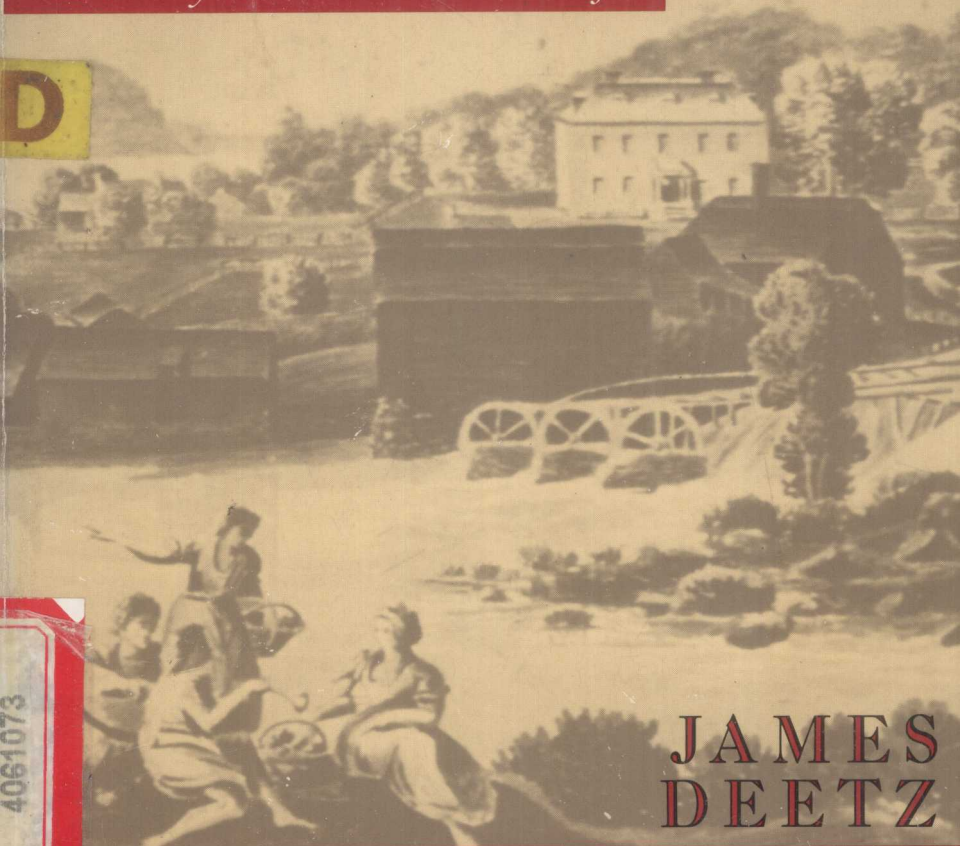


IN SMALL T·H·I·N·G·S FORGOTTEN

*The Archaeology of
Early American Life*



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DEETZ

Author of Invitation to Archaeology

In Small Things Forgotten

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF
EARLY AMERICAN LIFE

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DRAWINGS BY CHARLES CANN



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CHAPTER ONE

Recalling Things Forgotten: Archaeology and the American Artifact

PLYMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 1765

Ebenezer Soule set down his hammer and chisel. It was late evening, but he had completed the gravestone that he had been carving and that now stood before him. On its top he had carved a cheerful angel's face, and he thought of how it would look when it was placed over the grave the next day. Although he had been making gravestones for years, this design was new to him. He knew that the people in the area had recently come to prefer cherubs on their monuments, and lately he had been carving more and more of them to meet the new demand.

PORTSMOUTH, RHODE ISLAND, 1745

The job had been a big one, and the house carpenter had been at it for over a month. Now complete, Jacob Mott's farmhouse had a new wing and a new look. The old, projecting end of the second floor of the house had been removed, and the location of the door had been changed. Standing back to view his work, the carpenter noticed how much more the house now seemed like those in the center of town. Al-

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though it stood in the middle of more than a hundred acres of farmland tilled by the Mott family, its new face would tell the people of Portsmouth that Jacob Mott was one of them, just as though he lived as their next-door neighbor.

