

Idioms from Colonial Days: How Language Carries History

Written by: Margaret Betts and Nancy Boyle, product of the NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshops: Living on the Edge of Empire (July 10-15, 2016)

Common Core State Standards:

4LS-5(b) and 5LS-5(b): Recognize and explain the meaning of common idioms, adages, and proverbs.

1LS-4, 2LS-4, 3LS-4, 4LS-4, 5LS-4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases

Essential Questions:

What is an idiom?

Why does language change?

Enduring Understandings:

Language changes over time; as new people use it, words take on new meanings.

Language reflects our environment.

Language is a tool humans use to communicate.

Language carries with it words and phrases from the past and we can study the past to understand it.

Vocabulary:

- Idioms
- Historic
- Meaning
- Colonial
- Artifact
- Present day
- Reference

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Define an idiom.
- Explain what the idioms mean.
- Predict an idiom's meaning based on historical information.

Link:

Project and read the nursery rhyme Little Boy Blue

Focus attention on phrase "fast asleep."

Discuss literal meaning of those words.

Ask "Why then does "fast asleep" mean "very asleep?"

Students make predictions.

Show slide #6 of mattresses. A common stuffing for colonial mattresses was hay. With that in mind, what do you think “hit the hay” might mean? This phrase is called an “idiom.”

Lesson:

Slideshow of idioms with pictures

Activities: (teachers will choose one or more of these)

1. Historic meaning, modern meaning (version 1)

Students choose 2 idioms and will draw the historic reference and the modern meaning for each.

Idiom:	
Historic reference	Modern meaning

2. Historic meaning, modern meaning (version 2)

Students draw the historic reference and the modern meaning of the idioms taught in the power point.

3. Guess My Idiom bingo game (version 1)

Each child has a bingo board with the idioms pictured. Student leader or teacher gives definition of idiom and the others match the meaning to the idioms on their boards.

4. Guess My Idiom bingo game (version 2, with images)

Each child has a bingo board with the idioms definitions. Student leader or teacher shows a picture of the colonial artifact and students match it to the idiom on their boards.

Closure:

Students will share and use one of the learned idioms in the context of their own life. (Example: At night my mom says, “It’s nine o’clock- time to hit the hay.”)

Extension:

More idioms are collected by teacher and students. Students research the meaning of these idioms (from colonial days and other historic periods) and make books or displays with artifact images and history research.

Books to support idiom teaching:

In a Pickle: And Other Funny Idioms, by Marvin Terban and Giulio Maestro

Super Silly Sayings That Are over Your Head: A Children's Illustrated Book of Idioms, by Catherine S. Snodgrass

Amelia Bedelia, by Peggy Parish and Fritz Siebel (Series)

The Berenstain Bears' Trouble with Money, by Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain

The King Who Rained, by Fred Gwynne

Chocolate Moose for Dinner, by Fred Gwynne

Idioms from Colonial Days:

How Language Carries History

Little Boy Blue

Little boy blue, come blow your horn,

The sheep's in the meadow,

the cow's in the corn

Where is the boy who looks

after the sheep?

He's under the haystack, fast asleep.



"Little Boy Blue", image by Margaret W. Tarrant

“Fast asleep”, “fasten your seatbelt”,
“sleep tight”- all of these are called
idioms. Idioms are expressions that
don't exactly mean what the words
say.

We use idioms when we speak.
Colonial people used idioms too but
the meanings have changed over time.



**See if you can
guess the
meanings
of more
colonial idioms.**

**Hit
the hay
or
hit
the sack.**



The Fort at No. 4,
Charlestown, NH

Mattresses in colonial times were often filled with corn husks or hay.

In the winter mattresses might be filled with feathers.



In colonial times
when you went
to bed
you really were
hitting the hay
or hitting
the sack.



Plimoth Plantation

**Today if someone
says,
it's time
to "hit the hay",
or "hit the sack",
it means it is
time to
go to sleep.**



**Because mattresses
contained straw,
cornhusks, or feathers,
they could also
contain bugs!
So, when colonials
said,
“Don’t let the
bedbugs bite”,
they really meant it!**



He
got
the
sack.



To get the sack comes from a time when men used sacks to carry their tools and other things.



