

Checking the Record: An Analysis of 17th Century Probate Inventories from the Plymouth and Port Royal Colonies

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Probate inventories can tell a historian many things about an individual. Probate inventories can explain the occupation of a person; their social status; their economic standing; and what was of value to them. Through the examination of ten probate inventories from the Plymouth and Port Royal colonies, it can be illustrated that colonists participate in the material culture of the 17th century. Other things to consider is the interaction the individual has to the object, as well as the level of material consumption each person partook in with accordance of each inventory. To aid in this study, theories from scholars such as Henry Glassie, Jules David Prown, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi will further emphasize how material culture and other factors of the 17th century were incorporated into the lives of colonists in the North American and Caribbean colonies. However, this essay will mostly look upon historical records than actual artifacts from the period to determine the relationship and significance of some of the items listed in each inventory.

Upon review of the ten probate inventories, there are similarities and differences between each of them. In Plymouth, the five men from that colony ranging from 1677 to 1685, own some type of property. Englishmen began to settle in the Plymouth Colony after its establishment in the early 17th century and until its dissolution in the late 17th century. Since the North American colonies were still developing during the duration of the 17th century, it would be comprehensible for colonists being able to acquire land in the area. Whereas in the Port Royal Colony, which was established after the English took control of the Jamaican island in the mid-16th century, quickly became an urban port city and left little room for land or property possession. These differences in region may contribute to the types of items that the individuals in the ten estates would own.

A difference between the Port Royal and Plymouth inventories are the possession of livestock. Most of the selected Plymouth Colony probate inventories include recordings of livestock, while all except one of the selected Port Royal inventories do not. This is most likely due to the differing structures of the two colonies. The port city of Port Royal focused most of its attention on trade, while the rest of the Jamaican island engrossed itself on sugar production. Meanwhile, the Plymouth colony was heavily involved with farming, as it had the terrain to do so than the urbanized Port Royal.

The concept of material culture as described by Henry Glassie's *Material Culture* is "culture made material" and can be studied by "[using] objects to approach human

thought and action.”¹Through his interpretation, Glassie explains that material culture can reveal much about the past. The manufacturing of an item; its valued price; and the sort of activity the item was created for can impart some type of insight into the colonial past. With his ideas, one can put into perspective of how and why these colonists possessed and used these items during their lifetime.

Each of the estates of the ten probate inventories are comparable within £50 of each other, the highest estate being Beaumont Briscoe of the Port Royal colony in 1685, and the lowest being Dorothy Richardson, also from the Port Royal colony with her inventory dating in 1687. A noticeable difference between the two estates is the total value for the multiple list of items. Briscoe’s inventory that included at least 43 recorded items was worth about £166 16 00; Richardson’s inventory has around 58 listed items at a value of £106 11 00. Though Richardson has more items than Briscoe, the items listed in the Briscoe inventory have higher values than that of the articles listed in the Richardson inventory.

The case of William Parker’s 1684 Plymouth Colony probate inventory is expressive when compared to that of Briscoe and Richardson. The amount is valued at a price about £8 lower than the Briscoe estate, but was more than £50 in comparison to Richardson’s estate. Different factors in the different inventories contribute to the total value of each listing of assets. In the example of William Parker, most of the value of his estate came from the large amounts of land he owned. Most of Briscoe’s wealth came from the slaves he owned, along with some furniture and a barrel full of oil.² Richardson’s objects did not reach a value higher than £12 (the object in question being 8 gallons of rum).³ Each inventory illustrates the difference of the value of items, according to the category and region of the colonists. The gender of each of the three colonists may also play a role in the total sum value of each inventory, as the values of the Parker and Briscoe estates were higher than that of Dorothy Richardson.

Meanwhile, the inventories of Joseph Trevant and John Millard, Jr. of the Plymouth Colony are comparable to William Parker’s estate in terms of the sparseness in objects, but are still higher than that of Dorothy Richardson. However, by taking a look at the Millard inventory, it is presumable that he was a farmer in Plymouth, as he owns ten acres of land, some livestock, and multiple farming tools. The absence of glassware and recordable items of apparel also speaks to the possible status of a farmer, as he might not have been able to afford things like glassware or china; nor would he need to use them in his trade.⁴

¹ Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1999), 41.

² William Parker inventory, Plymouth Colony 1684.

