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Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Meanings and Uses of Material Goods in Lower Town Harpers Ferry

ABSTRACT

Recent archaeological excavations performed by the National Park Service at Harpers Ferry have contributed significantly toward understanding domestic life during both the 19th-century armory period and subsequent commercial development of the town. Many studies have focused on technical industrial development of cities, although few studies have highlighted the effects of industrialization on everyday life. An interdisciplinary approach provides insight into issues related to health, hygiene, diet, consumer behavior, landscape, and gender relations.

Introduction

While historical archaeology has been performed in Harpers Ferry National Historical Park since the 1960s, most of the work has served either compliance needs or particular questions concerning architectural or technical reconstruction rather than addressing questions related to the town’s social development (i.e., Hershey 1964; Gardner 1974; Powell 1978; Pousson 1986). This volume reports some of the most recent archaeological research, centered around a set of buildings situated in the heart of Harpers Ferry’s commercial district (Figure 1). Some of these structures were occupied by United States armory workers in the early 19th century; other dwellings and commercial buildings were erected in the late 19th century. These archaeological excavations, sponsored by the National Park Service, both fulfill compliance needs and contribute to understanding the town’s cultural history in the context of industrial capitalist growth. This volume addresses anthropological questions related to urbanization, work, and domestic life, and contributes to one’s understanding of the social, political, and economic development of industrialization and urbanization in a small industrial town.

Harpers Ferry lies at the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers in West Virginia. It became one of two federal armory towns developed in the United States following the American Revolution. In the first quarter of the 19th century, armory workers rejected the new factory discipline at Harpers Ferry. As long as the task-oriented, or craft-oriented, ethos remained, there was little chance of easily substituting the factory system for traditional methods. Each armorer was historically responsible for the production of the entire gun. They came to work when they chose as long as they fulfilled their monthly quota. Many of the armorers and their supervisors resisted new machinery and time discipline regardless of increased productivity. Technical and organizational innovations threatened the armorer’s craft and were often dismissed as “yankee notions.” Harpers Ferry armorers clearly feared becoming mere tenders of machinery, which is how they perceived their counterparts at the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts. Armorers at Harpers Ferry found it difficult to adjust to a rigid division of labor and regimented schedules. Under the new division of labor they were responsible for the production of only one small portion of the gun, and as a result were alienated from its entire production. A division of labor threatened the armorers’ self-esteem as craftspeople.

After 1829 the armory slowly changed from a craft system to a factory system. A new superintendent of the facility tried to enforce a labor discipline by prohibiting loitering, gambling, and alcohol consumption on armory grounds. As a result, tension developed in the armory and rapidly escalated into violence. Within six months of the introduction of labor discipline an armorer murdered the superintendent. The assassin, hailed as a hero among the armory workers, became a symbol of their resistance against the new work discipline.

During the 1830s the armory made some progress introducing new machinery and disciplined work habits, but industrial advancement developed slowly. In 1841 military officers replaced

civilians in an attempt to reinforce control and work discipline. All sections of the Harpers Ferry armory were forced to follow a division of labor as well as to conform to regular daily hours of work. Productivity increased and industry and commerce thrived until the outbreak of the Civil War. At the outset of the conflict armory operations ceased and many of the armormen followed their livelihood to Richmond after Confederates confiscated the manufacturing machinery and moved it to their capital in Richmond.

The war left the town economically shattered, and this situation worsened when the federal government decided not to rebuild the armory. Over a decade later, however, the town’s economy once again thrived as local commerce and tourist industry increased. During the 1880s and 1890s new hotels, boardinghouses, and dry goods stores developed to cater to the newest fad of visiting Civil War sites, which included the armory engine house in which John Brown had been captured.

The development of Harpers Ferry was closely intertwined with the debate over the rise of industrialism. Social historians have made explicit the controversy that this nation’s founding fathers faced regarding whether to establish an industrial or agrarian nation (Marx 1964; Bender 1975; Kasson 1979; de Costa Nunes 1986; see also Adas 1989). Agriculture was seen as natural and keeping in harmony with the cycles of nature. Pro-agrarianists were afraid of repeating the many evils associated with industrial life, such as crowded urban areas, poverty, and widespread diseases, that had begun to dominate industrial European cities. They
believed that America could develop as the world's "bread basket." Industrialists, on the other hand, believed that capital ventures in manufacturing could create a secure independent nation.

