

Rivkah Valley

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### **Fiddles, Footsteps, and Dances- Oh My!**

#### **The Imprint of Enslaved African Influence on Traditional New England Music and Dance**

When people talk about the vibrant music and dance traditions of colonial New England, it becomes clear that a crucial demographic is noticeably absent from these discussions. This specific group has played a significant role in shaping the history and evolution of these dance forms that many New Englanders and people across the nation hold dear. Such traditions provide a source of recreation, a way for social interactions, and a delightful link to the past. This cultural legacy continues to be celebrated in various contexts, reflecting the joy and camaraderie these forms of expression nurture within communities. It raises a thought-provoking question about who is included in the narrative of colonial music and dance and whose contributions have been overlooked in favor of more dominant narratives.

This population?

Enslaved Africans.

It's important to recognize that the first enslaved Africans arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1638, as noted in *The Journal of John Winthrop*<sup>1</sup>. This moment wasn't just a paragraph in history—it marked the beginning of a lasting and often overlooked cultural influence. Although not as widely known or considered, New England played a critical role in what would be termed the triangular trade. This began in 1644, with the Boston merchant class

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<sup>1</sup> Winthrop, John. *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649*. Edited by Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

importing enslaved peoples from Africa, sending them to the West Indies, and then bringing back large quantities of raw sugar for the distilling of rum<sup>2</sup>.

While very profitable, enslaved people still ended up in the New England colonies—in lesser, but no less agonizing, quantities than in the southern colonies. In colonial New England, integrating enslaved African musical traditions into the region’s dance and folk music was a powerful form of semi-forced cultural exchange, shaping the rhythm and structure of early American social dance and leaving an enduring legacy in the evolution of New England’s musical identity. Music and dance were central to the lives of enslaved Africans, serving as both a means of survival and a way to maintain their culture in a foreign land. Historical accounts make it clear that these individuals carried varied musical traditions, including complex rhythms, call-and-response singing, and percussive movement. Despite their circumstances, they found ways to keep these traditions alive, adapting them to their new environment.

As Tap Roots<sup>3</sup> notes, enslaved Africans “celebrated and utilized dance in their own way and incorporated multiple traditions into one,” blending their cultural heritage with European styles. This fusion of traditions helped shape early American music and dance, creating new forms that reflected both African and European influences. Even within the constraints of an oppressive system, enslaved individuals found ways to express joy, resilience, and resistance through movement. Some of these influences even carried into New England’s folk traditions, although they were often overlooked or appropriated in the historical context record.

To explore this further, Traditional New England social dance must be defined. According to the experiences of the author of this paper<sup>4</sup>, Traditional New England Social dance

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<sup>2</sup> Equal Justice Initiative. *Transatlantic Slave Trade: New England*. Equal Justice Initiative. <https://eji.org/report/transatlantic-slave-trade/new-england/>

<sup>3</sup> Knowles, Mark. *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002

<sup>4</sup> Valley, Rivkah. *Experiences*: 2025

is essentially made up of four key elements:

One: A good crowd of folks who won't stoop to arguing about current affairs on the floor.

Two: A halfway decent band who provides a solid New England sound- whether jazzed or rock and rolled up for the younger generation or procuring that odd rough-smoothness that defines the sound as it is currently known.

Three: A caller with sufficient education so as not to make a trainwreck of the whole thing.

Four: A willingness all around to work together and socially have fun.

Some may disagree with the source or the rather blatant sarcasm, but those are about the most essential points. As Ralph Page so dryly put it in *The Country Dance Book* <sup>5</sup>, “ Modern country dancing has been responsible for a friendship of town and country, young and old, beginner and veteran...your husband dances with the maid, your daughter with a Polish mill hand and you may be teamed up with the oldest inhabitant, and all of you may be in the same set together. It's a workable democracy, a rare find in these democratic days.”

