

A LEXICOGRAPHER'S SEARCH

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When I was researching my about-to-be-published A Glossary of Colonial American Words (Lederer's Lexicon) I encountered only a handful for which I could not find definitions in the many sources available. Perhaps some of Word Ways readers can come up with definitions. Here are the stumpers.

Albany board On August 16, 1780 Gen. Benedict Arnold, commanding West Point, wrote to Col. Timothy Pickering, Quartermaster General, regarding materials then needed at the fort. "Ten thousand Albany Board, at least, will be wanted." Did they saw boards differently in Albany?

Ales masters In 1757 John Woolman, regarding slavery, wrote, "I ought not to be the scribe where wills are drawn in which some children are made ales masters over others during life." What kind of a master was an ales master?

Bed's head In 1711 William Byrd was a delegate to the House of Burgesses of Virginia. One evening he visited "the Governor 'til he went to bed about 11 o'clock, and then we went to Maj. Harrison's to supper again, but the Governor ordered the sentry to keep us out and in revenge about 2 o'clock in the morning we danced a g-n-t-r dance just at the bed's head." What do you think they did?

Breeth In 1678 Charles Wolley in his A Two Year's Journal in New York wrote, "Were I to draw their Effigies [beasts and birds] it should be after the pattern of the Ancient Britains, called Picts from painting, and Britains from a word of their own Language, Breeth, Painting or Staining." Did breeth mean painting, and in what language?

Burning coals Again, William Byrd in 1707 recorded in his diary, "Then we went to play called burning coals at which we ran much and were very merry." What kind of a game was that?

Buttermilk Here's Wolley again. "Both Indians and Dutch, especially the latter, whose Diet especially of the boorish sort, being Sallets and Bacon, and very often picked buttermilk, require the use of that herb to keep their phlegm from coagulating and curdling." Buttermilk, an herb?

Caminute In 1784 one I. Tiffeny wrote to a storekeeper at Crompond, New York, "By some unaccountable mistake neglect or some other devilish affiar the caminute was not left as it ought to have been at New York." Could it have been a vehicle, a camionette?

Castle duty In 1677, in the Grievances of Isle of Wight County, S.C., "It was the custom of masters of ships to pay castle duties in powder and shot." I find the phrase castle duty nowhere else.

Charlton peas The Boston Evening Post in 1765 advertised "Charlton peas." What kind of peas were they?

Clark distemper Justin Foote, a storekeeper in Crompond, N.Y., in 1784 wrote as follows: "I am a little touched with the Clark distemper (spleen)."

Crown soap In a 1757 letter Franklin wrote, "I am glad that Peter is acquainted with the Crown Soap business."

Curse John On September 19, 1774 Philip Fithian was reminiscing in his diary about his undergraduate days at Princeton when they "often practiced mischief by parading bad women and burning Curse John." Rev. John Witherspoon was president of the college from 1768 to 1794. Did they burn him in effigy?

Dissuetude In the 1640 Freedoms and Exemptions of the West India Company appears "in case of privilege, innovation, dissuetude, customs, laws." The OED defines the word "to become unaccustomed to" but that makes no sense in this context.

Disteress A character in Robert Mumford's 1770 play "The Candidate" refers to "a very disteress motive." What kind is that?

d. vi m. Cotton Mather's diary for August 1721 has an entry that starts "d. vi m. Friday."

First Table The 1641 Massachusetts Body of Liberties alludes to "punishing all such crimes (being breaches of the First or Second Table) as are committed against the peace of our sovereign lord." Were these tables or lists of crimes?

Gropish Boston merchant John Rowe's diary for the 1760s refers to "Old fogrums only persue a gropish disposition." Grasping?

Gurnet The Massachusetts House of Representatives 7/1/76 appropriated money for "repair to the gurnet at the entrance of Plymouth harbor." In 1630 John Winthrop was "in a shallop to Plymouth ... and about the Gurnet's nose the wind blew."

