Outdoor Recreation at the Turn of the Eighteenth Century

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Today one of the primary highlights in the life of a teenage American male is when he gets his first car. For most boys their first car is their first major investment and therefore a source of great pride. Boys have undergone little but times have changed greatly. At the close of the eighteenth century, the house possessed the level of great esteem possessed by cars today. A boy's first house was one of the first social recognitions of his biological maturity. He was suddenly aloft, gazing down with contempt upon those friends so quickly forgotten.

The great pride the owners had in their house naturally led to competition between them. Idle boasting would lead to an informal race where a small wager was involved. These informal races are the last survivors of the small contests which grew into one of the nation's largest sports.

Horses were a necessity to the people, yet they surpassed the simple level of mechanical need into a true love affair between man and animal. Visitors to the Old Dominion were amazed at Virginian's kinship to their horses. Hugh Jones, after a tour through the Piedmont section of the state wrote:
They are such Lovers of Riding, that almost every ordinary person keeps a Horse; and I have known some to spend the morning ranging several miles in the woods to find and catch their horses only to ride two or three miles to church, to the Court House, or to a Horse-Race, where they generally appoint to meet upon Business; and are more certain of finding those that they want to speak or deal with, than at their House.

The English horse lover, J.F.D. Smyth, made the same observation:

The Virginian, of all ranks and denominations are excessively fond of horses ...; even the most indigent person has his saddle horse, which he rides to every place, and on every occasion; for in this country nobody walks on foot the smallest distance, except when hunting; indeed a man will frequently go five miles to catch a horse to ride only one mile upon afterwards.

The students of Liberty Hall Academy may not have been regulars at the race tracks but it is justifiable to speculate that they competed against each other. Certainly a lot of afternoons would find the students galloping across the fields in hot pursuit of each other. The fact that William Graham was contracted to build a
dormitory, a steward's house, and a stable is indicative of the importance placed on horses.\textsuperscript{3}

One of Virginia's greatest assets has always been the great abundance of wildlife. For the frontiersman this wildlife provided both sustenance and sport. When hunting game was necessary for survival the sport was developed into a fine art. This remained strong even after the domestic animals became the chief source of meat. One of the most popular positions of the gentility was for hunting. The cunning animal could elude men and dogs for hours before it would become tired. Then, and perhaps this explains the sport's popularity, the hunt would often end successfully.

Probably the favorite game among all classes was the white-tail deer. After the reckless destruction of the herds in the Tidewater area of the state, the deer population became centered in the Blue Ridge Mountain section of the state. Here the white-tail deer thrived and was hunted for both sport and food. Several methods were used to hunt the deer, the most popular being to use dogs to drive them into the open where they were shot on the run. Others used the stalking technique perfected by
the Indians. They felled trees for the deer to browse upon while they hid behind the brush pile, or they trained their horses to walk quietly by their side to cover them from the sight of the deer. One method looked down upon by many sportsmen was the setting of stakes along a fence line so that when the deer jumped the fence they were impaled.4

Virginia also offered extraordinary opportunity for bird hunting. The woods were filled with fowl of all kinds from the popular turkey to the tasty dove. The bird requiring the most skill and patience to hunt was the wild turkey. Turkey hunting was considered one of the purest sports for it pitted man against bird in a match of wits that more often than not ended in favor of the bird. Only the most skilled huntsman could call the gobbler into range and fell him before the bird became startled and escaped safely into the woods.

One of the most interesting hunts popular in the eighteen century was the nocternal search for the raccoon. A party of men and boys would take dogs and lanterns into the woods in the early hours of the morning. The excited yelp of the "coon" dogs would mean that the raccoon had been
found and "tried," The frightened animal would be spotted by the lanterns and a younger member of the party would climb the tree and attempt to catch the raccoon in a bag. If the animal were simply shot out of the tree both the hide and meat would be heavily damaged. Though unusual, trapping the raccoon in a bag and then hitting it in the head was by far the most advantageous way to hunt it.

