

**THE FASHIONABLE SET:
The Feasibility of Social Tea Drinking in 1774**

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

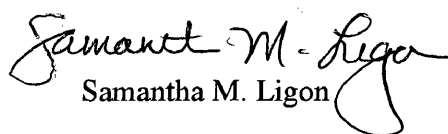
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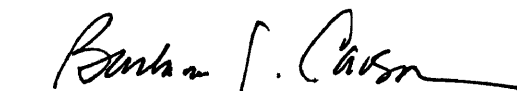
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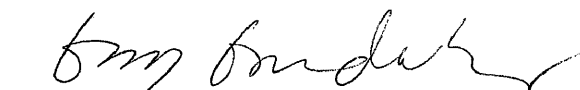
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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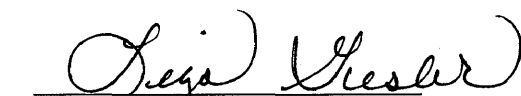

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Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
THE FASHIONABLE SET	2
APPENDIX	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	57

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Professor Barbara G. Carson for her patient direction and guidance throughout the research and writing involved in this investigation.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the presence of tea-drinking equipment in early America in the year 1774. The goal was not so much to find out whether or not people were drinking tea, but rather to investigate the various types of equipment these Americans owned for performing the tea ritual so common to white Anglo-American society.

Probate inventories were examined for the colonies of Massachusetts, New York and Virginia, based on a study done by Alice Hanson Jones, entitled *American Colonial Wealth*, from 1977. The inventories she compiled provided a sampling of decedents in various counties in each of these colonies. Any evidence of tea drinking in the goods listed for each decedent, explicit or implicit, was catalogued by the writer and then examined in order to get a sketch of how many early Americans were drinking tea and coffee, and at what levels of equipage.

The results suggest that approximately 75% of early Americans drank tea in their homes, that approximately 22% demonstrate evidence of coffee drinking, and that approximately 22% could serve tea in what would have been termed a "genteel" fashion by people at the time.

THE FASHIONABLE SET:

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Many little girls in the United States own tea sets. These are not normally high-fashion, high-quality, porcelain or silver services. The average six- or seven-year-old with a tea set owns a plastic one, with a basic supply of cups, saucers and a teapot. Perhaps she has a friend or two over for the “tea party,” coerces her parents or siblings into joining her, or makes do with imaginary companions. In any of these cases, she still enjoys her “adult” tea party. The young girl and her parents probably give little thought to why she would even want to play with tea sets; many of us just take it for granted that it is part of what little girls have done in twentieth-century America. Tea drinking is, after all, a part of children’s literature and play ranging from Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit to Felicity of the 1990s.¹ A child need not even witness the formal tea ritual in real life; it is played out for her through the familiar fictional characters of childhood. Those with a basic knowledge of history and Americana may also conjure up images of ladies one or two hundred years ago sitting down, in moderate formality, to have “tea” in the late afternoon, and recognize that act as a British custom – a custom still practiced in Britain today. Few of us, however, realize just how much effort could go into formal tea drinking, its social implications, and the cost of owning a fashionable tea service in the eighteenth century.

For those interested in tea in early America, a wealth of literature explores various aspects of the topic. This scholarship is based on primary evidence from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, many times coming from probate inventories, personal correspondence, or diaries. From these sources one can see that drinking tea was important to the upper classes in early American society, with various social ramifications based on the wide variety of tea equipment available for use, and whether or not one had the appropriate equipment with which to entertain others. To state the range of possibility in modern terms, the options vary from a person who today still infuses tea in a teapot, serving the beverage in fancy cups and saucers, to the person who just grabs a mug and a teabag, giving little thought to ceremony.

¹ “Felicity Merriman” is one in the series of American Girl dolls, marketed by the Pleasant Company in Middleton, WI. One can purchase a miniature teasetting, tea table and chairs for use with Felicity, along

There are clearly two very different modes of thought and sets of motivation behind each of these prototypes.

Just as is true today, the eighteenth century provides examples of people at both ends of the spectrum. We tend to associate the eighteenth century, however, with the former, more formal option. The question then arises as to how feasible all of this tea drinking really was two hundred and twenty-five years ago. One can easily deduce that the wealthy could and would serve tea to their own household and to guests, but how many other people in the colonies could do so in a social context? Did this habit persist down into the middling classes? Were some of the poor interested in it as well? By examining probate inventories from 1774, a convenient year just on the cusp between America's colonial status and her independence, one can begin to hazard guesses to each of these questions.

This paper will seek to give some basic answers to how much social tea equipment early Americans owned, and therefore, how prevalent the full tea ceremony was within American society at that time. Through the use of some of the probate inventories compiled by Alice Hanson Jones for her study of the wealth in America just before the Revolution, I will demonstrate that nearly three-fourths of the inventoried population in Massachusetts, New York and Virginia were at least minimal tea drinkers. Furthermore, approximately one-fifth of these same individuals owned equipment for coffee, and the same amount owned enough equipment for hot drinks to be able to serve an adequately "formal" tea to guests. These levels of ownership come as part of basic cultural attitudes towards tea (and her sibling drinks of coffee and chocolate), along with changes in consumer behavior in the eighteenth century that strove for gentility as exemplified through belongings. Based on these findings, and reports within other secondary literature, we can see today that even among the poor and middling classes, tea played an important role in American colonial society. Though our habits have moderated over the past

two centuries, in the 1770s Americans appear to have picked up and continued the same tea “habit” from their forebears in the mother country.

Historiography

A wide body of secondary literature exists regarding tea, its social implications, its history and related consumer behavior. A logical place to begin within these writings is Rodris Roth’s “Tea Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage.” In this article from 1961, Roth examines the equipment and behavior involved in social tea drinking among the upper classes, and also acknowledges that tea had penetrated the lower classes. Roth feels that the ritual was the most important function tea served for early Americans, and even the poor strove for the complete ceremony that afternoon tea would have encompassed in the eighteenth century. To follow the type of ritual that Roth describes in her paper, with the requisite equipment, would have limited “proper” tea drinking to the elite of early American society.

As the title of Roth’s article implies, to drink tea correctly in the eighteenth century required not only the physical items to do so, but also the appropriate knowledge of *how* to take this fashionable hot beverage. Tea could appear either at breakfast or later in the afternoon, or perhaps at both times of day. Afternoon or evening teas were the events which truly called for a certain etiquette, where the mistress of the house would both infuse and pour the tea for her guests, who were then expected to be adept at handling the cups and saucers, as well as providing lively and/or interesting conversation.² A complete tea service included a teapot, slop bowl, cream/milk container, tea canister or caddy, sugar container, tongs, teaspoons, cups and saucers. Tea kettles were the method used for boiling the water, though they may not have been seen in the room where the tea was actually taken. Towards the end of the eighteenth century tea urns,

² Rodris Roth. “Tea Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage,” in *Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1961, p.63.

for keeping hot water on hand, made their appearance.³ With all of this information, Roth provides her readers with a sense of the “kit” of items necessary for formal tea.

Roth also discusses several aspects of tea which have direct bearing on the study of what the American people owned and had access to for purchase in regard to the proper tea ritual. In the year 1767, Parliament imposed the Townsend Act that taxed tea and indirectly restricted its usage in America. The act was not strictly enforced until 1773, however, which is when the famous Boston Tea Party took place in response to the British action.⁴ Other trade restrictions on the colonies kept a lid on the amount of Chinese porcelain Americans were able to import. The frustrated wealthy who could have afforded the china deeply desired its fashionable qualities, which outshone other ceramics coming from England or Holland. The China trade increased dramatically after the Revolution, as the United States developed its own trading networks, and family antique collections show a significant number of tea sets purchased at this time⁵. Less politically, Roth also speaks to the issue of the role that furniture played in the formation of the kit used for social tea drinking. Inevitably, the fashionable hostess would have to own at least one tea table and several chairs to pull off an adequately formal tea for an intimate group of friends.

This treatment of what was required to engage in a proper tea ritual raises many material considerations. The first thing one might perceive is the near-impossibility for most people to actually put the whole kit together, including behavioral knowledge and social training. This study shows that the number of early Americans with the demonstrated means to serve a fancy afternoon or evening tea may have reached about 20% of the population, and was more likely closer to 10%. Roth also discusses how rigid enforcement of the tea tax by the British caused a changeover to coffee drinking, as a show of patriotism. The flip side of this, as Roth describes, is that concoctions like coffee and raspberry leaves (an attempt to imitate tea) were considered

³ Ibid., p.72.