Indian Cabinet In his London Diary William Byrd wrote "We played at stock jobbing. For the Indian Cabinet I gave B.B. the chance of one card and H.L. the chance of the other, but neither won." Byrd wrote three secret diaries in a shorthand that did not use vowels and the translator was forced to make frequent guesses. Indian carpet was the nearest game I could find, but it was a two-deck solitaire.

Leadman's dwarf peas These were advertised with Charlton peas.

Mole The Boston Independent Journal in 1776 advertised "8 thousand gallons of Mole molasses." Was Mole a place?

Moschetto In 1701 Edmund Randolph wrote, "Mr. Archdale provided for him a moschetto engine against his masters will to catch fish." What kind of a trap was that?

Mount John Rowe recorded in his diary in 1760, "Clearing sugar from the Mount ... They are all called in from molesting the Mount Trade." Where was the Mount? There is a Cape Mount in Liberia, but I don't think we imported sugar from there.

Nihil account In 1776 William Eddis was a customs collector paid by the British government and his loyalty was suspect by the local Committee of Observation. He wrote to them, "We are not entitled to our salaries without a nihil account transmitted quarterly for our proceedings." A nihil was a return made by a sheriff in cases where there was no property upon which a levy could be made. That's not the same. What was a nihil account?

Norris's Drops On November 22, 1772 Washington bought "two bottles of Norris's Drops for Miss Custis [his step-daughter]." Norris's Antimonial Drops were widely advertised in Virginia newspapers, but I don't know what they contained.

Pect meems In his Medicine in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century Blanton quotes a doctor's bill, "To pect meems 10 lbs." The Virginia Medical Society doesn't know what that means and neither do I, but 10 pounds of tobacco, the usual medium of exchange, was not a large fee.

Polenia linnen A 1700 bill for a shipment from New York to Holland "2 G. polenia linnen at 15 p b." We wouldn't be sending Polish linen from New York.

Priory sheep Mr. H. H. Gardner wrote in a 1775 letter, "I have often wished for a good flock of the Priory sheep."

Puption Mrs. Martha Bradley's British Housewife, a cookbook, tells how to make one, but not what it is when it's made.

Scars of Venus In Thomas D'Urfey's song "Great Lord Frog to Lady Mouse" appears, "Then altho my Bum be bare, / All must own 'tis smooth and fair; / I've no Scars of Venus there." Traces of venereal disease? What sort would appear on his backside?

Set her up William Byrd, in his London Diary recorded, "After dinner we gave a girl half a Guinea each to set her up." I can guess what they did, but I can't find any confirmation. I hope they didn't knock her up.

Single stockings John Harrower recorded in his diary, "I think no more of seeing forty or fifty Nigers every day than I did of seeing so many dabling wives at Johnsmis with single stockings." The OED defines them as stockings of one thickness, unlined. All citations are 1552 or earlier. Why would Harrower be concerned with the thickness of stockings?

Skinner Major Fishbourne's Orderly Book for July 1778 refers to

"Companies of sappers and skimmers." I know what sappers were, but what were skimmers with sappers in the army?

Spark John Rowe recorded in his diary, "I hope that spark may yet in some part ... be obliged to do me justice." Chance, fortune?

Stock jobbing William Byrd in his London Diary wrote, "We played at stock jobbing." Stock jobbing is dealing with shares of stock, generally on an exchange, not a card game (see Indian Cabinet).

Tie up by the leg William Byrd in 1710 recorded, "Redskin Peter was again sick in pretence but I tied him up by the leg to cure him and it did cure him." Was that a punishment, suspending by one foot?

Trustings A Connecticut law of 1676 regulating the cost of provisions provided, "Trustings and trifles under a shilling being left to each man's agreement." A trifle we know, but what's a trust-
ing?

Vault In 1708 was at the Capitol in Williamsburg and "We went into the vault and drank a glass of Rhenish wine." I doubt if it was the privy, rather a vaulted room. Was it a rotunda or a cellar?

Whip over the ground A character in Robert Mumford's 1770 play "The Candidate" observes, "You are determined to whip over the ground." Beat a dead horse?