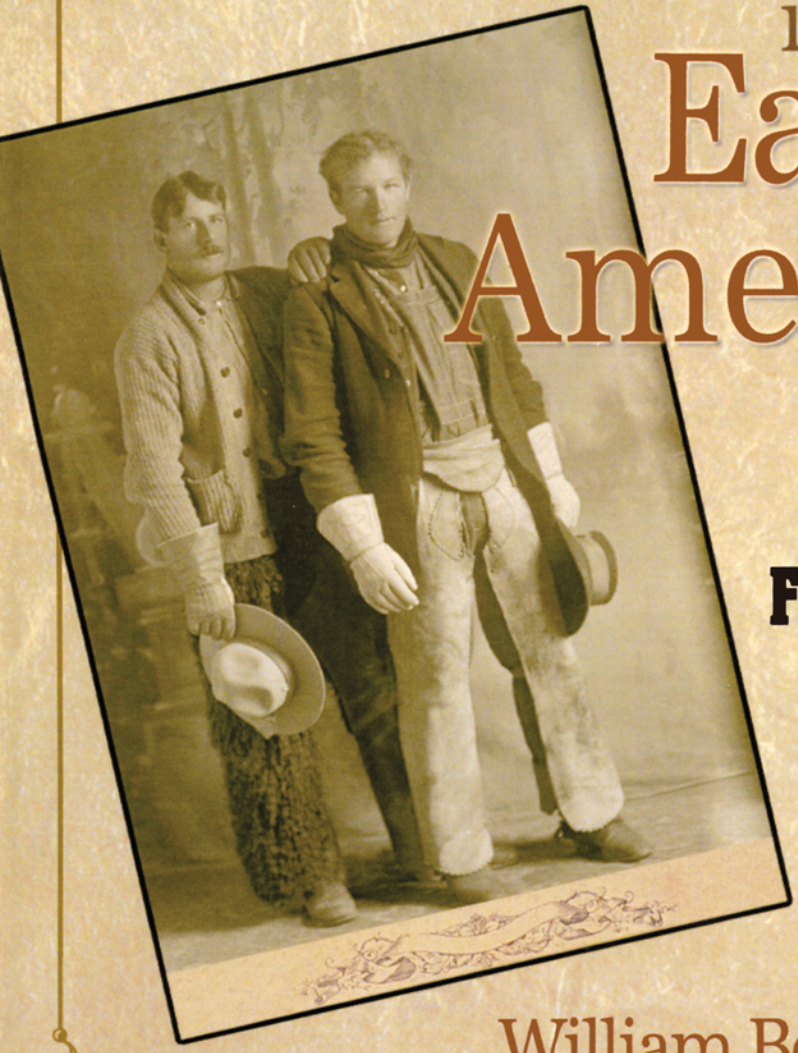
Male-Male Intimacy in Early America



Beyond Romantic Friendships

William Benemann

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For Kevin

Éist, a stór, tá ceol ar an ngaoth
Is casfar le chéile sinn roimh dhul faoi don ghrian . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Benemann is Archivist for the School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley, and Adjunct Curator for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender materials for The Bancroft Library at Berkeley. His book *A Year of Mud and Gold: San Francisco in Letters and Diaries, 1849-1850* received *Library Journal*'s highest recommendation for academic and public libraries. Mr. Benemann has been a contributor to the biographical compilation *Gay & Lesbian Literature,* as well as a book reviewer for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality.* He is the founder and current curator of the Gay Bears Collection in The University Archives at Berkeley, an archival collection focusing on the history of sexual minorities at the University of California.

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Preface

In spite of the ideology which would have us believe that women's sexuality is an enigma, it is in reality men's bodies, men's sexuality which is the true "dark continent" of this society.

Rosalind Coward

There were no gay men in America in the eighteenth century.

The statement is obviously false, and yet it is extremely difficult to prove the contrary. If we take one step forward we trip over the stumbling block of semantics. (Gay? Sodomite? Bugger? Homosexual? Queer?) If we push on anyway we hit what appears at first to be a stone wall of evidentiary silence. (Where are the love letters? The diaries? The public documents?) Break through that wall, and we need to come up with an interpretation of the existing evidence that can thread its way between the twin land mines of homophobia on the right and political correctness on the left. Little wonder then that historians of sexuality have shied away from the exploration of this troublesome aspect of early American history.[1] They have found it more attractive to concentrate on Europe, where the topic is better documented and the findings are less ambiguous.

What do we mean when we talk about homosexuality in eighteenth-century America? The word "homosexual" itself was not coined until the late nineteenth century, and it is admittedly difficult to conceptualize Americans *being* something without having a word for it. In the period under discussion the words most commonly used for the concept were "sodomite" (from a misunderstanding of the sin of the people of Sodom) or "bugger" (a reference to an eleventh-century Bulgarian sect which professed the Manichaean heresy and refused to engage in procreative activities). Both terms referred to participants in male-male sexual activity (along with a host of other meanings), but neither carried the modern sense of sexual orientation. It would have been meaningless in the eighteenth century to talk about a "latent sodomite" or a "bugger orientation." Action was ev-

erything. But that is not to say that men who felt a strong sexual and emotional attraction to other men were unaware that those feelings set them apart from the majority of Americans, or that they did not know that there were others just like them, fellows who shared their minority status.

Even if it were possible to fix on an acceptable definition of homosexuality when speaking of eighteenth-century America, the historian is still faced with a gaping void when it comes to documentation. Homosexuality has been labeled the *crimen inter Christianos non nominandum,* the sin not to be named among Christians, the unspeakable crime against nature, the love that dare not speak its name. Woven into Western society's attitude toward homosexuality is the imperative of silence. Men (and, to a much lesser extent, women) were condemned and executed for committing an act their accusers would not specify, for fear that even uttering the word would create scandal. Throughout the American colonial period and well into the early years of the Republic the penalty for sodomy was death, so it is not surprising that men who sought other men as sexual partners did not advertise their activities, and left behind little evidence which might be used against them in a court of law. But evidence—however obscured—*does* exist. The problem arises with interpretation.