⁴ Ibid., p.66.

“detestable.”⁶ The statistics gleaned from my investigation regarding ownership of coffee equipment mirrors the statistics for those Americans who were able to perform a full tea ritual. Perhaps the low percentages of ownership are in part a reflection of Roth’s documented distaste for coffee on the part of eighteenth-century Americans.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, on the other hand, spends much more time on the role of coffee in the eighteenth century. His book, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants* is a more broad-based work, covering the various new substances (tea, coffee, chocolate, spices, opium, etc.) which made their way into Europe from the end of the Middle Ages through the early modern period. Clearly Roth never intended to engage such a discussion in her article, but it is nonetheless interesting to move from her very specific look at eighteenth-century tea in America to Schivelbusch’s examination of how drinks like tea, coffee and chocolate influenced European culture before the American colonies were well-established, principally in the seventeenth century. The goal of Schivelbusch’s discussion is to examine the ways in which items like the “big three” hot drinks (chocolate, coffee and tea) changed from exotic luxuries, enjoyed by only the very wealthy, to virtual necessities that pervaded the daily routine of much more commonplace Europeans, over the course of several centuries.

Schivelbusch categorizes all of the items in *Tastes of Paradise* as *genusmittel*, or articles of pleasure. Tea is part of this array of foods, drinks and drugs which create pleasures of the senses.⁷ Though devoting time to each individual drink, Schivelbusch often discusses the “big three” together or in relation to each other. His examination begins with coffee, and the proliferation of coffeehouses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These establishments, which also served tea and chocolate, were “everything that taverns were not,⁸ promoting sobriety and thoughtfulness in a society inundated with alcohol. He takes care to distinguish

⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁷ Wolfgang Schivelbusch (translated by David Jacobson). *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p.xiii.

incidences of wretched drunkenness from the daily consumption of alcohol which was culturally condoned, and at times, even mandated by custom. Schivelbusch also notes that concurrent to the rise of the “big three” in popularity came the idea of sobriety as a middle class ideal.⁸ While it is not precisely clear whether Schivelbusch sees this change as having taken place in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, it seems certain that at least a tendency towards sobriety as an ideal among the middle class was a factor by the late eighteenth century. If sobriety and clean living had become the standard by 1774 (the year in question), it could certainly explain the popularity and pervasiveness of tea drinking in early America. On this specific issue, there is a chicken-egg question to be considered. Did a desire for sobriety cause a rise in demand for the “big three” hot drinks? Or, conversely, did the popularity of the “big three” create a change in middle-class ideals, thus making sobriety more desirable? Although this is not a question that can be completely answered in this forum, one can note that tea (as a sobering drink) was indeed a major presence in the British American colonies.

Schivelbusch also relates his historical discussion of tea to present-day habits in the Western world. Early in the book he compares England’s reliance on tea and cotton in their system of mercantilism to the current position foreign oil plays in the United States economy.¹⁰ This comparison ties into the theme of power relations, which Schivelbusch touches on later in *Tastes of Paradise*. He explains the eighteenth-century phenomenon of the aristocracy not believing that the commoners should “waste” their money on tea, and Schivelbusch thus reads this behavior as an attempt to maintain power.¹¹ He further questions whether or not the Western middle classes today prohibit certain drugs in an attempt to maintain cultural hegemony. This is a provocative question, but Schivelbusch sticks more to a story-telling discourse than to further development of such issues of power relations, which are so integral to social histories in general.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁹ Ibid., 148.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹¹ Ibid., 226.

Sidney Mintz emphasizes power relations in his 1985 book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Mintz performs an anthropological-type examination of what sugar has meant in modern history, and like Schivelbusch, explains how these rare luxuries came to be everyday necessities for a wide range of people. Mintz, however, carefully examines the power relationships involved in this transformation from rarity to commonality. In spite of the fact that sugar is the main focus of *Sweetness and Power*, the author uses tea throughout the work, as a vehicle for his arguments about sugar's role as a sweetener. Mintz organizes his book thematically, but also proceeds in a generally chronological progression as he claims to investigate "the mystery of people unknown to one another being linked through space and time."¹² Mintz is largely successful in this effort.

The major foundation upon which Mintz builds his discussion of sugar is his distinction of five different uses for sugar, or more specifically, sucrose. These uses are as a medicine, a spice-condiment, a decorative material, a sweetener, and lastly, as a preservative.¹³ In relation to tea, this study is concerned with sugar's role as a sweetener, which directly relates to the ways in which people's tastes were changing in England and America. The British Revenue ("Sugar") Act of 1764 further complicated the situation, when previously unenforced taxes on sugar were to be lowered, but strenuously enforced.¹⁴ Sugar and molasses clearly played a large role in the American diet, for the British to be so concerned about enforcing taxes upon them. On a fundamental level, depending on the type of tea, the beverage on its own can be quite bland or even bitter and not very tasty. As sugar, or sugar in the form of sucrose, became more easily obtained and a greater source of calories to the common person's diet, tea's popularity was similarly influenced. As opposed to Schivelbusch's flowing, but very loosely documented narrative, Mintz provides a tightly woven history of how tea made its appearance in Europe in the

¹² Sidney Mintz. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p.xxiv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.75.

¹⁴ Edward Countryman. *The American Revolution*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, pp. 46-47.

late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and then became a bastion of the working class by the end of the eighteenth century. He further notes, probably because of the purpose of his book, that the working classes liked their tea quite sweet, and that these calories from sugar provided important calories to an impoverished lifestyle in England and America.¹⁵ Tea was also one of the cheapest drinks per pound, and made otherwise cold meals seem like hot ones. This fact alone tells us more of the presumed causes for tea's popularity in English and American society centuries ago, especially for the working classes who could not afford to put on the fancy tea rituals which are the basis of Roth's article.

Mintz raises critical issues for consideration in a study like this one, where the behaviors of average people are investigated and their motives questioned. Mintz emphasizes throughout *Sweetness and Power* that there are fundamental relationships between commodities and the people who desire or consume them. This line of thought is truly fundamental to material culture study. Furthermore, Mintz reminds us that people often need to be taught to like new things;¹⁶ in this process, the things themselves must be given meaning. Applying this concept to a discussion of tea, one must certainly ask what kind of meaning tea drinking must have taken on in order to become as pervasive within Anglo-American society as Mintz and other authors maintain. In the earlier centuries when tea was still fairly rare and difficult to procure in Europe, the possession of tea leaves was a clear indicator of high social and/or economic status. Mintz reminds readers that this was also true of sugar, and furthermore, as sugar became more and more easily obtained by lower social classes, the commodity became a leveler of status.¹⁷ We can then question whether or not the same was true of tea. This seems to be the case, as several authors declare that tea became an integral part of the poor person's breakfast by the end of the eighteenth century. Following on this idea, perhaps one can conclude that although the tea itself was being consumed by a wide range of people, an entire population could never afford the items required to serve tea

¹⁵ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p.132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.183.

socially. Therefore, material items work as a sensible barrier to keeping the social hierarchy intact.

Questions regarding tea equipment and its prevalence lead to additional questions of consumer behavior in the period considered. A wealth of scholarship has been written in order to help dissect consumer behavior and opportunities in centuries past, among which Carole Shammas' *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* sheds light on the issue of tea and tea equipment. Shammas' work provides a lengthy analysis of the economic changes taking place in England and America between 1500 and 1800, organized in terms of demand, consumption and distribution. Just as Schivelbusch and Mintz examined transformations in goods from rarities to luxuries, Shammas looks at changes from an early modern or pre-industrial economy to modern or industrial modes of exchange. The author seeks to explain over the course of three centuries what people wanted, what they actually got, and how they got it.

