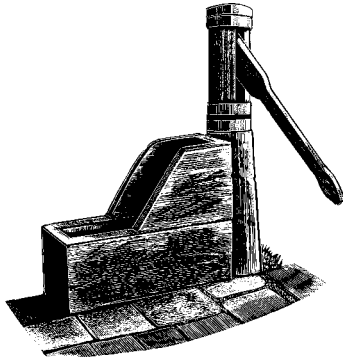


# Puritan Party Time



“Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by.”

**O**F MAKING BOOKS about Harvard there is no end, and here’s another, *Veritas: Harvard College and the American Experience*, coming in May. The author is Andrew Schlesinger ’70, son and grandson of two Harvard historians and himself the winner of two Emmy Awards for documentary-film scripts. The book is an engagingly written history of the College in 300 pages. Here’s a taste of it, chosen for the season, about the style of Commencement near the end of the seventeenth century, before it became the modest June get-together it is today:

“The Harvard Commencement was celebrated as a holiday throughout the province and attracted many inhabitants of Boston and the vicinity to Cambridge to honor the College and enjoy mid-summer pleasures in its name. A group of Natick Indians usually appeared at the Cambridge Common the week before, setting up their wigwams and beating on their drums. Then came the itinerant black fiddlers, ‘whose scraping never intermitted during the time of their abode.’ The hammering meant the tents and stands were rising, promising ample food, drink, and amusements. The jolly hucksters, the jugglers, the singing dwarfs, the dancing bears, the rum sellers, the gamblers, the vice merchants prepared themselves. Then the roads filled with people trudging and striding toward the Com-

mon—women and babies, schoolboys, farmers, craftsmen, traders, servants, slaves, paupers, Indians, blind men, cripples, lunatics; and the gentry and the grand seigneurs flew by in their coaches and chariots, and the horsemen with their fat saddlebags kicked up the dust.”

In *Three Centuries of Harvard*, the late Samuel Eliot Morison quoted a description in verse of the festivities (excerpted at right). The original was dated 1718, but, wrote Morison, “I doubt whether this masterpiece was composed before 1760.”

The party hadn’t quieted noticeably by 1795 when Judith Sargent Murray of Boston attended Commencement and wrote to family members about it. Murray (1751-1820) was a writer, a founding Universalist, and a prolific correspondent. She copied into 20 books almost 2,500 of her outgoing letters, which the Judith Sargent Murray Society is just beginning to publish (for more about Murray, see [www.hurd-smith.com/judith](http://www.hurd-smith.com/judith)). Primus is grateful to the society for permission to sample Murray’s hitherto unpublished letter.

“...This is the first time I have been a spectator of that confusion, which on those public days, pervades the hallowed scenes of Harvard—I think I shall not be solicitous again to partake the pleasures of a Cambridge Commencement, and I am ready to say they order these things much better in Philadelphia....Methinks the era appropriated to an exhibition of literary production, to a conferring of literary de-

gress, ought not to be marked by riot, and intemperance, either in meats, or in drinks, or in the manifestation of unbridled mirth—The Assembly on Commencement day was the most noisy in which I have ever mingled—It was with difficulty I obtained a place in the meeting house in the morning, and the tops of the pews were so completely occupied, as wholly to intercept the smallest glimpse of the Speakers—but this

## A SATYRICAL DESCRIPTION OF COMMENCEMENT

..While some intoxicated are with Wine,  
Others (as brutish) propagate their Kind:  
Where amorous Lads to shady Groves resort,  
And under Venus with their Misses sport.  
Some sing, some dance, some lay the Ground upon,  
Whatever fails, the IRON-WORK goes on.  
Our Rustick Sparks (to Taverns glew’d) they stay,  
And scarce can blunder Home by break of Day.  
Some lie in open Fields; others there are,  
Who to their Homes half Boozy do repair;  
Others go Home half starv’d: Some in the Way  
Get Fox’d, and then in Barns are forc’d to lay;  
So end the Actions of this famous Day.  
But not the Revel!

Each successive Day,  
Venus and Bacchus bear alternate sway.  
The raking Tribe their lawless Games repeat,  
Nor can three Days their Bacchanals compleat.  
To close recess, the Sons of Vice retire,  
And cool their raging Thirst, or quench their  
wanton Fire.  
Thus the loose Croud forbidden Pleasures seek,  
Drink HARVARD dry, and so conclude the Week.

was not all, the jargon of surrounding voices, split every sentence to pieces, so that I could scarce catch a flying sentiment, or even a vagrant idea...O! it is impossible for words to convey an adequate idea, of the licentious dis[s]onant uproar, which disgraced the sacred haunts of science....” ~PRIMUS V