Chapter 7

Dance in the United States: The 17th Through 19th Centuries

# Overview

From the time of the British colonies to the American Revolution, dance had unique positions in the northern and southern colonies. The theatrical fare of circuses and theaters included both English and American actors, dancers, and singers. Displaced British and French dance masters dominated the ballrooms with the newest dances from Europe or their own arrangements.

In the first half of the 19th century, foreign stars performed in the big cities on the eastern and southern coasts and traveled by water and rail to the outposts of civilization. The resident theatrical companies provided the support for dramatic, operatic, and balletic productions. As the pioneers pushed the frontier farther west, they took with them their portable arts of music and dance for amusement and celebration.

In the second half of the 19th century, minstrel shows, spectacles, variety shows, and vaudeville shows commanded the stages across the growing nation. In the ballroom, which remained a social test, the dance master continued to teach the latest dances and requisite etiquette for young people poised to climb the social ladder.

# Activities and Assignments

The activities and assignments for this chapter are presented in relation to the 18th and 19th centuries.

## Activity 1. 18th- and 19th-Century American Dancers

Select a dancer from the following list of American dancers. Research and write a two- to three-page biography of the dancer and his or her signature dance and music to accompany it. Find a picture of the dancer to include with your report. Present an oral biography of the dancer. Then perform the dancer’s signature dance.

* John Durang
* William Henry Lane
* Mary Ann Lee
* George Washington Smith
* Augusta Maywood

## Activity 2. Dance in George Washington’s Time

Using the following sources and the Web Links in this document, read and research social dance during pre- and post-American Revolutionary times. Select dances that Washington and his guests would dance at an 18th-century ball.

Sources:

* *Country Dances from Colonial New York: James Alexander’s Notebook,* 1730. Kate van Winkle and George A. Fogg, 2000.
* *Dances from George Washington’s Birthday Balls* byLeland B. Ticknor, 1990. (27 early American dances including 8 cotillions with music)
* *Social Dances From the American Revolution* by Charles Cyril Hendrickson and Kate van Winkle Keller, 1992.

For more sources, see Web Links in chapter 7 of the web resource.

### Extended Learning Experience: Intensive Research

Allegorical pantomime ballets proliferated around the time of the Revolutionary War. Research this topic, then create a dance drama scene that includes allegorical figures such as liberty and justice with American historical figures such as George Washington. Design the sets using 18th-century theater models and costumes.

## Activity 3. La Bayadère

Read the story that is the basis of *La Bayadère.* Re-create the shawl dance from the ballet. Then replay the scene as a burletta. You could select a new cast with male or female cast members performing roles en travesti.

## Activity 4. Who Danced Where: 19th-Century Theater Research

Find visual sources such as playbills, handbills, or flyers of 19th-century American theaters, Vauxhalls, circuses, museums, and amphitheaters. Begin by doing an Internet search of university libraries to locate specific theater sources. A local or state historical society is another good place to start; many touring companies traveled throughout the United States, especially in the last quarter of the 19th century. Or, select a big city that had numerous theaters and other performing spaces. The theater, historical society, or library may have records of theater events in that city. Compile a list of types of dramatic fare or acts performed in each of these places. Who were the dance artists? Did they also perform in drama? In opera? If this activity is a shared project with other members of the class, each person or group selects a theater from different parts of the country or within a specific city. Collecting information about different theaters and their fare could provide a more in-depth look at dance performances in these places or in different parts of the country.

## Activity 5. Western Dances

You have probably seen the Western movies with pioneers dancing after they raised the barn, at a wedding, a social evening, around a campfire, or the dance halls in saloons that presented music, song, and dance entertainments. Students can research and write a report, or they can perform for the class and discuss their research findings.

Plan a Western social gathering, select from the examples presented previously, or create another scenario. Research the music and dances the group would perform. Learn and perform two or three dances that fit the occasion you have selected. If possible, locate authentic or period music to accompany the dances.

What would this social gathering be like if it were in the Southwest? The Plains? The Mountains? (Type of music? Dances?)

How did the etiquette at these social gatherings differ from that of formal balls in the East?

In eastern cities to western towns, variety and vaudeville show numbers were popular entertainment. Stage two or three dance hall variety show numbers. Use popular songs of the time to accompany your dances.

## Activity 6. Comparing Countries

Compare and contrast 19th-century American ballet to European or Russian ballet during the same times during the century. Who were the artists that performed in Europe, the United States, or Russia?

# Web Links

American history from the colonies to the Revolution  
[www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/revolution/index.html](http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/revolution/index.html)

American general history  
[www.historyplace.com](http://www.historyplace.com)

Early American social dance  
[www.cdss.org/elibrary/DFIA/DancBibl.htm](http://www.cdss.org/elibrary/DFIA/DancBibl.htm)

Dancing with General Washington  
<https://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/colonial-life-today/dancing>

Master Juba, 19th-century dancer  
<http://masterjuba.com>

Etiquette for the ballroom  
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/?q=&fa=Subject%3AEtiquette>

*The Black Crook*[www.musicals101.com/1860to79.htm](http://www.musicals101.com/1860to79.htm)

# Review Questions

1. What was American society like during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries?
2. Who were the dancers and other contributors to dance during this period?
3. What were the dances, music, and other arts that supported dance during this period?
4. What were the significant dances, ballets, and literature of each period?

# Vocabulary

*Black Crook, The*

*Buy It Dear, ’Tis Made of Cashmere*

circuses

*Dieu et la Bayadère, Le*

Durang, John

Emmet, Daniel D.

*Forêt Noire, La*

Lane, William Henry (Juba)

Lee, Mary Ann

Maywood, Augusta

melodramas

minstrel show

Mr. Bones

Mr. Interlocutor

Mr. Tambo

olio

walk-around

pantomime ballets

Smith, George Washington

stock company

variety show

vaudeville

Vauxhalls