Due to tea's demonstrated importance in everyday Anglo-American life, whether among the upper or lower classes, Shammas constructs much of her discussion around tea and its equipment. In a discussion of household income, Shammas quotes Alice Hanson Jones (compiler of *American Colonial Wealth*) as having documented the average household income in the colonies in 1774 to have been between 10.7 and 12.5 pounds sterling.¹⁸ Shammas also investigates the amount of per capita tea consumption this level of income would have allowed. She cites estimates that range between .75 and 2.5 pounds per capita of tea consumption.¹⁹ She further concludes that even at the low end of this estimated range, the given amount would allow two-thirds of white adults to consume tea on a daily basis, which is the standard Shammas uses for declaring "mass consumption." As will follow in the discussion of the results of this

¹⁷ Ibid., p.96

¹⁸ Carole Shammas. *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p.68.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.64.

investigation, tea consumption does indeed appear to meet and exceed a two-thirds majority of white adults in the colonial population.

The amount of tea that early Americans were able to consume was surely affected by the behavior of retailers at the time. Although the percentages for more rural areas would certainly be lower than those for their urban counterparts, retailers do not appear to have been in severely short supply in the eighteenth century. In the 1770s, the colony of Massachusetts averaged 21.4 heads of household per known retailer, versus a nationwide 1982 statistic of 150.4 to 1.²⁰ This does not tell us precisely how well-stocked each retailer was, nor what variety of goods each store contained, but the numbers allow the inference that consumer goods were available to those with the disposable income to spend on them. One important issue this point raises, and which Shammaas spends time discussing, is what she calls restrictions upon “consumer sovereignty.” These restrictions were inherent in the mercantilist system Britain enforced upon the colonies, with the number and variety of items available being only part of the problem. Secondly, one can presume that there were often longer distances to be traveled in order to visit a retailer, or similarly, that significant periods of time passed between visits when isolated farms had retailers or peddlers travel close enough to them to conduct business. Furthermore, going back specifically to the issue of tea, drinking the popular infusion was usually presumed to be a female activity, and the equipment a largely female desire. This concept clashes with the fact that the head of the household, almost always male, had the ultimate control of what was actually purchased.²¹ Each individual in eighteenth-century America was by no means a sovereign consumer.

Shammaas also recognizes further restrictions, not in terms of “consumer sovereignty,” but rather regarding the roadblocks that face this type of study. In her appendix, Shammaas

²⁰ Ibid., pp.273, 275.

²¹ Ibid., p.210.

cautions that probate inventories “seldom” cover even fifty percent of decedents in a given year.²² This deficiency clearly creates difficulties in a study of this type, but as long as one keeps that in mind when interpreting results, all relevance is not lost. Furthermore, smuggling has significant influence on consumer studies regarding mercantilist Britain and her American colonies in the eighteenth century. Smuggling is, by nature, not a well-documented activity, so Shammas must largely base her conclusions upon only the legal imports, while making educated guesses at the impact of smuggling. Once again, as long as readers keep in mind that the given, official numbers do not always tell the whole story, such work does have solid meaning.

Carole Shammas wrote a wide-ranging and broad-based study in *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*, and while that work has relevance to this particular investigation, examination of another piece on consumer behavior that relates more specifically to the American colonies in the eighteenth century will be useful as well. In “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake” Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh take a close look at seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Maryland and Virginia. The authors investigate what they see as a transformation from a “pre-modern cultural attitude” to a more modern outlook based on notions of gentility.²³ Their study looked at parts of both colonies on a county-by-county basis, over the course of roughly two centuries. The analysis is accompanied by several pages of tables containing the authors’ numerical findings regarding various types of possessions. They catalog items ranging from bed furniture to crockery, and even list teaware, specifically. Each of these categories is meant to be an indicator of wealth among early Americans.

Their findings regarding tea-drinking and its equipment reinforce the main thesis of “Changing Lifestyles.” Ownership statistics over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth

²² Ibid., p.301.

²³ Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh. “Changing Lifestyles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake,” in Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (eds), *Of Consuming Interests*. Charlottesville, VA: Univ. of VA Press, 1994, p.64.

centuries show significant increases in the amount of teaware that even families categorized as “poor” owned. Carr and Walsh ranked the decedents in their studies in three wealth categories: estate values over 225 pounds sterling indicated wealthy status, estate values between 50 and 225 pounds sterling were middling, and those under 50 pounds were regarded as poor. Even if the prices of ceramics used for teaware had dropped precipitously over this time period, one might still find it hard to believe that the poor were spending the same or a higher proportion of their income on perceived luxury. Carr and Walsh note that “inhabitants at all levels of wealth were improving their standard of consumption,” and also that “tea and teaware... were nonessential items that showed major increases even in estates worth less than 50 pounds.”²⁴

As their buying power went further, even those with estate values under 50 pounds sterling spent an equal or increasing amount on teaware over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the mid-eighteenth century showing a peak in that type of ownership.²⁵ Ann Smart Martin backs up these assertions, cleverly commenting, that “buying teacups while living in a house with holes open to the cold and wind raises important questions of consumer priorities.”²⁶ Billy G. Smith’s work on the laboring classes of Philadelphia further illuminates how noteworthy this consumer behavior was. Smith contends that although historians have typically described the standard of living for the urban lower classes as “comfortable,” there was growing poverty and unemployment in the 1760s and 1770s. Furthermore, in analyzing the accounts of daily purchases for the Pennsylvania Hospital, an institution that aided the poor as well as the sick, Smith finds an interesting array of foodstuffs available. The beverages listed in the documents include “milk, coffee, several types of tea, chocolate and unfermented cider,”

²⁴ Ibid., pp.70, 81. For more information on the complexities of consumer priorities in early America, please see Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, “The Standard of Living in the Colonial Chesapeake,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 45 (1988).

²⁵ Ibid., p.130.

²⁶ Ann Smart Martin. “Makers, Buyers and Users: Consumerism as a Material Culture Framework,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Summer/Autumn 1993, p155.

amidst alcoholic drinks as well.²⁷ Thus even the poorest Philadelphians in the eighteenth century had access to tea. In analyzing consumer behavior, it is intriguing to note that while Smith claims the average laboring family's income in the 1770s was barely meeting the cost of necessities, other studies prove that the poor invested in teaware nonetheless.

According to Carr and Walsh, the explanation for such increases in spending is based on changing notions of gentility, and what gentility meant to one's social standing. The authors offer a working definition for gentility, saying that during the eighteenth century it "concerned increasing attractiveness and elegance in living quarters and dress, greater individual use of space and utensils, and increased emphasis on manners and social ceremony."²⁸ Tea equipment fits this definition in every aspect. Tea sets most certainly displayed fine aesthetic features within the context of one's dining or drawing room, and they provided separate utensils for everyone involved in the tea ritual, which also called for very distinguished social skills and etiquette. Carr and Walsh discuss these factors in marked difference to the conditions of the seventeenth century, where one earned his or her social rank through land ownership and hard work. By the eighteenth century, however, elegance and obvious luxury had taken over as the new standards in high society. This change leads one to ponder what might have caused such a transformation to occur. Carr and Walsh note that virtually all of the social changes taking place in the American colonies were prefaced by similar ones in England, most specifically London. Advances in English marketing and manufacturing were also starting to make luxury goods more plentiful in the colonies.²⁹ These facts, however, do not completely answer the question because one can further inquire what prompted the changes within England itself. Unfortunately, this study does not provide the time and space necessary to probe such a question, but it might be assumed that

²⁷ Billy G. Smith. "The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750-1800," *William & Mary Quarterly*, April 1981, p.168.

²⁸ Carr and Walsh, "Changing Lifestyles," p.60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.104-5.

similar changes in notions of gentility and elegance may have crossed the channel into England from the continent, especially from France.

Related studies of eighteenth-century gentility and elegance in early American dining and drawing rooms have also made their way into numerous other works in the past several decades. This is particularly true in the study of foodways, and early American eating and dining habits. In 1983, Louise Conway Belden investigated what she titled *The Festive Tradition: Table Decoration and Desserts in America, 1650-1900*. Although Belden spends most of her time on various dessert items and the ways in which they were served in high society, tea drinking and tea parties also figure into the equation. Belden is particularly concerned with late afternoon and evening tea parties because these were occasions upon which a variety of dessert refreshments could be served. Belden also asserts that tea played a secondary role to fruits and sweetmeats³⁰. Perhaps this statement is true within the context of upper class dessert courses, but according to the work of scholars like Mintz and Schivelbusch, tea was an integral part of early modern diets in England and America. Barbara G. Carson's study of dining habits in the earliest days of Washington, D.C., *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington*, also makes scattered references to the role tea played in high society. Carson describes tea as primarily a private, in-house activity at the turn of the nineteenth century.³¹ The exception to that would be the occasions upon which a hostess felt ambitious enough to put on a full evening tea for a multitude of guests. One can only begin to imagine the numbers of cups, saucers and spoons required to properly stage such an event. We learn from this scholarship that to be able to stage a large evening tea, or even an intimate, but completely equipped family tea, was no small feat in the eighteenth century.

