



HUCKSTERS AND HAMS

1716

Jersey Justice In Olden Days

1798

Itinerant peddlers sold inferior wares, and sometimes entered homes during the absence of the owners and "committed divers misdemeanors to the great prejudice of the inhabitants of this province." The General Assembly "Resolved, that every person who does not reside in this Province, which shall bring in goods to sell by retail (except in Publick affairs) shall pay not under four pounds per annum." Later, the law required hawkers to obtain "a warrant of good character from a Justice of the Peace in the county in which he lived and post with the clerk of the court a bond with one surety in the amount of not less than twenty pounds nor more than fifty," before the Governor issued a license.



The General Assembly deemed it "highly reasonable that hawkers should contribute a just proportion of publick taxes," and passed a law compelling them to pay "to the overseer of the poor an annual graded tax, dependent on whether they traveled by wagon, cart, carriage or on foot." Hawking without a license or refusing to show a receipt for payment of the fee, was an offense for which the offender was heavily fined."

Traveling shows were condemned by Puritans and Quakers. They attracted "large crowds at each performance" and increased the revenue of tavern-keepers. John Woolman remonstrated with persons who attended shows to support those who, as actors, "were of no use in the world." In the immorality laws, the stage was described as the "Devil's own playground." Any show whatsoever "for gain or reward on any publick stage, or in any publick house," was prohibited under penalty of a fine of sixteen dollars, to be given to the poor of the township in which the show was exhibited.



However, the home folks could put on a show once in a while, provided three justices of the peace could be found in the county, city or town who would agree that it was "innocent or would answer any useful purpose."

Ham actors had a tough time of it until well after the Civil War when they saved their necks by becoming campaign orators. Some of them did so well that they landed in Congress.

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