

Slippers, Snuff Boxes, and Slaves: What the Things Left Behind Say about Those Living in the Colonial Era

by Elizabeth Headrick

The need to create and possess, a driving force for so many humans, necessarily leaves a definable mark on the world once the possessor has moved on. Human history is cluttered with this detritus of billions of lives, left in midden heaps, abandoned homes, and graves throughout the world. These leavings, this material culture, offers a window into the lives of those who came before us, not only about what objects were used and why, but also how they were used, and what objects were valued the most.¹ It is said that the birth of gentility in the late seventeenth century saw an increased interest in the status afforded by particular furnishings, clothing, dinnerware and tea services; even tchotchkes and knickknacks were said to have become more common.² While not all things were given the same value across the board, a close analysis of probate inventories from Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts, York County in Virginia, and Port Royal in Jamaica demonstrates that noticeable trends began taking shape in the late seventeenth century. While one cannot fully define and identify how individuals in these regions lived, or who they were, these probate inventories provide a glimpse into the everyday lives of both free and enslaved men, women, and children who moved through these worlds in similar socioeconomic circles. Read together, a sampling of inventories taken from 1677 to 1697, in each of the aforementioned settlements, reveal clues as to the similarities across the three regions, and the differences that marks each region as unique.

In Plymouth Colony, three inventories stand out most noticeably for the presence of land, which was not found in the other seven inventories examined between Port Royal and York County. They are also notable for the lack of slaves, as is seen prominently in the inventories from the other two regions.

The largest inventory from those examined in Plymouth Colony is for Nathaniel Cooper, who died in 1677.³ At the time Cooper died, his estate was valued at £159 15 06, with the majority of this value being placed on a parcel of land in Rehoboth, presumably in what is now Delaware. This parcel of land was valued at £100 00 00 and was inherited from his own father, however, Cooper was only in possession of half of

¹ Rosemary Troy Krill, introduction, in *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860: A Handbook for Interpreters*, Amazon Kindle ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010), Loc. #89.

² Richard L. Bushman, introduction, in *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, Amazon Kindle ed. (New York: Knopf, 1992), Loc. #112.

³ Cooper, Nathaniel, "The Inventory of Nathaniel Cooper" (Plymouth Colony Wills 3(2):82) #P315.

the whole estate. No indication is given as to the owner of the other half of the parcel. He is also listed as owning an additional four acres of land in a location that is not clearly given, at a value of £03 00 00.

What is clear though, is that Cooper, in addition to owning these parcels of land, was also quite well established in his home in Plymouth. His inventory reveals a full house with a wide assortment of kitchen implements, clothing for many days wear, many beds with attendant bedding, and a thriving farm that played host to not only cows but also a horse, and several sheep and pigs. Curiously, Cooper was also listed as owning half of a cart and plow, as well as half of a saddle. Again, no indication was given as to the owner of the other half of these items though one might speculate that it was someone else in the family.

For William Spooner⁴ (died 1683) and William Parker⁵ of Plymouth Colony (died 1684) the inventories are considerably thinner, however they were both in possession of tracts of land that made up the bulk of their property value. Spooner, whose property was valued at £201 15 00 had very little to his name, including one bed and suit of clothes, an unspecified number of cattle valued at £25 00 00 and some cotton yarn as well as two spinning wheels and an assortment of tools. The greatest value was placed on his house itself, and the accompanying land, which came in at £150 00 00. Parker, whose total property value was £158 19 06, also appeared to own very little in the way of home goods, which included a gun, two bibles, and a brass kettle. His entire value came through a broad supply of livestock, valued at almost £50 00 00, and multiple parcels of land, including eleven acres of meadowland, twenty acres of upland, a house, and sixty acres of land near Hingham, Massachusetts. The combined value of all of these parcels is close to £100 00 00.

The indication that one can take from these Plymouth Colony inventories is that land was not only available but also highly profitable. A supposition could be made that Spooner and Parker, in contrast to Cooper, spent all they had on these parcels of land, possibly for investment purposes, though one can no longer know for sure. It is just as likely that this was inherited property from a deceased family member.