³ Dorothy Richardson inventory, Port Royal Colony 1687.

⁴ John Millard, Jr., Plymouth Colony 1684.

With the items listed in Trevant's inventory, he seems to hold the same occupation as Millard with his similar ownership of land, livestock, and farming tools. Trevant's inventory also includes lumber and articles of wearing apparel, things not present in Millard's inventory.⁵ The differences with these two inventories are evident when compared to the occupations of Thomas Stichbury (a doctor in Port Royal) and Thomas Moone (a gunsmith in Port Royal). These two estates featured less farming items than the Trevant and Millard estates.

Some of the inventories listed in the essay acknowledge the colonists' participation of material culture during the 17th century. A few of the inventories share similar listings of items, while containing some differences as well. The possession of particular items illustrates the type of community the individual lived in, or what type of objects they could afford or had the use for; the inventories can also indicate the lifestyle of the individual.

Glassie also explains that some kind of pattern in material ownership "imply intentions and carry toward meaning."⁶ Only three of the ten inventories collected contained the ownership of slaves or servants, all of them being from the Port Royal probate inventories. Since the Caribbean colonies received many Africans from the slave trade, it would seem likely that some of the colonists in the Port Royal colony would own slaves. The value of the slaves from these inventories range from £3 to £44; in the case of Beaumont Briscoe, the value of the slave men were much higher than that of an indentured servant named John Collins⁷. This pattern reveals that the ownership of black slaves was costly and not so widespread in the late-17th century.

Further into his explanation of material culture, Glassie mentions "consumption...collects contexts in which the meanings of the artifacts consolidate and expand."⁸ Similar to the concept of patterns, the amount of colonists' consumption can tell some information about the person. Their consumption can also reveal what categories of items were appealing enough to buy, or if it was needed to carry out daily functions. Eight of the ten inventories contain some type of furniture. In looking at the lack of objects in William Parker's Plymouth inventory, one can infer the vast amount of property that Parker did own was more valuable than any type of material goods. While John Barlett's Plymouth estate lists no furniture, the inventory accounts some items that were of practical use, such as spinning wheels, various clothes, and kitchen tools. So in these cases, the lack of material consumption gives a small insight into their lives.

⁵ Joseph Trevant, Plymouth Colony 1685.

⁶ Glassie, *Material Culture*, 47.

⁷ Beaumont Briscoe, Port Royal Colony, 1685.

⁸ Glassie, *Material Culture*, 57.

Examining the inventories of Thomas Stichbury and Thomas Moone are telling of their everyday lives in the Port Royal colony in the year 1689, as well as their professions as a doctor and a gunsmith, respectively. Thomas Stichbury's inventory gives some hints about his occupation as a doctor, such as the little box of medicines and the powder bed chamber. Mr. Stichbury also had a mortar listed in his inventory, possibly for grinding herbs or other materials⁹. From the items and locations listed in Thomas Moone's inventory, there is some evidence of Moone's profession as a gunsmith. Such evidence includes numerous iron products, an anvil, guns and pistols, among other things. With the consideration of these two inventories, the notion of scholar Jules David Prown about "the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them, and by extension, the beliefs of the larger society" can be interpreted in the items that they used in everyday life in the 17th century.¹⁰

Prown's concept may also apply to the inventory of Dorothy Richardson, as it speaks to her position as a female and widow in Port Royal during the late 1600s. Richardson owned a small amount of furniture, various types of clothes, and some miscellaneous items such as a spice box and candles. However, there is no mention of property or land ownership as some of the other inventories with male trustees. Richardson does have numerous types of kitchen tools listed in her inventory, along with apparel items such as a calico gown with a silk petticoat, along with three yards of old gold lace and gold buttons. Through Richardson's consumption of materials, it can be interpreted the status she had in both her gender role and her wealth with her ownership of some items. The absence of land in Richardson's inventory compared to the other inventories also speaks to the status of being a female, who were traditionally restricted from owning property in the 17th century.

In his essay "Why We Need Things", scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asserts that "one consequence of our evolution as cultural beings has been an increasing dependence on objects for survival and comfort."¹¹ Nearly all the inventories contained some type of kitchen tools/food preparation items made out of pewter (a fragile alloy) or other types of metal objects such as iron and brass. Most of the pewter and metal objects were imported into the colonies from England, especially during the early stages of colonization during the 17th century. This investment into material culture proves vital to carry out daily and basic human functions. Mrs. Richardson's inventory of kitchen items is very extensive compared to the other inventories; some objects include

⁹ Thomas Stichbury, Port Royal Colony 1689.

