

**“Whatcha talkin’ about Willis?” -- Popular Myths and Misconceptions about the Colonial Past
By Rod Cofield, Director of Interpretation at Historic London Town and Gardens**

● ***All people were shorter back then (or) People were dramatically shorter back then***

The two statements above are categorically false. In the 17th and 18th centuries the height range of people was similar to the 21st century. Though it is true that the *average* height was less, it was not a large difference. Depending on the specific time period the average height difference is somewhere between 2/3 of an inch (American Revolution) and 3 inches (pre-1650).

Additional information:

www.plimoth.org/discover/myth/4-ft-2.php (has many footnotes for additional readings)

Colonial Williamsburg Journal, Winter 2008; www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter08/stuff.cfm

J. Lawrence Angel, “Colonial to Modern Skeletal Change in the USA,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, Vol. 45, No. 3, November 1976.

● ***People died at a very young age (or) Colonials didn’t live as long as we do today***

These statements are misleading and do not give the full, textured answer required to understand a colonial person’s life expectancy. It should first be noted that in England, Scotland, New England, and the Chesapeake some individuals did survive into their 70s and beyond. However, depending on where they lived, the *average* life expectancy did vary. Just like today climate, environment, lifestyle, and genetics affect one’s life span. Also, the high infant death rate depressed the average life span.

Additional information:

www.plimoth.org/discover/myth/dead-at-40.php (has many footnotes for additional readings)

● ***The leading cause of death for women was childbirth***

In a word, no. Colonial women did die due to pregnancy and child birth complications at a higher rate than 21st-century American women. However, the leading cause of death for both women and men was disease.

Additional information:

Colonial Williamsburg Journal, Winter 2008; www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter08/stuff.cfm

Karen Mullian, “Maternal Mortality: Fact or Fabrication,” *Past Masters News*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter 2000.

● ***The second leading cause of death for women was burning to death (or) Wounds caused by burns became infected and was the second leading cause of death for women***

Again, no. Though there are cases of women, men, and children dying by fire, the prevalence of this is grossly exaggerated. As for infected wounds, there does not seem to be much evidence for this either.

Additional information:

Colonial Williamsburg Journal, Winter 2008; www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter08/stuff.cfm
Clarissa Dillon, "Fire! Fire! False Alarm?" *Food History News*, Vol. XI, No. III, FHN 43.

- ***Colonials didn't eat tomatoes because they thought they were poisonous***

According to Andrew Smith's book, *The Tomato in America*, only 3 out of 15,000 references between 1544 and 1860 said that tomatoes were poisonous. To say then that colonists didn't eat tomatoes because they were poisonous is erroneous at best. From an English and northern European perspective, tomatoes were a relatively new food item and conservative foodways took a while to adopt this food. The best answer to a question about tomatoes is that most English and other northern Europeans, or colonists descended from those groups, did not know enough about tomatoes to have an opinion as to whether or not they were poisonous.

Additional information:

Andrew Smith, *The Tomato in America*, 2001.

"The Truth About Poisonous Tomatoes," *Food History News*, Vol. VIII, No. 3, Winter 1997.

"Mythbusters; Tomatoes, also called Love Apples," *Past Masters News*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Summer 2005.

- ***"People today have an image in their minds of the Sons of Liberty dumping loose tea into the harbor, the kind of thing one might find by tearing open a tea bag. But, in fact, the tea of the day was compressed into 2.5 pound black bricks. These bricks were used as money and had break lines so that they could "make change" by being cut up into smaller blocks."*** (www.geocaching.com/track/details.aspx?id=23519)

Tea was never used as money in the colonial Chesapeake. A survey of colonial newspapers does not turn up advertisements for brick tea. Academic articles do not mention brick tea in relation to the North American colonies. Probate inventories do not mention brick tea. Surviving material culture has no connection to brick tea. The most evidence for brick tea is found in museum lore and in some colonial vendors' catalogues.

Additional info:

Rodris Roth, "Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America," *Material Life in America: 1600-1860*.

