A Study of Colonial Life through Probate Inventories

by Valeria M. Estrada

The past is something that has intrigued humans for centuries upon centuries. Humans excavate and examine objects that were left by the people before them. They take texts and other written documents from past generations and attempt to analyze those as well. All of this digging, searching, and analyzing is for the purpose of trying to understand the world that those people lived in. These objects and records are examined with the goal being, as James Deetz puts it, "to understand the significance of artifacts as they were thought of and used…in the past."[1] This is especially done in North America in an attempt to understand the life colonial Americans lived in. In addition to excavated objects, probate inventories are extremely helpful in examining the colonial past of North America. Probate inventories were inventories that were taken of the estates of colonists after the owners of those estates died. Through the analysis of colonial probate inventories one can see what colonists owned, and those possessions give historians clues as to how they lived. Analyzing those possessions can also show how what they owned may have been influenced by the different colonies that they lived in. In preparation for this essay, ten inventories were chosen and analyzed; four inventories are of estates from Plymouth Colony and the remaining six are of estates from the Port Royal Colony. All of the inventories are dated within the years 1672 and 1692, and they are all valued between 95£ and 139£. An analysis of these ten probate inventories will reveal that the Plymouth and Port Royal colonists resembled each other in their economic and social class rank, which can be determined by their ownership of china and glassware, furniture, and clothing. They differed in the way they sustained themselves economically, which can be determined by their ownership of slaves and livestock.

The first noticeable likeness among the ten inventories is their lack of china and glassware; of the ten, only two had anything in that category. Jacob Ormsbey, in his 1677 Plymouth inventory, had two glass bottles in the category.[2] Thomas Walley, in his 1672 Plymouth inventory, had one glass bottle in the same category. Of all the inventories, not one had a single piece of china.[3] Although it is important to look at what the inventories have, it can be just as important to examine what they lack. The small amount of glassware and absence of china reveal something about the social class

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[1] James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 4.

[2] Patricia Scott Deetz, Christopher Fennell, and J. Eric Deetz, *The Plymouth Colony Archive Project* (n.p., 2009).

[3] Ibid.

that those colonists belonged to. Rosemary Krill, a material culture expert, wrote that "throughout the 1600s…European merchants were the sources for what little porcelain entered the North American colonies."[4] This means there was a low level of availability for china, which indicates that it was expensive and therefore only available to the wealthy. The fact that the inventories contained no china is an indicator that the people named on the inventories may have belonged to the middle or low classes of their society. Glassware was also not common during the lifetimes of these colonists because "the commercial success [of glassware] did not occur until the eighteenth century."[5] It was still available, but not cheap for the same reason that china was not. Because glassware was expensive, the fact that two of the colonists in the inventories had glass bottles indicates that they may have belonged to the higher part of the middle class, but still confined to the middle class because they did not own more than one or two bottles.

Although this lack of china and glassware indicate that the colonists occupied the middle class, this labeling of social and economic rank is based on the analysis of only one category. To understand where the ten colonists really ranked, more must be analyzed. The type and amount of furniture owned by these colonists can also be helpful in figuring out status. Contrary to the china and glassware, the presence of furniture can be seen in all ten inventories. It can be deduced that the furniture in all of these inventories was of either the mannerist or early baroque styles simply because those were the styles in existence in the 1600s, according to Rosemary Krill's analysis of furniture styles.[6] Out of the ten inventories, six contain at least a bed, a chest, a table, and a chair; the remaining four inventories have at least two or three of those four things. The steady presence of furniture in these inventories may seem normal at first because, as Krill states, in the colonies, "ample opportunities and an abundant supply of wood meant that adequate quantities of furniture could be produced" and available at somewhat affordable prices.[7] This meant that to afford the basic types of furniture seen in the inventories, the colonists had to have been in at least the middle class. The way to determine their class status for sure, based on their furniture, can be done by looking at the less usual forms of furniture present. For example, the 1687 Port Royal inventory of Dorothy Richardson shows that she owned six cane chairs and two looking glasses.[8] Her ownership of cane chairs indicates that Dorothy was wealthy because, according to Krill, "until about 1700, cane chairs were among the possessions of the wealthy."[9] Her

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[4] Rosemary Troy Krill, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010), 137.
[5] Ibid., 150.
[6] Ibid., 21, 35.
[7] Ibid., 29.
[8] Donny L. Hamilton, *Port Royal Probate Inventories* (College Station: Nautical Archaeology Program, Texas A&M University, 2001).
[9] Rosemary Troy Krill, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010), 43.