³⁰ Louise Conway Belden. *The Festive Tradition: Table Decoration and Dessert in America, 1650-1900*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983, p.251.

³¹ Barbara G. Carson. *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington*. Washington, D.C.: American Institute of Architects' Press, 1990, p.28.

Determining who was well-equipped: Sources and methods

This idea that serving tea was not necessarily an easy or inexpensive ritual is what I wish to examine in the course of this study. Each of the scholars mentioned above has intricately described the ways in which tea pervaded the lives of eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans. Such studies are founded upon examination of various primary sources from the given time period, most often letters, diaries, wills and probate inventories. I have chosen to probe this final category of documents in an attempt to further document ownership of early American tea equipment. From this base, I propose to develop a body of statistical evidence to further illuminate and broaden prior discussions of tea drinking and its related behaviors in the eighteenth-century British American colonies. More specifically, this evidence will shed light upon the ways in which Americans were drinking tea at the time of the Revolution, going deeper than to question whether or not they were drinking it at all.

I have chosen *American Colonial Wealth*, a compilation of colonial probate inventories from 1774 by Alice Hanson Jones, as my fundamental collection of primary evidence. This body of work carries many implications for the study of early America because the year 1774 places the documentary evidence at an interesting turning point in the history of the United States. This year is still technically part of the colonial era of American history, but falls immediately prior to the beginning of the Revolutionary War. It therefore gives scholars a chance to examine evidence regarding the economic status of a nation that was just about to come into its own. Granted, the United States still had nine years of war and turmoil through which to persevere before it could rightfully call itself the United States of America, but the decedents in 1774 had lived their lives entirely within the colonial period, and presumably would have spent the years of their established adulthood in the tumultuous period of notorious taxes and increasing rebellion. Published as a set in 1977, Jones divided her work into three volumes, containing a selection of probate inventories from all thirteen British American colonies for the year 1774. These inventories formed the basis for Jones' work concerning the economic status of this virtual

nation, just on the verge of independence. Her selection amounted to a total of 919 inventories, from 21 counties in early America. In her own words, “the method is that of generalization from a small but properly designed statistical sample of decedents.”³²

Probate inventories are most clearly read as economic documents, but they also give a unique perspective on the social history of the nation. Inventories are indeed fraught with uncertainties for today’s scholar (to be discussed below), but they are also one of the best sources for examining lifestyles and preferences among a historical population. I wish to use the probate inventories published in *American Colonial Wealth* for the colonies of Massachusetts, New York and Virginia to estimate the percentage of people who had the real possibility of engaging in social tea-drinking on a regular basis. Extrapolating from those who met my minimum requirements for being classified as a possible daily tea-drinker, I further tried to estimate the number of individuals who could then make an attempt at putting together a fairly complete tea service. These individuals would comprise the class of people upon whom Carr and Walsh based their conclusions regarding gentility and elegance, and these are also the presumed members of high society Belden and Carson examined in their discussions of early American dining habits.

Tea, however, was not the only hot drink being consumed in Britain’s American colonies just prior to the Revolution. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch would have us all know, coffee also had a major dietary and cultural impact upon Europe in the early modern period, and by extension, European colonies as well. Coffee and its related equipment compose the second category of items for which I searched in the inventories from the three colonies. Going back to the idea of the embattled colonies in the decades just before the Revolution, taxes made coffee nearly as important as tea in some ways. Even though the British and Anglo-Americans clung more closely to tea than to coffee, the taxes the British imposed upon the importation of tea into the

³² Alice Hanson Jones. *American Colonial Wealth*. New York: Arno Press, 1977. Vol. 1, p.2 of preface. Jones compiled the 919 inventories in these volumes as a preface to and basis for her 1983 work *The Wealth of a Nation to Be*. She discusses the economic condition of the thirteen colonies on the brink of

colonies caused the hot drink to be a major political issue. The taxes supposedly made coffee a more patriotic drink, in the sense that it helped Americans boycott tea but still have a hot beverage for meals and parties. Therefore, as a corollary to my examination of the ownership of tea equipment, I made sure to document evidence of coffee and interpret its meaning within the context of 1774.

Investigating each of these topics – general ownership, complete tea sets, coffee – paints a picture of the true feasibility of the types of tea-drinking scholars have described. Saying that early Americans enjoyed and desired tea is one thing; documenting the actual amounts of tea equipment to which they had access is another. Examining the types and styles of equipment further deepens the understanding of consumer behaviors and speaks to the issue of ceremony or ritual. It is the question of feasibility, and possible projections of actual behavior, that I have undertaken in this investigation, in an effort to shed some light on how often and how well people really were drinking tea in 1774.

To pursue this line of inquiry, probate inventories were the basis of my studies. As mentioned earlier, however, probate inventories are not always the perfect primary source. Inherent in their nature are certain complications, ambiguities and easily misconstrued pieces of information. *American Colonial Wealth*, like any other compilation of probate inventories, is not exempt from research difficulties. Perhaps the first problem with any set of inventories claiming to represent a state, a county or even a town, is the fact that they are not usually able to account for the entire population. For various reasons, a significant percentage of the population was not inventoried upon death; Carole Shammas has estimated the number of missed decedents to be as high as fifty percent.³³ Most significantly, only property owners or holders of wealth would receive a probate inventory upon death, because the inventory was meant to put together a legal

their independence. For further information regarding how Jones chose her sample, please refer to Volume III of *American Colonial Wealth*.

representation of all that the person owned at the time of their decease. This effort would help clarify affairs in the case of legal disputes among relatives or others related to the decedent. In the words of Jones, their principal purpose was “to prevent dissipation of portable or moveable wealth before creditors had been paid their just claims.”³⁴ Jones believes that the financial costs of being probated upon death were not significant enough to keep many people who normally would have done so from going through the process. The only costs she perceives in probate are small filing fees, occasional remuneration of appraisers, executors or administrators, and possibly the costs of physically getting to the court if the person lived far from it.³⁵ In any case, these factors of property ownership alone would discount a significant proportion of the early American population, especially in the southern colonies, where various forms of indentured and slave labor could never be accounted for through such measures of wealth. Furthermore, many women never made it to the inventory rolls because they were either married and their property was never their own, or they never had married and were still part of the household in which they had been raised. The few women that appeared in the inventories of the three colonies I examined were almost all classified as widows, and the notation of “singlewoman” or “gentlewoman” was quite rare – two and one of each, respectively, over the course of all 410 inventories. In summation, inventories deal primarily with those white males whose death came to the attention of the local probate court, often because of debts or credits owed.

Another factor inherent in the nature of probate inventories is that they can only tell us what items the person owned at the time of his or her death. For the most part, this is more than satisfactory because it allows the researcher to look at what the person had accumulated over the course of many years, in comparison to his or her declared status in life. For instance, because occupations are listed on nearly all of the inventories in Jones’ work, one might find a decedent

³³ Shammass, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America*, p.301. For further discussion of why some people were or were not probated in early America, please refer to Holly V. Iazard’s article, “Random or Systematic? An Evaluation of the Probate Process,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, Autumn 1997, pp.147-167.

³⁴ Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, vol. 1, p.5.

listed as a physician, and be pleased to see that he owned what appears to be a fairly elaborate estate of fine furniture, clothing and other personal items, in addition to real estate or other holdings. This pattern of ownership makes clear sense, even from two hundred years' distance. On the other hand, if one were to find the same physician with an estate worth only 50 pounds sterling, and little in the way of elegant household items, the reader would be taken slightly aback, and would then perhaps have reason to further investigate what seems to be an illogical situation. Where this attribute of the inventory causes problems is in terms of disposable items. Eighteenth-century Americans did not live in as much of a disposable culture as most Americans do today, but they still had items that would be replaced from time to time. The concept of disposability is especially important for crockery in general, and teaware more specifically. As opposed to pewter, tin or other metals, ceramic items will chip and break over time, and will possibly be replaced at least once over the course of a long lifetime. Along similar lines, it is also impossible to know from inventories what items a person may have given away to relatives shortly before passing away.

