

# Dancing in Colonial America

By Kaye West

By 1776 in Colonial America over a hundred-fifty years had passed, characterized by endurance from dangerous ocean crossings, severe winters, starvation, disease, and multiple wars, and the thirteen colonies east of the Allegheny Mountains had established farms, towns, villages, and plantations with divergent peoples from many countries as well as indigenous people and Blacks. In the context of the English, French, and Spanish vying for political power worldwide and the wealth that the New World offered, colonists themselves were divided in their beliefs, languages, and loyalties.

Even in that turbulent context, with some craving independence and self-rule and others loyal to the King of England, colonists used social gatherings featuring music and dance as a means to demonstrate tolerance of those different from them as well as cooperation and community with their neighbors, though there remained distinctions of acceptable interaction according to social class. Learning to dance was required as part of the education of men, and dances provided an opportunity for young people to become acquainted and engage in courtship, since “dating” as we understand it today did not exist.

## Upper Class Dancing

The landed gentry of Southern colonies and the governing elite in Middle and Northern colonies held Balls which brought people together, often from a considerable distance. Southern Balls usually lasted several days. In the other colonies there were both private and public Balls. Private Balls were occasions to commemorate a special event such as an engagement or anniversary where the host/hostess issued invitations for selected guests. Organizers of public Balls sold tickets so only those with discretionary funds could participate.

Attendees wore their best clothing: ladies showed off their long formal gowns (all dresses were long in those days) and men often wore their military dress uniforms. They engaged in dance forms influenced by those from the courts of England and France and taught by dance masters they paid who largely had been influenced by the field of ballet.

Most prominently they showcased the Minuet, a courtly dance characterized by six counts of music which was played with a piano, harpsichord, harp, and/or violin. It was a “performance dance” done by one pair of dancers who exhibited their skill while all others watched.

The most prominent male selected the most prominent female as his partner for the first dance (typical today of wedding receptions). Following them, other pairs in descending order of importance danced while others observed, and that continued as long as there were pairs desiring to dance. Then they would begin doing some of the “country dances” popular at the time which they learned from the dance masters. Eventually they allowed only four Minuets to be danced at each Ball prior to beginning Country Dances.

## The Minuet

The six-counts of the Minuet are made with graceful steps in “first position” (having been recently standardized in ballet as a foot position with the toes pointed out and made on the balls of the feet). It begins on the right foot for both dancers who are side by side (the male on the right of his partner) or possibly on opposite sides of the room. They step as follows (R = right foot; L = left foot):

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Count	1	2	3	4	5	6
Action	Ball of R	R Foot Flat	Ball of L	Ball of R	Ball of L	L Foot Flat

The steps could be made forward in approximately a straight line. When made to the side, the path is like a contemporary Vine (right foot moves to the side on count 1, the left foot is placed behind the right foot on count 3, the right foot moves to the side on count 4, and the left foot moves in front of the right foot on count 5).

Dancers made geometric paths, such as a “Z” shape, on the floor (a published book described possible patterns). When dancers faced opposite directions such as with their right hands joined at about shoulder height, they could move in a clockwise circle around a common point in an action known as an Allemande (translated “with the hand”). Those less skillful would dance with flat feet as Slow-Quick-Quick-Slow (a Quick takes one count, a Slow takes two).

It is easy to see that as dancers adapted what they knew to other situations (the inevitable evolution of dancing), such as dancers facing each other in Closed Position (as in current dancing), one dancer (the male) had to begin with his left foot (count 5). The result is the count of Slow-Slow-Quick-Quick which is the timing pattern for Social Foxtrot which is often the first Rhythm taught at ballroom studios. Might that be the origin of Social Foxtrot?



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## Country Dances

People residing in the colonies arrived from many different countries, mingling their cultural practices and dances with those of indigenous people. The result was a number of “Country Dances” which had a more democratic flair where everyone was encouraged to participate simultaneously and where those of different backgrounds shared their heritage. Many of the dances corresponded to specific pieces of music, and according to authors Kate Van Winkle Keller and Charles Cyril Hendrickson in their book of *George Washington, A Biography in Social Dance* (1998), “figures of over 25,000 dances were published with their music in English books between 1700 and 1830.”

Typically the dances were performed in two lines with men on one side facing their partners in the opposite line. These “longways” dances, also called “contredanse,” were the origins of Contra Dance patterns still done today and were a precursor to the well-known Virginia Reel which was introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Longways dances favored in middle-class events began and ended with “honor your partner” where dancers bowed or curtsied as their first and last figure.

A variation practiced more by the elite, and depicted in his book in the 1760s by a London dance master De la Cuisse, was the Cotillion, with four couples forming a square and performing as many as twelve figures (listed in French, with “chassé” and “balancé,” used in four of the figures which are recognizable in today’s Round Dancing). The Quadrille, also with four couples forming a square, expanded the (French) dance vocabulary to about thirty figures.

Additionally, dancers from Scotland and Ireland brought jigs (also called hornpipes since they were sometimes accompanied by bagpipe music) where dancers performed intricate movements with their feet (often with stiff upper bodies) characteristic of Irish Step Dancing and modern Clogging. Dances called Allemandes (composed of various turns with joined hands) and Gavottes (including side leaps, vines, and hops) were added to dancing repertoire. Some of the early dances were done in circles (early “rounds”).

While slaves and servants did not participate in the Balls of the elites, they did observe the dancing, and not only did they imitate it, but also they brought their own background of experience to bear when they danced in their own social groups. In the South, additionally, slaves were called upon to dance to entertain their masters; their performances often were the early tap dances which involved not only the elaborate movement of the feet (as in jigs), but also animated actions of the whole body.

## Evolution of Dancing

The square formation is the basis of modern square dancing which has changed greatly over the years so there are levels of accomplishment (mainstream, plus, advanced 1 and 2, and challenge levels 1, 2, and 3). Currently it is experiencing a revival as people are interested in finding opportunities for exercise, socialization, and joy with a congenial group of people. In Mesa, the Checkmates Square Dance Club (<https://mesacheckmates.com/>) offers lessons.

Meanwhile dance masters formed ballroom studios and in the mid-1950s codified their dance rhythms from forms they appropriated from many sources. For example, Quickstep evolved from Charleston which originated from Black Americans and their early jigs. They also originated the Swing

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dances. Cha Cha and Rumba have their roots in African rhythms combined with Hispanic music which originated among slaves in the Caribbean. Current ballroom dancing caters primarily to a wealthy clientele desiring to perform or compete.

In contrast, the various dances from many countries danced by the common folk, which focused on learning and social interaction rather than competition, were the basis of modern Round Dancing which further evolved by incorporating all the Rhythms of both International and American Style Ballroom Dancing as “cued ballroom” or “choreographed ballroom” so dancers need not memorize routines written to specific music or invent choreography while dancing!

Round Dancing also is organized by levels: Phase 1 to 6, with two Rhythms beginning at Phase I and II, and others beginning at Phase III or IV. Leaders share their knowledge in person and at conventions and via cue sheets, videos, and websites. Their sequential learning sessions are much less expensive than private ballroom lessons. See the first link on any page after selecting a rhythm at the **Dance Rhythms Chart** (at <https://home.csulb.edu/~kwest/wido/rhythms.html>) for a checklist of figures for that Rhythm.

With the current world situation likewise in tremendous turmoil and some forces in this country attempting to pit folks against one another, and with young folks feeling increasingly despondent and isolated (experts blaming excessive use of cell phones and computers), our society needs opportunities for in-person social interaction more than ever. Square and Round Dancing provide that kind of community interaction through the joy of dancing. We invite everyone to get involved!