

The Expression of Gentility in Colonial America

by Stephanie Zwinggi

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in American history are filled with discovery and rapid evolution as well as a constant feeling or theme of instability and a heavy influence from multiple countries and other sources. This is comparable to the outlook of a modern teenager trying to make sense of their surroundings and take control of their future. The creation of the United States of America could be, and usually is, considered a successful project, but it can be difficult to understand our simple and fragile beginnings when there is little to no written documentation of the many cultures and circumstances in the vastly different but also strikingly similar economies and environments where the United States, as a unified nation, first began. Because of this, one must look to the physical evidence and the most abundant and important source of documentation left behind by these early Americans, their household inventories, in order to attempt to grasp their lives and cultures in an everyday sense.

Gentility was an extremely influential factor in early American culture and continued to play an even more influential role as the years unfolded, but for the middle to lower classes, it did not seem to affect spending habits near as much as one might think. Shown by purchasing habits and associated items listed in ten comparable inventories of middle-class Americans from York County, Virginia to different locations in Massachusetts, there is less of a struggle to appear wealthy and more of a focus on every day survival and basic needs for the majority of early American citizens. These specific inventories were chosen to be studied because of the interesting dichotomy in a cultural sense but closeness in a geographical sense. Massachusetts and Virginia were also very important and busy places during the colonial era of American history. Gentility is often viewed as a staple of colonial America. However, these inventories show how this was ultimately a time of survival for the majority of early Americans and that gentility was usually expressed in the lives of wealthier Americans at the time. Gentility was something that was yearned for by all but achieved by few in the simpler times of colonial America.

Objectivity is extremely important when observing artifacts and lists of artifacts from a long forgotten home. Conclusions derived from these objects are almost always inferences or basically educated guesses because of the lack of reference or means of fully understanding the surrounding context of said artifacts. Rosemary Troy Krill, the author of *Early American Decorative Arts*, which is a popular guide for the artifact analyzer and interpreter, describes the meaning of objects as having, "multiple layers of meaning, including the viewpoints of the maker, owner, and everyone who

subsequently has interacted with the objects."¹ Therefore, one must be careful when observing extremely valuable and informative probate inventories. While researching these inventories, it became obvious that the majority of people in the mid to late seventeenth century did not have the wealth or time required to give off the air of being genteel, an important part of colonial America.

Gentility was the most coveted aspect of popular culture in early colonial America, derived from western European structure and ideals. Richard Bushman, the author of *Refinement of America* in which gentility is discussed in detail, states that America's "cultural imagination was filled with the palaces and elegant people of Europe...gentility represented a way of lifting their lives to a higher level."² It was to present oneself as effortless yet beautiful, shown through methods of cordiality as well as architecture and personal possessions.³ It was an ever-present yet mostly unachievable goal, comparable to the modern lust for expensive brands in clothing and vehicles, etc. in the United States' modern youth culture. Although gentility was more than the worth of one's household items and, of course, also included genteel people who were graceful, beautiful, and extremely cordial, the two aspects of gentility seemed to go hand-in-hand. Although one can be graceful and polite without any goods needing to be purchased or money spent, gentility required these beautiful people to be living and be social in beautiful settings, including large and elegant houses with expensive tea cups and tea pots on expensive furniture. "With the houses went new modes of speech, dress, body carriage, and manners that gave an entirely new cast to the conduct and appearance of the American gentry."⁴ While most people can recognize the value in such things, the majority of the population does not or cannot possess them. Therefore, while the specific people in the following ten inventories discussed were very likely influenced by the effect of gentility in their culture, most, if not all, of their goods at the time of death portrayed a more simple way of life, unburdened with unnecessary but valuable goods.

The differences between the lives detailed in inventories in those in Massachusetts and those in Virginia are slim but important. New Englanders knew a life that revolved around a strict religious center. Mostly Puritan in the beginning, they were more reserved and lived a life in fear of the Lord instead of in joyous praise as most Christian religions of the modern day. Virginia came about from the prospects of business opportunities not available across the Atlantic, where there was more competition and fewer areas of untapped resources such as lumber. Not to say Virginians were not religious, but the creation of Virginia was not religiously driven;

¹ Rosemary Krill, *Early American Decorative Arts* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), ix.

² Alvin Sanoff, "A touch of finery and class." *U.S. News & World Report* 113, no. 19 (1992).