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, 1795

Mary Andrews looked sadly at the pieces of the fine queens-ware coffeepot which had been broken the day before and now lay with clamshells and trimmings from carrots and parsnips in a bucket just inside the hall of the house. She took the bucket outside, and walking to the rear of the yard, dumped its contents into the deep square pit that had been dug the week before. Coffeepot pieces, vegetable leaves, and shells fell atop other broken pottery, glass, and refuse.

INDEPENDENCE, VIRGINIA, 1932

Since his return from a trip to Tennessee, Wade Ward had been practicing a new way to play his banjo. Placing his fingers across all four strings high on the neck, he picked out a series of notes, then repeated the sequence farther down the fretboard. The day before, making music with his nephew Fields, he alternated the style he had used since childhood—striking the strings with the nails of his right hand—with another new trick: picking up with his fingertips. In doing this he was playing his banjo as the musicians did on so many of the new records that people listened to on their radios almost every day.

KINGSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 1765

The ads in the Boston newspapers had announced a new shipment of English china. William Rand made a special trip from his home in Kingston to Boston, where he pur-

chased a dozen matching blue-and-white plates. They would make a handsome addition to his household and complement the new set of matching chairs he had recently acquired for his dining room.

PLYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS, 1658

The appraiser appointed by the court worked slowly and carefully from room to room in the small, dimly lit house. Its owner had recently died, and his property had to be valued so that a proper tax could be levied on his estate. The list covered several pages: chairs, fireplace equipment, beds, napkins, chests, clothing—all of the property that had been used to make the world a more comfortable place in which to live. At the end of the listing, the appraiser made a final entry: "In small things forgotten, eight shillings sixpence." In this he acknowledged things that he may have overlooked but that nonetheless had value.

Six Americans engaged in commonplace activities; all in their fashion were communicating with us in a subtle way. In each case, material objects were involved—a house, a gravestone, a set of dishes—and if we could in some way find a way to understand the significance of artifacts as they were thought of and used by Americans in the past, we might gain new insight into the history of our nation.

Such a concern for the material objects of the past, the "small things forgotten," is central to the work of historical archaeologists. Archaeology is the study of past peoples based on the things they left behind and the ways they left their imprint on the world. Chipped-stone hand axes made hundreds of thousands of years ago and porcelain teacups from the eighteenth century carry messages from their makers and users. It is the archaeologist's task to decode those messages and apply them to our understanding of the human experience. America today, as the cultural heir of the Anglo-

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American tradition that began in North America in 1607, is studied by folklorists, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Historical archaeology can add to our understanding of the American experience in a unique way, by looking not at the written record alone but at the almost countless objects left behind by Americans for three and a half centuries.

Historical archaeology studies the cultural remains of literate societies that were capable of recording their own history. In this respect it contrasts directly with prehistoric archaeology, which treats all of cultural history before the advent of writing—millions of years in duration.¹ In America, historical archaeologists are concerned with the development of culture since the seventeenth century, the way it compares and contrasts with its Old World antecedents, and its impact on the Native American cultural tradition. A popular definition of historical archaeology is *the archaeology of the spread of European culture throughout the world since the fifteenth century and its impact on indigenous peoples*.

In England, studies of sites and artifacts that relate to Anglo-American sites are done by *post-medieval archaeologists*. Their work and that of historical archaeologists in America tells the story of the development of Anglo-American culture from its English beginnings to its ultimate twentieth-century form in North America. The Americanization of the English tradition provides the examples that will be examined in this volume, to illustrate the workings of historical archaeology as it is actually practiced in the United States.

It is in its sharp contrasts with prehistoric archaeology that historical archaeology may be further defined. Not only do the two disciplines treat complementary sets of data, based on the presence or absence of literacy and written records, but they differ in other critical ways which are only partly a result of this essential difference.

