



**Historical Context *Colonial Wedding*, 1911 by Edward Lamson Henry (1841-1919)
by Gregory Balan**



E.L. Henry (1841-1919) witnessed monumental change his entire life. Born in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, he was orphaned at seven and moved to New York to live with relatives. He came of age just as the United States barreled towards Civil War, saw the advent of the telephone and radio, and died just as the United States was emerging as a global power following the horrors of World War I. Despite, or perhaps because of, all of these changes that E.L. Henry experienced in life, he had an abiding interest in our nation's past. Henry became known for his vivid scenes of everyday life in an America from a bygone era. A meticulous researcher, Henry was almost obsessive about getting even minute historical details in his paintings correct. And yet, detractors claim that Henry portrayed America's past in an idealized or romanticized way that was ahistorical and unrealistic. One such portrayal of America's past is "*Colonial Wedding*"; it exhibits plenty of Henry's famous attention to detail and has been the subject of criticism for its portrayal of a wedding that exemplifies the ideal "melting pot" that many Americans cherish and others argue never existed.

The exact basis for *Colonial Wedding* is not entirely clear, but famed early 20th century art critic Elizabeth McCausland claimed that the painting was based upon Henry's conversations with her grandmother. McCausland's grandmother recounted the details of what may have been her mother's wedding at the estate known as Sir William Johnson Hall located in the Mohawk Valley of upstate New York. Regardless of the exact source for Henry's inspiration, *Colonial Wedding* presents a diverse and engaging wedding scene corroborated by historical studies of the Anglo-Dutch customs of New Amsterdam and later New York. Many of these wedding customs were shared or similar to those found in other colonies such as Virginia, where Henry set this painting.¹

Colonial Wedding depicts a wedding at a tidewater Virginia home, but beyond the setting, the details of the painting are derived from the wedding at Sir William Johnson Hall. William Johnson was an Anglo-Irish settler with extensive ties to the Mohawk tribe, and who was knighted by the British Crown for his efforts in building diplomatic and trade relations between the British Empire and the Iroquois Confederation, of which the Mohawks were a member. The newly minted Sir William Johnson built his estate for his Mohawk wife and their 8 children in 1763 at what was likely the height of cordial sentiments between the British Empire and her colonists following the British victory over the French in the French and Indian War. The Iroquois Confederation were key British allies during the war and assisted colonial militia and British regulars in rebuffing French attacks from Canada and joint French-Indian attacks from the Ohio River Valley

¹ See Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play*, (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989); Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896).

and Great Lakes regions. The wedding that occurred at Johnson's hall sometime after its construction would almost certainly have included Mohawk attendees. These Mohawks are seen gathered near the bride and groom as they set off together after the wedding party ended. Amidst the large crowd, where a minister can be seen, are both British regulars in their traditional red coats and colonial militia in the blue coats and red undercoats that were common in colonies like Virginia and New York. The remainder of the crowd appears to be family, friends, and servants, both black and white.

The depiction of various socioeconomic groups coming together in harmony for a wedding is a controversial one today when so much discourse is premised on the assertion that members of such diverse groups could not possibly get along socially. However, we know from extensive historical research that colonial weddings were, on the whole, fairly inclusive and joyous celebrations. Such weddings were rarely held in churches, but instead were typically held at the bride's home. While a minister of the couple's choosing would preside over the ceremony in most instances (secular Justices of the Peace could also perform the ceremony), the wedding being placed outside of a church tamped down on any sectarian exclusions. As mentioned earlier, the presence of Mohawks at the wedding is virtually guaranteed given Johnson's deep personal, economic, and diplomatic ties to the Mohawk tribe. The presence of both colonial militia and British officers is plausible given the approximate time when this wedding would have taken place—shortly after the British/colonist victory over the French. Johnson's respected position within the British diplomatic corps and his estate's location in a rural, frontier town would likely account for the presence of such soldiers. The presence of black and white servants was a common thing at colonial weddings. Tables were typically set up for the servants, though separated from the head table for the bride, groom, and wedding party, and they were permitted to partake in the festivities. Servants were expected to return to work once the wedding was over, though the bride and groom often spent time moving between the homes of members of the wedding party to continue the celebration for several days after the wedding itself. This practice appears to have originated with the Dutch, but became common in New York. The attire of the guests, bride, and groom, though a seemingly minor detail, are accurate for the time period as well, and attest to Henry's meticulous research. The advent of the white wedding dress had not yet come, and colorful prints were the favored textile for wedding dresses. Grooms often wore equally colorful coats that coordinated with the bride's dress.

These details are corroborated by historians' research into the letters, travel journals, newspaper articles, and diaries of colonists and visitors to the American colonies at the time. While many of these writers are obscure, more famed observers of the American melting pot provide us with vivid descriptions of the unique social conditions that constituted American society.² Colonial America was not a utopian society, but it was an unprecedented society where the potential for everyone to have a seat at the table, whether it was in the halls of power, or at a backyard wedding, existed. E.L. Henry's *Colonial Wedding* reminds us of that potential and serves as a happy reminder of what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature.

² See Volume I, Part 1, Chapter 3: "Social State of the Anglo-Americans" of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/schleifer-democracy-in-america-historical-critical-edition-vol-1#lf1532-01_label_1261; "Letter III—What is an American" of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*; Benjamin Franklin's *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/information-to-those-who-would-remove-to-america/>.