

Interpreter

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Urban Domestic Economy: The Powell-Waller Program

One of the first research projects Barney Barnes undertook when he came to Colonial Williamsburg was a study of the domestic economy of urban households. He shares some of his findings as they relate to new plans for interpreting the Powell-Waller property.

The interpretive program at the Powell-Waller House is scheduled to undergo a dramatic transformation over the next several months. A statement of interpretive aims focusing on familial relationships, patterns of work and play, and community ties was formulated in 1981 and submitted to an interdepartmental committee for detailed consideration and development. The protracted planning period that ensued has now run its course, and steps toward implementing the resulting interpretive plan are nearing completion.

Briefly stated, the plan projects an in-depth examination of the nature and quality of family life in an eighteenth-century urban Virginia context. One facet of that examination will explore the domestic economy of urban households—that is, the distinctive patterns of production and consumption established by urban households. The range of activities to be considered under the heading of domestic economy is substantial and all relate directly to one or more aspects of each of the three interpretive goals mentioned above.

Some of the questions that spring immediately to mind about one facet—cloth and/or clothing production—of the domestic economy illustrate how complicated the issue really is. Just how did a family clothe itself? Was it involved in cloth (as opposed to clothing) production, and, if it was, did it enter the process at the very beginning or at some intermediate stage? Did it produce its own raw materials through agriculture (flax, cotton) or animal husbandry (sheep raising)? Did it process the fiber by spinning it into thread, weave the thread into cloth, and then fashion the garments it needed from the cloth? Or did it purchase fiber, spin it into thread, pay to have

it woven into cloth, and then fabricate the necessary garments? On the other hand, did the family eliminate the cloth-production stage from its domestic economy and purchase material from some local producer of "Virginia cloth," or from a local merchant offering a range of commercially produced British fabrics, or even directly from Britain through a London factor? Did members of the family make their own garments from purchased cloth, or did they rely on the town's many tailors, milliners, seamstresses, and mantua makers for this service? Is it possible that individual households opted for a combination of the above, depending on the type of garment required and its intended use?

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The Art of the Old South

by Jessie Poesch

A book review by Nancy Milton

Studies of the visual arts in the American South have been notable only in their scarcity. Recent interest and scholarship have unearthed a wealth of new material, which is just beginning to be studied and analyzed.

In *The Art of the Old South: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture and the Products of Craftsmen, 1560-1860*, Jessie Poesch examines three hundred years of southern material culture: "Beginnings, 1560-1735," "An Established Society, 1735-1788," "A New Nation, 1788-1825," and "The Sense of Separation, 1825-1860." In this prodigious survey, Poesch, emphasizing architecture and painting, tells the story of the differences in the southern approach to the decorative arts and the cultural relationship this region had to America as a whole.

When studying southern material culture, one cannot use a single style or way of life to describe the entire region at any given time. The South stretched from tidewater Maryland

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Urban Domestic Economy, *continued*

Another directly relevant consideration here, once you have determined what work was being done, is discovering how the work was done and by whom. How was work organized and, once it was organized, who provided the necessary supervision to insure that it was being done effectively and efficiently?

It would be all too easy to fill several additional pages of text with similar questions—after all, issues such as food procurement and preservation, health, and lighting and heating needs have yet to be broached—but that would serve no useful purpose. In the absence of highly detailed domestic account books, none of which has survived for urban families in colonial Virginia, it is impossible to reconstruct in detail the domestic economy of any particular historical family. This does not mean, however, that highly plausible models of domestic economies cannot be constructed from a compilation of data from various sources, combined with a measured degree of historical imagination.

The most important thing to remember is the existence in urban economies of a range of options in both goods and services sufficient to fulfill any domestic need. When considering urban domestic economies, this is far more important than the persistent but misleading and largely erroneous belief in colonial self-reliance and self-sufficiency. The notion that colonists made virtually everything they needed for themselves or did without is a myth, pure and simple. The myth's dogged pertinacity has much more to do with Americans' nostalgic self-image than it does with the realities of colonial life, particularly southern urban colonial life.

Any particular urban family's freedom to select from the options was limited almost solely by its economic situation. That is, a poor family might not have the financial resources to purchase its clothing custom-made from a tailor or seamstress or even ready-made from a merchant, so those options were closed to it. At the same time, however, complete self-reliance was equally closed to them as an option because the investment in the necessary tools—to process sheep's wool into great coats, for example—would have been even further beyond their limited means.