Testimony of the Spade, Still Digging, Archaeology from

the Earth—all are titles of books, by prehistorians, which reflect the near identity in most people's minds between archaeology and excavation. This is so simply because the vast majority of human cultural remains *are* buried and must be dug up. But the excavation of archaeological sites, though an obviously essential first step in studying past cultures, is just that. Only after the material has been excavated can we begin to study it.

Because historical archaeologists work with material that is centuries old at most, rather than millennia or longer periods, they stand a much better chance of surviving above ground. Of course, much of historical archaeology is the digging of archaeological sites, but these sites are not the sole source of information. They can provide information that is not available from other sources, and the value of this material is further enhanced through the support of above ground information. For example, there is no need to detail the architecture of early New England timber-framed houses on the basis of excavated material alone, since the landscape is dotted with such buildings, still standing and in use.

Like old houses, there are certain other artifacts from America's past available for study, but their value is subject to certain limitations, which must be kept in mind. Collections in museums have preserved a vast wealth of American artifacts: ceramics, metalwork, and glassware have their archaeological counterparts, and many materials that the archaeologist rarely has access to, such as leather, paper, fabric, and wood, are also available for study. The question of the factors that favor survival of certain objects and the disappearance of others is important here. For a variety of reasons, surviving artifacts cannot be taken as necessarily representative objects of their period. If we were to rely solely on museum collections, we might get an impression of a much richer level of material wealth than truly was the case. This is because most museums save the unusual and the valuable object, and individuals now and in the past consign common-

place objects to the dump. A museum exhibit of all of the pottery found in a household of modest means in the mid-eighteenth century would not be beautiful to behold, since most of it would be simple, locally manufactured, coarse earthenware, red in color and undecorated. But such an exhibit would certainly be representative of the world of the people who lived in it. In a similar way, we often are told that old garments, shoes, or pieces of armor show definitely that "people were smaller in those days." This conclusion does not allow for the probability that very small items of personal wear would not be as eligible for hand-me-down status, which latter would certainly contribute to their ultimately wearing out. The houses that survive from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries also cannot be taken at face value as typical of their time, since their ruder counterparts almost certainly disappeared from the scene in a short time.

As the historical archaeologist works in increasingly more recent periods, he or she finds on occasion an information source that few if any prehistorians have encountered: the archaeological informant. Since the period with which historical archaeology is concerned extends to the present, nearly a quarter of the entire period since the early-seventeenth century can be studied through direct interviews with people who actually experienced the lifeways being studied.

The literacy of the people it studies is what sets historical archaeology apart from prehistory. But not all people were able to write; indeed only a minority could through most of the time with which we are concerned. But even if a majority lacked this ability, others often wrote about them. They were born, married, and died, and these events were recorded; their estates were listed for tax purposes and so were recorded. The church records, diaries, court records, land deeds, and contemporary histories give us a window through which to witness the past. This is not to say that we can learn all there is to know just from studying the written record. If this were so, there would be no need to dig into the

ground or to sort, measure, and classify artifacts. In spite of the richness and diversity of the historical record, there are things we want to know that are not to be discovered from it. Simple people doing simple things, the normal, everyday routine of life and how these people thought about it, are not the kinds of things anyone thought worthy of noting. We know far more about the philosophical underpinnings of Puritanism than we do about what its practitioners consumed at countless meals. But all left behind the material residue of their existence, and it, too, is worth study. As Henry Glassie says of the folks of middle Virginia: "They left no writing, but they did leave all those houses."²

The documentary record and the archaeological record complement each other. One of the most useful sets of written material is probate records. These are listings, of the contents of the houses and properties of persons, taken for tax purposes at their deaths. Although not every estate was probated—more often only the richer estates were—those inventories that we have access to are valuable for a number of reasons. Hundreds of thousands of inventories exist for the Anglo-American world. They usually take the form of a rather detailed listing of the contents of a person's estate, with accompanying values. The inventory of Thomas Lumbert's estate, which follows, is an example.