In contrast, the inventories of Jane Barbar⁶ and Robert Crawley⁷ of York County, while completely devoid of land of any kind, were both replete with a broad assortment of home goods, furniture, livestock, and farming implements, as well as slaves owned by each, indicating thriving farm communities in the burgeoning South. Indeed, the inventory for Jane Barbar, who died in 1686 and the only woman to be included in this research, is by far the most extensive of the ten inventories to be examined here while

⁴ Spooner, William, "The Inventory of William Spooner" (Plymouth Colony Wills 4(2):71) #P428.

⁵ Parker, William, "The Inventory of William Parker" (Plymouth Colony Wills 4(2):77) #P440.

⁶ Barbar, Jane, "Inventory of the Estate of Jane Barbar" (York County Estate Inventories, 1687)

⁷ Crawley, Robert, "The Inventory of the Estate of Robert Crawley" (York County Estate Inventories, 1697)

curiously enough, having the lowest value of the inventories thus examined. Barbar's property, valued at a mere £139 17 07 ½ contained enough items to fill what would have been a good size house. Among the furniture listed are four beds, complete with full bedding, a couch, several small tables as well as a "great" table, seven chairs, a desk, and multiple chests. She also appeared to have had a very full kitchen with many pots, kettles, and serving trays. Her farm would have been well worked, given the amount of implements, which included a cart, wheelbarrows, saws, spades, axes, and trowels. There was also extensive livestock, with many horses, cattle, and pigs of varying ages. Barbar even had several guns, assorted linens, and a few books, as well as yards of unused cotton and linen. Oddly, despite the presence of this unused fabric, the only items that Barbar did not seem to own in bulk were clothing and apparel. She is listed as having had only one gown, three petticoats, and two shifts. One could speculate that the unused fabric was intended to become new clothing for Barbar, had there been time.

As previously mentioned, Barbar was also in possession of one slave at the time of her death. This slave is listed only as a young female valued at £25 00 00. No name is given and no nationality. The natural assumption would be that this young woman was of African origin however Indian slaves were not unheard of in seventeenth-century Virginia, though they were notorious for being "difficult", so the actual nationality of this young woman will remain a mystery.⁸ Robert Crawley, who died in 1697 also owned slaves, three of them, all listed as Negroes; one man, one woman, and one child of about three years of age. Their names are not given but they were valued at almost £60 00 00, with their bedding written into this value, giving some indication of how their status was perceived by their owners.

Crawley, as with Barbar, was also the owner of an extensive amount of goods in addition to his slaves. The total property value at the time of his death was £162 11 06, and included four beds, several tables, and ten chairs that were described as being "old" and "rush". Crawley's inventory goes on to give every appearance of being a full and well-supplied home. Much like Barbar he presents as having a fully functioning and busy kitchen, with numerous dishes and servingware in a variety of materials, from pewter and iron to copper, ceramic and glass. His collection of pots, frying pans, spits, and roasters could have fed a multitude of people. He was also well-stocked on farming implements and owned horses, cows, and sheep. Also, again as with Barbar, Crawley owned little in the way of apparel, which included only one suit of clothes, some buttons, and three pairs of women's hosiery. Unlike Barbar however, Crawley was also in possession of a variety of raw and tanned leather. His profession is not listed, however, among the farming implements were fleshing knives and "tanners

⁸ James H. Merrell, "The Indians' New World: The Catawba Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1984): 103, doi:10.2307/1919153.

barks” which could lead one to assume that Crawley was a tanner and/or leatherworker at the time of his death.

For the five selected individuals living in Port Royal between 1686 and 1693, the picture is vastly different, and somewhat more complete, as all but one have their professions listed, and these professions are very evident in the possessions they left behind. They are also notable for their lack of land, buildings, and livestock. The most extensive of these Port Royal inventories is for William Davis⁹, a blacksmith who died in 1689. At the time of his death Davis’ property was valued at £151 11 06. As seen previously with Jane Barbar, Davis’ inventory is the lowest of value, for Port Royal, but it is the fullest as well, containing not only furnishings that consisted of multiple beds with bedding but also tables, chests of drawers, cots, and stools and some few items of apparel. While Davis’ kitchenware was rather thin, he did own both an unnamed Negro slave valued at £22 00 00 and an unnamed white child servant, valued at £08 00 00. Owing to Davis’ profession as a blacksmith, one can surmise that this unnamed white child was most likely an apprentice to Davis, learning the blacksmithing trade.