**Now, if
you “get
the sack”,
you get
fired
from
your job.**

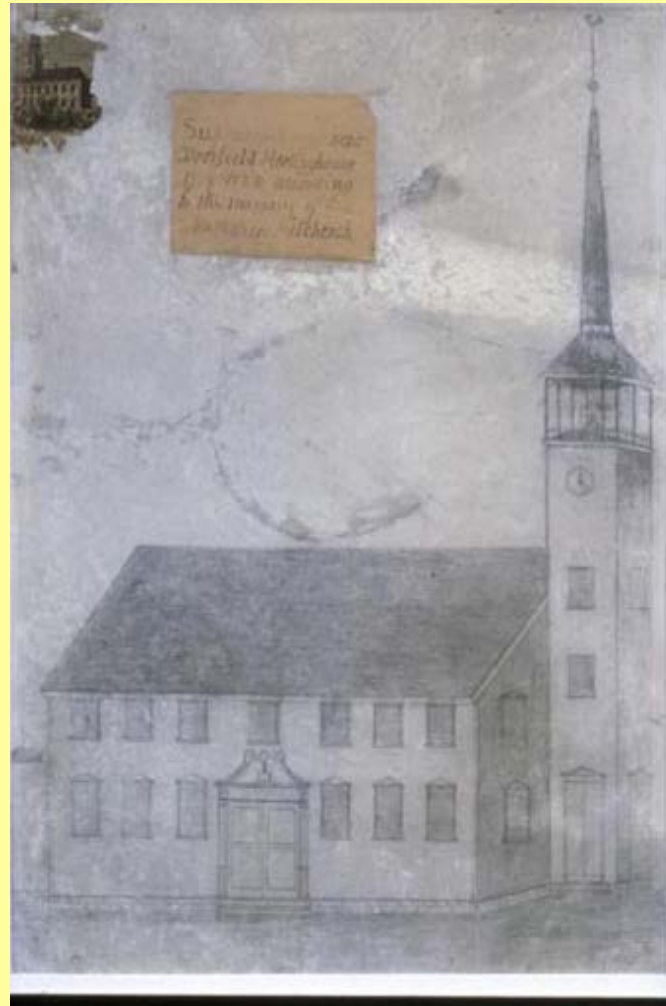


That
rings
a bell.

Fourth Meetinghouse

Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Asso. digital collections

[http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp?
itemid=5194](http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp?itemid=5194)



Brick Church, Deerfield, MA

Colonial church bells
rang for many
reasons- fires,
attacks, deaths,
weddings, religious
services, and to
announce morning,
noon and evening.



**Today when
someone says,
“That rings a bell”,
it means that
something sounds
familiar to them.**

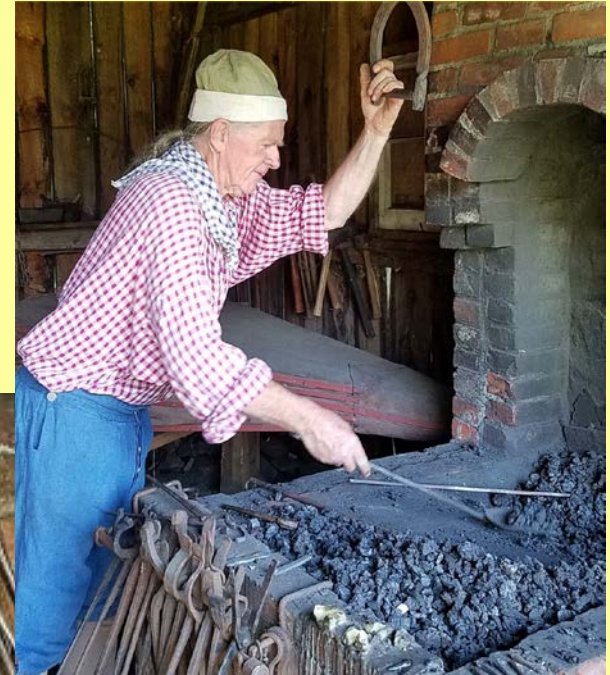


**I have too
many
irons in
the fire!**

The blacksmith shop at the Fort
at No. 4, Charlestown, NH



A colonial blacksmith heated up pieces of iron in his forge to make them hot and soft so that he could shape them into tools.



The blacksmith at the Fort at No. 4,
Charleston, NH

“I have too many irons in the fire!”

**Today this means that,
“I am too busy!”**



**Strike
while the
iron is hot.**



The blacksmith at the Fort
at No. 4, Charleston, NH



**A colonial
blacksmith
knew that
the iron had
to be hot
before it
could be
shaped.**



**“Strike while
the iron is
hot” now
means that it
is the right
time to do
something.**



**That doesn't
hold water.**



The Fort at No. 4
Charlestown, NH

**Colonists
needed to
make
containers to
hold liquids
and other
things.**



The Fort at No. 4, Charlestown, NH

“That doesn’t hold water” has a very different meaning today.