If we open a letter written by a young woman and read, "Often too he shared my pillow—or I his, and how sweet to sleep with him, to hold his beloved form in my embrace, to have his arms about my neck, to imprint upon his face sweet kisses," we can reasonably assume that she and the man in question shared a sexual relationship. There is no justifiable grounds for changing that assumption when we learn that the words were actually written by Albert Dodd, a Yale undergraduate in the 1830s, describing his relationship with a fellow student, Anthony Hall.[2] There is no valid reason to assert that passionate language in a letter between a man and woman implies a sexual attraction, while exactly the same language exchanged between two men is "just the way male friends wrote about one another back then." Yet this type of willful disbelief in the prevalence of historical homosexuality, and refusal to accept passionate male-male discourse as anything other than a literary convention, is all too common.[3]

I will give one example of the genre, not because it is outstandingly egregious, but because the book in question is an otherwise-excellent biography of an eighteenth-century American who plays a minor role

in the current study. A recent biography of John Laurens, son of the president of the Continental Congress Henry Laurens, is quite frank about the young man's passionate attachment to men and his clearly secondary interest in women.

> In his relationships with other men, particularly with his closest friend, Alexander Hamilton, [Laurens] illustrated how the man of feeling constructed sentimental attachments that tended to restrict women to the marginal role of spectators exhorting their men to virtuous accomplishments in the public realm. . . . [H]e continually centered his life around homosocial attachments to other men.[4]

Laurens impregnated and then married the daughter of a family friend, but then abandoned her in England (eight months pregnant) when hostilities broke out in the colonies. He never saw his wife again, and never saw his daughter. "The wife and child left behind in England," his biographer notes, "seemingly occupied little space in John's thoughts."[5] When Martha Laurens belatedly learned that John was in France on a diplomatic mission she traveled with their child to meet him, but by the time she arrived he had already returned to America.

While indifferent to the fate of his wife and daughter, Laurens formed a passionate "romantic friendship" with Alexander Hamilton. In his letters to Laurens, Hamilton was frank in expressing his devotion. The biographer quotes a few of the less steamy passages from the extant correspondence held by the Library of Congress (some of which is now unreadable because it was censored by John C. Hamilton, an early editor of the manuscripts). "I wish, my Dear Laurens . . . to convince you that I love you."[6] (The ellipsis inserted by the biographer refers to the omitted words "by action rather than words"—perhaps a troubling concept.)[7] "You should not have taken advantage of my sensibility to steal into my affections without my consent."[8] Hamilton assured Laurens that Hamilton's marriage to the plain but rich Elizabeth Schuyler would have no effect at all on their continued intimacy. He wrote bawdy passages referring to, among other things, the size of his penis and signed off his letters with an affectionate, "Adieu my Dear."[9] The biographer concedes that the Laurens-Hamilton letters "appear to contain homosexual overtones" if the passages are "taken out of context," but he dismisses the language as merely an

epistolary convention. "Their relationship was platonic," he pronounces with assurance, "a bond formed by their devotion to the Revolution and mutual ambition for fame."[10]

I would agree strongly that it is important to place these passionate declarations in context. Certainly not all professions of male-male devotion were declarations of sexual attraction—no more in the eighteenth century than in the twenty-first. But placed in context the ardor shared by Laurens and Hamilton achieves weight and significance. The Laurens biography includes ample evidence that he was cold toward women and emotionally drawn to men, and that Hamilton—whatever his later relations with women—at this stage of his life was much more devoted to his "friend" than to his fiancée. The biographer admits that there was something odd and inexplicable about Laurens's recklessness in battle:

> Yet for all the similarities with other gentlemen officers—the emphasis on status, the importance of honor, the passion for fame—something about John was different, even unsettling. . . . His continual risk-taking involved more than an outward combat against British tyranny; he also engaged in personal combat against an inner self he had rejected, the irresolute man who lacked self-control.[11]

The biographer is at a loss to explain Laurens's recklessness (which eventually led to his death), attributing it to an attempt to atone for unnamed "prior sins."[12] The biographer categorically rejects any suggestion of sexual attraction between the two men—but then is puzzled to explain their behavior.

Much of the evidence suggests two men passionately in love and perhaps sexually involved with each other who could not imagine a future in which they could continue to enjoy such intimacy. Why must a reader then assume that in their private correspondence these two men were merely participating in a nonsexual literary convention? If their discourse was common for the era and the language signified nothing more than the self-fashioning of two men of sensibility, why did Hamilton's literary editor irretrievably obliterate parts of his letters to Laurens and write in the margin of one, "I must not publish the whole of this"?[13] There is no irrefutable proof that Laurens and Hamilton were lovers, but there is sufficient circumstantial evi-

dence to render indefensible any unqualified pronouncement that they were not.

The pervasive reluctance to concede even *latent* desire between two men sets up serious obstacles to our understanding of the place of sexuality in American history. Until recently historians have been hampered by three intellectual barriers: a misconception about the prevalence of same-sex eroticism, a reluctance to abandon restrictive labels such as "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality," and an inability to move beyond negative preconceptions about "the gay lifestyle" toward a more nuanced understanding of human sexual behavior. Much of the current discussion of nineteenth-century "romantic friendships" therefore has been based on circular logic. Historians begin with the assumption that homosexual activity is rare, aberrant behavior. They then demonstrate that passionate attachments between American male friends were extremely common—so common that they label them "normal." But these normal, common attachments cannot be assumed to include at times actual homosexual activity. Why? Because homosexual activity is rare, aberrant behavior.

