

Gentility in Maryland and Virginia from 1763-1774

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Inventories of estates from Maryland and Virginia between 1763 and 1774 show the importance of gentility to upper class Americans because they contain items for engaging in social rituals, specific furniture and decorative choices within the home, and the use of elegant fabrics as apparel and home decoration. This essay will endeavor to further analyze individuals' attempts, failures, or successes in achieving gentility in colonial Maryland and Virginia and examine the items that they deemed significant to that endeavor. This will be determined through probate inventories, which are documentations of the property of colonists at the time of their death. These lists of possessions help researchers understand life in colonial America.

Six inventories were analyzed: four from Charles County, Maryland, one from Anne Arundel County, Maryland, and the last from Westmoreland County, Virginia.¹ The estate from Virginia belonged to Lawrence Butler whose estate was inventoried in 1766 and valued at 1,417 pounds 6 shillings.² In Maryland, William Neale's estate, inventoried in 1763, was valued at 1,450 pounds, 3 shillings and 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ pence.³ A fellow inhabitant of Charles County, Henry Brent, had an estate valued at 1461 pounds, 19 shillings and 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ pence and was evaluated in June of 1769.⁴ Captain John Laidler's estate in Charles County, Maryland was valued at 1,432 pounds, 16 shillings and 6 pence and was entered in April of 1774.⁵ The last decedent of Charles County was Joseph Milburn Semmes whose estate was valued at 1436 pounds and 15 shillings in October of 1764.⁶ The richest of the six estates was valued at 1,475 pounds, 2 shillings and 2 pence and belonged to Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany of Anne Arundel County, Maryland.⁷

Each of these inventories showed gentility or aspirations of gentility. Richard Bushman, in his book *The Refinement of America*, describes gentility as belonging to the gentry or higher social class.⁸ They achieved this in several different ways but the most obvious and defining were through manner and courtesy. This required gentlemen to be sophisticated as well as have the outward appearance of gentility; this included

¹ The items in the inventories are given a value by the evaluator. In colonial America, the currency used was British. There were 12 pence in a shilling, and 20 shillings in a pound.

² "Lawrence Butler, Westmoreland County, Virginia 1766"

³ "William Neale, Charles County, Maryland, 1763"

⁴ "Henry Brent, Charles County, Maryland, 1769"

⁵ "Captain John Laidler, Charles County, Maryland, 1774".

⁶ "Joseph Milburn Semmes, Charles County, Maryland, 1764"

⁷ "Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 1766"

⁸ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

manner of dress, occupation, home furnishing, and home life. However, the definition of gentility was malleable and formed by those who held genteel status to further ostracize the non-genteel class. For example, Dr. Alexander Hamilton wrote in his itinerary about an encounter at a tavern with another traveler in which the other man came down for breakfast dressed in a “greasy jacket and breeches and a dirty worsted cap” who was served scraps compared to those who appeared genteel.⁹ Those that held a genteel status clung to it and those that did not possess it sought to achieve it because, according to Bushman, “genteel behavior always reflected the belief that somewhere a glorious circle existed where life was lived at its highest and best...where true gentility was achieved, where perfect harmony, grace and beauty can be found.”¹⁰ Being a member of the genteel class meant that one possessed specific qualities and items that displayed that wealth and status to others in society, giving that person a strong sense of importance.

To be considered a member of high society, or genteel, one had to behave a certain way and participate in specific social rituals. One of the most significant social rituals among the genteel class was that of drinking tea. Rodris Roth described tea as the “preferred beverage of the eighteenth century; ...drinking it was a custom with distinctive manners and specific equipment.”¹¹ Individuals enjoyed tea in their own time, but it was also a significant part of social life. While entertaining guests, genteel people served tea using specialized equipment and specific, unspoken, rules.¹²

In order to entertain while drinking tea, one must have certain equipment and fine china. The finer the china the more it aided in displaying gentility, status, and wealth. Captain John Laidler of Charles County Maryland possessed 3 tea pots, 1 iron tea kettle and 1 pewter tea pot. These items totaled to 8 shillings and 6 pence.¹³ The material of the tea pot and kettle were not of the higher quality that one would expect to see in a more genteel home, however, his ownership of these items showed some awareness of the social importance that tea held. Another resident of Charles County, Henry Brent, had a few more items in his estate that were relevant to the consumption of tea. He possessed a sugar box and tea canisters along with 7 china cups and 4 saucers. The existence of china cups and saucers in his home displayed more aspects of gentility, however the quality of the china was not specified.¹⁴ Mr. Butler of Virginia had even more tea-related items. He owned 11 china cups and saucers, 1 dozen

⁹ Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 62.