Moving back to the focus of this paper, that being in colonial times, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*<sup>6</sup> offers an intriguing look at colonial attitudes toward dance and music in New England, revealing the complex and often contradictory views held by religious and social leaders. In the diary, Sewall records instances where the Puritans debated the moral implications of dancing, a practice frequently associated with excess and indulgence. For the Puritans, who upheld strict

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<sup>5</sup> Ralph Page, *The Country Dance Book* (Keene, NH: Country Dance and Song Society, 1949)

<sup>6</sup> Sewall, Samuel. *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*. Edited by M. Halsey Thomas. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973

moral codes, any form of social gathering, especially music and dance, had to be scrutinized through religious discipline. Yet, despite their minor concerns, Puritans also recognized that dance and music had an essential role in the community, mainly when conducted within certain boundaries. This duality reflects the ongoing tension between Puritanical values and the societal practices that inevitably became ingrained in everyday life. After all, back in the days of Puritan rule in England, they were the first to introduce opera<sup>7</sup>.

Interestingly, the Puritans did not outright reject dancing as a concept. Instead, they recognized its potential as a valuable educational tool, particularly in teaching young people about the importance of restraint, self-discipline, and proper manners. While they may have frowned upon rowdy or overly exuberant forms of dance that lacked decorum, they acknowledged the value of more structured and disciplined dances that adhered to social standards.

These dance forms were viewed not merely as entertainment but as a meaningful opportunity for young people to practice social decorum, interact with peers, and develop self-control in a communal environment. Puritans held the belief that dancing could be a positive force in promoting the virtues of modesty, propriety, and appropriate behavior, especially within public settings where decorum was essential. For them, dance was not inherently sinful or morally wrong; instead, it was seen as a legitimate means to reinforce good manners, cultivate social skills, and establish a sense of order within the community, ultimately contributing to a more cohesive societal structure.

The Puritans' willingness to embrace certain types of dance was primarily based on the belief that it could serve as a framework for upholding moral conduct, especially among the

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<sup>7</sup> Weiss, Piero, 'The First English Operas', *Opera: A History in Documents* (New York, NY, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 31 Oct. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195116373.003.0011>,

youth. Music and dance were used as mechanisms to teach respect for authority and reinforce the social hierarchy. In this way, dance was not just a form of entertainment but also an essential method for instilling Christian values. As endorsed by Puritan leaders, the concept of “proper” dancing was a way of keeping youthful energy in check and ensuring that it was directed toward productive and socially acceptable behavior. In many ways, this mirrored their broader approach to life, where every aspect of daily existence was scrutinized for its moral and spiritual alignment.

Despite the slight hesitancy, dance eventually became integrated into the social fabric of colonial New England, provided it adhered to certain norms. The paradox is evident: while Puritans viewed music and dance with suspicion due to their potential to incite disorder, they also recognized the necessity of these practices as a means of community bonding and teaching virtues. Over time, the influence of European and African musical traditions, along with New England’s evolving social dynamics, led to the creation of distinct forms of music and dance that were embraced and celebrated, even under the watchful and conscientious eye of Puritanical moral standards. The struggle between maintaining control and recognizing the value of dance illustrates colonial New England's complex cultural and religious landscape, where tradition, discipline, and social interaction were all carefully balanced.

New England dancing at that time was heavily Euro-centric. As noted in *Country Dances of Colonial America*<sup>8</sup> reels, minutes, and jigs were among the most popular dances of the time, each serving a role in the social structure of colonial life. These dances weren’t just entertainment; they reinforced etiquette and community bonds. The minuet, for example, was an elegant and highly structured dance reserved for those who had been through dancing school. At

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<sup>8</sup> Millar, John Fitzhugh. *Country Dances of Colonial America*. Williamsburg, VA: Thirteen Colonies Press, 2011

the same time, reels and jigs were more accessible to the general population and taught on the fly by traveling dancing masters<sup>9</sup>.

While the Puritans had waged their moral tug-of-war with dance, allowing it within the bounds of propriety but side-eyeing anything too lively, another cultural force was at work, which didn't just dance within boundaries but reshaped them subtly. As noted, enslaved Africans, torn from their homelands but carrying rhythms in their bones, found ways to infuse their traditions into New England's rigid social structures.