The ways in which the inventories are presented vary from one colony to another, and even within the counties of each individual colony. For instance, the most difficult situation to encounter when studying inventories is when a person's belongings are grouped into very large, very vague categories. This was a problem most often in some of the counties of Massachusetts. Within Plymouth County one can find several examples of this phenomenon. The estate of Ebenezer Cox, a yeoman in the town of Middleborough, was divided into only three items: homestead and farm (with buildings), outland and meadow, and his "personal estate."³⁵ One slightly better, but nonetheless useless document for my purposes was that of Seth Bryant, a yeoman in the town of Halifax, in Plymouth County. His estate is broken down into nine categories: real estate, wearing apparel, livestock, husbandry tools, household furniture, ironware,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.9-10.

³⁶ Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, vol. 2, p.858.

corn and meat, half a pew and boards and timber.³⁷ If I were, for instance, trying to approximate general livestock ownership in Massachusetts, this inventory would be adequate. For anyone probing for a specific household item, this document must be passed over and placed in the “non-owner” category, for lack of specificity. Within Plymouth County alone, I was forced to skip 48% of the county’s inventories, often for this structural reason. (Please Refer to Columns D and E, p.51, in the Appendix.) Sometimes items within homes are grouped and mentioned only by room, without specific mention of what that room might have contained. Items are also sometimes grouped by their type – china, pewter, tin, etc. This format of entry was helpful in my search at times, because if the person displayed ownership of kettles or other tea-related items, I could take note of the china, and speculate that the set very possibly contained more teaware.

Some problems with inventories are simply due to the passage of time and the specific context of the eighteenth century. Within *American Colonial Wealth*, Jones noted that certain words were illegible or that the document itself had been damaged, and certain portions had to be omitted. This type of hindrance is inevitable when working with centuries-old documents. Less destructively, language itself can cause research problems. One inventory in the New York segment, for instance, was printed completely in Dutch.³⁸ This is understandable given the Dutch heritage in New York, however, it does not do the non-Dutch-speaking researcher much good. The use of English has also changed, significantly at times, over the course of the past two hundred years. One simple example is how the terms *dish*, *plate* and *bowl* have at times been quite interchangeable in the history of the United States. Aside from meaning, spelling variations are another issue to be conquered in the study of early American documents. Words and names often change spelling not only from document to document, but sometimes even within the same inventory. A careful eye and flexible mind are good attributes to have in the quest to study historical documents.

³⁷ Ibid., p.855.

³⁸ Ibid., p.1121.

For all of their faults, however, probate inventories are very valuable sources of documentary information for the eighteenth century. Most often, inventories give the most accurate picture available of a person's economic status. A portion of the inventories may be written in vague categories, but for the most part, they tell a detailed story of the items that made up people's homes and estates. One can often form a picture of the type of home in which a family resided, mainly because of the descriptive words used by the appraisers. Rarely does one simply see the listing of "chair." Even if the chair is simple or rundown, the entry will read "old wooden chair," or on the other hand, "black walnut armed chair." I was careful to keep track of any descriptive words used in the mention of tea equipment, which will be discussed in more detail below. In addition, for the purposes of this study, where ceramics are a matter of such great interest, it matters little how much has been broken over the course of a lifetime. As long as a china tea set is present at the time of the person's death, it makes no difference whether it was the first set the person ever owned, or the third. At times, even how the inventories are structured can be of service. Some items may get lost in the shuffle, but occasionally a grouping of items will help the researcher make inferences regarding hard to read or misspelled words. For instance, when in a portion of an inventory that lists ceramic items, seeing "dozen cups" and then "dozen casers" listed immediately afterward leads me to believe that the "casers" are really saucers. Lastly, for this investigation, inventories also occasionally contain listings of relevant foodstuffs. Every so often, a hogshead of sugar or several pounds of tea or coffee will make an appearance. This is the best and by far the most direct evidence of tea and coffee drinking, and helps to bolster inferences about the purpose of the kettles and cups that people owned – at times perhaps turning tea-drinking aspirations into reality. Even livestock can help provide clues, in the sense that if a person owns even one cow, it seems clear that he or she would have direct access to cream or milk for hot drinks. Once again, a sleuthing mind is an asset in this type of research.

Due to the complexity of interpreting probate inventories, my method for determining the actual presence of tea and teaware was a bit complex at times, yet consistently logical. As

described above, my intentions were to estimate how many Americans on the verge of independence from Britain in 1774 had the capability of drinking tea regularly, and with ceremony. Alice Hanson Jones's *American Colonial Wealth* appeared to be a convenient and accurate sampling of early American documents, and therefore, I chose to use those as the basis for my research. I did however, narrow down the scope of my investigation from all thirteen colonies to three. The short list for this study covers Massachusetts, New York and Virginia, as an attempt to glean information from the three major regions of the early United States: New England, the middle colonies, and the South. The one problem with the choice of these three particular areas is that the number of inventories that each contains is not evenly weighted. New York presents the biggest problem, because Jones was able to include only twenty-three inventories from that colony. I believe that New York is still relevant, however, because it is a colony that contained both urban and rural areas, and the inventories Jones used do indeed cover both extremes. On the other hand, the very large number of inventories from Massachusetts, 311 of the 410 total from the three colonies, gave the colony extraordinary weight in the overall percentages. Separate colony and county statistics were also kept so that the information could be more easily dissected.

The first task in going through the inventories was to put together a listing of items that were appropriate to a study of tea and coffee drinking. This job was not particularly difficult due to the "kits" that authors like Rodris Roth and Louise Conway Belden have identified. When going through the inventories I noted the general demographic information: the person's name, location, occupation and total estate value. The specific items tallied were kettles, teapots, tea cups, saucers, spoons, bowls, plates, creamers, sugars, coffee pots, tables, chairs, coffee mills, anything identified as a "set" of teaware, and the miscellaneous items that included tea chests, canisters, caddies, boards, waiters, tongs, tablecloths and any mention of tea, coffee or sugar. Documenting this range of items allows for the examination of whether or not the owner would have had the possibility of putting on a comprehensive tea party, with dessert and other

refreshments in addition to the tea itself. Furthermore, a decedent may not have demonstrated ownership of tea cups and saucers, but if he or she owned a parcel of “china” in addition to a teapot or tea canister, we can then assume that the person had the ability to put together a moderately well-equipped tea service. This wide range of items allowed me to look at the larger picture of the tea ritual.

At the other extreme, some individuals did not own many of these items, and seemed to show no evidence of tea drinking. The question arises, subsequently, of what constitutes tea-readiness. A person may own several objects on the list of related items, especially tables, chairs, plates and spoons, but ownership of those items does not directly bear upon the ritual of drinking tea or coffee. Therefore, I have set the threshold for a decedent to be included as a “positive” in my examination at either owning a kettle (which directly implies hot drinks) or owning another item that specifically has the adjective “tea” or “coffee” attached to it. Because my intentions are to demonstrate the social aspects of tea, and the status that tea equipment conveyed upon the owner, I held to the kettle, rather than a simple iron pot, as the minimum requirement. Any type of pot will suffice for boiling water, but a kettle indicates a more direct desire to drink tea or coffee in the proper format.

After having set this standard, all of the decedents still did not appear to have had the capability to drink tea on a regular basis. These individuals were then noted on a separate list, for those without direct evidence of tea drinking. This was true no matter what the wealth of the individual. At times, decedents with an estate valued at several hundred pounds had to be put on this list simply due to the ways in which their inventories were written. For instance, one would assume that if a person whose estate was valued at 75 pounds were able to own the minimum of equipment, then an individual worth 300 pounds would have owned some tea equipment also. Certain inventories, however, were so vague as to not list individual items, and I therefore could not put them into the “positive” category with any certainty. Lois Green Carr and Lorena S.

Walsh used the level of 225 pounds of wealth as their cutoff for being categorized as “wealthy.”³⁹ Using this artificial wealth level to calculate a new set of figures, and as a means for inclusion in the “yes” category, the percentage in every colony rises significantly. Separate statistics were calculated taking wealth levels into consideration. (See Column L, p.52, in the Appendix.)