¹⁰ Bushman, 37.

¹¹ Rodris Roth, “Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage” in *Material Life in America 1600-1860*, ed. Robert Blair St. George, (Boston: NEOP, 1988)

¹² Roth, “Tea-Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America.”

¹³ “Captain John Laidler, Charles County, Maryland, 1774”

¹⁴ “Henry Brent, Charles County, Maryland, 1769”

teaspoons, 2 tea kettles, and 2 tea pots.¹⁵ Lawrence Butler showed the most evidence of participation in the tea drinking culture regarding the equipment needed to make and drink the tea, but another very important item needs to be looked at; the tea table.

The tea table was the center of conversation and activity during teatime. These tables were usually foldable, which allowed for them to be stored out of the way and to then be brought out during tea. Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany had the richest collection of tea tables. Mrs. Dulany had a mahogany tea table, a mahogany tea board, a mahogany tea waiter and a “very old Jappan’d” table and tea board all of which totaled to 2 pounds 19 shillings 6 pence.¹⁶ *Japanning* a piece of wooden furniture was a specific kind of staining and detailing that was especially prevalent in upper-class homes.¹⁷ Mahogany was also a favorite material for furniture pieces among the gentility. The evidence of both elements in Mrs. Dulany’s estate show gentility because she most likely served and stored tea with these pieces. William Neale owned 5 tea tables, one of which was made of pine and the others’ materials are unspecified. Pine was not nearly as desired among the genteel class as mahogany, but his inventory still showed evidence of participation in the consumption of tea, which was a quality of the gentility.

Tea tables are one of the many items of decoration that may be analyzed as examples of gentility in colonial America. As previously mentioned, mahogany and the style of *japanning* were popular for these wooden pieces. These items would have been more expensive, as evidenced by the inventories, and more desirable. A defining aspect of genteel home interior would have been the existence of non-essential items in addition to basic items or much nicer essential items. For example, Mrs. Dulany had several beds and tables, necessities in any home, but, in addition, she had 1 screen worth 6 pounds, and 5 separate looking glasses, just a couple of which were broken. She also owned several sets of chairs with leather or fabric bottoms.¹⁸ These more expensive items in Mrs. Dulany’s home displayed her status and wealth. Looking glasses would have been more difficult to come by and expensive, due to glass’ fragility. In comparison to Mrs. Dulany’s collection of glass, Joseph Semmes only had one looking glass listed in his estate, which was valued at 40 shillings.¹⁹ However, he had several pieces that were of high-quality wood such as his mahogany desk, 2 walnut tables, and his pine table. In addition to these pieces, Mr. Semmes also owned a clock which was worth 7 pounds.²⁰ Clock technology was not new to the people of the eighteenth century but they were still time consuming and expensive to make and, therefore, expensive to purchase, so the average person would not have had one in their home.

¹⁵ “Lawrence Butler, Westmoreland County, Virginia, 1766”

¹⁶ “Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 1766”

¹⁷ Pauline K. Eversmann and Rosemary Troy Krill, *Early American Decorative Art, 1620-1860*.

¹⁸ “Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 1766”

¹⁹ “Joseph Milburn Semmes, Charles County, Maryland, 1764”

²⁰ “Joseph Milburn Semmes, Charles County, Maryland, 1764”

The craft and art of clockwork was a very detailed one and the clocks produced were becoming more intricate and beautiful as craftsmen perfected their skills. The elegance of these pieces made them even more desirable to genteel people.²¹

In addition to the clock, Mr. Semmes had another item of note. Pieces that were strictly for decoration were more prominent in genteel homes, as shown by Mr. Semmes possession of 2 sconces which were valued at 6 shillings. The worth of the pieces showed that they may have been more elegant than a sconce found in the home of a lower-class family. The style of Mr. Semmes sconces is, of course, not listed in his inventory but the Rococo style was popular at the time of the inventory. If the sconce was of that style, it may have had specific carving motifs such as flowers or animals. There also would have been carved details and curves which were distinctive of the style.²²

Other items that were mostly for decoration were also significant in showing gentility. Decorative fabrics like curtains, quilts and rugs, or floor cloths, adorned genteel homes and added to their more elegant nature. Mr. Butler had a particularly interesting piece of fabric: 1, new, painted, floor cloth which was worth 30 shillings.²³ The purely decorative nature of this item adds to its significance within the genteel home. The value of Mr. Butler's floor cloth also shows how nice it must have been. In comparison, Henry Brent had an old rug listed in his estate that was only worth 3 shillings.²⁴ Mrs. Henrietta Dulany's estate contained a rich collection of fabric and among them was an old rug worth 1 pound.²⁵ Comparing two rugs that are both listed as 'old' while at substantially different values shows the higher quality of the rug owned by Mrs. Dulany compared to that of the rug owned by Henry Brent.

