

An Archaeology of Manners

The Polite World of the Merchant Elite
of Colonial Massachusetts

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An Archaeology of Manners

The Polite World of the Merchant
Elite of Colonial Massachusetts

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Dancing [women], From F. Nivelon's *The Rudiments of Genteel Behavior* (1737). Courtesy, The Winterthur Library: Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

To James, who dares me ...

Foreword



A glance at the title of this book might well beg the question “What in heaven’s name does archaeology have to do with manners? We cannot dig up manners or mannerly behavior—or can we?” One might also ask “Why is mannerly behavior important?” and “What can archaeology contribute to our understanding of the role of manners in the development of social relations and cultural identity in early America?”

English colonists in America and elsewhere sought to replicate English notions of gentility and social structure, but of necessity diverged from the English model. The first generation of elites in colonial America did not spring from the landed gentry of old England. Rather, they were self-made, newly rich, and newly possessed of land and other trappings of England’s genteel classes. The result was a new model of gentry culture that overcame the contradiction between a value system in which gentility was conferred by birth, and the new values of bourgeois materialism and commercialism among the emerging colonial elites.

Manners played a critical role in the struggle for the cultural legitimacy of gentility; mannerly behavior—along with exhibition of refined taste in architecture, fashionable clothing, elegant furnishings, and literature—provided the means through which the new-sprung colonial elites defined themselves and validated their claims on power and prestige to accompany their newfound wealth.

In his book *The Complete Colonial Gentleman: Cultural Legitimacy in Plantation America* (University Press of Virginia, 1998), cultural historian Michal J. Rozbicki probes the determined quest for gentility by members of America’s emerging planter elite. The colonials equated gentility with cultural legitimacy, the achievement of which Rozbicki saw as a “constant struggle, a dynamic that cuts across the network of cultural, political, and social relationships.” Rozbicki’s study is one of several recent works by historians that underscores the timeliness and importance of Lorinda Goodwin’s work *An Archeology Of Manners: The Polite World of the Merchant Elite of Colonial Massachusetts*.

Goodwin’s examination of mannerly behavior as part of New England merchants’ struggle to attain cultural legitimacy has many parallels

with Rozbicki's study of the plantation elites of the Chesapeake and the Caribbean. The cultural dynamic that arose from the quest for gentility fostered the development of a highly demarcated subculture among New England merchants, with its own rules for inclusion and exclusion, supported by a densely interrelated network of kinship. Goodwin takes a fresh look at the subculture of the New England merchant elite. She draws on social history and anthropology to establish the historical and cultural context for examining the transnational development of cultural identity among merchant elites in England, Europe, and British America, and scrutinizes evidence derived from material culture studies and historical archaeology to explore ways of reading artifacts as active elements in the pursuit of gentility by New England's nouveaux riches. Mannerly behavior involved not just the ephemeral media of speech and gesture, but was inscribed in symbolic ways through material culture, via artifacts that bespoke education, style, and taste—all important elements of gentility.

Goodwin utilizes manuals of etiquette and manners to demonstrate two important criteria of mannerly behavior. To be authentic and reputable, manners must be dictated by an authoritative source; for this reason it is no surprise that etiquette books and manuals of advice proliferated and enjoyed wide distribution and use during this period. At the same time, the dynamic of the pursuit of cultural legitimacy among elites requires that specific forms and props of mannerly behavior change just enough over time to ensure that manners continue to set elites apart from nonelites. Hence, as Goodwin demonstrates, mannerly behavior has a strong expression through material culture and is ripe for archaeological study. Indeed, an archaeology of manners is not only possible but essential; by recognizing the ways that material culture was mobilized as a symbolic medium through which to convey the appropriate values, taste, manners, and style that were part of the pursuit of gentility, historical archaeologists can make important contributions to our understanding of the formation of American culture and identity.

In her concluding chapter, Goodwin, quoting Miss Manners, makes the important point that "etiquette is the greatest friend of the powerless." For the merchants of colonial New England, mastery of manners paid dividends in cultural capital, a far from inconsequential form of power. In *An Archaeology of Manners*, Lorinda Goodwin demonstrates that the interdisciplinary field of historical archaeology offers a stimulating medium for exploring the ways that the merchant elite of New England—as citizens of British America—pursued cultural legitimacy

by employing mannerly behavior and its material symbols to meld their wealth and power with the values of English gentry culture into a distinctively American ethos of gentility.