Indeed, it seems that the bulk of value in Davis’ estate was made up of the tools of his trade, with numerous entries for anvils, grinding stones, hammers, sledges, and much more. The sheer volume of items connected to his profession gives rise to the supposition that Davis’ was a smith of long standing, and quite successful, despite the absence of what could be considered necessary home goods. Interestingly, among the miscellaneous items among Davis’ possessions were remnants of ribbons and old flowers, as well as a parcel of old books, giving a hint of sentimentality to the blacksmith.

The highest value inventory among the Port Royal selections was for Nathaniel Mason¹⁰, a cooper by trade, who left property valued at £191 02 09. Mason was in possession of both a Negro woman and child as slaves at a combined value of £45 00 00, as well as two white male servants, valued together at £27 00 00. His furnishings would have suited a nicely appointed small home, with three beds and assorted bedding, a large number of chairs, a desk, and multiple tables. His clothing, though not broken down into particulars, came to a total value of £05 15 00, indicating that he did spend some money on his appearance. The largest part of his inventory, and the most value, came from the assorted hoops and staves that made up his profession as a cooper. He had in his possession multiple staves and hoops for the construction of hogsheads (casks) as well as casks in varying states of completion. He was also in possession of four guns and an iron sword, leading one to wonder either what he did before becoming a cooper, or what he feared from others in Port Royal.

⁹ Davis, William “Inventory of William Davis” (Port Royal Colony, 1689)

¹⁰ Mason, Nathaniel “Inventory of Nathaniel Mason” (Port Royal Colony, 1689)

For John Hickee¹¹, a goldsmith who died in 1688 in Port Royal, the situation seems to be very different. While he owned little that could be said to make up a house and the total property value at the time of his death was only £158 01 03 ½, he did own three Negro slaves, one boy and two girls, all unnamed, and valued at a combined £40 00 00. Hickee's meager furnishings consisted of several tables and chairs, a kettle, a looking glass, table linen, and a gun. The majority of Hickee's property, as with Davis and Mason, was made up of his tools as a goldsmith. While there is no real breakdown given for them, Hickee's tools, bellows, and anvil are valued at a combined sum of £27 10 00. Hickee's inventory is also most notable for the sheer amount of debts that were outstanding and owed to him at the time of his death, which amounted to almost £50 00 00. The lack of real furniture and kitchen implements suggests a man who lived alone, and possibly rented a furnished home, but still felt the need to have slaves.

Andrew Burne¹², a Port Royal clerk who died in 1686, had no slaves and almost no furniture outside of a bed and its bedding, however, unlike any of the other nine inventories, what Burne did have was an extensive wardrobe for the time period. His inventory lists not only multiple parson's gowns, new breeches, and cravats, but also silk stockings, multiple handkerchiefs, and a beaver (castor) hat. In addition to the apparel itself, Burne appears to have spent quite a bit on accouterments such as crystal rings, silver buttons, snuff boxes, and much more. An inspection of the inventory makes it apparent that Burne must have had a wife, a sister, or possibly a lady friend, due to the presence of women's slippers and caps on the inventory. Interestingly, no gowns are listed, only feminine accessories.

As with Hickee, Burne's inventory gives the impression of someone who rented or shared furnished living quarters with someone else, and thus did not own any land or dwellings. One might draw the inference that Burne did not entertain in his home or even take his meals there however there is no indication of what furnishings and home goods might have been provided with the dwelling. What can be seen unequivocally is that Burne was well dressed and most likely very fashionable. In addition, again, much like Hickee, Burne's inventory is notable for the debts that were outstanding at the time of his death, one in the princely sum of £33 02 03, owed by a Charles Sadler. While one cannot know what specific duties Burne performed as a clerk, he apparently was paid well for those duties.