While industrial development was slow in the first decades of the new Republic, Alexander Hamilton was successful in creating America's first industrial town, Paterson, New Jersey, by the end of the 18th century. In the following decades industrial towns such as Lowell, Massachusetts, developed in the Northeast (Coolidge 1942). Capitalists at Lowell, as well as those at many of the other growing Northeast industrial complexes, took advantage of local demography and exploited what they perceived as previously untapped labor resources, such as "idle women, children, and older members of the population" (Marx 1964). By the beginning of the second quarter of the 19th century the New England factory labor force was primarily composed of unmarried women from rural communities (Dublin 1977, 1979; Vogel 1977; Stansell 1986). Because there were few kinship ties among these workers it was easy to impose a corporate paternalism upon the labor force. Not only did rules and regulations govern the factory process, but a less explicit discipline existed to standardize and control workers after they left the factory. The corporation used furnishings, foods, and surroundings to promote materially the personal discipline of the workplace (Beaudy 1987:11; Beaudy and Mrozowski 1988:5, 17). The built environment in Lowell, Massachusetts, for instance, served as an essential component of a training ground for instilling ideals which could be used in the factory setting. Manufacturers established regulations and erected standardized housing in order to reinforce standardized behavior in the work force. For example, the original eight blocks of the Boott Mills boardinghouses were erected between 1835 and 1839, contemporaneous with the construction of the mills. The boardinghouses were arranged at right angles to each other and had facades similar to that of the mill (Beaudy 1987:11). Industrialists thus created a similar architectural setting at home to that which was found in the factory. Similar patterns are apparent at other industrial towns such as Lynn, Massachusetts (Faler 1981), and Manchester, New Hampshire (Hareven 1978, 1982; Hanlan 1981).

One of the most notable anthropological studies of early industry is Anthony F. C. Wallace’s (1978) work on Rockdale, Pennsylvania. Rockdale is not particularly unusual in the annals of American history. It developed as a cotton factory town in the antebellum rural north. Rockdale was run by mill owners who presided over the labor and daily affairs of the workers. The "mill lords" operated in a paternalistic system and controlled the town’s access to sources of money and information. Mill owners assumed that their power gave them the right to act as God’s stewards on earth (Wallace 1978:21). It was the entrepreneur’s duty to house, feed, clothe, and educate his employees and their families, and to train them to be industrious and productive servants in the eyes of God and the industrialist. Wallace argues that while the new republic embraced the Enlightenment ideals of progressive improvement without divine intervention, such was not the case for early industrial development. By the end of the first half of the 19th century, "romantic, freethinking radicals . . . tried—and failed—to wrest control of the machines away from the private owner and place it in the hands of the community" (Wallace 1978:246). Most workers became part of the industrial order and were subsumed by an entrepreneurial oligarchy which acted on behalf of divine intervention and subjected workers to new industrial work behaviors and the disciplining and repetitive motions of the new technology and machinery.

From the early industrial era changing work habits and labor management practices became a vital concern for managers and capitalists. Controlling labor practices allowed for the increased regulation of workers and their material production. E. P. Thompson’s (1967) classic study accounts for changes in production and labor relations in early industrial England, and the change from craft to cottage industry, to factory discipline. While time management became the industrialist’s standard practice by the second quarter of the 19th century, time motion studies in the form of Taylorism became an essential manufacturing component by the turn of the 20th century (Braverman 1975; Aitken
1985; O’Malley 1990). Many of these new labor practices did not go uncontested in England (e.g., Rule 1986), or in the United States (e.g., Smith 1977).

Our study of an industrial town in Harpers Ferry calls for focusing upon the interrelationship between material culture, industrialization, and everyday domestic life. The area that underwent archaeological investigations contained the residence and outbuildings of the master armorer, dating to the first half of the 19th century. The master armorer managed the armory’s daily manufacturing operations. Archaeological analysis of the master armorers’ domestic assemblages provides insight into how domestic relations were transformed within the context of changing work discipline in the armory. Following the Civil War the area continued its pattern of domestic and commercial use (Figures 2, 3).

The project area was inhabited by master armorers, merchants, entrepreneurs, and laborers during the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries. A diachronic analysis provides information regarding the complex interrelationships between various groups of people within the hierarchical order of an industrializing community. Discerning how material culture articulated with changing workers’ lives and understanding why various people responded differently to industrial ideology may explain the variability found between sites. This examination enables archaeologists to understand better the effects of the industrializing process among different social groups.

This archaeological analysis of Harpers Ferry’s
residential and commercial district incorporates an interdisciplinary approach, similar to that employed at Lowell, Massachusetts (Beaudry and Mrozowski 1987a, 1987b, 1989). An analysis of material goods and archaeological features contributes insights into the changing functions and meanings of goods and is useful for interpreting lifeways in Harpers Ferry. It illuminates the dynamic history of a portion of the town’s inhabitants—such as laborers, craftspeople, women, and minorities—who helped to shape and create the urban landscape and the material culture remains, and who are often mute in our interpretation of the past.

