



Myth Busting 101

People were shorter back then....the second leading cause of death for women was by fire....many 18th century men were painted with one arm tucked behind them because paintings cost ‘an arm and a leg’....sleep tight don’t let the bed bugs bite come from rope beds....and on and on. We have all heard these statements at historic sites throughout the country, and perhaps even the world. But, are they true? All true? Part true? Not true at all?

Myths are a way to explain the unfamiliar or different, to rationalize slang or odd statements, or they make the assumption that things never change, that events that happen in today’s world would have had the same result or meaning 200 years ago.

One of the most prevalent of all myths states the second leading cause of death for women was burns when their petticoats caught on fire. According to Mary Miley Theobald, in her book Death by Petticoat, this myth began in the 1970’s as many historic sites began to dress their staff in polyester skirts. Many of them quickly

switched back when these ‘new and improved’ (think *cheaper*) fabrics soon caught fire or melted. Thus, one could rationalize that if modern women’s skirts caught fire easily, our foremothers must have had the same problem. But there is little to no proof that a Colonial woman’s petticoats blazed up in a big ball of flame. Yet, most myths contain a kernel of truth. There are documented cases of horrific deaths by fire, but these are few and far between. Published accounts of death by fire were probably printed because they were an odd occurrence, not the norm. Like our press today, newspapers of the past loved to print sensational stories of mayhem and woe, not the everyday, normal occurrences.

Like our flaming petticoats, “sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite” also has some truth to the statement. It is true that bed bugs bite, and this indeed is a saying. But according to the *Colonial Williamsburg Journal*, the first written reference to the saying, dates to the second quarter of the 19th century, not the Colonial period. Most historic sites will tell you the ‘sleep tight’ refers to having (continued on top of page 2)

Readington Museums

P.O. Box 216

Stanton, NJ 08885

Phone 908-236-2327

Fax 908-236-2306

readingtonmuseums@gmail.com

www.readingtonmuseums.org



Myths Busting Continued

to tighten the ropes on the bottom of a rope bed in order not to sink to the floor. But by the 1830's most beds had full or slat bottoms, not ropes. The *sleep tight* in this expression refers to the adverb *tightly* meaning



What do George Washington and Napoleon have in common?

money. Hmmmm. Well, it is true that having one's portrait painted was expensive, but there is no evidence that painters charged by the limb. If you look at the two portraits depicted here of Washington and Napoleon, you will see they are standing in exactly the



'soundly, properly, well, effectively'. In fact, this statement doesn't really become popular until the 1930's.

When something is expensive we say it *costs an arm and a leg*. This saying is said to have originated from 17th and 18th century portraiture. According to the myth, a portrait painter would change by the hour, or the 'limb'. So, to save money, sitters opted to stand in such a way that the missing limbs would not be included, and thus save time and

the same pose. Since Washington was arguably one of the wealthiest men in Colonial America, and Napoleon was an Emperor, I highly doubt that they could not afford the cost of having their image immortalized. To stand with one's arm in a waistcoat, or in a three quarter pose was simply the fashionable thing to do. We could equate this today to all those photos you see on social media where the individual takes their image reflected in a mirror. It's fashionable!

Plans are underway for a program next spring in which many of the most fun and popular myths will be debunked. Until then, if you wish to find out more about great American myths, either grab yourself a copy of *Death by Petticoat* by Mary Miley Theobald, or visit her blog at <http://historymyths.wordpress.com>, and enjoy!

Historic Lecture Series Returns in June

Now in its ninth year, the popular Friday Night Lecture series returns to the Readington Museums this summer. All of the lectures begin at 7:00 p.m., and are held inside the historic Wade-Wyckoff Barn located at the Bouman-Stickney Farmstead, 114 Dreahook Road in the Stan-

ton section of Readington Township. On Friday, June 28th historian David Sperling will present **18th Century Clocks and Clockmakers of Hunterdon County**. On Friday, July 26th brewing Master Rich Wagner will be on hand to discuss **Colonial Breweries of Easton, PA**.

On Friday, August 30th historic tool enthusiast Bob Garay will present a lecture on **Antique Tools of New Jersey**. There is a \$5.00 suggested donation for adults and refreshments will be served. For more information please call the Museums office.

Barn Dance Returns

Dust off your dancing shoes! It's time for our first Barn Dance of the year! Our popular Barn Dance will be held on Saturday, May 18th from 7:00-9:30 p.m. Caller Betsy Gotta will give easy to follow instructions. There is a suggested donation of \$5.00 per adult and \$3.00 per child. Refreshments served. All dances are family friendly, and no prior experience is necessary. Clear instructions will be given before and during all of the dances. Ad-

vance registration is also recommended for groups of six or more. Please call 908-236-2327.



Save the Date!

Monday Mornings at the Museum for kids ages 5-14 will return this summer on four consecutive Mondays- July 22nd and 29th, August 5th and 12th, from 10:00 a.m. and noon, at the Bouman-Stickney Farmstead. Kids will have a chance to make a historical or nature inspired craft with a new theme offered each week. The cost of each program is \$3.00 per child, per day. Registration recommended but not required.

Readington Assembly Dance

Our first Readington Assembly-English Country Dance was held on April 6th. Twenty two visitors got the chance to try out a wide variety of dances popular during the time of Jane Austen. During an intermission between dances, the staff served a boun-

tiful period Dessert Collation inside the historic Farmhouse. Then it was back to dancing. The night ended with a traditional waltz, with the caller, Lynn Symborski of Tapestry Dance Ensemble, choosing the Spanish Waltz. According to Lynn, this

popular dance has roots in the early 19th century and remained popular throughout the Victorian era. Next Spring we will offer an English Country Colonial Dance. Watch for details in the newsletter and on the web site.



A Day in the Life of Vrouw Bouman, April 7, 2013



Calendar 2013

The Bouman-Stickney Farmstead is located at 114 Dreahook Road, in the Stanton section of the township. \$5.00 suggested donations for all lectures and programs.

Sunday, May 5

1:00-4:00 p.m.

Colonial Beer Brewing with Master brewer Rich Wagner

Saturday, May 18

7:00-9:30 p.m.

Barn Dance

See page 3 for details

Friday, June 28

7:00-8:00 p.m.

18th Century Clocks and Clockmakers of Hunterdon County with David Sperling

Monday, July 22 and 29

10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Monday Mornings at the Museum, crafts for kids program, \$3.00 per child

Friday, July 26

7:00-8:00 p.m.

Colonial Breweries of Easton, PA with Master brewer Rich Wagner

Monday, August 5 and 12

10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Monday Mornings at the Museum, crafts for kids program, \$3.00 per child

Friday, August 30

7:00-8:00 p.m.

Antique Tools of New Jersey with Bob Garay

Sunday, September 8

1:00-4:00 p.m.

Come visit Mrs. Hall as she opens her home to visitors. The *Eversole-Hall House* is located at 511 Rt. 523 (blue house next to the Readington Twp. municipal building)