Missing from this logical loop is any detailed knowledge of the sexual practices of Americans during the early years of the Republic, and in the absence of any reliable information there is, I would argue, no justification for a priori statements about the prevalence of same-sex relations. The best we can do with the information currently available is to assume that human sexual response has not changed so very much in the past 250 years (which is precisely the assumption we are *already* making when we interpret the discourse of heterosexual desire). In 1948 Alfred Kinsey wrote that "at least 37 per cent of the male population has some homosexual experience between the beginning of adolescence and old age," and that "4 per cent of the white males are exclusively homosexual throughout their lives, after the onset of adolescence."[14] If we apply Kinsey's figure of 4 percent to the 1790 United States Census (taking into account the fact that people of color were not recorded by age or gender), we need to assume that 32,292 white adult males with a homosexual orientation were living in the United States in 1790.[15]

Who were these men? How did they meet one another? Where did they seek information about male-male sexuality? What were their options in life? These are the questions explored by the current study. There is no need to tie ourselves into ontological knots by focusing on

the essentialist/constructionist debate, or by trying to identify the exact moment in American history when a "homosexual identity" was first formulated. If we begin the discussion with the assumption that there *were* men in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who were emotionally and erotically drawn to other men, it is a large enough task to recover their *exterior* lives, and perhaps by reconstructing the milieu in which these men moved we may be able to create a platform on which to begin the investigation of their thoughts and feelings. Yet defining that milieu will not be easy. In this study I will attempt to investigate what Christopher Nealon has aptly termed "the mystery of the vast but elusive presence of homosexuals in America."[16] These 32,292 homosexually inclined men were, I contend, hiding in plain sight.

In discussing the bonds that developed between American men in the eighteenth century I will attempt as much as possible to reconstruct what is known about their sexual conduct, but the surviving evidence that has been uncovered to date is so slim that in many instances I will be able only to speculate. Although it would be unwise to assume that a deep and abiding affection between two men necessarily implied a sexual relationship, it would be equally wrong to assume that such a relationship *never* included a sexual component. Nor should it be assumed that the fact of a man's having married and had children is conclusive proof that he was not attracted to other men. That is certainly not the case in the twenty-first century, and it should not be presumed for the eighteenth. Although sources such as court records and popular newspapers can be extremely explicit in their description of male-male sexual encounters, private correspondence during this period is usually less frankly sexual (with a few notable exceptions). In interpreting ambiguous language there is always the danger of "presentism"—the attribution of a modern gay sensibility to men who knew neither Freud nor Stonewall. But the reader should keep in mind that presentism can go both ways, and we should not insist that men in the past *must* have shared the same sexual "comfort zone" as the majority of American males today. We need only look to the extensive literature of prison sexuality to understand how fluid the concept of a sexual comfort zone can become; acts that a man with a heterosexual orientation once viewed with horror and disgust may be avidly pursued in the absence of a female referent.

I join my voice to those who have begun to question some of the theories of Michel Foucault concerning the formation of a homosexual identity.[17] I do *not* believe that a homosexual orientation was nonexistent until it was socially constructed during the late nineteenth century. From my reading of sources from the colonial, Revolutionary, and post-Revolutionary period, I am convinced that there were men who were homosexual and who—without the help of physicians, clerics, legislators, or sociologists—regarded themselves as different from their comrades, a difference based solely on their sexual response. I also believe that there were de facto gay communities. Some of these communities were congruent with specific geographic places. Others were real but floating, linked to a profession rather than a physical place. Still others had their existence only on a subconscious level but were nonetheless a powerful impetus to bring men together. I believe that men-loving men in the early years of this country were aware of the concept we now label as "queer space," and that they took active steps to separate themselves from the heterosexual majority in order to join their brothers in an underground community based on a shared sexual response.

In this exploration we will be entering a territory so barren of familiar landmarks that we must create our own language in order to describe what we see. As much as possible I will avoid the use of the word "gay," which carries with it too much modern political and social baggage. I will use the word "homosexual" sparingly, in recognition of the fact that the word had not yet been coined at the time these men were living. I will instead borrow one term and create two others.

I will use the term "romantic friendship" to describe a close affectionate relationship between two men who were social equals. The term has been used extensively in scholarship focusing on the effusive writings of young male couples during the mid-nineteenth century, usually with the implied understanding that the relationship was not sexual (despite the steamy rhetoric of the surviving correspondence). I will use the term with the explicit contention that a romantic friendship might indeed have included a sexual component, since I have come to believe that eighteenth-century Americans did not draw borders around sexual behavior with quite the clarity and severity of their Victorian successors. A fluidity to male intimacy admitted a wide repertoire of physical expression, and those expressions ebbed and flowed with time and circumstance.

Romantic friendships usually arose between men of similar age and social class. The relationships were passionate but in most cases fleeting, not because the men were unable or unwilling to make a lasting commitment, but because they could not envision a future in which they could ever consider themselves to be a recognized couple. America included only one city that could begin to rival the size and social complexity of Berlin, Paris, or London. Only Philadelphia was large enough to provide men-loving men with the anonymity of numbers. In rural areas among the lower classes it might be possible for two men to live their lives together working the same farm or pursuing the same craft, but in more urban areas, especially among the socially prominent (whose stories are the ones most likely to be preserved in surviving documents), heterosexual marriage was the only acceptable goal. Men entered into romantic friendships with the understanding that one—and probably both—of the partners would eventually marry and establish a traditional family. Though many tried to maintain an emotional connection with their partner, the demands of their new roles as husband and father rarely allowed for continued intimacy. This arc from passionate devotion to wistful nostalgia is documented again and again whenever long runs of male-male letters have been preserved.

In contrast to romantic friendship I will coin the term "romantic mentorship" to describe a close affectionate relationship between two men with a substantial age gap, though sometimes between men of similar age but of differing socioeconomic status. Again, I will assume that a sexual relationship was possible. Men in these types of relationships drew on the models of classical Greece and Rome, which had been presented to them as schoolboys. Here was a way they could think about themselves, taking their cue from the *Phaedrus* rather than the King James Bible. Whether the sexuality was explicit or sublimated, there was an undeniable erotic component to these relationships. The connection usually faded when the younger partner entered into a heterosexual marriage.

I will also explore a third type of relationship, which I will call "erotic employment." These relationships involved two men of very unequal social status, with one man (usually significantly younger) serving as the employee of the other. As an employee—secretary, valet, paid companion—the younger member performed specific duties for which he was paid a salary, but he also served a sexual func-

tion. The relationships could also include an emotional component, and there was frequently some level of respect and even affection between the men, but at base the arrangement was economic, and it would cease whenever the wages ceased.

These terms should be viewed as a convenient way of classifying certain male-male relationships, but it should be stressed that these relationships were not static over time, nor did both partners necessarily view the same relationship in the same way. As we shall see, the dynamics of male relationships changed and evolved with altered circumstances, and lovers frequently became good friends. In some cases the two men viewed their relationship very differently at the same time: one considering it to be a romantic mentorship, the other seeing it as merely erotic employment.