It has come to mean your story is not believable.



**You are
blowing
smoke.**



Indian House Children's Museum
Deerfield, MA



Smoking was common for the colonists. They grew a lot of tobacco. It was used in trading with the Indians. It was sent to England. It became worth a lot of money because it was so popular. Tobacco was also thought to be a treatment for sickness. Blowing smoke was even thought to be a cure for lung disease!



**Now when
you're "blowing
smoke"
you are just
kidding me!**



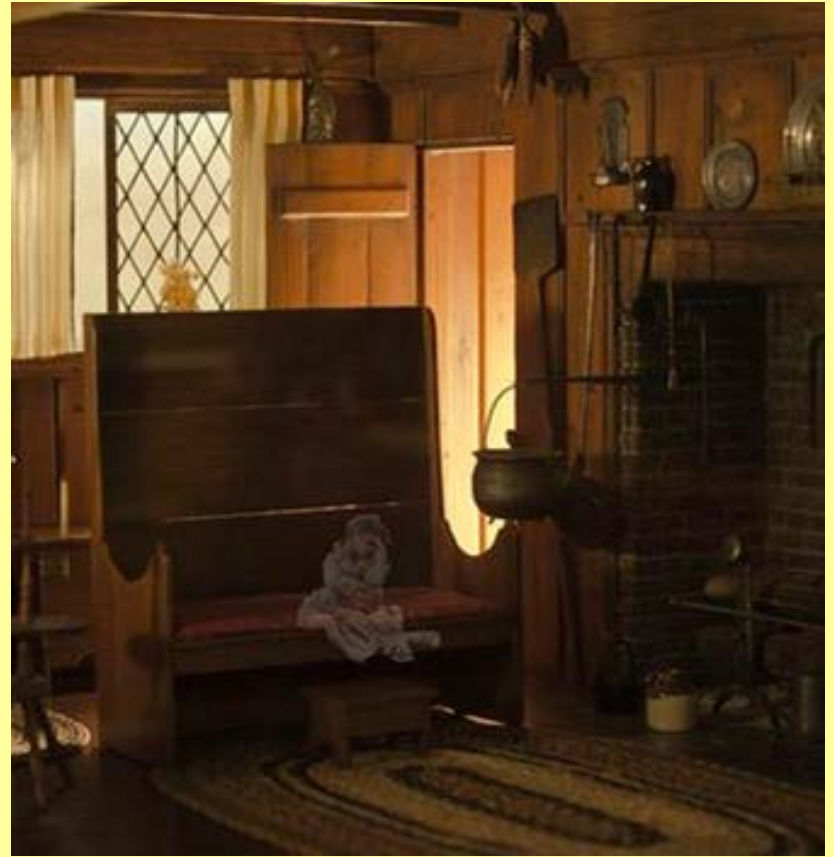
Settle down

or

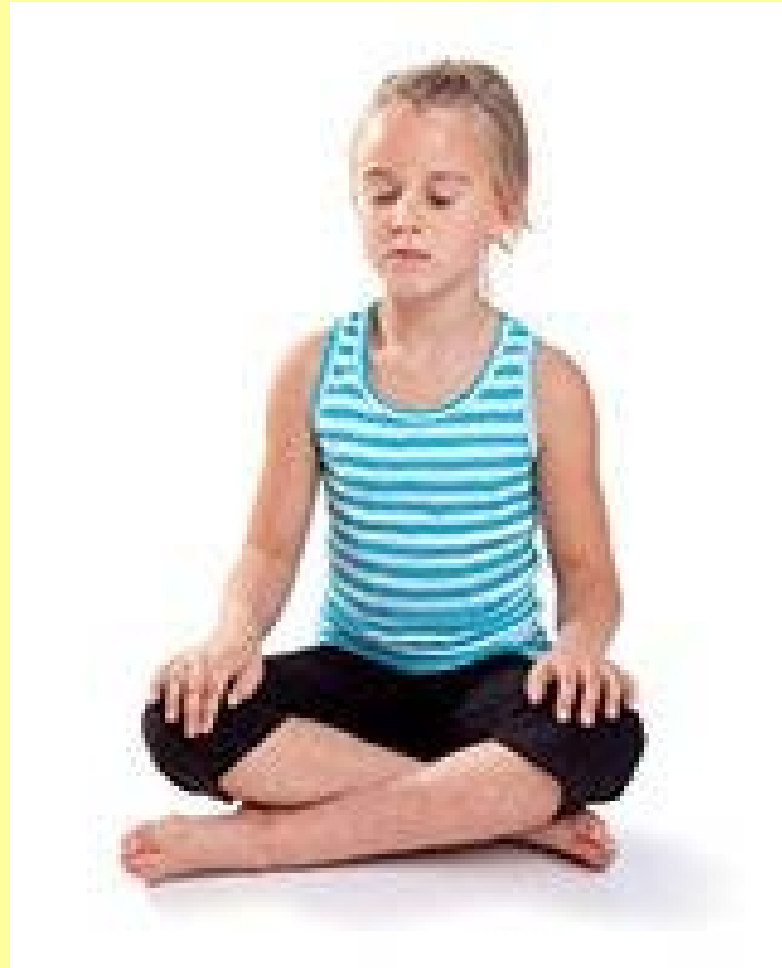
**settle
yourself.**



**A settle was a bench
to sit upon.
