



Debunking Old House Myths

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People trust museums to provide truthful information about history. Thus it is vital that professionals in museums and similar institutions remain vigilant about the public's misconceptions about the past. This article will address three common myths associated with old houses.

Myth 1: “They were shorter back then”

Many people who enter historic house museums see the low ceiling height and period beds and exclaim “they must have been shorter back then.” Evidence tells us that Americans of the last few centuries were not significantly shorter on average (gaining at most ¼ inch over the last 300 years.) How do we know this? By examining records of soldiers' height in the Revolution and of sailors on a merchant ships, records between tailors and their clients, runaway slave ads, and coffin-makers' records. Beds appear short in historic houses, causing people to conclude that their occupants were also short. But curators at Winterthur and Colonial Williamsburg measured every bed in their collections only to find that some period beds were longer and some shorter than ours today. Ceiling heights are lower in early homes because wood was expensive. Larger spaces required more timber to build and more wood to heat. Given today's heating prices, I think we can relate to that.

Myth 2: Windows and closets were taxed in the colonial period

Though glass was relatively costly in the 18th century, the number and size of windows in the old homes of Newport have more to do with fashion and function than with the need to hide one's wealth from the tax collector (or to flaunt one's wealth to the neighbors). The origins of this myth probably come from the fact that there was a window tax in England in the 1700s, but no evidence exists of similar taxes here. The 1798 property tax in the U.S. did take into consideration the number of windows along with lot size, number of enslaved people in the household, and other considerations, but this lasted for just one year. As for clothes closets, they simply weren't needed. People had fewer clothes than we do now and their wardrobes were adequately stored in chests and on pegs. Perhaps these myths persist because taxes are a part of our current reality and we enjoy comparing the “then-and-now” of the government's role in family economics.

Myth 3: The leading cause of death for women was catching on fire from the hearth

Since colonial towns kept death records, this is a fairly easy one to debunk. Historians have determined that the leading cause of death among women was disease. Though a few women did die of having been burned at the hearth, complications from childbirth, for example, was a much greater concern. Women knew their way around their own hearths. Perhaps the myth persists because the drama of a lady on fire is so compelling and the large hearths of Newport's historic houses seem so daunting. This story fills an important need for us – thinking about how hard or dangerous life was “back then” allows us to appreciate the comforts we enjoy today.

Is it a travesty if most Americans retain these misapprehensions about aspects of colonial life? No, but to let them go unchallenged is to miss the opportunity to help people hone their skills of logic. Most of these myths persist because of common mistakes in historical reasoning. Moreover, then-and-now comparisons are one way in which the study of history is eminently useful for our own lives. Indeed, this is why getting our historical facts straight is so important, because we use them to inform the present and, hopefully, to guide our future.

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