³ Richard Bushman, *Refinement in America* (New York: Random House, 1992), 13.

⁴ *Ibid*, xii.

most inhabitants were only there for a short while in order to make a profit and then return to their homeland, most commonly Europe. This focus on business directly relates to the inclusion of slaves that were, out of all ten inventories observed, found solely in the middle-class Virginian inventories from York County. Another distinction between Massachusetts and Virginia is that earthfast construction derived from and was overwhelmingly popular for quite some time in colonial Virginia. Wooden beams kept such structures from collapsing, and therefore, there was much more residue from wood in the ground around locations of homes long gone. This made it easier to discover where these homes once stood. Although, through their differences, Massachusetts' and Virginian inventories of the seventeenth century both regularly spoke of the importance of farm life and the basic comforts of home. Both Salem and Plymouth Colony are covered in the inventories of this essay. Although these places are in the same state, at the time they were still very unique and localized places.

Interestingly, the least wealthy inventory of the three chosen from Salem, Massachusetts, is the only one that mentions containing additional acreage outside of that used for the household. The only livestock mentioned are a couple of pigs. Therefore, because of the upper northern American location, one could infer that the rest of the land was either forest or used for display. This would be a show of gentility for those who might not be able to build a large, impressive household. There is also mention of Indian corn in the inventory, so most likely the remainder of the land was used for farming purposes in order to provide food for the family. It could be argued either way, for gentility or farming, but because of the other items in the inventory having little to do with entertainment or exhibition and more with everyday life and chores, it is most likely that Thomas Oliver, the deceased owner of the land and house, used the land for and lived his life in a more practical manner than gentility would prescribe. Also, multiple items in the inventory are described as being "old," "small," or "little."⁵ This is indicative of a household that does not replace items when they become unfashionable but uses them until they cannot be used anymore. Gentility became more important with the evolvement of American economics and trade, which included many new and stylish items replacing the old and most likely handmade items. Through evidence of inventory, Oliver did not seem preoccupied with these newer, probably fancier, and more expensive items. The only item that was of little use in a practical sense was "an old rusty sword & old bandeleers."⁶ Although this item was most likely on display and could be seen as useful in an entertainment setting with friends or during a holiday or ceremony, it seemed to be kept in the household instead of thrown out because it was a family heirloom or an old war relic. This is inferred

⁵ Edmund Batter and Hilliard Veren sr, "Inventory of the estate of Thomas Oliver, intestate, was granted 21: 4m: 1679."

⁶ Ibid.

because it is, once again, described as "old" and "rusty," which implies it was not used but instead held some kind of meaning to Oliver.⁷

Another inventory from Salem, Massachusetts, was that of Alester Mackmallen. Like Oliver's inventory, most of the items are described as "old," "small" and "little."⁸ There are many farming tools, including an axe and spade, but no livestock listed. The house and accompanying land are by far the most expensive items on the inventory. Because of these two facts, it once again points toward the land being used in farming for sustenance. The dishes and cooking utensils listed are described as basic and minimal. There is also earthenware listed which leads one to believe that Mackmallen did not have money to spend in order to provide decoration in his every day life, at least in the way of cooking and eating. There is also "pewter & lanthorne" listed in the inventory.⁹ Pewter was a metal commonly used in colonial America because it was cheap and could be made to look like silver if shined extensively. Similar to an imitation item seen today, the purpose of pewter was for basic needs and for those who could not afford more expensive metals. This inventory is also the smallest out of all ten, leaving little to be imagined for the observer or researcher. Because of all of these items and the meanings behind them, it is not difficult to assume that Alester Mackmallen was a simple man with little time or necessity for gentility.

John Wilkins, the final inventory from Salem, Massachusetts, also had a relatively small inventory upon his death. Despite this, his items were worth the most out of all three Salem men. This is most likely because he had an abundance of livestock and metals. Interestingly enough, even though he owned many animals such as pigs, cows, and horses, there is no land mentioned for these animals. Therefore, it must have not been worth much or was potentially owned by someone else. Another interesting point is that only "the halef of a house," is mentioned in the inventory as Wilkins' property.¹⁰ It leads one to wonder what the story is behind only owning half of a house and what the reasons for that may be. It is also curious to imagine families dividing a house in such a way, unless it was a situation similar to living in a duplex today. Although this inventory lists a few different metals, being iron, pewter, and brass, all of these are relatively cheap and most commonly used in making items for basic daily needs, like tools and cooking and eating utensils. Although items such as plates and cups can be made to make the owner appear genteel, these items are usually made out of china or glass. Iron, pewter, and brass items were usually not fancy or meant for display. Additionally, Wilkins' probate was the only one from Salem to list weapons