It had a high back to
keep the sitters
protected from drafts
in the cold houses of
early
New England.**



**Have you ever
needed to
“settle down”
or “settle
yourself”?**



**A stitch
in time
saves
nine.**



**Colonists needed to
sew their own clothes.**

**If a small hole
appeared it was best to
fix it right away before
the hole became larger
and took longer to fix.**



“A stitch in time saves time” even today. We need to do things as they occur so we do not get behind.



**Coming
apart
at the
seams**



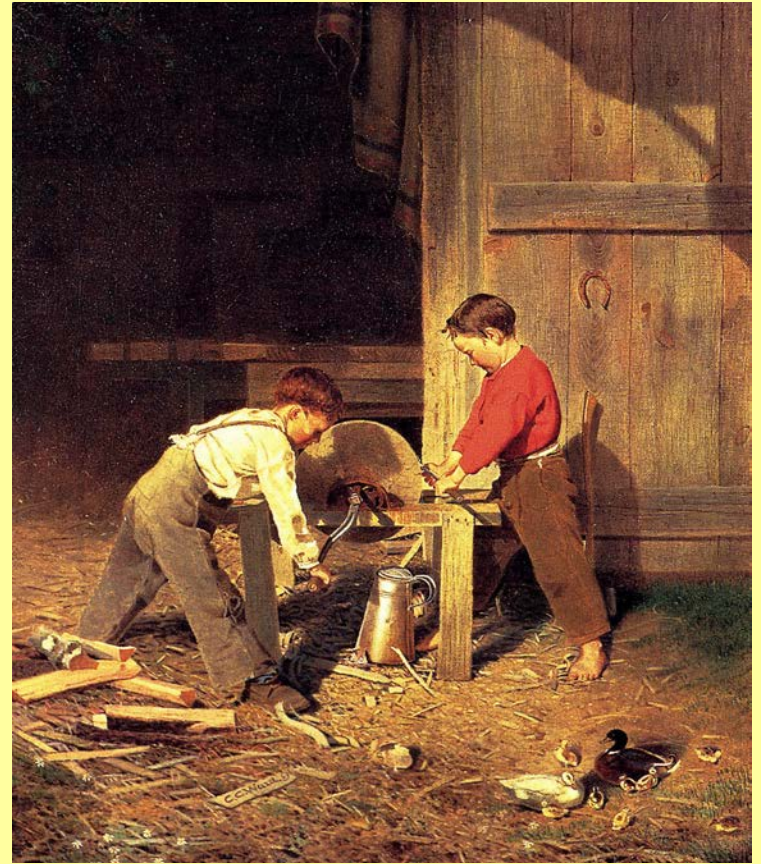
“Coming apart at the seams” is when a piece of cloth is stretched so much that the two pieces come apart and rip open.