An Archaeology of Social Relations

Since the early 1980s, Eric Wolf’s (1982) work has stimulated many researchers to rediscover the uses of history in anthropology. Ian Hodder (1987) and Bruce Trigger (1991) have also recently called for the rediscovery of historical approaches in archaeology. The rediscovery of historical anthropology has facilitated historical archaeologists’ use of context and meanings in their analyses. An understanding of context can reveal the social situations within which goods operated and can provide an understanding of the types of inequalities produced
in society since the advent of the industrial revolution (Shackel 1993).

Anthropologists (Wolf 1990) have also become increasingly concerned with relations of power in everyday social intercourse. It is the differing and changing relationships to power that creates hierarchical social relations in society. A focus on inequality has become prominent in the field of archaeology since the 1980s (Hodder 1982; Tilley 1982; Shanks and Tilley 1982, 1987a, 1987b; Paynter 1989; McGuire and Paynter 1991). Historical archaeologists have pursued this avenue of inquiry when exploring landscapes of formal gardens (Leone 1984; Leone and Shackel 1990) and industrial towns (Mrozowski and Beaudry 1990), modernization of everyday behavior (Shackel 1992, 1993), health and hygiene in an urban context (Mrozowski et al. 1989), gender relations in domestic realms (Yentsch 1991; Spencer-Wood 1991) and in a craft context (Little 1993), as well as plantation studies (Orser 1988).

Study of power relations and the development of mercantile and industrial capitalism has become an integral part of New World historical archaeology. The works of Fernand Braudel (1981a, 1981b, 1981c) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1988) have become increasingly important to historical archaeologists who trace the roots of modern capitalism in urban and regional contexts. For instance, Robert Paynter’s (1982) regional study of the Connecticut River valley explores changing settlement patterns in relationship to the developing merchant and industrial infrastructure. In Alexandria, Virginia, general wealth and material culture is examined in relationship to households’ access to power. As the town’s capitalist infrastructure changed, so too did the general patterns of the town’s core-periphery relationships (Cressey et al. 1982). The growth and development of neighborhoods and settlement systems in New York City have also been examined (e.g., Wall 1987; Rothschild 1990).

The archaeological and social historical research at Harpers Ferry provides a context for understanding social life in an industrializing town, and creates an understanding of the meaning and uses of everyday material culture. Material culture does more than reflect or serve as an index of wealth. Goods can create, enforce, and reinforce behavior. They create and maintain social boundaries and communicate through a whole set of cues which elicit appropriate behaviors. Goods may have different meanings in different social circumstances as their messages are continually changed and renegotiated. Goods can be used to justify and support different subgroups in society, or they can mask, contradict, or exaggerate social relations (Rapport 1982; Hodder 1982; Miller and Tilley 1984). Therefore, cultural uniformity or variability of material goods between or within groups must be explained by more than patterns of interaction. Variability may express both within-group cohesion and competition (Hodder 1979:447, 1982:7).

In studying the 19th century, understanding the development of the culture of capitalism and industrialization contributes to a framework for discerning variability in the archaeological record. New consumer goods were created, used, and discarded with greater frequency. Material goods played a greater role in creating and maintaining social relations. New work discipline meant the gradual but steady abandonment of the craft ethos and greatly affected the work and social lives of those who participated in this new work system. New factory disciplines were developed, imposed, and sometimes resisted (Paynter 1989). As part of this resistance, an explosion of utopian reform societies grew during the early American industrial movement (Wallace 1978; Savulis 1992). In a consumer society, material goods play an instrumental role in shaping and creating the social order. Material culture studies in the framework of a developing culture of capitalism allow one to examine the roots of modern ideology issues such as power relations, class, gender, and ethnicity. An archaeological investigation of 19th-century Harpers Ferry provides an example of the changing meanings and uses of consumer goods in an industrializing society.

Research Goals

The Harpers Ferry archaeology project, sponsored by the National Park Service, began in 1989
in conjunction with the rehabilitation of many of the buildings in its historic commercial district. Archaeological excavations yielded data regarding changing consumption patterns in a growing urban center. During the first half of the 19th century, factory work behavior at the armory gradually replaced the traditional craft ethos (Smith 1977). The development of interchangeable parts along with its resulting division of labor marked the beginning of work discipline in Harpers Ferry. Changes in behavior not only occurred in the workplace, but were also found in everyday life, thus the purpose of this volume. Accompanying these transformations was a new material culture that helped to create and reinforce these changes. These new behaviors and goods became the norm for everyday existence in industrializing America, and are very much part of modern-day culture.

