

GEDDY GARDEN NEWS

**Spring, the sweet Spring, is the year's pleasant king;
Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring,
Cold doth not sting, the pretty birds do sing,
Jug-jug, pu-we, to-witta-woo!**

Thomas Nash,
16th Century English author

For the past several months I have been researching the history of the celebration and customs of May Day in preparation for the 300th anniversary of the establishment of the city of Williamsburg. The decision had been made to create a May pole and to invite the citizens to take part in the Maypole dance. This assignment was appropriate for me because of the relationship of May Day with spring flowers.

Very quickly I learned that May Day celebrations represented very different things to various people.

Originally it was a pagan ritual dating from prehistoric times. It had many names. The Celts called it Beltane, Teutons called it Walpurgis, and the Romans named it Floralia, for Flora, the goddess of flowers and springtime. Some believe the Druids were celebrating tree worship and in Egypt and India the May Day celebrations were like spring festivals. These celebrations were a combination of mythology and folklore.

May Day was a major festival in pre-Christian Europe that celebrated the important seasonal transition in the year. It was an expression of the death of winter. A key symbol of the day was fresh spring flowers, which served to generate feelings of hope and joy in the communities.

Trees, which became the Maypoles, were carried from the woods. The branches were chopped off and the tree trunks were wrapped in violets and ribbons were attached to the top of the Maypoles after the trees were carried to towns accompanied by the music of horns and flutes.

In the earliest days May Day used to be a period of great sexual license and a fertility rite. Men and young maidens went into the forests on the eve of May Day to gather birch boughs, flowers and garlands for the Maypole and did not return from the forest until the next day. This was called going a-Maying.

Because of these sexual overtones the Church of England tried to suppress the Maypole celebrations. The Maypoles were deemed devilish instruments and heathenish and the constables and churchwardens tried to remove the poles in England

and Wales. It was, however, the Puritans who reacted in horror to the frivolous, unrestrained May Eve antics and made Maypoles illegal in 1644.

However with the reign of the Stuarts the Maypoles returned to England. Villages competed in trying to produce the tallest poles and London set their poles permanently in the ground. A famously large one was purchased by Sir Isaac Newton to be used to support his 124-foot telescope. The last Maypole in the strand in London was in 1717. Today there is still a section of the city of old Warwickshire which is named Maypole, where the old wooden Maypole was replaced in 1850 with an official one which stands today, set in concrete in front of the Maypole Public House.

Traditional dramas were often enacted on May Day in many countries. Shakespeare's comedy, A Midsummer Nights Dream, takes place not in Midsummer but on May Day. Poets like John Milton and Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote poems about May Day.

When May Day returned it was without the elements of sexual license. It took on a much more moral tone in the 19th century with the emphasis placed on the innocence of children, the beauty of nature and the hopefulness of the coming of spring.

During the French Revolution the Maypole became known to the French people as the tree of Liberty, symbolic of freedom.

May Day is the only major festival of pre-Christian Europe that was not adapted by the Christian church and there was never any significant church service connected with it. The secular nature of May Day probably accounts for its being the choice of the Russian Communists in 1920 as the day to display their military strength with parading soldiers and weapons.

This year May Day 1999 in Brixton, London, a group called the International Cannabis Coalition met and chose the day to seek and end to the prohibition to the herb Cannabis, which is the hemp plant. So as you can see May Day has been used by many people with diverse agendas.

We chose to simply recreate the Maypole dance with the emphasis on innocence and a welcome to springtime in support of the future of our city of Williamsburg.

Our carpenters contributed their time and skills to the making of our Maypole. Because baskets of flowers were a part of the custom of the celebration, I encircled the Maypole with flower baskets.

Those of us who were assigned to present the Maypole dance to this community rehearsed our dance. Phyllis Putnam, Pat Gibbs, Julie Sweet, myself, and our two junior interpreter peer teachers, Sara Finklestein and Caroline Hollis, practiced our dance. It was immediately obvious to us all that Caroline was to be the director of the

performance. She knew exactly what she was doing and had the ability to maintain control. She taught the crowds of adults and children the Maypole dance for the entire afternoon and exhibited the same energy and enthusiasm at the end of the day as she shared with her very first group of the day. We all agree that Caroline Hollis is Williamsburg's Queen of the May!!

We do not know for sure whether there were actually Maypoles in Virginia in the past 300 years, but neither do we know that there were not any. We do know that the people here were inclined to follow many of the customs of their culture and I believe there were probably some Maypoles erected in some towns in early Virginia.

I was pleasantly surprised to have so many people of all ages, both men and women, relate their experiences of having danced around a Maypole at some time in their lives. Our Maypole united us of Colonial Williamsburg with our neighbors, the residents in the city of Williamsburg and visitors in a very special, carefree way. It was a day of good will.

Janet Guthrie