Much of the discussion in this book will focus on largely unexplored territories of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American male-male relations, on the complex web of profound affection and sexual attraction, on the place where *agape* flows into *eros*. Basic to the discussion is an understanding that sexual orientation should not be viewed as two rooms, one labeled "straight" and one labeled "gay," with a door between them which may open enticingly (or ominously) for some people. One of the pitfalls of this particular visualization is the assumption that once a person passes through the door from straight to gay, the door slams shut and no return is possible. This bifurcated view of humanity is frequently seized upon by gay hagiographers who will claim as their own anyone who ever expressed erotic attraction to another person of the same gender. One need only search the Internet for the profusion of lists of Great Gays to see the result of this type of affectional reductionism. The other side of the coin is biographers who insist that unless irrefutable proof of actual genital contact to the point of orgasm can be found, their subject must be considered a bedrock heterosexual. Implicit in both these views is the assumption that a person must be one or the other. A more useful model is the one presented by Alfred Kinsey in 1948. Kinsey described sexual orientation as a continuum, a scale from one to six with one being entirely heterosexual and six being entirely homosexual.[18] Most human beings fall somewhere between the two extremes of the scale.

I have chosen the term "male intimacy" because it can imply both a psychological and a physical closeness. By the term I do not mean

mere good-hearted comradeship, but rather an intense affectional bonding which necessarily includes sexual attraction, whether the two men acknowledge it or not. In the twenty-first century American men have a well-developed sense of the boundaries that separate them from other men. From boyhood onward we receive unmistakable signals about what types of approach and response are appropriate between males. Like the buried electrical cables that serve as invisible fences to keep livestock from straying, culturally imposed alarms keep us at the proper emotional (and physical) distance from one another. Although he may have difficulty articulating exactly where the ambiguous border area lies, every American male knows instinctively when he has crossed into it. Our eighteenth-century forefathers had a similar sixth sense, and it is that crossed border of intimacy that will be the focus of the current study.

This book will focus primarily on the lives of men-loving men from the colonial period to the opening years of the antebellum period. The intimate lives of women are beyond the scope of this study, and it certainly should not be inferred that the pressures and options which molded the lives of American homosexual men during the country's early years necessarily reflect the lived experiences of lesbians. Feminist scholars are only now beginning to investigate that very different story.

The current study should be viewed as an exploratory sketch, a rough map of largely unknown territory. As Rosalind Coward has asserted, male sexuality is the "dark continent" of American history. Much remains to be explored, but there is ample evidence of a thriving and complex culture waiting to be discovered.

Acknowledgments

This study was aided enormously by the skill, knowledge, and professionalism of the staffs of a wide range of archives. In my travels in pursuit of gay men in early America I was fortunate to be able to call upon the services of the following collections: in Washington, DC, the Library of Congress Manuscript Reading Room, the National Library of Medicine History of Medicine Division, and the Society of the Cincinnati Archives; in Philadelphia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia City Archives; at West Point, the United States Military Academy Archives; in St. Louis, the Missouri Historical Society; in San Marino, California, the Huntington Library; in San Francisco, the University of California, San Francisco Medical Archives; in Berkeley, the University of California Bancroft Library and the Robbins Collection of Religious and Civil Law at the Boalt Hall Law Library. In addition, I was provided with photocopies or microfilms of archival materials by the National Archives, the New Jersey Historical Society, the New-York Historical Society, the Rutgers University Libraries, the Beinecke Library of Yale University, the Harvard University Archives, and the Oneida County Historical Society. To all the individuals who opened their collections to me, I owe a large debt of thanks.

My travels were supported by a generous research grant from the Librarians Association of the University of California, and while my original topic—developing ways of uncovering hidden archival material on gay and lesbian lives—was rendered largely superfluous by a simple addition of "gaydar" to standard archival searching skills, I trust with the appearance of this book they will agree that their funds were well spent.

This text went through many wildly different metamorphoses before reaching its current form as I responded to a succession of readers, most of whom were more frank than kind. It is a better book for their frankness. Of those readers I would like especially to acknowledge Richard Holway, whose comments were always courteous as

well as cogent, and whose good humor and enthusiasm for the project saw me through more revisions than any author cares to face.

I thank my employer, the University of California School of Law at Berkeley, for allowing me the flexibility of scheduling in my "day job" that allowed me to pursue my passion. It is difficult to imagine a more humane and nurturing work environment.

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Finally and always, I thank my partner Kevin Jewell, who for over two decades has been my working week and my Sunday rest.

Chapter 1

The Freedom of the Frontier

Marvilous it may be to see and consider how some kind of wickednes did grow & breake forth here, in a land wher the same was so much witnesed against, and so narrowly looked unto, & severly punished when it was knowne . . . even sodomie and bugerie (things fearfull to name) have broak forth in this land, oftener then once.

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Colony* (1642)

Mr. Gallatin assured me the other Day that the Grecian Vice was common among the Indians as well as among the back Woodsmen.

Augustus John Foster (1806)

The casual observation of Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, jotted down in Augustus John Foster's commonplace book, provides a key to understanding an important aspect of early American history: settlement patterns encouraged the proliferation of male-male sexuality.[1] The margins of American society—the ever-receding frontier to the west and the open seas to the east—provided the opportunity for extensive male-male sexual activity. Among those taking part in this activity were men who engaged in male-male contact solely because few female partners were available, as well as men who had fled their home towns specifically in hopes of finding a place where they could act upon their attraction to other men. The distinction between the two is important only if we insist on a binary model of sexual orientation. If we accept a more fluid view of human sexuality, we can understand both the openness to same-sex activity *and* the sincere eagerness with which most men looked forward to the "civilizing" effect of the arrival of women. It is likely that most men who engaged in male-male sexuality were neither driven to it by uncontrollable frustration nor fleeing from any possible sexual contact with

a woman. Male-male sexuality was simply one of the many adjustments necessary for living on the margins of a new world.