ownership of looking glass also indicates her wealth because they were only available to "wealthy householders at the turn of the eighteenth century in the…colonies."[10] William Brock's 1690 Port Royal inventory also contains a looking glass, which indicates that he was wealthy like Dorothy.[11] Several furniture of one kind was also indicative of wealth because "not only did the wealthy have more kinds of furniture, they also had more objects of each kind." This means that, instead of having just one of everything, the wealthy had several to put in different parts of their homes. William Brock's inventory is also a great example for this because it shows that he owned four tables and seventeen chairs, which was plenty more than the amount needed in homes.[12] Thomas Walley's 1672 Plymouth inventory is also a great example because it shows that he owned two beds and two tables.[13] Owning more than one of these was only typical of the wealthy; therefore, Walley was a part of the wealthier class. Furniture was clearly an indicator of wealth in colonial times because "the amount and value of one's furnishings visually conveyed economic and social position."[14] Therefore, the inventories show, through their furniture content, that the colonists had a high economic and social position.

In addition to china, glassware, and furniture, the apparel category is helpful in determining social and economic status of the colonists in the probates from Plymouth and Port Royal. In fact, according to Karin Calvert, "throughout the seventeenth century, colonists had brought with them to America, in the clothing they wore, established and recognizable patterns of social stratification."[15] Simple articles of clothing were a need for all, but the wealth was shown in the materials that made up the clothing. A poor colonist and a rich colonist could both be wearing a shirt, but what set one apart from the other was the material of the shirt. For example, the 1676 Plymouth probate of John Mayo contains a satin cap that hints at his higher than average social and economic rank.[16] The material of the cap is what sets him at that rank because materials like satin, velvet, and silk were expensive in the seventeenth

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[10] Ibid., 43.
[11] Donny L. Hamilton, *Port Royal Probate Inventories* (College Station: Nautical Archaeology Program, Texas A&M University, 2001).
[12] Ibid.
[13] Patricia Scott Deetz, Christopher Fennell, and J. Eric Deetz, *The Plymouth Colony Archive Project* (n.p., 2009).
[14] Rosemary Troy Krill, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010), 29.
[15] Karin Calvert, "The Function of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 253.
[16] Patricia Scott Deetz, Christopher Fennell, and J. Eric Deetz, *The Plymouth Colony Archive Project* (n.p., 2009).

century.[17] The 1689/90 Port Royal probate of William Jaymes also has clothing that hints at a high societal rank; the most significant, among his items of apparel, was a scarlet coat.[18] The scarlet coat is most certainly a sign of wealth because colored clothing was also very expensive. Coats such as this were made of expensive textiles that were, as Calvert put it, "further enriched with the expensive dyes necessary to produce…brilliant colors."[19] Therefore, only very wealthy colonists, like Jaymes, could have those coats in their inventories. Another way clothing could represent wealth was not only by the type, but by the amount of clothing one possessed. In the seventeenth century, "most people owned little more than a rudimentary set of clothing."[20] This means that if colonists owned several of one type of apparel, they were of a higher ranking economically and socially. The 1687 Port Royal probate inventory of William Robinson is a great example of this. His inventory shows that he owned eight pairs of shoes, eight pairs of children's shoes, sixteen hats, twelve cravats, nineteen pairs of gloves, and many more items of apparel.[21] Just the fact that he owned so much shows that he belonged to one of the higher ranks of the social and economic classes. There clearly was a great and important connection between clothing and wealth.

The ten probate inventories that were chosen do not only reflect similarities between Plymouth and Port Royal colonists; they reflect differences, too. One major difference that can be found in the inventories is ownership of livestock animals. All four of the inventories from Plymouth have livestock listed. Jacob Ormsbey's 1677 Plymouth inventory has a horse, cows, and pigs listed.[22] Nicholas Wade's 1683/84 Plymouth inventory lists his ownership of cows, a bull, sheep, mares, and a pig.[23] John Mayo's 1676 Plymouth inventory shows that he owned horses, sheep, and lambs.[24] Thomas Walley's 1672 Plymouth inventory lists that he owned cows, horses, sheep, lambs, and a steer.[25] While all of these Plymouth inventories show the ownership of a

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[17] Karin Calvert, "The Function of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 254.

[18] Donny L. Hamilton, *Port Royal Probate Inventories* (College Station: Nautical Archaeology Program, Texas A&M University, 2001).

[19] Karin Calvert, "The Function of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America," in *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 254.

