

Subject: Phrases with Historical Meanings

George Washington's days, there were no cameras. One's image was either sculpted or painted. Some paintings of George Washington showed him both legs and both arms. Prices charged by painters were not based on how many people were to be painted, but by how many limbs were to be painted. Arms and legs are "limbs," therefore painting them would cost the buyer more. Hence the expression, "Okay, but it'll cost you an arm and a leg."

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As incredible as it sounds, men and women took baths only twice a year! (May and October) Women kept their hair covered, while men shaved their heads (because of lice and bugs) and wore wigs. Wealthy men could afford good wigs made from wool. The wigs couldn't be washed, so to clean them they could carve out a loaf of bread, put the wig in the shell, and bake it for 30 minutes. The heat would make the wig big and fluffy, hence the term "big wig." Today we often use the term "here comes the Big Wig" because someone appears to be or is powerful and wealthy.

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In the late 1700s, many houses consisted of a large room with only one chair. Commonly, a long wide board was folded down from the wall and used for dining. The "head of the household" always sat in the chair while everyone else ate sitting on the floor. Once in a while, a guest (who was almost always a man) would be invited to sit in this chair during a meal. To sit in the chair meant you were important and in charge. Sitting in the chair, one was called the "chair man." Today in business, we use the expression or title "Chairman" or "Chairman of the Board."

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Needless to say, personal hygiene left much room for improvement. As a result, many women and men had developed acne scars by adulthood. The women would spread bee's wax over their facial skin to smooth out their complexions. When they were speaking to each other, if a woman began to stare at another woman's face she was told, "mind your own bee's wax." Should the woman smile, the wax would crack, hence the term "crack a smile." Also, when they sat too close to the fire, the wax would melt and therefore the expression "losing face."

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Ladies wore corsets, which would lace up in the front. A tightly tied

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was worn by a proper and dignified lady as in "straight laced."

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Common entertainment included playing cards. However, there was a tax levied when purchasing playing cards but only applicable to the "Ace of Spades." To avoid paying the tax, people would purchase 51 cards instead. Yet, since most games require 52 cards, these people were thought to be stupid or dumb because they weren't "playing with a full deck."

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Early politicians required feedback from the public to determine what was considered important to the people. Since there were no telephones, TV's or radios, the politicians sent their assistants to local taverns, pubs, and bars who were told to "go sip some ale" and listen to people's conversations and political concerns. Many assistants were dispatched at different times.

"You go sip here" and "You go sip there." The two words "go sip" were eventually combined when referring to the local opinion and, thus we have the term "gossip."

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At local taverns, pubs, and bars, people drank from pint and quart-sized containers. A bar maid's job was to keep an eye on the customers and keep the drinks coming. She had to pay close attention and remember who was drinking in "pints" and who was drinking in "quarts," hence the term "minding your "P's and Q's."

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One more: bet you didn't know this!

In the heyday of sailing ships, all war ships and many freighters carried iron cannons. Those cannons fired round iron cannon balls. It was necessary to keep a good supply near the cannon, but how to prevent them from rolling about the deck? The best storage method devised was a square-based pyramid with one ball on top, resting on four resting on nine, which rested on sixteen. Thus, a supply of 30 cannon balls could be stacked in a small area right next to the cannon. There was only one problem...how to prevent the bottom layer from sliding or rolling from under the others. The solution was a metal plate called a "Monkey" with 16 round indentations.

But, if this plate were made of iron, the ironballs would quickly rust to it. The solution to the rusting problem was to make "Brass Monkeys." Few landlubbers realize that brass contracts much more and much faster than

iron when chilled. Consequently, when the temperature dropped too far, the brass indentations would shrink so much that the iron cannonballs would come right off the monkey. Thus, it was quite literally, "Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey." (And all this time, you thought that was an improper expression, didn't you?)