Even in the Puritan colonies, where extended families rather than large numbers of unmarried males had emigrated, the scarcity of suitable marriage partners led to sexual experimentation among the men. "But it may be demanded," Governor William Bradford sputtered in 1642, "how came it to pass that so many wicked persons and profane people should so quickly come over into this land and mix themselves amongst us? Seeing it was religious men that began the work and they came for religion's sake?"[2] Bradford speculated that these wicked persons had been sent over by family members "under hope that they would be made better" by the rigors of life in a religious colony, or perhaps that shocked families had sent their black sheep out of England "that they might be eased of such burdens, and they kept from shame at home, that would necessarily follow their dissolute courses."[3] Bradford drew clear distinctions between "us" and "them," unable to imagine that sincere members of his own colony might be capable of engaging in "things fearful to name."

Among the common folk of the Puritan colonies, however, there was a sense that the New World was a new world, one with special dispensations. It was not possible to replicate exactly European community life, nor was such a replication necessarily desirable in all cases. Europe was viewed as hopelessly corrupt, while America was pristine with possibilities. Few colonists were eager to import all of the social controls they had sailed so far to escape. Leaders such as William Bradford often shook with paroxysms of righteous indignation about sexual improprieties simply because their fellow colonists *did not*. Richard Godbeer has written of the indulgent attitude of the New Englanders:

> Whereas ministers perceived sodomy as one of many acts, sexual and nonsexual, that expressed human depravity, some lay persons apparently recognized a special inclination toward sodomitical behavior in certain individuals. The extant sources reveal a few occasions on which New Englanders, sensing that official discourse was of limited use in making intelligible their actual experiences and observations, created what seemed to them more appropriate categories and frameworks of meaning. This informal and inchoate discourse did not go so far as to invoke a "homosexual" identity as such, but it does seem to have

> posited an ongoing erotic predilection that transcended the acts themselves. Villagers and townspeople were, moreover, seldom willing to invoke official sanctions against sodomy, despite theological and legal denunciations. Whatever their leaders' expectations, they viewed and treated sodomy on their own terms.[4]

The idea of America as the land of the new sexual dispensation was strengthened by what the colonists observed (or thought they observed) about the sex lives of the Indians who occupied the country before them. Although at first aghast at the red man's apparent lack of modesty about private matters, the colonists eventually came to appreciate the sexual restraint exhibited by the tribes they encountered. White women taken captive by Indians fully expected to be ravished, and were puzzled when their honor remained intact. The Indians' restraint in these instances was to a large extent motivated by a strong incest taboo. White settlers were captured in order to secure new members for a dwindling tribe; raping a member of one's own clan would have been a grave transgression. The religious practices of many Indian tribes also included a strict code of warrior continence. "The Indians will not cohabit with women while they are out at war;" wrote trader James Adair in 1775, "they religiously abstain from every kind of intercourse even with their own wives, for the space of three days and nights before they go to war, and so after they return home, because they are to sanctify themselves."[5]

Perhaps making a guilty comparison with lax European sexual mores, the amazed colonists began to ascribe an even wider chastity to the Indians (at least to the men). The sophists of the Enlightenment found in the native North American a convenient prototype of Natural Man, and praised (among other virtues) his freedom from the tyranny of sexual desire. It was mostly a spun fantasy: men who had never been beyond the coast of Normandy projected their philosophical theories onto the unspoiled Native American, fashioning a paragon from a few snippets of second-hand anthropology. Diderot, for example, claimed that *"le goût anti-physique des Américains"* was a result of the enforced celibacy of Indian men who needed to range far afield on hunting expeditions.[6] (Apparently the Frenchman saw in the all-male hunts no opportunity for sexual release.)

From the seventeenth century to the eighteenth, European and colonial perceptions of American Indian sexuality underwent a slow in-

version. Indian men were at first assumed to be lust-crazed beasts, lurking in the forest, aching to ravish vulnerable white women. With familiarity came a grudging admiration and an acknowledgment that Indians were not so prone as white men to making unwanted sexual advances to colonial maidens. As the power balance shifted and the Europeans took control of the new land, the Indian warrior's manhood increasingly came into question. What had at first been seen as laudable restraint was in time taken as evidence of a weak libido. Benjamin Rush assured his readers that it was "universally acknowledged that the venereal propensities among Indians are in a very feeble state," and he attributed the condition to the strain on their groins caused by long horseback rides.[7] In an 1801 dissertation James Tongue argued that Indians could not possibly have been the origin of venereal disease, since everyone knew that they rarely engaged in sexual intercourse.[8] "A proof of some feebleness in their frame, still more striking," wrote Englishman William Robertson, "is the insensibility of the Americans to the charms of beauty, and the power of love. That passion which was destined to perpetuate life . . . is the most ardent in the human breast. . . . But the Americans are, in an amazing degree, strangers to the force of this first instinct of nature."[9] Frenchman Corneille de Pauw wrote that among American Indians the women were very masculine looking, but that the men "had no beards, their bodies hairless, like those of eunuques; that they were almost insensible to the passion of love; had milk, or a kind of milky liquid, in their breasts . . . ," and they lacked pubic hair entirely.[10] Comte de Buffon insisted, "In the [American] savage, the organs of generation are small and feeble. He has no hair, no beard, no ardour for the female."[11] The American Indian male had in the course of a century gone from brutish ravisher to listless hermaphrodite. What was going on here?

First we need to understand how Europeans projected their own fears and insecurities onto the people they encountered in the New World. Already primed with the ancient legends of Amazonian warriors, the first explorers brought back tales of women who were so libidinous that their husbands were not man enough to satisfy them. In the opening years of the sixteenth century Amerigo Vespucci issued a warning (or a challenge?) to any man who dreamed of sailing to the Indies.

> For their women, being very lustful, cause the private parts of their husbands to swell up to such a huge size that they appear deformed and disgusting; and this is accomplished by a certain device of theirs, the biting of certain poisonous animals. And in consequence of this many lose their organs which break through lack of attention, and they remain eunuchs.[12]

By 1801 when St. John de Crèvecoeur published *Journey into Northern Pennsylvania and the State of New York,* the lure of sexual tourism remained strong, but the locus of anxiety had shifted. Crèvecoeur's description of an Iroquois council includes a passage that closely fits the queer theorists' concept of the "homoerotic gaze"—the objectification of the male body by a male observer. Here the Native American retains his exotic sensuality, but the fear of emasculation by poisonous women has been replaced by a different source of performance anxiety: the European knows he can never measure up to the Indians' primordial virility.

