

Social dancing does not exist in a vacuum. It is as much about “social” as it is about “dancing” and, as such, reflects the manners and mores of its era. Dance evolves, absorbing or rejecting the influence of other dances and of world events, both big and small. And virtually every new style is based on the ones that came before.

The contras and quadrilles of nineteenth century Lowell shared their roots with ballet; both originated in the courts of Europe. Contras and squares have come a very long way since then. But when Lowell was young, learning to dance properly meant learning the five basic positions that are still used in ballet. Terms such as *Jété*, *Assemblée*, *Pas de Bourré*, *Battement*, *Chassé*, *Entrechat*, and *Glissade* appear as moves in dance manuals of the 1830s and will all be familiar to the modern ballet dancer.

Even so, by the time Lowell sprang up, the steps were less important than in prior days. The preface to 1841’s *Ball-Room Instructor* says: “There are many unacquainted with dancing, who labor under an erroneous impression, that

Country Dance:

Contras and Quadrilles, Past and Present

‘the steps’ are all that are necessary to be learned to fit a person for the ball-room. In our modern assemblies, scarcely one person in ten is acquainted with them; and if they are, they make use of steps to please their own fancy...”

He further states that it is far more important that one knows the *figures* than any fancy footwork: “A person well skilled in graceful and classic steps, [but] unacquainted with figures, would certainly make a ridiculous appearance.”¹

Not to mention being a hazard on the dance floor!

