

HE CALLED FOR HIS PIPE

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First, a disclaimer. When Old King Cole called for his pipe, it wasn't a tobacco pipe, but I couldn't think of a nursery rhyme mentioning tobacco or smoke. King Cole was from the third century; tobacco use didn't become a European fad until the sixteenth century. And fad is the proper word.

We think of tobacco as an early staple crop of Virginia, becoming a standard currency in several New World colonies (see *THE KING WAS IN HIS COUNTING HOUSE*). But until recently I hadn't understood just how pervasive a part of daily and occupational life it was, both in Europe and early America.

Tobacco smoking was prevalent in Europe. The early healthy-body guru, Tobias Venner of London, wrote against tobacco in 1637, commenting on the prevalence of tobacco smoking as early as 1621 and lamenting people who "cannot travel without a tobacco-pipe at their mouth" and who smoked between courses at dinner.

Early New World explorers were introduced to tobacco and tobacco pipes by the natives. They brought seeds and pipes back to Europe, where tobacco was grown in France, Portugal, and Spain in the 1550s, with England following in the next decade. Organized growing by white settlers occurred in the Caribbean in the sixteenth century and took firm hold in Virginia and the Chesapeake in the early seventeenth century. By 1640 Virginia was shipping nearly a million and a half pounds of tobacco to England each year.

Early settlers saw tobacco as a means to wealth. Some of the problems in the Jamestown colony in the early years were blamed on the fact that instead of growing corn, many colonists were focusing all their time and efforts on growing tobacco. It took a lot of both.

Tobacco raising was labor intensive, but the labor did not need to be highly skilled, except for a planter or overseer who could tell exactly when and how each step should be done. Timing and technique (controlling moisture content) was crucial to delivering a good product, but indentured servants, slaves, women, and even children performed many of the mundane tasks.

Even if your ancestor was a small farmer rather than a large landowner, he (and his entire family) may have been involved in tobacco growing, with an acre or so in tobacco for their cash crop. It is said that a man could manage up to four acres of tobacco a year, but that was if it was his only significant crop.

This was a year-round effort. The tiny seeds were planted around Epiphany in beds that were then covered with branches to protect them from frost. In a month, they were thinned to about ten times as many as were expected to mature. Tobacco growing quickly exhausted the soil, so clearing and preparing new fields was important.

The seedlings were transplanted in late spring and early summer. To receive the transplants, knee-high tobacco hills were built about four feet apart (more labor).

Transplanting was best done after (or during!) a down-pour, when the seedlings could be pulled up without breaking roots. A seedling would be rushed to a hill, where an experienced person would plant it in the hill. If the transplant didn't take root, a new seedling would replace it.

Then the constant tending began, with weeding and insect removal. There were, of course, no sprays, so constant vigilance was required to spot, remove by hand, and kill any of the several insects who loved the tobacco plant, often a task for children and unskilled labor.

In midsummer, the plant was "topped" (like we pinch back some kinds of garden plants) and "primed" (several of the lowest leaves removed), leaving a plant about three to four feet tall. Thereafter, the suckers (new growth) that formed were removed. The goal was a strong plant with about a dozen large leaves.

Plants were ready to harvest in late summer, when they were much taller than a man. They were cut down individually, when the grower determined that a specific plant was ready. Poles were threaded through the base of the plants, which were then hung upside down in tobacco barns for controlled drying. I've seen a number of abandoned tobacco barns in the Virginia countryside.

This was a critical time. If it wasn't properly cured, the tobacco would spoil during shipment. When the moisture content was just right, the leaves were stripped from the stalks and sorted by size and type (more labor). Some planters "stemmed" the leaves, stripping out the main stem, creating a higher quality product.

The leaves were shipped in large casks (barrels) called *hogsheads* for shipment to Europe. In an earlier article we talked about the important role of *coopers* (barrelmakers) in early America. The leaves were layered in the hogshead and pressed until it held about half a ton of tobacco. This was called *prizing*. Shipping was charged by the barrel, rather than by the weight, so the pressing was pretty aggressive. If the cooper had not done a good job, the barrel might split.

Getting the hogsheads from the tobacco-growing areas to warehouses was a logistical problem. First, the hogsheads were often rolled to the local landing. As you can imagine, the very large barrel sometimes got out of control going downhill. To prevent this, a long pole might be put through the middle of hogshead, from top to bottom, in effect creating an axle, so the hogshead could be rolled by a men on each side or pulled behind a mule, horse, or ox.

Then came the problem of managing the hogsheads on the waterways. In earlier columns we talked about boats being adapted based on need. An interesting such adaptation was the flat-bottomed *James River batteau* created to transport the hogsheads. It was a combination of the Indian log canoe and the batteaus used by the French fur trappers. You can read more about it by searching online for the [now named] James River Batteau Festival.

Tobacco growing was strictly controlled. Most colonies had laws limiting how much an individual could grow or ship. They also regulated truth-in-packaging. For instance, Maryland required that the weight be “cut or marked upon the bulge” of the hogshead.

The basic growing process and terminology hasn't changed much in three and a half centuries (although I don't think they roll hogsheads anymore). I've given a generic view of the process, which varied based on time period, locality, soil, type of plant, and market specialties. You can learn much more about growing and processing tobacco at the website for the Colonial National Historical Park (Jamestown, Colonial Parkway, and Yorktown).

