

A Day in 1795: Line Dancing and Cooking



Settlers began arriving in Charlotte, Vermont in 1784, just after the end of the Revolutionary War, and built log dwellings like Settlers' House. People came to Vermont from other states in New England, especially from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Those states had become crowded, and men who had fought in the war were looking for better opportunities. In this lesson we'll learn about everyday life in Vermont in the 1790s, learn and practice the steps to a popular dance of the time, The Virginia Reel, and explore classic and useful recipes from 18th century kitchens.

Goals

- Gain a deeper understanding of everyday life in the 1700's
- Learn the steps to the Virginia Reel dance
- Explore and experiment with recipes appropriate for the time period

Standards

DA:Cr1.1.1 Explore a variety of locomotor and non-locomotor movements by experimenting with and changing the elements of dance.

D2.Civ.2.K-2. Explain how all people, not just official leaders, play important roles in a community.

D2.His.2.3-5. Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.

Vocabulary

Barter—the act of trading goods as money. Settlers would barter with neighbors and shopkeepers to gain the supplies they needed for everyday life.

Colonization—the act of settling a group of people in a new place.

Pickle—a method of preserving food in vinegar solution.

Settler—a person that moves into a new area to establish a new life.

Virginia Reel—a lively American country dance performed by a number of couples facing each other in parallel lines.

Background/ History

Settlers' House

The Settlers' House is a two-room house built in East Charlotte, Vermont, about 1846. It is constructed of hand-hewn beech and pine timbers, dovetailed, or jointed, at the corners; the ceiling and floor joists are dovetailed into the outside walls.

Although this structure dates from later than the time period we focus on in this lesson, early Vermont settlers often built their houses using similar log construction or post-and-beam construction. Simple, basic log constructions often were considered temporary, and after their period of usefulness, they were often left to fall down. Those more substantially built were sometimes added on to. Clapboards—long, thin slats of wood that overlap—were applied to the outside, and the walls were plastered on the inside. Research conducted in 1999 determined that a French-Canadian named Antoine Loraine (who was working to clear Charlotte land at the time) most likely built this log house. Several similar homes have been located in the vicinity. When acquired by the Museum in 1955, it was moved intact and restored.

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Vermont Settlement

French explorer Samuel de Champlain first traveled to the region that is now Vermont in 1609. By the early 18th century both British and French populations established military and civilian outposts in the area. Conflicts between the two nations continued until the French defeat in the French and Indian War (1754–1763), after which the land was ceded to England. During the American Revolution (1775–1783), Vermont declared independence separately from the original 13 American colonies, although the Continental Congress refused to recognize it. Vermont was finally admitted to the union as the 14th state in 1791, after 14 years as an independent republic.

Towns throughout Vermont, just like Charlotte, were first organized, or chartered, in the 1760s. Early travelers to the area talked about the poor traveling conditions; between April and June of 1789 a man named Nathaniel Perkins described the lack of roads and how deep the mud was on the paths—“mud up to my horse’s belly.” One night he stayed in “a little log hut...and slept on a chaff-bed [straw bed] without any covering.” The roads that settlers traveled on were often in poor condition, littered with tree stumps and muddy and rutted. Travel would have been difficult and travelers would need to establish visual landmarks to mark their way. Some early settlers found their way to Charlotte by traveling on Lake Champlain in early spring when the lake was still frozen, bringing their belongings on a sled pulled by oxen and horses.

During the early years of Charlotte, the main business in town was harvesting the trees for spars—poles that helped hold a sail—for boats for the British navy. Settlers began arriving in Charlotte in 1784, just after the end of the Revolutionary War, and built log dwellings like Settlers’ House. There was a sawmill in Charlotte as early as 1787, so as soon as a family put up the “temporary” or basic cabin and began clearing the land they might have brought their wood to the sawyer to be cut to build a barn. Then the family needed to build a stronger, more permanent house for themselves and begin to raise livestock. By 1795, more than 600 people lived in Charlotte and were busy with all of their daily chores.



Settlers' House interior.