However, as colonial society evolved, these European forms didn't remain static as one would suspect. While European influence dictated the steps and sequences of dances, African Americans—enslaved and free—participated in them in their own way, bringing in polyrhythms and movement patterns distinct to West African traditions. Over time, this blending of European structure with African musical sensibilities created something new. Even in formal settings, dancers might incorporate more grounded, rhythmic movements. The infusion of African musical elements became even more pronounced in informal settings.

Music was the force behind these dances, and the European traditions that dominated early colonial America were largely based on structured melodies and predictable rhythmic patterns. Fiddles, flutes, and harpsichords provided the music, and the emphasis was often on smooth, flowing movements. Yet, as enslaved Africans brought their own musical traditions into this environment, the rhythmic landscape began to shift. Instead of the straight, even beats characteristic of European dance music, African syncopation—where emphasis is placed on unexpected beats—began subtly making its way into colonial music. This wasn't necessarily a

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<sup>9</sup> Playford, John. *The Dancing Master: Or, Directions for Dancing Country Dances, with the Tunes to Each Dance for the Treble-Violin*. London: Printed by J. Heptinstall, 1698.  
<https://archive.org/details/dancingmasterord00play/page/4/mode/2up>.

deliberate fusion at first but rather a natural result of different cultural groups existing nearby, each leaving their mark on the shared social experiences of dance and music.

What started as small rhythmic variations eventually contributed to the evolution of American dance traditions, laying the groundwork for later folk and popular dance forms. This author suspects that the Pigeon Wing balance, as recorded in *The Country Dance Book*<sup>10</sup>, is linked as a distant ancestor or at least adapted from African influence. However, no paper or note has been written on the subject. As Page puts it, the pigeon wing balance is “...a tremendously fast shake, first with the right, and then with the left foot.” This observation, however, is only that- an observation until further notice

One significant example of African influence on colonial dance music is found in the life and work of Ignatius Sancho, a formerly enslaved African who became a respected musician and composer in England. As *The Life and World of Ignatius Sancho*<sup>11</sup> details, Sancho’s compositions blended English country dance forms with African rhythmic sensibilities, demonstrating how cultural exchange transcended national borders. Similarly, the history of Durham, Connecticut<sup>12</sup> provides evidence of an African fiddler and composer named Sawney Freeman, further proving the active participation of African musicians in shaping New England’s folk traditions.

In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, they had their own in-town musician of choice: Cuffee Whipple<sup>13</sup>. He was regarded as a professional musician and top-notch violinist/fiddler, usually playing at the Assembly Ballroom. It is also noted that the whites of New England thought

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Page, *The Country Dance Book* (Keene, NH: Country Dance and Song Society, 1949)

<sup>11</sup> Carretta, Vincent. *The Life and World of Ignatius Sancho*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011

<sup>12</sup> Early Music America. “Sawney Freeman, Black Composer & Fiddler.” 5.

<https://www.earlymusicamerica.org/emag-feature/sawney-freeman-black-composer-fiddler/>.

<sup>13</sup> Sammons, Mark J., and Valerie Cunningham. *Black Portsmouth: Three Centuries of African-American Heritage*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2004.

African musicians played and danced with an unfamiliar intensity. This indicates the influence of West African memories of their own music and dance.

In the early years of America's establishment, music transcended merely being a form of entertainment. It emerged as an indispensable tool for survival, playing a particularly crucial role for enslaved Africans who had been forcibly brought to the land. According to the insights gathered from the NPS Ethnography project<sup>14</sup> music not only provided an emotional outlet but also served as a significant conduit of resistance against the harsh realities they faced. It was instrumental in preserving vital connections to their rich African heritage.

For enslaved Africans, who were repeatedly stripped of their freedoms and subjected to unimaginable hardships, music and dance became powerful mediums through which they could maintain their cultural identities amidst the overwhelming oppression surrounding them. These musical practices transcended mere recreation or a way to fill the time; they were deeply intertwined with African traditions and spiritual beliefs. Each note and rhythm represented a form of defiance against the imposed conditions of their lives and acted as a poignant reminder of their home and heritage, which they were forced to leave behind in a foreign landscape that often sought to erase their identities.