Six main themes are found in this volume on Harpers Ferry archaeology. These are changing land use, industrialization and work conditions, health and sanitation, consumer goods and foods, women’s roles, and boardinghouse life. The topics are necessarily dependent upon each other. To study any one in isolation would ignore the complex relationships and social dynamics found in an industrializing society. Hence the goal of the volume is not to study a particular issue in the archaeology of an urbanizing and industrializing society, but rather to illuminate the various and complex social and economic interrelationships found in industrial capitalism.

Changing Land Use

Susan Winter provides an overview of the archaeological record and reviews some of the social issues that urban dwellers faced in an industrializing society. She supplies a general historical overview of Harpers Ferry and the households that created the archaeological record, built environment, and topographic landscape of the study area. Irwin Rovner and Linda Scott Cummings contribute phytolith and pollen data, respectively, to furnish an analysis of the changing yardscapes. Significant differences are found between the armory’s craft ethos phase, the armory’s industrial phase, and the town’s commercial and residential phase. While pollen and phytolith grass data are nonexistent in the pre-armory landscape, they are abundant by the 1820s. New buildings were constructed and the armory maintained a well-groomed landscape. But the garden-like landscape disappeared by the 1840s when industrialization no longer had to be justified as coexisting harmoniously with nature (Shackel 1991). Through the 19th century entrepreneurs developed the lot but continued to no longer groom the landscape.

Industrialization and Work Conditions

Work in 19th-century factories was long, arduous, and unhealthy compared to standards today. During armory operations at Harper Ferry in the first half of the 19th century, workers continually fought to have their work days shortened from 12 to 10 hours (Smith 1977). Deborah Hull-Walski and Frank Walski note that brewery workers in late 19th- and very early 20th-century Harpers Ferry probably subscribed to the national average for breweries of 14–18 hour work days, six days per week. Between 1890 and 1910 unions gradually decreased the work day to 10 hours. Whether the brewery workers at Harpers Ferry were organized is unknown. But what is probably true is that the brewery workers were subject to the same health conditions as other brewery workers. They were constantly exposed to radical temperature changes and breathed contaminated air. Diseases such as tuberculosis were prevalent. In the first decade of the 20th century, brewery-related accidents were almost 30 percent higher than those of other trades. This rate increased over the decade, probably due to the "higher speeding of machinery." No doubt the excessive use of alcohol by workers under the "free beer system" aided this high casualty rate—these rates are calculated for only those workers unemployed for at least 13 weeks (Schulter 1910: 259–268).

Health and Sanitation

An analysis of archaeological contexts yields information concerning changing health and hygiene
among various social groups in 19th-century Harpers Ferry. Benjamin Ford examines the various placements of privies, cisterns, and sewer lines relative to domestic structures. His analysis documents the general development of health concerns in the United States and demonstrates how Harpers Ferry residents did not participate in national trends toward health reform. Karl Reinhard examines parasites from three privies for clues regarding the health of the various residents of the study area, and compares the economic and social status of the inhabitants. In this particular case, access to wealth, political power, and social influence did not necessarily correlate with superior health conditions.

In addition, archaeological analyses indicate shifting attitudes toward health care. An examination of bottles allows for an exploration of late 19th-century gender roles. Eric Larsen discusses the changing attitudes toward child rearing and feeding and demonstrates the relationship between social inequality and the persistent use of various health care forms.

Foodways

Archaeology provides perspectives on the effects of industrialization on everyday life and social relations. From the early 19th century, Harpers Ferry's economy increasingly became linked with the core areas of East Coast industrialism, especially through the improved transportation that came with construction of the Potomac Canal (1807), the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal (1833), and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad (1837). Households of different socioeconomic statuses relied on regional and national networks and were influenced by the development of the new factory discipline. Effects on domestic lives in the early 19th century are discussed in the article by Michael Lucas and Paul Shuckel. The ceramic consumption patterns of the master armorer's household reveal the relationship between the diversity of the ceramic assemblage and the penetration of a modernizing discipline into the household. The faunal analysis supports greater reliance on industrial systems for survival. As industrialization became increasingly prevalent in the 1830s, the master armorer's household relied more on regional and national sources for foods and diet became increasingly standardized.

