SHAME ON YOU!



Created image Depicting a Woman's Position of Isolation as a Result of Public Shaming

FEAR AND HUMILIATION KEPT COMMUNITIES ORDERLY AND RESILIENT

Punishment for colonists who strayed from lawful behavior was deeply rooted in fear and shame conveyed to these shores with Great Britain's systems of authority. The system proved effective in tightly knit, isolated colonial communities like Beaufort. With the exception of cities like Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Charleston where populations exceeded 3,000, emerging colonial towns or settlements along the Atlantic Seaboard were more similar to trading posts than the well-established towns we experience today. As reference, Beaufort had less than 50 inhabitants and no more than 12 houses as recorded in 1749. In such remote environments the stability of family, community, and church were crucial for daily survival, making cooperation and social standing vital. With limited numbers of able-bodied workers swift forms of justice, or injustice, persisted throughout the 18th century. No matter how flawed or horrifying they seem now, fear inducing, shame-based punishments were intended to prevent criminal infractions from happening at all. When they did occur, most corporal punishments were designed to steer the accused to repent and quickly return to their essential tasks in the community.



It comes as no surprise that social class influenced degrees of punishment. Wealthy individuals often paid fines instead of enduring corporal punishment. In contrast, poorer individuals, including servants and the enslaved, frequently faced shaming punishments. Whipping posts, stocks, and pillories were abundant in colonial era communities of all sizes and were deliberately located near courthouses or town commons.



Created Image of Man Behind Bars in Colonial Era Jail

WHY THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SHAMING? WHY NOT LOCK UP CRIMINALS AND LET THEM SERVE TIME?

Large jails for incarceration were a costly drain of precious resources, especially for small settlement towns like Beaufort. The catch and release method of shame-based justice meant small jails existed for the brief detention of the accused immediately prior to a hearing, public shaming, or hanging. On the Beaufort Historic Site is a restored colonial era jail complete with pillory, open for viewing during tours and special events year-round. The Jail on Site is not from the 1700s. It was built in Beaufort circa 1829. It replaced the previous wooden jail that burned down, built in 1736.

WHAT ARE YOU IN FOR?

Not long is the short answer, but the official list of offenses was plentiful that would result in fines, shaming, and sometimes, death.

WHAT HAPPENED IF MORE THAN 1 OR 2 ACCUSED AWAITED TRIAL?

Beaufort's Carteret County records from the 1700s document that prisoners awaiting trials weeks or months away were shackled to a ball-and-chain and legally confined to several blocks of town similar to house arrest today. Most shaming tools restrained offenders in which they were subjected to public ridicule and physical discomfort. Shaming punishments were public events, usually carried out on days when court was in session providing moral lessons and perverse amusements for the community.



COMMON TYPES AND TOOLS OF SHAME-BASED PUNISHMENT

STOCKS AND PILLORIES



Stocks held offenders' ankles, while pillories restrained the head and hands making pillories more severe.

WHIPPING POSTS



Whipping was one of the most harsh and painful, but one of the most common punishments on record throughout the colonies.

LETTERS AND BRANDING





More common in northern colonies were *letters*. Branding was the more permanent form of the shaming letters method, whereas wearing of letters forced the accused to self-inflict shame daily. Different letters signified the crime such as T = Thief, A = Adulterer, V = Vagrant, B = Burglary.

HANGING



Hanging was the ultimate shaming punishment. It was also the shortest in duration for the convicted but hangings were done in public to discourage anyone who witnessed the ordeal from behavior that would lead to such an end.



REFLECTION

- Do you think shaming punishments are more or less effective at deterring crime than the incarceration/rehabilitation types of punishments we use today?
- The shaming punishments above were outlawed in North Carolina by 1910 for being too barbaric. Isn't it interesting that public shaming has resurfaced in modern society through social media platforms?