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Richard Adams and Hilliard Verin sr, "Inventory of the estate of Alester Mackmallen, deceased 20: 4m: 1679."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nathaniell Putnam and John Putnam, "Inventory of the estate of John Wilkins, of Saylem, deceased."

ready for use; "pisstoles, holsters, sord, & belt."¹¹ Because of the accompanying holsters and belt, it would be more likely that these items were used in a practical sense, either to hunt or protect oneself, instead of in use to display or promote oneself.

The inventories of Plymouth Colony seemed to be written in a slightly different style which excluded seemingly important things like houses and land, which could have been for multiple different reasons as discussed below. Upon his demise, John Sutton had the least wealthy inventory from the four inventories chosen from Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts. The majority of Sutton's wealth came from his land. Sutton probably used his land and farming abilities in multiple ways, as can be seen in the farming tools used and livestock owned, including "A hamer a drawing knife a hand saw and 2 paire of Chissells," "A meale trough," "2 bushells of Rye 3 bushells of Indian Corne," and "Piggs."¹² All of these items together prove that Sutton was resourceful and skilled. The tools were most likely used for making furniture or more instruments used for farming, the corn and rye were most likely grown on Sutton's own land, and the meal trough and pigs suggest that some amount of livestock farming occurred on Sutton's land. Two of the cows listed in Sutton's inventory are described as being in another person's "hand."¹³ This could be an implication of not having enough land to support these cows or sharing the prospects of these animals with another, but either way this inclusion in the inventory is most likely a sign of a certain lack of wealth. John Sutton's inventory is the only one out of all ten that includes a Bible. This is interesting because, although the seventeenth century was an extremely religious period in American, and world, history, Bibles were not readily available to many because they were expensive before the invention of the printing press and because of the general lack of education for the middle to lower classes. Therefore, in the case of John Sutton, the inclusion of a Bible emphasizes some amount of wealth and a focus on religion.

Richard Beare was another member of the Plymouth Colony in the mid seventeenth century. Beare's inventory does not mention a house or land, so perhaps he lived in a house he rented or a family house he did not own. However, he owned a few pigs and cows, regardless of the lack of land shown. One item with the name, "Cattle in partenorship," shows that Beare worked with someone to care for and receive the benefits of owning livestock.¹⁴ Because of this, Beare might not have owned any land and instead kept his animals elsewhere. Upon Beare's death, he also had a multitude of debts owed to quite a few people.¹⁵ Although relatively small amounts, once added up together they become a substantial amount of Beare's inventory statement. Beare has

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Leiftenant Peter hung Ensigne henery Smith and Willaim Carpenter, "The Inventory of John Sutton."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Marke Eanes and John Bourne, "The Inventory of Richard Beare."

¹⁵ Ibid.

nothing much outside of the absolutely necessary. Although he most likely lived a comfortable life, there is nothing that suggests that Beare was concerned with presenting himself in any sort of way, especially not one that might have been more expensive to him.

Nathaniel Goodspeed, also a member of Plymouth Colony, was one of the wealthiest people of all ten inventories. Interestingly, his inventory, like Beare's, also does not mention any land or a house. Most of Goodspeed's wealth comes from his animals. Although Beare and Goodspeed have a semi-large difference in wealth, their situations could be similar in the vein of house ownership, perhaps a family home. Goodspeed's inventory stood out because his clothes were so expensive.¹⁶ This could mean that because Goodspeed had a little more wealth, he was able to wear fancier, more genteel clothing. This fact supports the statement that money spent on appearing genteel increased the more wealth one had in the seventeenth century.

Edward Hall seemed to be the wealthiest man out of all four from Plymouth Colony, as shown through their inventories. His land is worth half of his inventory and he has an abundance of corn and livestock that were also worth quite a bit of money.¹⁷ However, although Hall was wealthier and more successful than most, he had a farmer's mentality and was not seemingly focused on gentility. The rest of his inventory consists of nothing but clothing, cooking ware, and furniture; objects needed for daily life in the seventeenth century.