Once financial considerations are removed as a limiting factor, then the specific choices made by a family from the wide range of options become highly idiosyncratic, reflecting the collective familial value system, habits,

and predilections. For example, among families with equivalent financial situations, one might opt for purchasing custom-made clothing for stylistic reasons, while another might produce all of its clothing from commercially available cloth because of a mother's pride in her sewing skills, or because she felt she could best introduce her daughters to the mysteries of competent housewifery through sewing. She may even have valued the time spent with her daughters in close, cooperative endeavor for its own sake.

How, then, does one go about sorting through the variables to produce some tangible information about urban domestic economies? One method is through inventory analysis. Remember that production in the home implies ownership of, or at least access to, the necessary technology. If one were proposing home cloth production, one would expect to find wool cards, spinning wheels, looms, and the like; for candlemaking, one would expect to find wicking materials and candle molds. An analysis of seventy-two estate inventories of Williamsburg decedents was undertaken several years ago for the specific purpose of discovering evidence of urban domestic production and its significance in the domestic economy. The results were revealing. To cite just a few examples, of the seventy-two inventories evaluated, evidence of ownership of the means of production in the following categories is stated as a percentage of the whole:

1. Candlemaking (candle molds), 25% (18 inventories of 72).
2. Cloth or clothing making (spinning wheels, looms, feathers, quilting frames), 46% (33 inventories of 72). This category is particularly interesting. The most commonly owned piece of equipment was a spinning wheel. Looms were nonexistent, and quilting frames were only rarely mentioned. Listed below are the numbers of inventories, broken down by decade, that reveal some evidence of cloth production equipment.
 - a. 1735–44 33% (4 inventories of 12)
 - b. 1745–54 45% (5 inventories of 11)
 - c. 1755–64 0% (no inventories of 13 for the decade)
 - d. 1765–74 55% (11 inventories of 20)
 - e. 1775–84 81% (13 inventories of 16)(It is hard to know exactly what to make of this skewed pattern of distribution. One could plausibly deduce from it, however, that the onset of

the Revolutionary War with the consequent loss of access to commercial-ly produced cloth from Great Britain forced many families to engage in home production for the first time.)

3. Food acquisition (seines; fish hooks, lines, or poles; fowling pieces), 7% (5 inventories of 72).
4. Poultry and/or poultry production (chickens or fowl, ducks, geese, turkeys, guinea hens; coops or hen houses). Only one of the seventy-two inventories mentioned chickens; they were located on John Prentis's quarter, not a town lot. Seven percent (5 inventories of 72) listed hen houses or "portable" hen houses; since structures were normally considered real rather than personal property, the hen houses may in fact have been large baskets in which poultry could be confined for a day or two until slaughter.

The poultry business in eighteenth-century Virginia towns appears to have been largely in the hands of blacks. While the data available on this issue are not definitive, most of the references I have seen to poultry sales—usually in merchants' account books noting acceptance of poultry in exchange for store goods—identify the seller as a free black, mulatto, or as a slave. The near monopoly enjoyed by blacks did not go unchallenged, however. In the 1760s, farmers in the immediate vicinity of Williamsburg petitioned—unsuccessfully—the House of Burgesses to have slaves prohibited from selling poultry in the Williamsburg market.

Pat Gibbs has suggested that some poultry was raised in town by slaves with the acquiescence of their masters, that the poultry was recognized *de facto* as the property of the slaves, and that the poultry was omitted from decedent inventories for that reason. This is a speculative proposition without substantiation in the records at present.

Even the brief list above—there were sixty-four additional categories in the original analysis—should indicate that few urban families in eighteenth-century Virginia attained, or strove for, full self-sufficiency in most facets of their domestic economy. Instead, they relied on that fact of urban life that has attracted people to cities since time immemorial—the existence of marketplaces where goods and services could be obtained from specialized producers. In urban contexts no one has to be a generalist to survive; virtually everyone can specialize in the area of his

own expertise and exchange the products of his labor for those of others. That is why fully 90 percent of the inventory of every store in colonial Virginia was composed of fabrics. It simply made no sense to devote the necessary time, labor, and capital to cloth production when better, much cheaper cloth was readily available at every store in town. And purchasing rather than making cloth fit one much more neatly into the economic role envisioned for the colonists by Britain's mercantilist politicians.