> Their blankets of beaverskin fell off their shoulders, revealing their mighty chests and muscular arms on which in their youth various animal and insect figures had been tattooed. At such a scene a painter could have drawn bodies that were perfect in proportion, limbs controlled by muscles lightly covered with a kind of swelling that was unknown to the whites, and which among the Indians attests to vigor, strength, and health: heads and faces of a special type, the like of which one sees only in the depths of the New World's forests.[13]

Crèvecoeur's body-builder Iroquois had no more relation to reality than Vespucci's grossly engorged penises, but it was the Indian-as-symbol which engaged the white man's imagination. It is important to note that Crèvecoeur's paean to Indian masculinity and James Tongue's assertion that Indians are nonsexual were published in the same year. They represent the split in the American psyche where Indian sexuality was concerned. As a conquered race, Indian men were pathetic and impotent. Or noble vestiges of a virile civilization. Or savages too passive to prevail against the vigorous thrust of European manhood. Or prelapsarian Adams, immune to the enticements of lusty, dusky Eves.

These self-canceling contradictions were finally reconciled in a philosophy that neatly blended nostalgia with genocide. The Indian in his "natural" state was indeed worthy of respect, and even envy. His life was at one with the elements, simple and pure. If his passions were few, so were his needs. But unfortunately the Indian's primitive virtues condemned him eternally to an inchoate state of unfulfilled potential, and therefore justified his destruction. His freedoms were in actuality fetters holding him (and the land) back from the glorious march of human progress. Wrote Samuel Williams in 1793:

> We need not hesitate to pronounce that these disadvantages far exceeded any advantages that could attend it; and operated with a certain and fatal tendency, to continue man in a state of infancy, weakness, and the greatest imperfection. The freedom to which it led, was its greatest blessing; but the independence of which the savage was so fond, was never designed for man: And it is only in the improvement of civil society, that the human race can find the greatest increase of their numbers, knowledge, safety and happiness.[14]

Independence, it was said, is not the natural state of man. The improvement of civil society, an increase of numbers, the safety, happiness, and stability of nuclear families permanently settled in large interconnected communities—this was progress. And it was progress that could take place only in a world of strictly regulated sexual outlets, a world based on marriage, procreation, and domesticity in which the free-ranging, sexually continent Indian had no place. The Indian's perceived disinclination to engage in sexual intercourse was an affront to the forces of civilization, and it provided justification for both the expropriation of his land the destruction of his lifestyle. Through a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, then, Natural Man was convicted of a crime against nature. Conveniently, just as the idea of the Indian as "unmanly" came into prominence, observers of tribal life began to record that the gender confusion was even more shocking than anyone had ever imagined.

On December 22, 1804, explorer William Clark wrote in his journal at the Mandan Villages, "a number of Squars women & men Dressed in Squars Clothes Came with Corn to Sell to the men for little things."[15] He later told editor Nicholas Biddle,

> Among Minitarees if a boy shows any symptoms of effeminacy or girlish inclinations he is put among the girls, dressed in their way, brought up with them, & sometimes married to men. They submit as women to all the duties of a wife. I have seen them—the French call them Birdashes.[16]

The phenomenon Clark is describing is the berdache tradition, a word derived from the Persian *bardaj* through the Arabic *bardag,* which as early as the sixteenth century was borrowed by Romance languages to denote a passive partner in male-male sexual intercourse.[17] The term was introduced to the North American continent by French trappers who observed male-male sexuality among the Indians they encountered. Berdaches or "Two-Spirits" came to the role in a variety of ways: some were reared by their parents to take on the role of the opposite sex, while others voluntarily adopted the status upon reaching puberty, or after a trauma or a vision quest. Clark reports that the berdaches he encountered were men who dressed as women, but transvestism was not universally observed. Among the Pima and the Comanche, the berdaches imitated the speech and behavior of women but were required to dress as men. Cheyenne berdaches of all ages reportedly dressed as old men, while among the Navajo, Paiute, and Shoshone, cross-dressing was practiced only if it was the man's personal choice. In some instances gendered clothing was regulated only under certain circumstances. The Navajo required berdaches to dress as men if they married, whether their spouse was male or female. The Miami required male clothing for berdaches only when they went to war. Berdaches were usually biologically male, though they could also be women who took on the gender role of men.[18]

Berdaches usually performed the chores of whichever gender's clothing they adopted, but it was not unknown for a berdache man to both cook with the women and hunt with the men. Their intermediate gender status was believed to give them special powers; Teton parents asked the berdaches to bestow secret names upon their children, and among many California Indian tribes the berdaches were responsible for burial and mourning rituals. Among the Illinois tribe no major decision was made without first consulting a berdache. When a man became a berdache he usually assumed the female role in sexual relations with other men, and it was this connection with homosexuality which drew the ire and disdain of non-Indian observers.[19]

The negative reaction to this indigenous American practice has a long and varied history. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who explored Florida between 1528 and 1533, later wrote, "During the time that I was thus among these people I saw a devilish thing, and it is that I saw one man married to another, and these are impotent, effeminate men [*amariconados*] and they go about dressed as women, and do women's tasks."[20] The major objection of European observers seems to have been the institutionalized nature of the berdache tradition, with its explicit rejection of the male role. Occasional or situational male-male sexual contact was understandable (particularly if it was mutual and entailed no invasion of the male body), but for a man to embrace the feminine role in insertive sex was simply beyond comprehension. Their horror at the idea of male-receptive sexuality blinded most observers to the mystical or religious functions of the berdache. So scandalized were many of the early writers that they slipped into Latin to describe the aberrant behavior.