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Preface



The subject of the present study has its origins in a long-distance correspondence. While trying to decide how best to incorporate the data from my dissertation into a book, I described the Turner family as “the makers of manners” to Chuck Orser, who encouraged me to explore mannerly behavior. As I researched I found, as others have done, that manners provide a superlative opportunity to study a range of anthropological and historical archaeological topics, including the history of New England merchants, social behavior, material culture, period literature, and the changes that culture undergoes when it is moved from one place to another distant place.

As engaging as all those topics are, I soon found, to nobody’s surprise, that I would need to focus very narrowly in order to keep the project from ballooning out of all compass. Even when part of a culture appears to be neatly packaged and prescribed, as it is in courtesy literature, it is subject to selective application in the past, and to any number of interpretations in the present. I focus on the way one aspect of life (mannerly behavior) was used by a small group (Massachusetts merchants) during one century (about 1660–1760), informed by my training in archaeology at Boston University and in American civilization at the University of Pennsylvania. The present work therefore synthesizes research from historical archaeology, social history, material culture, and anthropology. Perhaps by drawing from so many fields, I shall satisfy no one completely, but it is my hope that this work will encourage others to explore related disciplines further, stimulating collaboration between these fields, as well as between American and British scholars.

Because of the dual nature of manners, which are both the means by which hierarchies are reinforced, as well as the marker that distinguishes a virtuous individual regardless of birth, I also found that two key, interrelated ideas repeatedly surfaced in the course of this study. The first corresponded with my interest in studying the archaeological manifestations of personal identity. The roles one played as an individual, family member, and citizen might be carefully delineated as never before, even agreed upon by contemporary observers in print in the

early modern period, but the proof of the genuinely successful communication of one's identity was to be found in the material pudding. Dress or other possessions and novel or exotic artifacts confirmed or belied the status that one claimed or to which one pretended; birth was no longer the single concluding factor in determining social aspirations. It was knowledge, first of one's own identity, second of one's place in society, and finally, of appropriate material display, that was critical to maintaining one's identity and successfully playing a particular role in society.

The other concept that appeared involved another sort of identity: the way that communities, of different sorts and sizes, are formed and maintained. The newly powerful merchant community generated controversy as well as commerce in the early modern period because of its lack of easy identification within an antiquated hierarchy. Although the social identity and relevance of the merchant and his family varied over time, no one (including the merchants) seemed to have any trouble in identifying them, or in precisely where they seemed to challenge accepted social norms. This was particularly clear in the British American colonies, where merchants rose, in many instances, to social heights that were not attainable in England. Within the changing shape of the merchant class, there were certain consistent, approved values that also were revered outside that community—it was the embrace of these that helped to define the merchant class and to ease its assimilation and the subtle redefinition of their roles in a wider society. Although group identity was largely based on one's individual identity, once accepted into a powerful group, that association frequently proved to be the more powerful identity.

The final discovery that I made was one of the relevance of mannerly behavior in the past to present life, linked by issues of identification. In conversational discussions of my research, many people suggested connections with Jane Austen (several of her novels had been made into films just as I started this work), Judith Martin (who writes as "Miss Manners"), or Martha Stewart's advice on entertaining. Certainly communication, etiquette, and celebrative display are all elements in this work, but I believe the strongest connection between mannerly behavior in the past and in the present can be seen in the "civility movement" that is slowly gaining currency in the United States, which in my opinion is significantly involved with the reconciliation of individual and group identity with that of the wider community. Throughout history, the value of manners has been rediscovered periodically, when the restraint of personal passions and egos was necessary for the good of a changing society. The Turners and their associates were as

beneficent or greedy, as stupid or clever, as other people in the past or since; the practice of mannerly behavior did not automatically cure their social shortcomings. What participation in civil life did (and does) allow is communication between individuals that might not otherwise be possible, something that never goes out of style.

Acknowledgments



One of the very great pleasures of research is the exchanges with other scholars and other interested individuals. Sometimes these can take place over many years of acquaintance; sometimes a chance meeting can uncover a wealth of ideas and resources. To all those who helped me on this journey, my most profound thanks (and my sincere apologies to anyone I inadvertently forgot to thank individually below).

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