In a further effort to keep an eye on the “big picture” of tea-drinking, care was taken to make accurate notation of any descriptors attached to the items. As mentioned earlier, adjectives abound in the inventories, and taking note of them allows the researcher to construct a mental image of the true level of gentility the person was able to attain in his or her tea service. For example, an entry of “dozen cups and saucers” does not say nearly as much as “dozen blue and white cups and saucers.” This description shows a preference for a type of ceramic that was quite popular in the late eighteenth century, and the type of person who probably wanted to own only the best. On this same track, item value was also noted for each relevant entry. For the most part, items were appraised individually, or in logical sets, such as the “dozen cups and saucers,” but at other times, items were more vaguely grouped and individual value is harder to ascertain. In such situations, footnotes were made within my tables of evidence listing the entire group of items and the combined value the items were given at appraisal.

Tea in 1774

From this method and analysis, I drew some concrete conclusions regarding the overall commonality and prevalence of tea drinking, and more specifically, ownership of tea equipment in the thirteen British American colonies in 1774. Of the total 410 inventories contained in Jones’ sampling of Massachusetts, New York and Virginia, just under 75% demonstrate at least minimal ownership of tea equipment. The standards used to gauge this factor were only meant to indicate the possibility of the decedent, and therefore, his or her household (if any), for preparing and drinking tea or coffee. Further analysis indicates that approximately 22% of the total

³⁹ Carr and Walsh, “Changing Lifestyles,” pp.70,81.

decedents also displayed the capability to put together and serve a more complete and formal tea. The decedents included within this 22% ranged in capability, but they all at least showed signs of owning a kettle, teapot and some cups and saucers for a sit-down tea ritual. These same people were those who also often demonstrated some of the more high-end elements of the kit, i.e. tea caddies, silver tongs, etc. In terms of coffee drinking, the same percentage as could serve a fairly complete tea (22%) also demonstrated ownership of equipment specifically for coffee. For the most part, these percentages serve to reinforce earlier studies and conclusions made about the role of tea in eighteenth-century America.

There were no real surprises in relation to the findings on general tea ownership. Within the three colonies examined, 74.88% of the decedents met the minimum requirements for brewing tea. As mentioned earlier, this standard meant either owning a kettle or another piece of equipment specifically described as being used for tea. Again, presumably if an individual owned something like a tea board or tea canister, in spite of no mention being made about cups or saucers, the person was probably using such items in the process of drinking and serving tea, or other hot drinks. A good example of this phenomenon is that of Joshua Coffin, Esquire, of Newbury, Massachusetts.⁴⁰ Coffin's estate was valued at just over 485 pounds.⁴¹ An estate value of just under 500 pounds, in addition to having the title "esquire" indicates that Coffin was a man of some social and economic standing. His estate, however, lists only one item directly pertaining to either tea or coffee – a coffee mill valued at two shillings. This specific mention allowed him to be included in my analysis, but one does not have to look far to find other circumstantial indicators that Coffin's household (he was married) drank tea or coffee. Certainly one would wonder what Coffin was doing with a coffee mill if he and his family were not grinding the beans, and then presumably roasting and brewing them to drink. Possibly, it could

⁴⁰ Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, vol.2, pp.637-9.

⁴¹ All values listed in Jones' study are given in the local currency. Coffin's estate, for example, is measured in Massachusetts pounds, rather than British pounds sterling. Exchange rates are given within Jones' work, in volume three of *American Colonial Wealth*, p.1706.

have just been some sort of family legacy or odd acquisition, but other items within Coffin's inventory seem to indicate tea or coffee drinking. Amidst the variety of his possessions nothing bears the adjective "tea," nor are there any cups, saucers or even spoons. What we do find, however, is an entry of "glass, earthen & China" -ware valued at 34 shillings. It seems safe to say that amidst more than one pound's worth of glass and ceramics (a significant amount of money) there were cups, saucers or other items involved in partaking of hot drinks. It is for this reason that Joshua Coffin falls safely within the approximately 75% of tea owners in this study.

My findings in this general category of equipment ownership seem reasonable based on other scholarship from the past several decades. Sidney Mintz and Wolfgang Schivelbusch make a strong case for tea as having been a pervasive drink among all economic levels of households in the eighteenth century. Mintz, especially, having probed some of the dietary habits of poor British citizens argues that highly sweetened tea was an integral part of the working-class diet. Mintz describes how the adult males in such families got to eat most of the meat and substantial foodstuffs in order to go out and perform a full day of hard work, while women and children in families ate more bread and drinks sweetened with sugar as their main calorie source⁴². Furthermore, considering the small percentage of truly wealthy people within early American society, a statistic showing a population composed of 75% tea-drinkers demonstrates that a large number of poorer people drank tea in some form, and possibly even made attempts at a more complete tea ritual. Furthermore, if the statistics are modified by wealth strata, and the wealthy can be assumed to have owned tea equipment, the overall percentage jumps to just over 83%⁴³. This number seems to correlate even further with Mintz and Schivelbusch. One must continue to keep in mind, however, that my sample is not even half the size of Jones' original sampling (410 of 919), and that these colonies could potentially display characteristics not consistent with the

⁴² Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, p.145.

⁴³ Carr and Walsh established 225 pounds as the minimum estate value of a "wealthy" person. I have chosen to keep this standard, and all further references to the wealthy will be based upon it unless an exception is noted.

other ten. Such aberrations seem unlikely though, and other scholarship backs this claim. Carole Shammas demonstrated that tea was an item of “mass consumption,” an item used regularly by two-thirds of white adults.⁴⁴ An ownership percentage of 75%, well over two-thirds, is consistent with this data.

The colony of Virginia presents the lowest showing of tea-drinkers among the three colonies included in this investigation. (Refer to Column C, p.51, in the Appendix) Only 52% of the decedents in the counties that Jones selected for her survey demonstrated the capability of adequately producing tea or other hot drinks. In fact, the colony also had a survey-wide county low of 33% ownership in Mecklenburg County. Mecklenburg becomes a statistical oddity though, because the county only had a total of three inventories for 1774. Either the population of the county was lower than most others, or it simply experienced a lower-than-normal death rate in that year. In any case, it is hard to make many significant conclusions from the inventories in Mecklenburg County. Counties like Halifax and Chesterfield had a much more reasonable number of inventories, fifteen or sixteen apiece, and their ownership statistics came much closer to the colony’s 52% than Mecklenburg. Spotsylvania County had the highest percentage of ownership within Virginia, demonstrating that 87% of its decedents seemed to make or drink tea on a regular basis.

Virginia’s more rural and agrarian nature, in comparison to New York and Massachusetts, explains why Virginia was more than twenty points behind the rest of the survey in ownership of tea equipment. Virginia did have Williamsburg as a major town, and ports where ships bearing goods from England would have been able to dock and make exchanges, most especially for tobacco. As the eighteenth century wore on, though, Williamsburg could not begin to compete with the major cities of Boston and New York. These cities were markets for exchange and purchase, and also capitols of the fashion world. This is not to say that Williamsburg, or ports along the James River, did not have any contact with London or Paris, but

⁴⁴ This discussion occurs on pp.6-7 of this paper, and is documented at footnote number 17.

the ties to New York and Boston could certainly be perceived to be stronger. Interestingly enough, proximity to a major city seems to have had little impact on tea ownership. The counties in Virginia with the highest ownership percentages were not clustered around the capitol city of Williamsburg. In fact, the counties from Virginia that Jones used for her work lie mainly along the North Carolina border, though Fairfax and Spotsylvania are further north and are located closer to Maryland. The higher statistics for tea ownership were scattered all over the eastern portion of the colony, which can be explained by the nature of planter society, where large, wealthy landowners are spread across the countryside, rather than clustered in one location. In this sense, the desire for genteel behavior was more important than geographic location.