**Today
“coming
apart at the
seams” is to
become
upset and
lose control.**

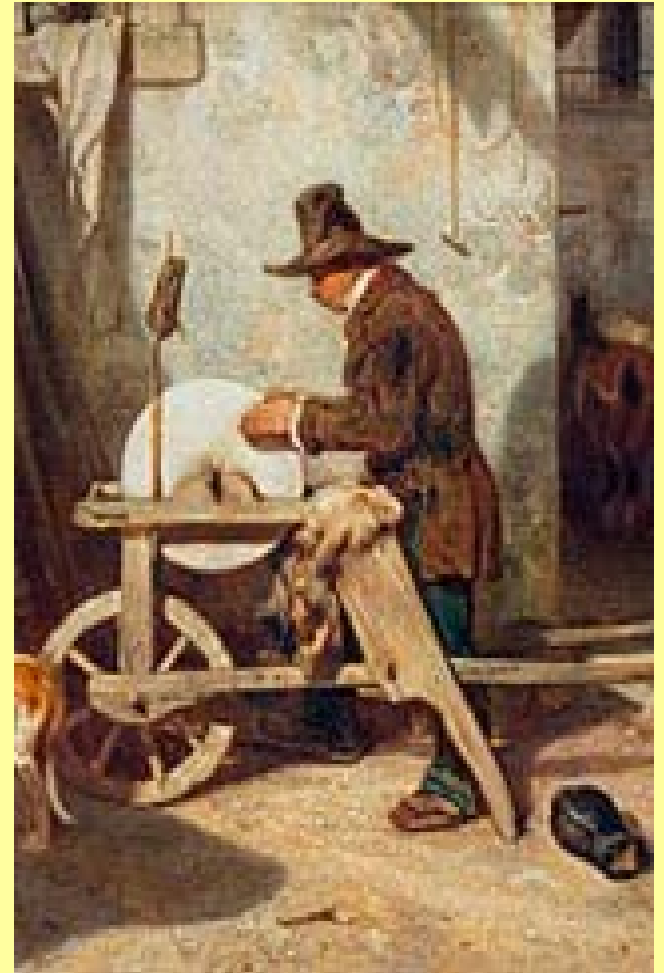


**Keep
your nose
to the
grindstone.**



Force and Skill, Charles Caleb Ward, ca. 1869

A grindstone was used to sharpen knives and blades. “Keeping your nose to the grindstone” meant keeping your face near it in order to hold and see the blades sharpening against the stone.



**“Keeping your
nose to the
grindstone” now
means you are
continuing
to work hard
to achieve
your goals.**



Dead as a doornail

The "Old Indian House Door" at Memorial Hall Museum
Deerfield, MA

<http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/item.page.jsp?itemid=5692>



In colonial times when you made your front door you used many nails to hold it together.

The points of the nails were then bent backwards.

“Dead as a doornail” meant that you couldn’t reuse the nail you had just bent.



Today, we
might say
that both of
these are
“dead as a
doornail”.



**Bury
the
hatchet.**



It was a custom among the Iroquois Native Americans to bury or put away their tomahawks and other weapons in peaceful times.



Iroquois Soapstone Tomahawk Pipe

http://www.traditioncreek.com/storefront/gifts-souvenirs-native-american-c-435_7_164_312.html

**Today, “to bury the hatchet”
means to stop fighting and
start getting along again.**

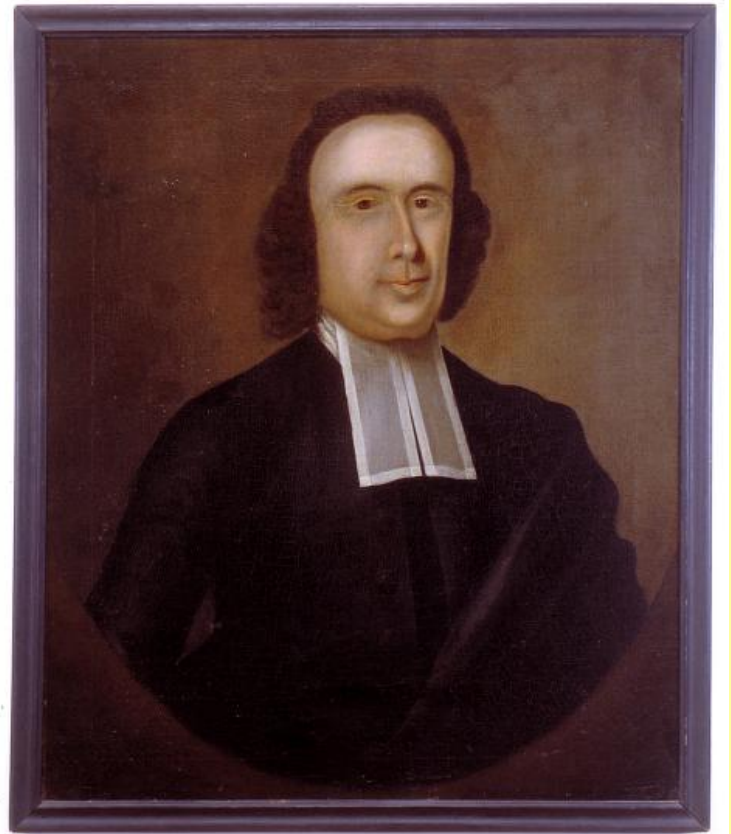


A blockhead



The Fort at No. 4
Charlestown, NH

**It was fashionable
for men to wear
wigs during the
colonial period.
The blockhead held the
wig when it was not
being worn.**



This man is wearing a wig
The Reverend Stephen Williams

Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Assn. digital collections

<http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp?itemid=6006>

When Lucy calls
Charlie Brown
a blockhead, she means
he is not very smart
because
he falls for her football
trick every time,
so blockhead now
means not very smart.