Ceramic and faunal analyses of a late 19th-century business entrepreneur's household and a boardinghouse provide some expected patterns, with finer china found in the entrepreneur's house. Some findings, however, also challenge conventional wisdom of the late 19th-century quality of life among workers and entrepreneurs. Michael Lucas discerns the various dining habits of the boardinghouse residents and the entrepreneur's household. Shifts in ceramic production are more than an issue of supply and demand, but also have broader implications related to the meanings and uses of material goods. In particular, the entrepreneur and his household subscribed to a very regimented style of dining that implicitly separated them from those outsiders who did not know the "proper" rules and etiquette of dining. The entrepreneur's assemblage had a greater diversity of fresh fruits and vegetables (Cummings, this volume). The analyses explore rates at which households and different social groups resisted and participated in a regionally-based consumer and commercial food system, and how this rate changed through time.

Women's Roles

Women played an influential role in creating and reinforcing industrial ideals on the domestic front. With the rise of 19th-century industrialism many lower-class women found jobs in mills, although such opportunities were limited in Harpers Ferry. As industrialization removed traditional professions and crafts from the house to the factory, women became excluded from these once traditional fields. Manufactured goods increasingly could be purchased instead of made at home, and middle-class women focused on the care of the children and the home instead of working in factories. Boundaries and roles became increasingly codified, and the home developed as a separate
sphere from the rest of society (Strasser 1982:5; Mintz and Kellogg 1989; Wall 1991). Lucas describes the role of 19th-century middle-class women and their roles as housekeepers and major participants in the dining ritual. Larsen describes the role of mothering offspring in a boardinghouse situation. As industrialization engulfed Harpers Ferry, the lower-class women’s role in the working community changed and became increasingly separated from the child nurturing process (Larsen, this volume).

Boardinghouse Life

Susan Strasser (1982:148ff.) indicates that between 1870 and 1910 about one-third of America’s population was foreign born or first generation. Most of these immigrants were landless transients, searching for an opportunity to earn money working for others. Immigrants comprised a large portion of the boarding population. Different accommodations existed for different classes of boarders. Because a limited number of wage-labor opportunities were available, some women ran boardinghouse businesses. Boardinghouse work was legitimized as it was seen as an extension of women’s domestic role. Boardinghouse mistresses prepared food, cleaned dishes, washed bed linens, and often washed the boarders’ clothes.

Although the exact demographic composition of residents in the Harpers Ferry boardinghouse is unknown, an informal survey of the population census indicates that in the early 20th century most of the boarders tended to be immigrants from Germany, England, and Ireland. Many of the authors in this volume examine late 19th-century boardinghouse life. As noted earlier, Larsen’s analysis surveys evidence from the boardinghouse context to examine the changing roles of child rearing in an industrializing context. Cummings provides an overview of the daily dietary habits of boarders. Macroflora remains show that boarders had a consistently standardized diet, while high-status entrepreneurs enjoyed a diverse composition of fruits and vegetables. Running counter to our intuition of past lifeways, the entrepreneur’s meat consumption consisted of what has typically been classified as “low-status cuts of meat,” while boarders typically ate meals considered delicacies of the era, such as calves’ heads and eyeballs. Reinhard’s analyses show a higher proportion of parasites in the entrepreneur’s privy when compared to the boardinghouse privy. Hull-Walski and Walski also provide a framework for the daily living conditions of brewery workers, some of whom may have inhabited the boardinghouse.

Overview

An archaeological analysis of an industrializing community needs to examine the social construction of everyday material goods and their relationship to the changing ideologies of industrial capitalism. An historical analysis is, in one way, a vehicle to illuminate the roots of modern ideology, to identify the historical relations between groups, and to understand how ideologies maintain social inequalities. Since the 18th century, an increasing number of people have spent their lives in a factory system guided by capitalist wage relations. The domestic realm of society became saturated with factory by-products and was increasingly influenced by these new behavioral disciplines and the routines of everyday life.

In a new consumer society material goods play an important role in shaping and creating social and work relations. These material culture analyses of the domestic and commercial uses of Lots 2 and 3 in Harpers Ferry provide insights into the everyday life of the 19th- and early 20th-century residents of Harpers Ferry. From the advent of the consumer revolution, types and quantity of material goods played an increasing role in structuring society. Consumer goods, use and manipulation of landscape, health, hygiene, and diet became prominent issues in industrializing and urbanizing society, and thus are an appropriate focus for this volume.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people are responsible for the success of this project including the dedicated staff and personnel
at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. Much of the project's success is due to Superintendent Donald Campbell's support from the beginning of the program. I am grateful for the helpful and thought-provoking remarks made by three anonymous reviewers. While critical, these comments were made in the spirit of improving the volume and allowing the authors to make a conscientious and thoughtful contribution to the discipline. Their spirit and helpfulness will always be much appreciated. I also appreciate the time and energy of the journal's associate editor, Glenn Farris, and SHA copyeditor, Sarah Peabody Turnbaugh, who helped shepherd the volume through the review and copyediting processes.

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