THE INVENTORY OF THOMAS LUMBERT

A true Inventory of the estate of Thomas Lumbert of Barnstable senir: deceased; exhibited to the Court held att Plymouth March the seauenth 1664 on the oath of Ioyce Lumbert widdow;

	li	s	d
Impr in Lands and housing	60	00	00
Item 2 oxen	12	00	00
Item 5 Cowes	19	10	00
Item 1 heiffer	03	00	00

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Item 4 yearlings	04	10	00
Item 2 Calves	00	10	00
Item 2 oxen 1211 and six pound in [vse?] laied out for meddow	18	00	00
Item 2 mares	15	00	00
Item 1 mare Colt	03	00	00
Item 2 horses	14	00	00
Item a two yeare old Colt	4	[10]	00
Item 1 yearling Calfe	02	10	00
Item swine	01	00	00
Item his wearing clothes	03	10	00
Item in beding and yearne	07	15	00
Item in linnine	02	00	00
Item in brasse potts and kettles	03	10	00
Item one warming pan	00	08	00
Item 1 frying pan 3s 1 Iron kettle 3s and hangers 1s6d	00	07	06
Item Cubbert and Chistes	01	00	00
Item Chernes barrells tubbs treyes and such like lumber	01	05	00
Item bookes	00	14	00
Item Amunition	04	00	00
Item in a saddle and bridle	00	12	00
Item in flesh meale and prouision for the family	01	15	00
Item in Corne and pease	01	12	00
Item in Cart wheeles plough and plow tackling	04	00	00
Item in Carpenters tooles	03	00	00
Item the loomes	00	10	00
Item in sythes hoes wedges old Iron-mattock & such like thinges	01	00	00

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Item in debtes due	[16] 00 00
February the 8th 1664)	<u>210 08 06</u>
more in triuiall things omitted	00 10 00
To debts owing to seuerall men	10 00 00
	henery Cobb
	John Gorum
	Nathaniel Bacon

Ioyce Lumbert was deposed to the truth of this Inven-
tory; soe farr as shee knowes) before mee Thomas hinck-
ley this sixt of March (64)

65

The uses of inventories transcend the obvious, descriptive one. The terms used in the inventories are those used by the people themselves, and as such constitute what is known as a folk taxonomy. This can be very misleading on occasion. Numerous listings of "looking glasses" in inventories of early-seventeenth-century Plymouth might lead the reader to believe there was a good supply of mirrors. While this is possible, we learn from the Oxford English Dictionary that "looking glass" was a common vernacular term for chamber pot during the first half of the seventeenth century. "Bedstead" at this time denotes what we call a bed, and "bed" in the folk taxonomy refers to what we would call a mattress. The adjective "coarse" did not denote texture until late in the seventeenth century; earlier, it meant normal or average. It is therefore necessary that one become familiar with the semantics of the English language during the period under study.

A significant number of inventories were taken on a room-by-room basis, and as such give us not only an idea of the layout of the house but the terms used for its various rooms. In such cases, the objects listed for various rooms also hint at the activities that went on in them.

But the inventories always stop short of the kind of detail

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that the archaeologist often finds important. A listing of earthenware could refer either to fancy, imported pottery or to plain, coarse ware of local manufacture. "Six old spoons" might have been of either pewter or brass, and even if the material is mentioned, there was a variety of styles of spoons in use at any one time. In many ways the inventories are given detail by what is excavated from the earth. Taken together, inventories and archaeological assemblages give a more detailed and complete picture than either could alone.