While somewhat reluctant to use the term "homosexual" to describe the berdaches, modern anthropologists and ethno-historians agree that male-male sexuality was a common feature of berdache life, and that this sexual activity played a major role in the disappearance of the tradition. In most precontact tribes, the berdache assumed a privileged status and was held in high esteem. He was considered to be holy and mysterious, revered—even feared—as a shaman or a seer (though the roles of shaman and berdache were not necessarily linked). Gradually throughout the nineteenth century the berdaches' prestige fell until they became objects of ridicule and a source of embarrassment. Nancy Lurie's interviews explain why: "Most informants felt that the berdache was at one time a highly honored and respected person, but that the Winnebago had become ashamed of the custom because the white people thought it was amusing or evil."[21] Perhaps the most famous berdache was a Zuni named We'wha, whose 1886 visit to President Grover Cleveland in the White House was documented by Will Roscoe.[22]

The white male response to the American Indian—as reality and as symbol—was complex and contradictory. The need to defend the New World against the slurs of European chauvinists forced American writers to become linguistic contortionists where Indian life was concerned. The newcomers, in defending their right to expropriate Native American territory, needed to portray Indians as infantile and

backward, half-civilized creatures who were unwilling or even incapable of exploiting the country's resources to the fullest extent. The accent needed to fall unambiguously on "savage" not "noble." Yet it was the noble savage who demonstrated the patriots' contention that America was not a backward land where everything was smaller, poorer, and less well developed than its Old World counterpart, as some eighteenth-century writers had suggested. The American colonists weighed the Indian as Natural Man against the degenerate European courtier, and in the same way that American trees were taller, American horses were swifter, American fruit was tastier and American birds sang in the springtime with a sweeter note, the Native American was obviously more of a man than any snuff-sniffing European fop could ever hope to be. Yet the Indian needed to be subjugated, so the colonists took the two stereotypes—Vespucci's monstrously endowed savage and Buffon's puny, hairless hermaphrodite—and fashioned an imago which fell exactly in the middle: the Indian did indeed have an impressive penis, but he was disinclined to use it. This convenient construction resolved the cognitive dissonance over Indian masculinity and allowed the settlers to proceed with the destruction of Indian culture. Yet confusion remained in the hearts of many white American men. If the Indian was infantile, he was also boyishly free, and along with disdain, the usurpers felt a deep pang of envy. To many American men the free-ranging Indian represented an attractive alternative to the forced conformity of colonial society.

From a few plantations clinging precariously to the edge of the Atlantic, colonial society grew into a complex agrarian culture, yet the patterns of obligations and opportunities for young men remained unusually static. To a curious extent, gender roles in American culture retained the peculiar imprint of the early plantation years. The settlements bordering on the Chesapeake Bay, for example, were strikingly different from their sister colonies to the north. The Plymouth, New Haven, and Massachusetts Bay colonies were established primarily by multigenerational families, and as a consequence they were able to develop a view of society based on the philosophy of Sir Robert Filmer. The household to a New Englander was an integral part of the structure of government, a subunit which replicated governmental functions on a miniature scale. Just as the king was the head of the nation, the husband/father was the head of the family, a position which

carried with it implicit privileges and obligations as well as unquestioned authority. Any opposition to the power of the husband/father was, in effect, an act of treason against the whole government.

Along the shores of the Chesapeake, however, a very different philosophy prevailed. In Virginia the early immigrants included large numbers of unmarried indentured male servants, and throughout much of the initial phase of colonization, men outnumbered women four to one. Indeed, Virginia had the most lopsided gender ratio of any colony in British North America.[23] Unable to re-create the small patriarchal units envisioned by Filmer, Virginians adopted a more open, fluid view of human society. Following the philosophy of John Locke, they saw external government and family structure as distinctive entities.[24] Idiosyncratic responses to the gender ratio imbalance were viewed as an inescapable part of Southern life.

Yet deviance had its limits. Given the small number of available women in the Virginia colonies, it is perhaps not surprising that authorities feared that unmarried men might seek an alternate means of sexual release, and they moved quickly to condemn it. The first anti-homosexual statute in America was promulgated by the leaders of Jamestown Colony and published in London in 1612 in the volume *For the Colony in Virginea Britannia, Lavves Diuine, Morall, and Martiall, &c*. The law stated, "No man shal commit the horrible, and detestable sins of Sodomie vpon pain of death; & he or she that can be lawfully conuict of Adultery shall be punished with death."[25] It is interesting to note that the statute gives equal weight to the crimes of sodomy and adultery, and that while women are specifically noted as partners in adultery, they are excluded from the discussion of sodomy. This may be in part a result of the writers' ignorance of the existence of lesbianism, and in part a reflection of English legal tradition which required proof of penetration and emission of semen for a sodomy conviction (biologically impossible where two women were concerned). After 1619, Henry VIII's Buggery Statute of 1533 was considered to be in effect in the Virginia colony, but there were few sodomy prosecutions under the statute. Capital crimes required the corroboration of two eye witnesses, a stipulation difficult to fulfill for any private sexual transgression.

By the eighteenth century the gender imbalance in Virginia had improved somewhat, but women remained in the minority, primarily because so many died in childbirth. The unhealthful climate resulted

in a high mortality rate in general, and when a Virginian died his or her surviving spouse quickly remarried. It was not unusual for a colonist to have two or three spouses during his or her lifetime. Families inevitably became a jumble of children from current and previous marriages, and frequently included children adopted by a later stepparent when both the biological parents had died, as well as formal or informal guardian/ward relationships. Sir Robert Filmer's neat interlocking pattern of government and household could not be discerned in the patchwork crazy quilt of Chesapeake family relations.