Almost equal in popularity to hunting was fishing. There was an abundance of fish in the rivers and lakes of Virginia, providing great sport and often a tasty meal. Trout, perch, and bass were the favorite fish in Virginia since they were both fun to catch and good to eat. Fishing was and still is a sport enjoyed by both young and old, requiring neither the expense nor the skill of hunting. All that was required to go fishing was a bamboo pole, a string, a hook from the general store and some worms. It is difficult to determine whether the students at Liberty Hall were given to the freedom to hunt in the local woods. I am certain, however, that they would occasionally find time, whether sanctioned or not, to wander down to the Maury and try their luck with
The foremost qualities required of a frontiersman was stamina and courage. Wrestling matches, whether for money or sport, were considered the best way to determine who excelled in these areas. A wrestling match would often draw a large crowd, from which many would eagerly place bets on the contestants. These matches were usually not friendly contests to see who would prevail but rather heated two-men battles. While travelling in America, Thomas Ashe witnessed one of the matches and reported:

The indolence and dissipation of the middling and lower classes of white inhabitants of Virginia, are such as to give pain to every reflecting mind. Horse-racing, cock fighting, and wrestling matches are standing amusements for which they neglect all business; and in the latter of which they conduct themselves with a barbarity worthy of their savage neighbors.  

The contestants in these matches, often the result of a drunken quarrel would often suffer permanent injuries. Ashe noted in the same text that the eyes were especially susceptible to being gorged, plucked, or otherwise put out.

A sport enjoyed by many people and lacking the violence of wrestling was bowling. The most common form of bowling was the game of minipins, sometimes called skittles. The
rules of the game were quite simple and it was enjoyed by all classes. The more affluent would play on specially designed greens while the average man would merely find a suitable flat place. Nine pins, usually made of bone, were set up in a square formation and the players, standing at an agreed distance, tried to knock them down with a ball. In order to win the player was required to knock down exactly thirty-one pins in the fewest possible bowls. If a player goes over thirty-one he continues to roll in turn until he knocks down exactly nine pins in one or more rolls. The first player to knock thirty-one pins or, having surpassed thirty-one, to knock down nine pins is declared the winner.6

The game of bowls or jacks was also quite popular in the seventeenth and eighteen centuries. A small round ball called a jack and made of white earthenware was rolled onto the green as a target. The players then rolled their bowls in turn attempting to place them closest to the jack. The game of bowls was played on all scales with jacks ranging in size from that of a marble to that of a present-day bowling ball. It is highly possible that the numerous ceramic marbles found at Liberty Hall were used in playing some form of jacks.

Another game popularized in rural Virginia was the game
of horseshoes. Horseshoes originated in England as the game of quoits. Quoits was played by driving two iron stakes, called hobs, at a distance of twenty yards from each other. The contestants attempted to encircle the hobs with the quoits, round disks with holes in the middle. Three points were scored for encircling the hob and one point for having the quoit closest to the stake if there were no ringers. A regulation game consisted of twenty-one points. The only difference in the American version is the use of horseshoes instead of quoits.

The English also gave us the game of cricket, various forms of which were played in America. One of the most simple variations which became quite popular was stool ball. The rules of stool ball as described by Strutt:

consists simply in setting a stool upon the ground, and one of the players takes his place before it, while his antagonist, standing at a distance, tosses a ball with the intention of striking the stool, and this it is the business of the former to prevent by beating it away with the hand, reckoning one to the game for every stroke of the ball; if, on the contrary, it should be missed by the hand and touch the stool, the players change places; the conqueror at this game is he who strikes the ball most times before it touches the stool. I believe the same also happens if the person who threw the ball can catch and retain it when driven back, before it reaches the ground.
The Virginia countryside afforded many opportunities for outdoor recreations that required no elaborate equipment yet provided hours of pleasure. Water sports of all kinds, from swimming in the summer to skating in the winter were available. Certainly the students of Liberty Hall enjoyed some form of the recreation discussed in this paper and did not limit themselves to academic aspirations.
Footnotes

1 The Present State of Virginia, ed. by Richard Morton (Chapel Hill, 1956), p. 84.

2 Itinerant Observations in America (Savannah, 1878), p. 49.

3 Liberty Hall Excavations Book.


6 Colonial Virginians at Play - p. 178.

7 Ibid., p. 177.


9 Ibid., pp. 102-103.

2. Thomas Ashe, *Itinerant Observations in America* (Savannah, 1878)


7. *Liberty Hall Excavation Book*
HORSE RACING.
Colored engraving, artist unknown
A GAME OF NINEPINS OR SKITLES. Artist unknown
PLAYING AT COITS. Engraving by John Boydell
TRAP BALL, Played at the Black Prince, Newington Butts. Artist unknown
THE PLEASURES OF SKATING or, A VIEW in WINTER.

Colored mezzotint from painting by John Collet