¹⁰ Jules David Prown, "The Truth of Material Culture: History or Fiction?" *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (1993): 11.

¹¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (1993): 20.

many silver items and other metals¹². Richardson could have likely have the task of preparing meals due to her position as a female in the colonial period.

This thought can be argued with the inventory of Nathaniel Cooper of the Plymouth Colony. In examining Cooper's inventory, one will find that Cooper possessed a variety of objects that range from apparel, furniture, and pottery among other things. The objects listed in the Cooper inventory may have suited the physical needs of Cooper. Such items like the muskets and swords listed in Cooper's inventory may have come into some type of practical use, to either warn off threats to Cooper, or to kill some type of prey that was in the Plymouth area. Other things like the pewter and metal dishes, the iron kettle, and earthenware were most likely used to cook and serve food, as the consumption of food is a basic human need for survival. These types of objects have made modes of life easier for colonial Americans like Nathaniel Cooper. With the development of firearms and weapons, it was easier to kill animals and ward off threats. The various items such as the dishes, pots, and kettles helped change methods of food preparation and serving.

The inventory of John Millard Jr. is rather indicative to his reliance on material objects to carry out day-to-day functions. Millard's inventory includes items such as a cart and plow, four old bags, and barrels and lumber. Millard most likely used these objects to contain goods and to plow his land. As objects listed in the aforementioned inventories offer some kind of fulfillment of physical needs of the human kind, some objects can represent some type of satisfaction for the psychological state of an individual. Csikszentmihalyi asserts that "artifacts help objectify the self in at least three major ways": 1) by displaying the power of its owner, 2) revealing the objects continuity over time, and 3) presenting evidence of the owner's symbolism in valued relationships in society.¹³ Through his interpretation, Csikszentmihalyi argues that objects help establish one's identity to oneself as well as the society for which they live in.

By inquiring the inventory of Beaumont Briscoe of Port Royal, the numerous objects the gentleman had helps give an insight about Briscoe's identity. Some of the most telling features in the Briscoe inventory are 12 leather chairs along with other items.¹⁴ As many colonists who settled in the western hemisphere would not have the use of multiple chairs (unless they had the wealth or social esteem to do so), it is interesting to see that Briscoe acquired at least twelve leather chairs. The amount of furniture and other items listed in Briscoe's inventory may have established the identity of Briscoe amidst his neighbors and himself; such things could have offered the man comfort and some interaction with his society with his ownership of multiple chairs, dishes, metal objects, and a table.

¹² Dorothy Richardson, Port Royal Colony 1687.

¹³ Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things." 23.

¹⁴ Beaumont Briscoe, Port Royal Colony 1685.

The estate of Port Royal clerk Andrew Burne also tells about his contribution to material culture to assert his status in the colony. Items recorded in Burne's inventory include: a silver cane, golden jewelry, and a snuff box with a small amount of money in it. Burne also had multiple items of clothing, including multiple women's garments (signaling the presence of a female in the household) as well as cravats (a sort of early necktie).¹⁵ The numerous trinkets and articles listed in Burne's inventory help piece together his establishment to his society as a clerk.

With the ideas expressed by Csikszentmihalyi and emphasized with the aforementioned inventories, objects can signify the meeting of physical needs of an individual, such as protection from the environment or to prepare items for basic human necessities. Objects can also have the power to establish one's identity and offer comfort of the consciousness. These ideas contribute to the understanding of material culture in the colonial period. Through their involvement with material consumption, an individual from the current period can learn about material culture ideas expressed by Glassie, Prown, and Csikszentmihalyi concerning the concept.

As has been noted, probate inventories from the Port Royal and Plymouth colonies can disclose facets of everyday life in the late 17th century. The inventories also reveal the engagement of colonists to the material culture of the era. Incidentally, the inventories are suggestive to regional differences, consumer culture, and the occupation of colonists. By comparing and contrasting the inventories of the individuals' estates, one can learn many things from how those from the past lived. Therefore, probate inventories prove to be an important tool into the historical perspective of life in colonial times.

¹⁵ Andrew Burne, Port Royal Colony 1686.