TOBACCO RETAILING

Thomas Ines was a *tobacco spinner* in Boston in 1666. Englishman Randall Spakeman was a tobacconist in Philadelphia in 1725, and Peter Paris and Abraham Wild were tobacconists there in the 1750s and 1760s. The latter two came from a village in the Alsace where it seems a significant portion of the population was engaged in the trade. Many individuals in the village were identified as tobacco spinners.

Tobacco spinners (occasionally in America we see the term *tobacco twisters*) are found in cities and towns. I find them in England, Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and Denmark. It is clear from records that they are involved at the retail level and, indeed, are often called *tobacconists*, who are persons who sell directly to the public. (Note, however, that twisting and spinning tobacco leaves into a rope and then rolling the rope into a ball also could be used to transport small quantities of tobacco from where it was grown and cured.) In Victorian times the term tobacco spinner was applied to those involved in cigar-making and may also have applied those who prepared ropes of chewing tobacco. But we're interested in earlier centuries.

In the tobacco shop, tobacco spinners prepared tobacco for sale by spinning tobacco leaves into a continuous rope or coil twist on spinning tables with a drum at one side. A customer could purchase a length of this rope and would cut off a piece to place the tobacco in his (or her) pipe.

Which brings us to the tobacco pipe.

THE EVOLUTION OF TOBACCO PIPES

The tobacco pipe is said to have been introduced to Europe with the gift of an Indian pipe to Walter Raleigh in 1586. Pipemaking was a specific occupation. We find several mentions of tobacco pipemakers in the Leiden (Holland) archives in the early 1600s. The pipemakers of London incorporated as their own guild in 1619.

Robert Cotton, tobacco pipemaker, arrived in Jamestown in 1608. He apparently died or returned to England, but before doing so made tobacco pipes with a mold using Virginia red clay and decorated the stems with stamps of four fleur-de-lis forming a cross within a diamond, thought to be related to those of a London pipemaker. Most tobacco pipes in the colonies were imported from Europe,

but evidence of a thriving business in the Chesapeake has been found.

It is with some trepidation that I even bring up the subject of tobacco-pipe dating, but I do at least want to give an overview of their evolution. Pipes are comprised of two parts, the bowl and the stem.

Various studies have shown that the earliest bowls were smaller, probably indicative of the high cost of the tobacco itself, with the bowls becoming more generous as tobacco became less costly. They also somewhat changed shape, with moderations in the heel (a projection on the base of the bowl).

As time went on, the stems, which were already much longer than our modern image of pipes, became even longer. As they did so, the diameter of the bore (the hole in the stem through which the smoke was drawn) became smaller.

Which is where the controversy comes in. I can say “as time went on,” but that won't do for archaeologists, who want to date a dig site with precision. Of necessity, pipes are pretty disposable. As you can imagine, a long thin clay tube was subject to breakage, so garbage pits, roadsides, and fireplaces being excavated often hold fragments of discarded tobacco pipes.

Guidelines for dating ranging from bowl shapes and sizes to a precise mathematical formula for bore size have been presented by archaeologists (these presume that all pipe makers got the memo and changed their molds and manufacturing processes simultaneously).

You can read more about tobacco pipes and archaeology (along with his acerbic asides) in Ivor Noel Hume's book *Martin's Hundred*, the story of a dig at Carter's Grove, a few miles southeast of Williamsburg.

THE KNICKERBOCKER HISTORY OF TOBACCO PIPES

Washington Irving gives us a slightly different perspective on the changing styles of tobacco pipes. He hated the New York Dutch. In 1809, under the pseudonym Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving wrote a scathing satire, *A History of New York*. In Chapter 8 of Book 4, he describes “The Pipe Plot, and the Rise of Feuds and Parties.”

Knickerbocker says “The pipe, in fact, was the great organ of reflection and deliberation of the New-Netherlander. It was his constant companion and solace—was he gay, he smoked; was he sad, he smoked; his pipe was never out of his mouth; it was a part of his physiognomy; without it his best friends would not know him. Take away his pipe? You might as well take away his nose!”

I have an etching by E. C. Caswell derived from the William Heath etching of an event from the book showing “Peter Stuyvesant's Army Entering New Amsterdam,” which is a satirical portrait of the early Dutch burghers. Many men are carrying or smoking long-stem pipes while walking or, like my own ancestor, while riding horses.

In the supposed Pipe Plot, Wilhelmus Kiest, observing that the New Amsterdam residents at dissenting political discussions always had pipes in their mouths, determined “that there was some mysterious affinity between politics

and tobacco smoke” and banned the smoking of tobacco throughout New Netherlands, which immediately brought protests. A compromise solution was to ban long-stem pipes in favor of short-stem pipes (previously favored only by the Dutch yeomanry).

Knickerbocker then says “From this fatal schism in tobacco pipes we may date the rise of parties in Nieuw-Nederlands. The rich and self-important burghers . . .

formed a kind of aristocracy known as Long Pipes; while the lower order . . . were branded with the plebeian name of Short Pipes. A third party sprang up, [who] . . . took to chewing tobacco; hence they were called Quids. . . . The enlightened inhabitants of the Manhattoes, therefore, being divided into parties, were enabled to hate each other with great accuracy.” (If you like satire, you’ll love this book.)