Aside from access and knowledge of the latest modes of fashion, Virginians may not have had the income to purchase the same amount and quality of new wares as in New York or Massachusetts. The agrarian economy in the Chesapeake was dominated by slave labor, and aside from the few wealthy white planters who owned slaves, most of the whites in Virginia were not much better off financially than slaves. Out of the three colonies examined, Virginia had the highest percentage (18.42%) of individuals whose estates were valued at less than fifty pounds, and concurrently showed no evidence of tea-drinking. (Refer to Column H, p.52) Adjusting for wealthy owners, the overall percentage for the colony rises to 64% (Column L), but that is still approximately twenty percentage points less than the survey total, and remains the lowest of the three colonies examined.

The information from New York, having not been divided into counties for Jones' purposes, or for this examination, is harder to dissect. Information was taken from several different counties, but the inventories are not presented in the same structured pattern as in Virginia and Massachusetts. In addition, the entire number of documents was so much lower in comparison to the other colonies (23 versus 76 or 311) that the effort to distinguish them seems almost futile. In any case, New York came up with an impressive showing of 69% ownership of tea equipment among decedents. Furthermore, as expected, if one makes an arbitrary standard of

what is “wealthy,” the percentage of ownership can be presumed to rest at just under 74%. On the other end of the spectrum, 13% of the decedents had an estate valued at less than fifty pounds, and showed no sign of tea equipment. This statistic of poor decedents is lower than that in Virginia, but still significantly higher than Massachusetts.

One generally expects that New Yorkers, even in the eighteenth century, would have been at the head of whatever wealth measurements are made, whether it be estate value, cost of living, or ownership of luxury goods. After all, as of 1763, all thirteen colonies had a population of under three million, whereas New York was the largest city in the colonies, with a population of approximately 22,000.⁴⁵ New York did not win the race in this study, however, and was easily surpassed by ownership levels in Massachusetts. Perhaps this is where the size of the sample comes most strongly into effect. New York’s percentages here are based solely upon twenty-three probate inventories, whereas Massachusetts has 311. The discrepancy is enormous. Alice Hanson Jones, however, felt that the twenty-three inventories from New York were the best to be had, and perhaps they really do provide the most representative example of what the colony looked like economically in 1774.

The colony of Massachusetts by far displayed the greatest amount of wealth and luxury goods of the three colonies examined for this investigation. The colony easily outpaced New York and Virginia with an explicit ownership percentage of just under 81%. Adjustment for wealth brings the total even higher, to 88%. For all intents and purposes, Massachusetts presents itself, at least through its probate inventories, as a prominent area for tea drinking and other genteel habits. The percentage of decedents who owned less than 50 pounds worth of property at the time of their death and also showed no direct evidence of tea equipment was an astonishingly low 6%. It also appears that wealth, rather than culture or habit was the main factor for non-ownership. Among the sixty decedents in the colony who were not counted in the category of explicit owners, nineteen owned less than fifty pounds worth of property, or 31%. (Refer to

Column G, p.52, in the Appendix) This number does not create a majority among those not counted, but it does reach almost one-third, which seems to at least hint at the fact that wealth, or lack thereof, was a major factor in whether or not one owned tea equipment – wealth as opposed to just not being interested, a cultural factor.

On a county-by-county basis Massachusetts also shows some astonishing numbers. Hampshire County, incidentally, the county in the study farthest from Boston, had the highest ownership percentage at just over 96%. The colony-wide low of 51% in Plymouth County was also higher than half of the counties included from Virginia. Plymouth County was one of the worst “victims” of vague inventories, meaning the type that only listed large categories of goods, such as land or household items. When Plymouth is corrected for decedents with estates valued at 225 pounds or more, the county percentage of ownership jumps dramatically to 74%, higher than the entire sampling within New York.

The possible reasons for the impressive showing of Massachusetts are many and varied. Though proximity to an urban center on a county-by-county basis does not appear to have made much difference in this investigation, the presence of Boston cannot be ignored. As mentioned earlier, Boston was one of the largest cities in the British American colonies and was a major commercial center, whose residents numbered approximately 15,000⁴⁶. Throughout the Revolutionary and New Nation periods in American history, Boston, and New England in general, were known for being large manufacturing centers with a strong interest in international trade and the world economy. For the purposes of this study, trade equals fashion, and tea-drinking was certainly a part of fashionable Anglo society. Ladies in the Boston area would have been some of the best informed in the colonies regarding new modes of table setting for afternoon tea and evening tea parties. They would have been privy to what ceramics and imported porcelains were available back in England through trade with China, and most certainly made

⁴⁵ Countryman, *The American Revolution*, p.9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.9.

requests for such items. In his article on the demand behind the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, Cary Carson quoted Daniel Neal's comments from *The History of New England* (1720), noting that

‘A gentleman from London,’ according to one who was, ‘would almost think himself at home in Boston, when he observes the numbers of people, their houses, their furniture, their tables, their dress and conversation.’ A Bostonian’s display of fashion... was ‘as splendid as that of the most considerable Tradesman in London.’⁴⁷

The colonies clearly had the ability to keep up with British fashions if they so desired.

The general standard of living in Massachusetts also appears higher than either New York or Virginia, based on the limited findings of this investigation. Only six percent of Massachusetts’ inventories demonstrated decedents without any evidence of tea equipment, as well as an estate valued at less than fifty pounds. This number compares with New York’s 13% and Virginia’s 18%. (Column H, p.52) Once again, Massachusetts has far outstripped her fellow colonies in terms of wealth indicators. As will be further discussed below, among those who could have made a valid attempt at a full tea ritual, Massachusetts also demonstrated the highest percentage of ownership. To be able to have the basic equipment for high afternoon tea, much less an all-encompassing tea party with invited guests, requires a significant degree of wealth, disposable income, and knowledge of genteel behavior. Families in Massachusetts seem the best prepared of those in the three colonies to meet those standards.

The cultural importance of tea may have also played a role in explaining Massachusetts’ percentages of tea equipment ownership. In Revolutionary lore, Massachusetts is often characterized as the birthplace and home of numerous patriots like Paul Revere, John Hancock and Samuel and John Adams. The people of the New England colonies were the men and women who took their tea seriously enough to risk imprisonment by throwing cases of the beloved stuff into Boston Harbor at the most famous “Tea Party” ever. Perhaps the reason that Massachusetts

has the greatest indications of tea-drinking in her probate inventories is because her population was much more committed to the practice than those in other areas of the almost-independent nation. The reason the findings in this study for Virginia do not equal Massachusetts is most likely due to demographics. The number of these wealthy planters was miniscule in proportion to the numbers of African slaves and poor whites that also inhabited the colony. This is not to say that slavery was not a factor north of the Mason-Dixon line, because it certainly was present. A New England colony, however, is able to make a better statistical showing of gentility and wealth indicators due to a more balanced population than that of the South. Historians also often describe how the great planters of Virginia saw themselves as transplanted English Cavaliers; that these men worked diligently to remain as fashionable as any gentleman on a London street. If this assumption is true, we can further presume that tea was also a part of planter fashions – perhaps the female counterpart for the males’ hunting and riding equipment.

Coffee: The patriotic alternative

Changing the focus just slightly, let us now examine the role coffee played in the three colonies in 1774. Many scholars over the years have made it clear that coffee and tea came hand-in-hand, with the third of the “big three,” chocolate, right in tow. Tea eventually became the most important drink of the three among the British. Many on the continent may have endorsed coffee and chocolate, but when it came down to it, Britain was a nation of tea-drinkers in the eighteenth century. The findings of this investigation alone make it clear that the colonists also took their tea seriously in the late eighteenth century, and appear just as committed to the Asian import as their forebears in the mother country. Due to coffee’s historical ties to tea and coffee’s strong history in Britain, and Europe in general, it is worthy of attention in this study, especially considering the taxes levied on the colonists in the 1760s and 1770s.

⁴⁷ Cary Carson, “The Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in Carson, Hoffman and Albert (eds). *Of Consuming Interests*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia,

In addition to tea, coffee also shows a significant, though smaller, presence in the property of the 1774 decedents. For the 410 inventories in all three colonies, just under 22% of the decedents owned a piece of equipment directly related to the processing and/or drinking of coffee. The most common items were coffee mills for grinding the beans, but ownership also included a large number of coffee pots, and sometimes even separate sets of coffee cups and saucers in addition to whatever tea set the person may have owned. A handful of decedents even had a store of coffee itself. The problems of representation in the inventories has already been addressed at length, but readers must again keep in mind that these surveys could, on one hand, be as accurate a sample as possible, or perhaps represent only half of the population as a whole, or possibly even both. Whatever extrapolations are made about the findings must be made with those considerations in mind.