So it is with many other types of recorded information. Building contracts often give specific descriptions of the house or barn to be constructed. The following is a good example:

Thomas Joy hath an account against M^r Robert Keayne for Doing the Carpentry worke of a Barne at M^r Keaynes house at Rumney Marsh & for setting up & finishing the same being of 72 foot in length & 26 foot wide & 10 foot high wth 2 porches each of 13 foot wide one way & 12 another for w^{ch} the said Tho: J alleageeth he ought to be payd so much as the Carpentry worke thereof is worth and he saith that the said worke comes unto in value as followeth in particulares viz^t the framing of the said barne 30£ the sawing thereof 17£. The felling crosse cutting & squaring of the timber 15£ and more the rearing up of the barne by him & his servants 7 the clapping of the barne 11£ 5s for boards 4£ 16s for laying of 600 of boards over the porches 18s for making of 4 payres of great doores & hanging of them 2£ for making of two paire of stayres 6s for making of four little doors 6s for laying the barne floare wth plancks 600£ 10s for putting on gutters upon the barne 1£ 10s for ferrayge of him and his servants 2 10s for losse of time in going and comming 4£ w^{ch} comes in all to 98£ 1s

(a 1640 contract, between Thomas Joy and Robert Keayne, for a barn to be erected in Rumney Marsh, Essex County, Massachusetts)

Even the court records provide us with information concerning architecture. Certain important details are supplied by two coroners' inquests in seventeenth-century Plymouth:

Wee declare, y^t coming into the house of the said Richard Bishope, wee saw at the foot of a ladder w^{ch} leadeth into an vpper chamber, much blood; and going vp all of of vs into the chamber, wee found a woman child, of about foure years. . . .

(an inquest held at Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1648; *Plymouth Colony Records, II, Court Orders*, p. 133)

. . . they sent vp into the chamber by one of the children, whoe cried out that his mother is hanging herself; whereupon the said Elizabeth and Robert ran vp . . . and there found an haire rope or halter, fastened very feirme to the collor beame. . . .

(verdict of coroner's jury re suicide of the wife of James Claghorne, Yarmouth, Massachusetts, 1677; *Plymouth Colony Records, V, Court Orders*, p. 249)

In the first example, we learn of the use of a ladder rather than stairs to gain access to an upper chamber. The second tells us that collar beams were used, typical of one of several roof-framing techniques.

As we can see from the three examples above, historical archaeology must work with parallel and related sets of information. Yet in some cases there is a disturbing contradiction between what is excavated and what is written down. For example, listings of livestock often do not reflect the ratios of various species that are turned up by excavating animal bones in sites of the same period. This is because not all livestock was used as a meat source. Early Plymouth supported its economy in large measure by trading cattle to Massachusetts Bay Colony; the islands in Narragansett Bay were used to raise vast herds of sheep for export to the West Indies. In neither case would the actual frequency of one species to another appear in excavated animal bone, since the latter reflects only those animals consumed as food.

A second kind of accommodation between excavated materials and documentary information bears directly on the whole complex problem of artifact typology as it is practiced by prehistorians. The classification of the artifacts recovered from a prehistoric site is a critical initial step in any archaeological analysis.³ In briefest terms, typology involves the classification of objects based on similarity of form; triangular arrowheads are different from those with curved sides; pots painted red on white are different from those painted black on red. Such classification allows controlled comparison between collections from different sites. But such classifications are entirely formal, and arrived at, by necessity, independently of what the makers of the objects perceived as different types. With the rich documentary materials of historical archaeology, such classifications are not only sterile exercises but potentially very misleading. European-made ceramics excavated from Anglo-American sites are complex and very diverse, but since so much research has been done on the history of the pottery industry in England and continental Europe, it is not unusual to know how the makers of this pottery classified, named, and traded their wares. To apply strictly formal classificatory methods to this material and ignore the historical data is like trying to reinvent the incandescent lamp by candlelight while ignoring the light switch at one's elbow.

A poor fit between the two above kinds of information forces the researcher to refine his or her interpretations, to the benefit of the final results. At the same time, the historical sources have the potential to provide the archaeologist with a much more richly detailed statement of a past lifestyle, and with deeper and more sophisticated understandings of the workings and development of the American past.

If you were to visit a "typical" historical archaeological site, it would look not terribly different from its prehistoric counterpart. To be sure, the artifacts being recovered would be very different, but the use of excavation grids, trenches,