**It's
the
pits
or
down
in the
pits**



The sawman of
the two man team
who had to saw
from
underneath
the lumber
in the pit was
down in the pits.



**Today if you
are “down
in the pits”
you are
feeling
very sad.**



That is
the pot
calling
the
kettle
black.



Lidded Hanging Pot
Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Asso. digital collections
<http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp?itemid=5665>



Bake kettle, Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Asso. digital
collections

<http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/itempage.jsp?itemid=5697>

The “pot calling the kettle black.” refers to the fact that both pots and kettles were made from sturdy cast iron and both would get black with soot from the open fire.

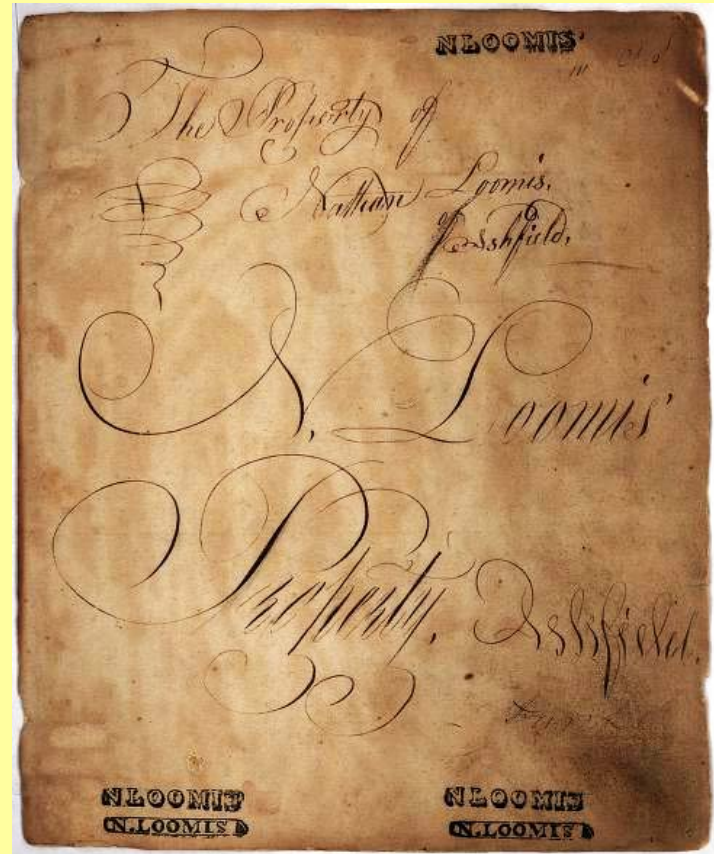
The kitchen collection at Memorial Hall Museum
Deerfield, MA



If you called someone greedy but you are just as greedy then that is the “pot calling the kettle black”. Both of you are guilty of being greedy.



Pages in a book were called "leaves".
When you turned over a new leaf it meant you were turning the page in a book.



Nathan Loomis's Copy Book
Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Asso. digital collections
<http://www.americancenturies.mass.edu/collection/item/page.jsp?itemid=12661>

**Today if you
“turn over a new
leaf” it means to
make a fresh
start, to change
your behavior or
attitude.**



Goody two shoes



The tool room at Memorial Hall Museum
Deerfield, MA

In the 1700's there was a nursery tale called *The History of Little Goody Two-shoes*.^{*} The name "Goody Two-shoes" was given to a poor orphan named Margery Meanwell. She was so poor that she only owned one shoe. She was given a pair of shoes by a rich gentleman and was so happy that she kept repeating to everyone that she had two shoes.



^{*} *The History of Little Goody Two-shoes*, John Newbery, 1765, London

**Someone who
thinks they are
perfect and never
does anything
wrong might be
called a
“goody two shoes.”**



**Now, can you
see how words
and phrases
from the past
can carry
history?**

Colonial Williamsburg
Williamsburg, VA