Because of the gender imbalance in Virginia during the early period, men were forced to (or were free to) develop alternative household structures. It was so common for two unmarried men to join together to live and work on the same piece of land that the relationship was given a name: each man was the other's "mate." The relationship between mates was so strongly regarded that it could endure even after one of the men took a wife. Only when *both* men married did a type of social mitosis occur, two new households being created where previously there was only one.[26]

Although male-male sexuality was emphatically prohibited by law there is some evidence that Virginians were willing to look the other way, tempering regulation with reality. When in 1630 a court sentenced a man named Hugh Davis "to be soundly whipped, before an assembly of Negroes and others for abusing himself to the dishonor of God and shame of Christians, by defiling his body in lying with a negro" it is the interracial aspect of the sex act which seems to cause the greater consternation, not the homosexuality.[27] Indeed, so vague is the condemnation of the sex itself that historians are divided about whether this was an act of sodomy or simply fornication with a woman.[28] That the punishment is to be delivered before "an assembly of Negroes and others" may be read as an attempt to warn other black women not to engage in interracial sex with white men like Davis, but that assumes a greater degree of freedom of choice for black women than was a reality at the time. Restricting the audience primary to blacks may have been part of the general pattern of withholding information about sodomy from tender members of the (white) community, or it may merely have been an attempt to humiliate Davis further by punishing him in front of his "inferiors." Certainly it was the convention of the court to use the term "negro woman" when referring to

a black female; its absence here is a strong indication that Davis's partner was a man.[29]

Because of the Virginian's reluctance to pry into the household arrangements of his or her neighbors, two white men could live together quietly without interference. The problem with these male-male households, as far as the colonial government was concerned, was that so many laws vested privileges or responsibilities only in the head of the family. In a traditional marriage the identity of the "head" was clear, but where two men formed a household there was the possibility of legal ambiguity. Consequently in 1644 the House of Burgesses passed a law specifying who should be "master of the family" in the case where two men "make a joynt crop."[30] This act may be considered America's first domestic partnership ordinance, since it not only provided legal recognition that a relationship existed between the two men but also specifically designated that that relationship constituted a "family."

Two mates who engaged in a "joynt crop" relationship were usually living in isolation from their immediate neighbors and even from their slaves or servants, and if they engaged in intimate behavior the details were easily concealed.[31] The two men tended to be social equals, with an equal investment in maintaining their privacy. More difficult to keep from gossipers was sexual contact between males of different social classes, though neighbors were likely to ignore unconfirmed rumors as long as the sex was performed privately and no overt force was involved. As Colin L. Talley has written,

> A master and servant having sex in the middle of the night posed little threat to the production of corn or tobacco the next day. That a dominant male would seduce an adolescent behind the barn did not prevent the planting of seeds, the care of animals, or the harvesting of crops; nor did it threaten the sexual division of labor.

American colonists were able to look the other way because of an implicit understanding that such behavior was unavoidable—and temporary.

> This particular same-sex erotic behavioral pattern did not actually threaten the institution of marriage because it was rarely ex-

> clusively homosexual, and the vast majority of same-sex erotic behavior never reached the attention of the courts much less the written record.[32]

Though early Virginia law provided for an alternative household structure, and prevailing custom allowed for a certain amount of non-traditional sexual activity, the acquisition of a spouse and the establishment of a nuclear family were essential to any definition of social success. Pressure ultimately to conform to society's expectations was every bit as strong along the shores of the Chesapeake as it was in Massachusetts Bay. Unmarried adults of both sexes—but especially males—were "almost in the class of suspected criminals."[33] Contemporary society had little patience for anyone unwilling to participate in the marriage market. One Maryland newspaper in 1798 thundered, "*That* MAN *who resolves to live without* WOMAN, *or that* WOMAN *who resolves to live without* MAN, *are* ENEMIES TO THE COMMUNITY *in which they dwell,* INJURIOUS TO THEMSELVES, DESTRUCTIVE TO THE WORLD, APOSTATES TO NATURE, *and* REBELS AGAINST HEAVEN AND EARTH."[34]

From the earliest colonial times the goal for any ambitious young man was marriage and the establishment of a household. An unmarried woman passed from the control and protection of her father to that of her husband (or, if she failed to marry before her father died, to that of another male relative), but for an unmarried man the situation was more pressing. He could chafe under the authority of his father, or join in a partnership with a male mate to create a separate family. If he did not eventually marry, at some point in his life he would assume the mantle of the "confirmed bachelor"—a role viewed by society with a combination of amusement, scorn, distrust, and pity. As Vincent Bertolini has written, "In his solitary and unmonitorable status as an autonomous adult male, the bachelor represented the transgressive triple threat of masturbation, whoremongering, and the nameless horror—homosexual sex."[35]

A suspicion of "unnatural" inclinations hovered over any man who seemed to be avoiding the altar. The pseudonymous "Old Bachelor" writing in the Richmond (Va.) *Enquirer* during the opening years of the nineteenth century assured his readers that his failure to marry could not be blamed on the two most frequent causes of prolonged bachelorhood:

> Hence I am not distinguished by the disgusting and loathsome neglect of my person on the one hand; nor by the elaborate tidiness, formality and precision of my dress and appearance on the other. My rooms are not polluted by the fumes of tobacco and brandy; nor my toilet covered with lotions and patches and powders.[36]

In other words, it was not that marriageable women found his lack of personal cleanliness repulsive, nor that his sexual interests were unspeakably perverse. The *Enquirer*'s "Old Bachelor" (a composite persona created by William Wirt, Dabney Carr, St. George Tucker, and others) was well aware that a man who was financially independent and reasonably presentable and yet *unmarried* ran the risk of raising inevitable questions about his sexual proclivities.

Bachelors in colonial America were penalized, harried, and hemmed in. Colonial Connecticut imposed a fine of one pound for each week a bachelor lived on his own. Maryland imposed special punitive taxes on him. Some local laws required bachelors and spinsters to live within an established household; others permitted a man to live alone only with the expressed permission of the village authorities.[37] To marry was a man's civic obligation, the only course open to a law-abiding citizen.

A man who was uninterested in marriage presented society with an intolerable ambiguity which needed to be resolved. The solution for some men was simply to leave the community. The open sea promised an all-male environment accustomed to frank male-male sexuality. Newly opened territories also provided a setting where nuclear families were few and the expectation of marriage was temporarily suspended. The professions of soldier, sailor, merchant marine, whaler, riverman, trapper, or itinerant trader provided an unmarried man with a context in which to live his life until he either found a wife or accepted the status of confirmed bachelor, and in these female-deficient environments, men were free to turn to one another for sexual release, if they so desired. In 1948 Alfred Kinsey noted that the patterns of this type of sexual behavior had altered little since pioneer days. While most of the men surveyed by Kinsey in remote locales preferred sexual contact with women, they had adopted a very pragmatic approach to male-male sexual relations. "[T]here is a fair amount of sexual contact among the older males in Western rural areas," wrote Kinsey.