Food Ways

Once settled, a farmer would have practiced varied agriculture, growing a cereal (wheat, rye, or oats) and hay in cleared areas, planting corn around the stumps in his newer fields, gathering maple sugar in season, and perhaps cultivating a small young apple orchard. Settlers would also have kitchen gardens, growing herb for cooking and medicinal uses, and vegetables like carrots, turnips, parsnips, potatoes, cabbage, pumpkin, beans, and corn.

Growing and tending to a garden was a laborious task. Children often helped seed, weed, and harvest herbs as well as vegetables to help prepare for the long winters. Having a stocked pantry in the late 18th century meant pickling and preserving as many foods as possible and working together as a family to get all the tasks completed.

A Day in 1795: Virginia Reel

ACTIVITY

For this activity we will learn the steps of the Virginia reel, a traditional line dance!

Note—you can learn these steps on your own but, if you can, get family members involved!

Be the caller and teach everyone the steps.

Virginia Reel

The square dance is an American institution. It began in New England when the first settlers, and the immigrant groups that followed, brought with them the popular dances of the day including the schottische (shot-ish) line dance from eastern Europe, the quadrille (kwad-drill)—a fashionable English dance, the minuet (min-you-et) couples dance from France, and Irish and Scottish jigs and reels.

As people of different backgrounds arrived and communities grew, so too did the number of dances, making it more difficult for the average person to remember all the different steps.

That's how the dance "caller" developed. The person who remembered all the various movements in each dance could cue, or prompt, the dancers in case they happened to forget what came next. Over time, the caller developed his own way of "calling" the dances, and could teach different dances to different communities.

Settlers looked forward to organized dances as a way to connect with neighbors and friends and provide a break from their busy lives. Dances took place in barns, town halls, ballrooms, or anywhere with a hard-surfaced floor, and some lively music.

More Resources

Barn Dance-Virginia Reel, Youtube,
<https://bit.ly/YoutubeReel-SM>

Virginia Reel, Youtube,
<https://bit.ly/YoutubeReel2-SM>

Historic Kitchens vs Modern Kitchens, Youtube,
<https://bit.ly/YoutubeKitchens-SM>

Materials

- A flat surface for dancing
- Optional: music, most often these dances were done to a fiddle or other single instrument
<https://bit.ly/YoutubeReel2-SM>

Call the Virginia Reel (*calls are in bold italics*)

Honor your partner

Bow to your partner, forward 2 steps, back 2 steps (twice)

Right Hand to Your Partner, Round You Go

(walking clockwise)

Left Hand Now, Don't Be Slow

(walking counter clockwise)

Forward Both Hands Around

(partners join hands and walk in circle clockwise)

Dos-a-do Your Partner

(walk forward passing partner with right shoulder, making a box, return to place passing left shoulder.)

Head Couple Down the Center

(head couple join hands and slide 8 steps down the line and back)

Cast Off-Dancers

(play follow the leader. Leaders make a circle by going to the back of the line.)

Head Couple Form an Arch

(like a bridge)

Join Hands Passing Through

(2nd couple join hands and pass through arch, going to the end of the line and sliding back into position. 2nd couple now becomes the Head Couple and dance is repeated until all couples have had a turn to be Head Couple.)

A Day in 1795: Cooking Traditional Recipes

ACTIVITY

For this activity we will learn to cook some traditional 18th century recipes. At social gatherings, neighbors and friends would bring food and dance line dances, celebrating special events or activities like community barn raisings. Try some recipes with your family, and enjoy a taste of the 18th century!

Switchel—Old Fashioned Summer Drink

Ingredients

- 1/2 c. honey (more or less to taste)
- 1/2 c. apple cider vinegar (more or less to taste)
- 1/2 gallon water

Mix ingredients together, chill and serve cold.

Corn Chowder (serves 8)

Ingredients

- 6 large soda crackers (or use oyster crackers or saltines – enough to create a paste when mixed with milk)
- 1 cup milk
- ¼ lb salt pork or bacon
- 1 large onion, sliced
- 4 large potatoes, peeled, sliced
- 2 cups water
- 2 cups of corn cut whole from the cob, or 2 cups of frozen corn
- 1 ¼ tsp salt
- ¼ teaspoon paprika

1. Soak crackers or biscuits in milk.
2. Cut salt pork/bacon into cubes and brown over medium fire.
3. Add onion and cook until soft.
4. Add potatoes and water, then cook until potatoes are soft but not all broken.
5. Stir in the cracker-milk mixture, corn, salt, and paprika.
6. Heat through; serve.