Of the five Port Royal inventories examined here, the only one who does not have a profession listed is Thomas Buckley¹³, who died in 1693 and left an estate valued at £171 19 10 ½. However, while no profession is explicitly stated, given the sheer volume and variety of animal hides listed among his belongings, one can safely assume

¹¹ Hickee, John "Inventory of John Hickee" (Port Royal Colony, 1688)

¹² Burne, Andrew "Inventory of Andrew Burne" (Port Royal Colony, 1686)

¹³ Buckley, Thomas "Inventory of Thomas Buckley" (Port Royal Colony, 1693)

that Buckley was, like Robert Crawley of Virginia, most likely a tanner or leatherworker. Interestingly, careful note was made on several of the hide parcels that their valuation was for work done on them on behalf of others, indicating that these were hides obtained by others and brought in to Buckley for curing and processing. Buckley also had in his possession shoemaker's tools, and two slaves. Unlike previous inventories, Buckley's slaves were named (Jack and Waterford), though their nationality and ages were not given. The combined value for these two human beings was £56 00 00. Also of note is the fact that Buckley is the only Port Royal citizen examined here to have kept animals, in this case two young dogs, valued at £00 10 00.

The remainder of Buckley's inventory leads to conclusions similar to those reached about the other residents of Port Royal. It appears, from the outside, that he did not own his home, but perhaps rented it, and possibly did not take his meals there, or did not cook himself as there is very little listed in the way of dishes or cookware. He did, however, have some furnishings, including two beds, several tables, chairs, and stools, and an old chest.

While the most apparent differences between these ten inventories is the presence, or absence of land, there could be many reasons that land is not listed for York County and Port Royal. It may simply be that those particular jurisdictions did not feel it necessary to include land and dwellings in an estate inventory, or that it was valued in a separate form of inventory. Certainly the large amount of livestock and farm implements for Barbar and Crawley in York County gives every indication of a working farm, as does the fact that they are listed as living within the county but not within the city proper, which would also indicate land ownership but this is not necessarily the case. For the individuals in Port Royal, it is entirely another matter. Port Royal was a thriving city, and thus the presence of so many tradesman in one area is not at all surprising. It would have been unlikely for busy tradesmen to also run a farm but one can only make suppositions as to whether they owned their homes and business premises or rented them from a landlord.

Overall, the greatest similarities in the objects among the three regions came largely in the form of firearms and books. Firearms of varying sorts were owned by eight of the decedents, the only exceptions being Burne and Davis of Port Royal, the clerk and blacksmith, respectively. Some of the gun owners also had in their possession bayonets that went with their guns, which may indicate time spent in the military at some point in their pasts. Seven of the decedents owned at least a few books, even if they were only bibles. Most were listed as having simply "parcels" of books, however, Crawley of York County is listed as having an entire library and Burne, again of Port Royal, owned a "trunk" of books, though the type and nature cannot be known.

Interestingly, given the non-importation laws that were in effect, the only spinning wheels to be seen were those owned by Cooper and Spooner of Plymouth

Colony, and Crawley of York County.¹⁴ Each gentleman owned two spinning wheels, as well as parcels of sheep's wool and cotton wool and lengths of cotton, linen, and hemp yarn.

There are many inferences and interpretations that can be drawn from these ten inventories. By all appearances, Crawley and Barbar of York County had everything required to live a comfortable life full of consumer goods, with plenty of seating and servingware to host gatherings at their homes regularly. Cooper of Plymouth Colony also had what appears to be a very full life and yet he did not own his property outright, or even his horse-cart and saddle. Both Cooper, and Burne of Port Royal, had a large amount of apparel for the time, with enough breeches, shirts, and neckcloths for several days and yet Barbar of York County had almost no clothing at all. Was she simply unconcerned about her clothing and appearance or did some things not make it into the inventories?

Questions like this are almost impossible to answer and yet they are almost impossible to avoid asking. The collection of objects in these inventories prompt a need to contextualize and make sense of what is given, and what must surely be missing, whether it be in regards to home goods, clothing, or even the very presence, or notable absence, of a domicile. What is most apparent, among all of the studied individuals, are full and busy lives, with hard work common across the board, but time also given to literature, apparel, even possibly entertaining family and friends. None of them left vast wealth behind, but they left memories in the form of family bibles, pressed flowers, snuff boxes, bits of ribbons, even muskets and bayonets. They may not have had much in the way of pleasureable goods but what they did have was obviously important, and speaks to who they were as individuals moving through a new world, whether in Massachusetts, Virginia, or Jamaica, making the best of the lives that they had and leaving a bit of themselves behind for future generations.

¹⁴ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories In the Creation of an American Myth*, Amazon Kindle ed. (New York: Knopf, 2001), Loc. #1411.