During communal gatherings, music and dance emerged as essential and vibrant outlets for enslaved Africans, providing entertainment and a profound means of expression. In his notable work, *Black Yankees*, William D. Piersen<sup>15</sup> emphasizes how these culturally rich events allowed enslaved individuals to actively preserve and celebrate their cultural identity, even amid

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<sup>14</sup> National Park Service. "The Meanings of 'Black' in the American System." African American Heritage & Ethnography Program. <https://www.nps.gov/ethnography/aah/aaheritage/sysmeaningb.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Piersen, William D. *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.



the harsh constraints imposed by the institution of slavery, particularly through the significant observance of Election Days.

These days of celebration were marked by the playful mimicking of their white counterparts, combined with the dynamic rhythms of music and dance that drew from both African and European traditions. Through music, these resilient individuals managed to continue practices deeply rooted in African culture, which included intricate rhythmic structures, engaging call-and-response patterns that fostered community involvement, and the age-old tradition of storytelling through song. In this way, music transformed into a subtle yet powerful form of resistance against the dehumanizing systems of slavery, offering a means for the enslaved to reclaim their humanity and assert their cultural heritage in the face of oppression.

The Colonial Society of Massachusetts<sup>16</sup> further supports this by listing historical references to Black musicians in and around Boston, illustrating how their contributions were integral to the region's evolving musical landscape. As these musical practices persisted, they eventually began to blend with the European musical traditions that dominated colonial society. Piersen<sup>17</sup> notes that enslaved African Americans “preserved their cultural identity through the clandestine continuation of their musical traditions,” even as they encountered European forms of music and dance. Over time, the rhythms and melodies from West Africa merged with European styles, creating new, hybrid musical forms that reflected both cultures. This blending wasn't a one-sided exchange but a dynamic process in which African Americans contributed their musical sensibilities to the broader colonial musical landscape.

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<sup>16</sup> The Colonial Society of Massachusetts. “Music and Dance in the Eighteenth Century.”  
<https://www.colonialociety.org/node/2030#ch01>.

<sup>17</sup> Piersen, William D. *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.

This cultural fusion laid the groundwork for the development of American music in the centuries to come. The influences of African music and dance became deeply embedded in American traditions, from folk music to later genres like jazz and blues. Though often overlooked in historical records, the role of enslaved Africans in shaping early American music cannot be overstated. Their ability to adapt and combine their traditions with European influences created a new musical identity, one that would continue to evolve and shape the nation's cultural soundscape long after the end of slavery.

Really, the enslaved Africans made traditional New England social dancing what it is today. Our first indication of the presence of a caller/prompter is from informal dance gatherings that the enslaved Africans would hold. European Americans thought this was odd and disorderly until they figured out that more people would come to dances- however this is only in evidence in the southern colonies. It eventually made its way up to New England and callers are an essential part of the traditional New England social dance scene- all thanks to the enslaved African Americans from long ago.<sup>18</sup>

Today, a growing number of contra dance musicians and bands are actively incorporating African ideas alongside the vibrant influences of jazz and blues into their unique renditions of traditional tunes. This evolution has led to increased syncopation, a heightened emphasis on off-beats, and a remarkable growth in the number of enthusiastic people about playing this genre. The profound influence of the kidnapped and enslaved Africans continues to thrive, now infused with a greater sense of appreciation and respect, more than it ever has before in the history of this musical tradition. This blending of diverse musical elements not only enriches the contra dance experience but also honors the cultural roots that have shaped it over time.

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<sup>18</sup> Jamison, Philip A. "Square Dance Calling: The African-American Connection." *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2003): 387-98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41446577>.

In the end, the musical contributions of Africans in colonial New England transcended mere incidental occurrences; they emerged as a vital and dynamic force in shaping the unique cultural identity of the region. The remarkable fusion of African rhythms with European dance forms not only showcased the enduring tapestry of cultural exchange but also stood as a powerful testament to the resilience, creative adaptation, and enduring influence of African musical traditions.

This semi-forced cultural exchange, born out of the complexities of colonialism, left a lasting and deeply significant imprint on New England's musical evolution. This influence can still be traced in the vibrant folk traditions and musical practices that continue to thrive and evolve in contemporary society—an indelible mark, one that this author, having witnessed and realized the impact firsthand, won't soon forget.

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