What, then, will our interpretation of the Powell family's domestic economy be? What sorts of work will be represented? The focus will be on those activities that are most plausible for the Powells—food preparation and preservation, cleaning of all sorts, spinning, knitting, clothing production, and the like. Each will be adjusted according to the dictates of the season, and specialized activities will be introduced as appropriate. Substantial emphasis will be placed on the many ways in which the Powells' domestic needs were satisfied by, and linked them inextricably to, their community. This does mean that certain popular, but inappropriate, activities formerly represented on the Powell property—weaving, candledipping, flax heckling—will disappear to be replaced by others such as those mentioned above that more certainly represent the actual work that would have occurred when Benjamin, Annabelle, and others lived there.

The King's English

Balsam—an aromatic oily or resinous medicinal preparation, usually for external application to heal wounds or to soothe pain. In addition to those known in England, many natural balsams derived from plants were discovered in America.

Bodkin—a long pin or pin-shaped ornament used by women to fasten up the hair; a needle-like instrument with a blunt knobbed point, having a large (as well as a small) eye for drawing tape or cord through a stitched channel or casing.

Bullock—a castrated bull, an ox; applied loosely to a bull or bovine beast generally; for example, barbecued bullock was served at large outdoor gatherings.

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Art of the Old South, *continued*

and Virginia to western Kentucky and Tennessee and to Spanish Florida and French Louisiana. We are not seeing just one culture change over time, but several diverse cultures adapting and adjusting to climate and settlement patterns, each with its own peculiar ethnic heritage.

Poesch begins this survey by discussing the impermanent sixteenth- and seventeenth-century colonial societies—Spanish, French, and English—and moves into the eighteenth century with a more definitive concentration on English cultural evolution. The author sees the South looking back after 1788 as the new nation emerged—back beyond its colonial origins to classical antiquity—for a definition of its identity. This trend “with its romanticized view of the past” serves as a basis for the emergence of a peculiarly southern consciousness.

The study of art in the old South is too extensive to allow for the presentation of a complete and totally accurate picture of what southern art encompassed in three hundred years. It is what the author states in the beginning—a “broad survey” built around a “historical context.”

It is a book for leisurely perusal, a brilliantly illustrated text that is both a visual delight and a curiosity stimulant. It is a long overdue recognition of the importance of southern decorative arts in the evolution of American material culture with some interesting insights into colonial Virginia and Williamsburg arts and architecture. After reading it one simply wants to know more.

King's English, *continued*

Card—“a pair of cards” in an inventory referred to a set of two paddle-like implements with iron teeth used to part, brush, and set in order the fibers of wool, cotton, or hemp. *To card* means to prepare fibers for spinning in this way.

Corn—the seed of one of the cereals such as wheat, rye, barley; grain. In England the word is often understood to denote the kind of cereal that is the leading crop in a particular region. For example, in the greater part of England, corn meant *wheat*. In America corn referred to *Indian corn* or *maize*.

Drugget—wool cloth, or a mixture of wool and linen, or wool and silk used for making wearing apparel or for spreading on the floor

under a dining table to catch crumbs.

Pullet—a young domestic fowl older than a chick but not a mature fowl.

Robin—the name colonists gave to the red-breasted thrush they encountered in North America. The English robin, although it has a reddish breast, is a smaller, different bird.

Sack—a dry white wine made near Xeres (now Jerez) on the southern coast of Spain; sherry.

Spinster—a woman who spins, especially one who practices spinning as a regular occupation; also appended to names of women originally to denote their occupation, but from the seventeenth century, it was the proper legal designation of a woman who had not married.

Undertaker—one who takes on a task or challenge; one who undertakes to carry out work or business for another. Note that this is a general term describing a person's relationship to a project—it is not an occupation.

Ward—the action or function of a watchman, sentinel, or the like; also each of the incisions in the bit of a key that must correspond to ridges in a lock (also called wards) in order to open the lock. A 1768 *Virginia Gazette* article described a rash of thefts from smokehouses and cellars. Incriminating evidence discovered in an out-house owned by the accused culprit were tools to pick locks and keys with the wards filed out.

Waste-book—a rough account book (now little used in ordinary business) in which entries are made of all transactions (purchases, sales, receipts, payments, etc.) at the time of their occurrence, to be “posted” afterward into more formal journals and ledgers.

Wog—vogue; popularity; general acceptance or currency. By 1700 *vogue* or *to have the vogue* was more common than *wog*.

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