



The Colonial Privy (Toilet) at Liberty Hall Museum

Liberty Hall was built in 1774 and the Livingston and Kean families lived in the house for over 200 years. The house today has nine bathrooms, but all those are flush toilets, like the toilets you have at your house! These flush toilets were not installed until 1925 when indoor plumbing was put into the house. So, did you ever wonder where the residents of Liberty Hall “did their business” before they had flush toilets?! I’m so glad you asked; let’s take a look at Liberty Hall Museum’s privy, aka colonial toilet!

The Privy



Exterior and interior views of the privy at Liberty Hall Museum, built 18th or 19th century

The privy is an outdoor toilet without plumbing. Normally, they are built a reasonable distance away from the house and on the downwind side. This location helped balance the issues of easy access versus the smell! A privy consists of a wooden bench seat with holes where one could sit and “do their business” into a large hole in the ground underneath the privy structure. The wooden structure over the benches existed to shelter and provide privacy to the user as well as to protect the toilet itself. The privy at

Liberty Hall has two seats inside each door. The seats are different sizes—the large one for adults and the small one for children. This double privy was unusual for the time, most privies would have been single. Toilet paper was not yet invented, so most colonial people used leaves or corn cobs. Yes, corn cobs! Privies were very unsanitary by our modern standard and most people did not wash their hands after using the bathrooms because they did not know about germs or bacteria. Yuck!

Imagine having to use a privy and go outside to use the bathroom? What would you do if it was raining, snowing, or the middle of the night? Colonists had a solution for this...

The Chamber Pot



Chamber pot, glazed stoneware, 18th or 19th century, on display in the Alexander Hamilton Room

Chamber pots were small clay or porcelain bowls used in the house. Many had fancy designs and most had a lid. Some chamber pots had a crocheted piece that slid over the lid called a shusher. These Chamber Pots were used during the night (aren't you glad they had a shusher?!) and had to be emptied each morning into the privy. Unless a family had enslaved people or servants to empty the chamber pots, this chore was done by the youngest member of a family. Are you the youngest member in your family?

People have been writing about bathrooms since before the American Revolution. Read below the poem by American poet (1849-1916) James Whitcomb Riley called "The Passing of the Backhouse." Analyze the poem and try your hand at writing poetry about your own bathroom!

THE PASSING OF THE BACKHOUSE - By James Whitcomb Riley

When memory keeps me company and moves to smiles and tears,
A weather-beaten object looms through the mist of years.
Behind the house and barn it stood, a half a mile or more.
And hurrying feet a path had made straight to its swinging door.
Its architecture was a type of simple classic art.
But in the tragedy of life it played a leading part;
And oft the passing traveler drove slow and heaved a sigh
To see the modest hired girl slip out with glances shy.

We had our posy garden that the women loved so well
I loved it too, but better still I loved the stronger smell
That filled the evening breezes so full of homely cheer,
And told the night - o'ertaken tramp that human life was near,
On lazy August afternoons it made a little bower,
Delightful, where my grandsire sat and whiled away an hour.
For there the summer morning its very cares entwined.
And berry bushes reddened in the steaming soil behind.

All day fat spiders spun their web to catch the buzzing flies
That flitted to and from the house, where Ma was making pies.
And once a swarm of hornets bold had built a palace there,
And stung my unsuspecting aunt--I must not tell where;
Then father took a flaming pole--that was a happy day--
He nearly burned the building up, but the hornets left to stay.
When summer bloom began to fade and winter to carouse,
We banked the little building with a heap of hemlock boughs.

But when the crust was on the snow and sullen skies were gray,
In sooth, the building was no place where one could wish to stay.
We did our duties promptly there, one purpose swayed the mind;
We tarried not, nor lingered long, on what we left behind.
The torture of the icy seat would make a Spartan sob,
For needs must scrape the goose-flesh with a lacerating cob,
That from a frost-encrusted nail hung pendant by a string.
My father was a frugal man and wasted not a thing.

When grandpa had to "go out back" and make his morning call,
We'd bundle up the dear old man with muffler and a shawl.
I knew the hole on which he sat--'twas padded all around,
And once I dared to sit there-'twas all too wide I found;
My loins were all too little and I jack-knifed there to stay.
They had to come and get me out or I'd have passed away.
Then father said ambition was a thing boys should shun,
And I must use the children's hole 'till childhood's days were done.

But still I marvel at the craft that cut those holes so true;
The baby hole, and the slender hole that fitted Sister Sue,
That dear old country landmark; I've tramped around a bit,
And in the lap of luxury my lot has been sit;
But e'er I die I'll eat the fruit of trees I robbed of yore,
Then seek the shanty where my name is carved upon the door.
I ween the old familiar smell will soothe my jaded soul;
I'm now a man, but none the less, I'll try the children's hole.



Sketch courtesy of Dave Weaver of Sunbury, PA

Identify some elements of this poem:

Rhyme Scheme: *pattern of rhymes at the end of each line. It is usually referred to by using letters to indicate which lines rhyme; lines designated with the same letter all rhyme with each other.*

Figurative Language: *words and expressions used to convey various meanings and interpretations that appeal to the senses of the reader*

Symbolism: *using symbols to represent larger ideas*

Alliteration: *the repetition of initial sounds on the same line or stanza*

Onomatopoeia: *words that sound like that which they describe*

Personification: *treating abstract or inanimate objects as human*

What other elements of poetry can you find in this poem?

Analyze the Poem:

Backhouses still exist today. What are some other names for a “backhouse”?

Where was the backhouse located on the speaker’s property?

What other animals could be found in the backhouse?

What did they use to wipe?

What was the speaker’s favorite time of year to use the backhouse? What was his least favorite time of year?

Why couldn’t the speaker use the same hole as his Grandfather?

If the speaker could go back and use the backhouse again, what hole would he use? Why?

Write Your Own Poem:

We all have bathrooms in our house. It's time to write your own poem.

1. Try to include some of the same information found in Riley's poem:
 - Do any animals or insects visit your bathroom?
 - Who else besides you uses your bathroom?
 - Where is your bathroom located in the house?
 - What do you use to wipe?
1. Try to include some of the same poetry elements found in Riley's poem:
 - Will your poem have a rhyme scheme?
 - What kind of figurative language will you use?
 - Will you use any alliterations or onomatopoeias?
 - Will you personify any objects in your poem?

On the lines below write an ode to your bathroom!

[illegible]

Want to do more?

- Read your favorite book about colonial bathrooms! Some of our favorites include:
 - *Animals in the Outhouse* by Anja Fröhlich
 - Youtube Read Aloud: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1v_w0AfZedU
 - *Morry Moose's Time-Traveling Outhouse Adventure* by Darin and Chad Carpenter
 - *The Two Story Outhouse* by Norman Weis
 - *The Dreadful, Smelly Colonies: The Disgusting Details about Life in Colonial America* by Elizabeth Raum
- Looking for other books?
 - Check your local library's digital collections
 - Free Audio Book Guide from Scholastic:
 - <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/free-audio-books-and-why-you-should-try-them.html>
 - Audible Free Audiobooks
 - <https://stories.audible.com/discovery>

Tag us on Social Media!

If you had fun learning about colonial toilets, we'd love to hear about it! Please share your stories, pictures, and poems by emailing the museum or tagging us on our social media platforms!

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