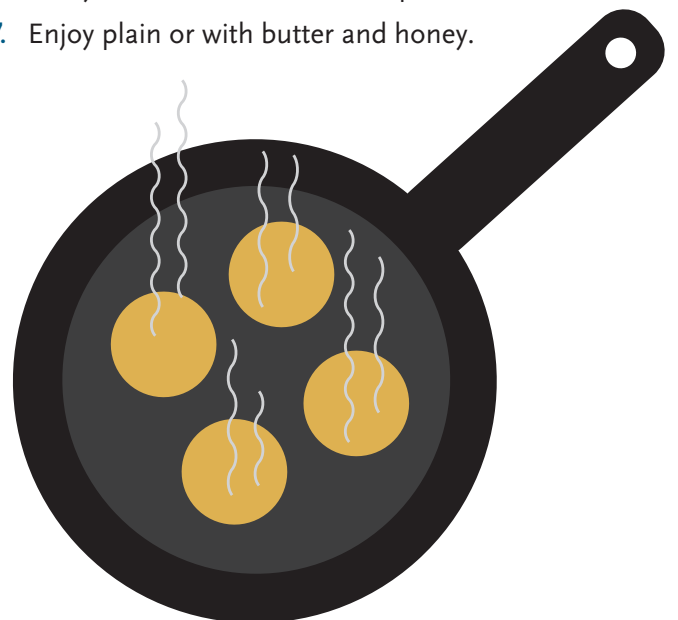
Johnny Cakes

Johnny cakes were synonymous with settler life. Made from just four ingredients—rye flour, wheat flour, cornmeal, and water—these patty shaped cakes lasted a long time and were carried in pockets out in the field on long working days, supplying steady nutrients.

Ingredients

- 1/2 cup Rye Flour
- 1/2 cup Wheat Flour
- 1 cup Cornmeal
- Water

1. In a bowl, combine 1 cup corn meal, ½ cup wheat flour and ½ cup rye flour.
2. While stirring, slowly add water until a dough forms. You don't want the dough to be too wet. It should be tacky but hold a shape.
3. Roll your dough into small balls and place to the side to dry out while the pan is heating.
4. Heat a heavy bottom pan on the stove. No need to add any oil or butter, settlers would have cooked them straight on the pan.
5. When the pan is hot, add in your dough balls and flatten.
6. You know they are ready to turn when they easily lift off the surface of the pan.
7. Enjoy plain or with butter and honey.



A Day in 1795: Cooking Traditional Recipes

Pickled Cucumbers

Cucumbers, when pickled and canned, last for years in a cool storage area. Pickling was commonplace for all settlers as they let nothing go to waste. Don't stop at cucumbers! You can pickle almost anything...even meat, and eggs!

NOTE: You will need to boil the liquid so please ask an adult for help.

Ingredients

- Young cucumbers
- Salt
- Water
- Fresh egg
- Vinegar
- Cloves, ground
- Mace, ground
- Nutmeg, ground
- Whole pepper corns
- Ginger, ground
- Optional: Grape leaves

1. Make a pickle of salt and water, strong enough to bear an egg. (Fresh eggs will float in salt water if the brine is strong enough.)
2. Boil the salt pickle and pour it over the cucumbers in a bowl.
3. Let the cucumbers sit overnight.
4. Strain them, cut into slices and drain or dry on paper towel or dish towel. (You can also leave them whole if they are small.)
5. Boil vinegar with cloves, mace, nutmeg, pepper, and ginger. (Ratio of spices to vinegar is about 1 tsp each spice to 1 cup vinegar.) You may increase the spices and use apple cider vinegar if preferred.
6. Put the cucumbers in the pot with the hot vinegar. (Add some grape leaves if you want to.)
7. Let the cucumbers sit in the pot several minutes.
8. Transfer the cucumbers to a jar.
9. Pour the vinegar/spice mixture over the pickles.
10. After they have cooled completely, put the lid on the jar. The longer they sit, the more they will taste like pickles. Eat too soon and they taste like vinegar. Suggested time to sit in brine is at least 48 hours.
11. Enjoy your pickles!