[20] Ibid., 254.

[21] Donny L. Hamilton, *Port Royal Probate Inventories* (College Station: Nautical Archaeology Program, Texas A&M University, 2001).

[22] Patricia Scott Deetz, Christopher Fennell, and J. Eric Deetz, *The Plymouth Colony Archive Project* (n.p., 2009).

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

variety of animals, none of the six Port Royal probate inventories show livestock being owned. At first, this may not make sense, but geographic and economic factors come into play. Port Royal Colony was located in Jamaica, and Plymouth Colony was located in Massachusetts. This means they were extremely far apart, and that indicates differences in the land and the way the colonists used it. One can see, from looking at the inventories, that the land in Plymouth was used to support livestock, while the land in Jamaica was not. Another reason for the difference is that the Plymouth colonists were dependent on livestock because, as James Deetz wrote, cattle trading "was the mainstay of Plymouth's economy" during much of the seventeenth century.[26] The other animals, like pigs, are in the inventories because they were also important to the colonists; they "were used for their meat" in order to feed the families that raised them.[27] Raising livestock was not as economically important to the colonists in Port Royal because, like David Johnson said in his research, their economic system was largely "based on the monoculture of sugar and the associated products of molasses muscovado and rum."[28] Thus, it makes complete sense that livestock was present in the Plymouth inventories and not in those of Port Royal colonists.

In addition to the differences in ownership of livestock, there are differences in the ownership of slaves and white servants that can be seen when examining the inventories. Not one of the four inventories from Plymouth showed a slave or servant. On the contrary, five of the Port Royal inventories exhibited servant and slave ownership. Dorothy Richardson's 1687 Port Royal inventory shows her owning one female slave.[29] William Brock's 1690 Port Royal inventory shows that he owned one slave woman and one slave man.[30] The Port Royal 1689/90 inventory of William Jaymes shows that he had two male slaves and three white male servants.[31] William Atwell's 1692/93 Port Royal inventory lists that he owned two male slaves.[32] Thomas Stichbury, as shown in his 1689 Port Royal inventory, owned two female slaves and two male slaves.[33] William Robinson's 1687 Port Royal inventory was the only one that did not list slave ownership. This difference between Plymouth and Port Royal can be attributed to two reasons. One reason the Plymouth colonists did not own slaves was because, as Richard Bushman said, they did not think owning slaves was good for

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[26] James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 77.
[27] Ibid., 77.
[28] David A. Johnson, *Port Royal, Jamaica, and the Slave Trade* (College Station: n.p., 2000), 44.
[29] Donny L. Hamilton, *Port Royal Probate Inventories* (College Station: Nautical Archaeology Program, Texas A&M University, 2001).
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.

character; in fact, they thought it caused the "deterioration of character."[34] Many northerners believed that this deterioration occurred because "slavery corrupted masters by bringing them wealth without labor."[35] The Port Royal colonists, on the other hand, did not share the same perspective on slaves. The other reason for the difference was a combination of availability and need. "During the final quarter of the seventeenth century…the slave population grew dramatically"[36] in Jamaica and especially in Port Royal. With the slave trade going on in everyday life, the Port Royal colonists found slaves readily available. There was also a need for slaves in Jamaica because, as it was mentioned earlier, the economy of the island was dependent on the growing and harvesting of sugar, and slaves were needed to work on the sugar plantations. The Plymouth colonists did not have slaves readily available like those in Port Royal, nor did they really have a need for slaves in their economy. These differences in opinion, need, and availability clearly show why Plymouth and Port Royal differed in the slave category of the probate inventories.

It is evident that there were many likenesses and differences among the ten Plymouth and Port Royal colonists. They shared similarities in their statuses among society and how they used similar objects to achieve those statuses; these similarities tied them together despite them being in different locations. The location difference is what set the inventories apart; it caused clear divisions between the colonists in terms of how they participated in their economies. These similarities and differences were only found through the analysis of the objects that the ten colonists owned. The inventories may not have shown much more than listings of objects and their prices, but they provided enough to allow for some insight to be gained about the people who owned those objects. This supports the idea that even the simplest written records, like probate inventories, can be invaluable to historians when figuring out how life was for occupants of the past. Clearly, despite the parting advice James Deetz offers in *In Small Things Forgotten*, it is important to read what has been written.

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[34] Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, and Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 392.

[35] Ibid., 392.

[36] David A. Johnson, *Port Royal, Jamaica, and the Slave Trade* (College Station: n.p., 2000), 68.