Window curtains were also items that were desired by the genteel class. Mrs. Dulany's estate lists that she had 13 window curtains.²⁶ Based on these numbers, it is possible that she had one for each window in her home. Those who possessed genteel status usually had their homes decorated in a way that reflected that gentility. Lawrence Butler, in contrast, had 8 sets of window curtains.²⁷ It is possible that his home had fewer windows, but still, the existence of the curtains in his estate speak to his status. Only Mr. Butler and Mrs. Dulany's estates listed window curtains among their belongings. This is significant, not only because of how they decorated their homes with fabric, but because it also reveals that their homes were more expensive.

²¹ Pauline K. Eversmann and Rosemary Troy Krill, *Early American Decorative Art, 1620-1860*, (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001).

²² Eversmann and Krill, *Early American Decorative Art, 1620-1860*, 61-62.

²³ "Lawrence Butler, Westmoreland County, Virginia, 1766"

²⁴ "Henry Brent, Charles County, Maryland, 1769"

²⁵ "Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 1766"

²⁶ "Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany"

²⁷ "Lawrence Butler, Westmoreland County, Virginia, 1766"

Due to the cost of glass and window installation, having more windows represented greater wealth.

In addition to the fabrics that adorned their homes, the genteel people also adorned themselves with fine fabrics, which allowed for someone to identify them as genteel before knowing much else about them. Genteel people would wear finer, more extravagant fabrics to special occasions or events but, for everyday wear, would dress more simply.²⁸ It was essential for a gentleman to have a clean, fine linen shirt. For example, Joseph Semmes had 8 yards of linen valued at 12 pence per yard.²⁹ Mr. Neale had 16 yards of Irish linen which totaled to over 4 pounds in value.³⁰ Mr. Brent's 19 and ½ yards of Irish linen was valued at just over 2 pounds.³¹ It is apparent that these gentlemen were aware of the necessity of linen as a garment cloth by their possession of many yards of it.

Another fine and desirable fabric was silk. Mr. Semmes' inventory lists 3 silk purses valued at 7 shillings and 6 pence.³² Mrs. Dulany had 18 yards of Beladine silk that was worth 2 pounds and 5 shillings. She, or someone in her employ, could have been using this silk to make garments or other home décor items.

In addition to the garments themselves, other items of apparel could also show status and wealth. Listed in Mrs. Dulany's estate is 7 boys' felt hats, 8 men's felt hats, 1 pair of girls' satin shoes, and 5 pairs of girls' mitts, just to name a few.³³ This shows that, in addition to the essential items of dress, one needed decoration and accessories that were equally elegant. This is also evidenced in Mr. Brent's inventory and in his ownership of a silver watch which was valued at 3 pounds.³⁴ Items made of silver, of course, were much more valuable in and of themselves but this item being a silver watch is also significant. Of the six inventories, only one other, in addition to Mr. Brent's, contain a watch, adding to the evidence that they were harder to find and more expensive to purchase, likely because of the craftsmanship required to make a timepiece.

Of the six inventories that were analyzed, Mrs. Henrietta Dulany appears to have had the most items linked to the genteel class. Her estate was of the highest value as well. Value of the estates is significant, however, Lawrence Butler, whose estate was of the lowest value, still seemed to have been a member of the genteel class through his ownership of specific furniture, foodstuffs, and utensils.

²⁸ Linda Baumgarten. *Eighteenth-century Clothing at Williamsburg*, "Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1986).

²⁹ "Joseph Milburn Semmes, Charles County, Maryland, 1764"

³⁰ "William Neale, Charles County, Maryland, 1763"

³¹ "Henry Brent, Charles County, Maryland, 1769"

³² "Joseph Milburn Semmes, Charles County, Maryland, 1764"

³³ "Mrs. Henrietta Maria Dulany, Anne Arundel County, Maryland, 1766"

³⁴ "Henry Brent, Charles County, Maryland, 1769"

As this essay has described, gentility is exemplified through manners, outward dress and appearance, and various home decorations. Those of the genteel class in the time of colonial America adorned their homes and themselves in very specific ways in order to more clearly define their class and to separate themselves from the lower classes. Social rules and order were also significant and shaped how the genteel class lived and filled their homes. They decorated their homes according to unspoken rules and traditions and in ways that displayed their wealth. The wealth of the genteel class was literally in their homes, on their tables, in their cabinets, and on their bodies. Each item that was owned was specific and purposeful, only adding to their status. Through the items analyzed, it is evident that gentility was a prevalent and motivating aspect of life in colonial America.