The major difference between the inventories from these places in Massachusetts and York County, Virginia, is the inclusion of slaves in Virginian inventories. Because of Virginia's more heightened sense of business, these slaves and servants were more popular in order to make the business process go faster and be more efficient. This way, these Virginians could go back to their homelands successful at a quicker rate. The first citizen analyzed from York County is Laughone Person. Laughone owned five slaves at the time of his death and left instructions about how long to keep them afterwards and how much they were worth.¹⁸ Surprisingly, some of these people were not worth more than some of the livestock, but the young men seemed to be worth quite a bit more. Person also owned quite a bit of livestock, more than any of the other ten inventories, but they did not have a price listed with them.¹⁹ Person also owned a decent amount of sewing and cooking materials, but barely any farming equipment or outside tools.²⁰ This is probably because Person did not farm and take care of the livestock himself, but

¹⁶ Vs whose hands are heer subscribed, "A true inventory of the estate of Nathaniel: Goodspeed of Barnstable lately deceased."

¹⁷ Ester hall widdow, "A true inventory of the estate of Edward hall of Rehoboth [deceased]."

¹⁸ John Cotton and Edward Greene, "an Appraisment and devision of the estate of laughone person deceased."

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

instead had his slaves do it for him with tools they owned or had made. One would think this would make Laughone Person the wealthiest out of all ten inventories but he is more towards the middle of the ladder of wealth. Perhaps if the livestock had been priced it would be a different matter.

Elizabeth Bushroad is the only female included in the ten inventories analyzed. She was an interesting character for colonial America in comparison to the men of these inventories. Bushroad did not own any slaves but lived a unique life, especially as a woman, in that she was one of the wealthiest of the ten. Bushroad's inventory is different than the others; more detailed and with quite a difference in items. Bushroad owned no farming equipment or livestock, and instead had an abundance of sewing materials and a detailed account of the clothing and furniture owned.²¹ The thirteen items of clothing owned compared to the typical account of just "wearing clothes" in most of the other inventories was a nice change of pace. This could be because the women during this time typically kept up with the making of, washing and organization of the clothing, as well as dressing the children, but it could also be where Bushroad made her money. From all the sewing materials listed, it is a high possibility that Bushroad was a seamstress of some type. This was common during the seventeenth century because it gave women a sense of importance and individuality, as well as community with other women, in a world dominated by men. Another attribute to Bushroad's wealth was the fact that she owned a looking glass.²² A looking glass was expensive and rare for quite some time and most likely meant that the owner was wealthier. Therefore, these objects gave off a sense of gentility and class. Bushroad, out of all the people analyzed in these inventories, seemed more aware of the outside world. Although she was by no means an extravagant or rich person, this and the fact that she was a woman and most likely appreciated the more expensive items of the times, makes her the most genteel of all ten.

Finally, we arrive at William Major, the wealthiest of all three people from York County, Virginia. Major, like Person, also owned slaves. Although they were not worth as much as Person's slaves, they also had notes describing when to release these people and how much they were worth.²³ Unlike Person's slaves, they had names for themselves in the inventory.²⁴ This is important and says a thing or two about the differences between Laughone Person and William Major, as well as the differences in how the whites associated with slaves in the seventeenth century. Major is the only male from these probate inventories to also have an extensive list of furniture and

²¹ Adminrs Mr Tho Harwoo[d] Mr David Condo, "Inventoried, appraised, & divided the Estate of Mrs Elizabeth Bushrod decd."

²² Ibid.

²³ Mr Edward Mosse one his Matys Justices, "Estate of Mr. William Major deced."

²⁴ Ibid.

clothing.²⁵ Perhaps this is because he had more to brag about than most, or maybe, like Bushroad, he was in the business of sewing. There is also listed many livestock animals and farming tools, which leads one to believe that Major, with the help of his slaves, worked in a few different veins of business.²⁶ Although he was obviously lucrative and successful, Major owns nothing to suggest that he appreciated gentility or wanted to show off his wealth.

In conclusion, the ten people in these inventories each lived completely different and separate lives. They each had unique traits that made their lives seem real and valuable instead of just objects listed on old paper. Even through their differences, it becomes clear that all of these people lived a difficult and new lifestyle in the early and quickly developing America. The inventories prove that they were representative of the middle class and were all very brave and hardworking individuals. Therefore, despite the cultural popularity of gentility, the middle class in the seventeenth century focused on basic survival and making a life for themselves before they were able to invest in an expression of themselves through gentility.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.