"Mythbusters; Tea in the 18th Century," *Past Masters News*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Spring 2004.

- ***The Chestertown Tea Party actually happened***

Though residents of 1774 Chestertown passed some resolves to stop importing, selling, and

drinking tea, there is no evidence that this particular tea party occurred.

Additional information:

Adam Goodheart, "Tea and Fantasy: Fact, fiction, and revolution in a historic American town," *The American Scholar*, 2005; www.washcoll.edu/wc/news/press_releases/2005/10/26_teaparty.pdf

- ***Bricks, stones, and other building material was used as ship's ballast***

In the tidewater Chesapeake area dig down and you will find all the clay you need for regular bricks. Cargo, whether it be furniture, foodstuffs, or manufactured goods, was considered by the ship master as a form of ballast. Depending on the cargo's weight, additional ballast (sometimes just sand; other times random rocks) was added or taken from the ship's hold.

Additional information:

Michael Dunbar, "Old House Myths," *Early American Life*, May 1987.

- ***A closet tax existed in colonial times***

No laws or regulations concerning the taxation of either closets or second stories are known to have existed in colonial America.

Additional information:

Colonial Williamsburg Journal, Winter 2008; www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter08/stuff.cfm

- ***The phrase "costs an arm and a leg" came from portrait painters charging more to paint arms and legs which is why many people in portraits have their legs, hands, or arms hidden behind something or in their clothing***

There is no historical evidence to suggest portrait painters charged more for painting an individual's fingers, arms, legs, or feet. Charles Willson Peale's records indicate that he based his charge primarily on the size of the portrait: whole length, 3/4, 1/2, and miniature.

Additional information:

Colonial Williamsburg Journal, Winter 2008; www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter08/stuff.cfm

- ***Some clay tobacco pipes were very long because when sharing a pipe, smokers would break off the tip of the stem before passing (or smoking) the pipe for sanitary reasons.***

In a time before germ theory was known, this practice would not have occurred. There is no evidence for this practice. The long stem kept the heat in the bowl away from the face; the many fragments found archaeologically reflect the fragility of the clay stems.

Additional information:

Colonial Williamsburg Journal, Winter 2008; www.history.org/Foundation/journal/Winter08/stuff.cfm

- ***A toaster is called a toaster because one moved it by stirring it with your toe***

Find a dictionary, look up the definition for toaster, then toast, then the suffix -er. If you still feel that the above saying is correct, stop leading tours or talking about history.

- ***The phrase “Mind your Ps and Qs” comes from bartenders getting a tally of pints and quarts***

No one knows from whence this phrase derived. As such, no one should say for certain they know it came from bartending. One alternative origin is from the printing trade and apprentices mixing up the letters p, q, b, and d. Another one is that this phrase came from people telling each other to mind their pea(jackets) and queues (ponytails). A first known reference to the phrase is from Francis Grose's 1785 edition of *The Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*: "To mind one's P's and Q's; to be attentive to the main chance."

- ***A tussy-mussy was a bag filled with herbs to make one smell better***

The term tussy-mussy does not appear to be used during the colonial period as the name for what should be called a sweet bag. The 1784 edition of Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery* has this recipe: "Sweet Scented Bags **to Lay with Linen** - Eight ounces of damask rose leaves, eight ounces of coriander seeds, eight ounces of sweet orrisroot, eight ounces of calamus aromaticus, one ounce of mace, one ounce of cinnamon, half an ounce of cloves, four drachms of musk-powder, two drachms of white loaf sugar, three ounces of lavender flowers and some of Rhodium wood. Beat them well together and make them in small silk bags."

Additional Myth-Related Readings:

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 1988.

James Loewen, *Lies Across America: What our Historic Sites get Wrong*, 2007; *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 2008.

Richard Shenkman, *Legends, Lies, and Cherished Myths of American History*, 1988.

Ivan Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History*, 1987.

Susan Vasoti, *A Study of American Colonial Myths*, unpublished Master's Thesis, Old Dominion University, 1993.