That over one-fifth of the inventoried persons in this study owned some of the equipment used in making and serving coffee is not surprising. Coffee had become something of a patriotic drink in the colonies in the 1770s. Rodris Roth describes how political one's choice of breakfast beverage could be in the last decade of America's colonial status with the coming of the Townsend Act in 1767. The Act put duties on several imports, including tea.⁴⁸ More stringent enforcement of the tax in 1773 led to the Boston Tea Party, which further provoked to the British government and brought greater restrictions upon the colonies. Americans however, had devised other, less confrontational ways to avoid the tea tax. A switch on the part of colonists to coffee for their hot morning beverage, and as a closing act for dinner, was taken to be the patriotic way to denounce Britain's taxes. Indications from this study demonstrate that a significant amount of the population at least made the motions towards drinking coffee. In addition, the statistics for explicit signs of coffee are quite consistent, especially in comparison to the statistics on tea. Between New York's low of 17% and Massachusetts high of 22.5% there are only five and a half

1994, p.635.

⁴⁸ Roth, "Tea Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America," pp.66-67.

percentage points difference, which makes it seem that levels of ownership were fairly even throughout the colonies.

Deducing conclusions from the coffee statistics is not, however, without its complications. The primary problem is that the ownership levels may appear artificially low due to the similar nature of the two drinks. As long as individuals were able to purchase coffee beans for roasting, grinding and brewing, no equipment beyond that used for tea was really necessary. Perhaps a residual taste or aroma was left behind in the ceramics themselves when switching between the two beverages, but if a person could not afford two separate sets, one would certainly suffice. A coffee mill is perhaps the one true exception to that rule. For the most part, however, tea equipment could easily double for coffee equipment, provided one wasn't too particular about the way in which the coffee was brewed and served. As far as fashion was concerned, coffeepots were shaped differently than teapots, and coffee cups were taller and narrower than traditional Chinese-style teacups.⁴⁹ The truly fashion-conscious would have wanted to own an appropriate set of coffee equipment for serving the patriotic drink to company, but those who could not afford to do so could have easily made do with whatever tea equipment they already had. Among the wealthy, however, if an individual wanted to be truly patriotic (in addition to being fashionable), and had the means to do so, he or she would have probably made sure to purchase as much specific coffee equipment as possible.

Examples of both extremes (improvisers and extravagant coffee-drinkers) exist within the inventories examined for this study. In terms of improvisation, John Soren, a baker in Boston, is one of the best examples. Soren owned what appears to be a fairly decent set of tea equipment, including one small tea kettle, six tea cups and saucers, and what is described as one "old" tea table.⁵⁰ Soren shows no evidence of coffee equipment, not even a coffee mill, but he did own three pounds of coffee at the time of his death. There seems to be no other obvious explanation

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.81.

⁵⁰ Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, vol.2, p.998.

except that Soren was using his tea equipment to brew and drink coffee. One of Soren's Boston neighbors, Andrew Oliver, Esquire, resided at the other end of the coffee spectrum. Oliver had one of the most comprehensive tea sets in the inventories – three tea kettles, over two dozen tea cups and saucers, six tea spoons, a cream pot, sugar canister, two tea tables, a tea canister and an “old” tea board.⁵¹ He also owned a substantial set of coffee equipment, which included six coffee cups and saucers, two coffeepots and a coffee mill. Oliver would have been able to serve coffee in nearly as fine a fashion, if not to so many people, as his household served tea.

Among the three colonies examined, Massachusetts again came out with the highest percentage of ownership. In this category, however, the percentages were not nearly so wide-ranging as with general tea ownership. Virginia surprisingly outdistanced New York, by several percentage points – 21% as opposed to 17%. (Refer to Column N, p.53, in the Appendix) Virginia also had the greatest swing from high to low in this field. Southampton County only demonstrated 9% ownership, and Spotsylvania County was at the other extreme with 37.5% ownership. Surprisingly enough, this mark of 37% was the highest within any of the three colonies. The caveat to that finding is that the statistic is based upon only three out of eight inventories in the county. Suffolk County in Massachusetts had a more balanced finding of 34%, based on 34 out of 99 inventories.

As mentioned earlier, because the results of all three colonies were so close, there does not appear to be much room for wide discrepancies. In other words, in spite of any possible “flukes” the numbers are consistent enough to appear accurate on a wider level. Surely if all three of these colonies contained a population of whom one-fifth were dedicated, or at least nominal, coffee drinkers, then other colonies must have found themselves in this same range. These findings regarding coffee-drinking seem to bolster other claims regarding coffee having been somewhat popular, if not extremely patriotic, as a late-colonial beverage. It also makes sense, in several ways, that Massachusetts should have demonstrated the highest ownership

⁵¹ Ibid., pp.966-971.

percentages. The point has been belabored before, but Massachusetts did have a great asset in the city of Boston, with its access to imported goods and knowledge of the latest fashions. One must also keep in mind that Massachusetts was the colony known for patriotism and for challenging what were perceived to be unjust taxes and limitations upon personal liberties. Demonstrably switching from enjoying the traditional afternoon tea, to taking a cup of coffee in its place was one good way for the colonists there to go about expressing their patriotism.

A fashionable ritual for family and guests

Discussing tea and coffee equipage in the eighteenth century does not stop at a cursory examination of basic ownership levels. Within the 410 inventories examined for this study, there was a wide range of levels of ownership. Many individuals barely made the threshold of being counted as a “positive,” with perhaps only a kettle and few cups. Other, more wealthy colonists owned every possible item related to tea, from a mahogany tea tray to a pair of fancy silver sugar tongs. Somewhere within the extremes of these two personas exists a status where one can be said to have the ability to serve tea adequately to guests. The issue of how many inventoried people made this next cutoff point will be the subject of this next section.

Determining the appropriate standard for this level of equipage is difficult. Where is the line between a full tea service for guests and a more limited set for family use? The numbers of items distinguished within in the inventories give some indication of an answer to this question, but do not set a definitive standard. It is important to note that the number of inventories that give an absolute count on the amount of cups and saucers a decedent owned is relatively few. For the most part, entries within the inventories simply mentioned “cups and saucers” or a “set” of tea equipage. Among those where numerical quantities were mentioned, multiples of six were the most common, with some decedents owning several sets of six, thus giving them the capacity to serve a larger group of people. Of the 410 inventories used in this study, only eight displayed

evidence of decedents having the ability to serve 24 or more guests – which might be considered the standard number for a large afternoon or evening tea party.⁵²

Certainly, very few people owned the entire spectrum of tea and coffee items, but does that mean that everyone else was unable to still sit down with some company and serve a respectable tea? I would venture to say that the answer is in the negative. Just as there are varying levels of social acceptance today, the same surely existed in the eighteenth century. Upon going to work for the British furniture designer Thomas Sheraton, a young Adam Black noted:

He [Sheraton] lived on an obscure street, his house half shop, half dwelling-house, and looked himself like a worn-out Methodist minister, with a threadbare black coat. I took tea with them one afternoon. There were a cup and a saucer for the host, and another for his wife, and a little porringer for their daughter. The wife's cup and saucer were given to me, and she had to put up with another little porringer. My host seemed a good man, with some talent... Miserable as the pay was, I was half ashamed to take it from the poor man.⁵³

This was clearly a case where the host and hostess did not reach the appropriate level of fashion. We can see that one's guests could easily observe whether or not their host or hostess was keeping up with the Joneses (to borrow a phrase), but the replacement of an imported china slop bowl with a Delft sample would presumably not condemn a woman to societal infamy.

For such reasons, I set what I believe to be a low, but nonetheless comprehensive standard for being judged as able to serve a full tea. First of all, all of these individuals who met the standard for even being classified as “positive” for tea ownership owned at least a kettle or the minimum trappings for preparing a hot drink. The next item required for moving to the next level is a teapot, of any sort. The person should also have cups, and hopefully saucers for those teacups. The last set of required items is that of tables and chairs. The table need not have been described as a “tea” table, nor did the decedent have to own high-fashion chairs, but he or she

⁵² The absolute numbers of decedents suited for this area of inquiry were so small that I felt calculating statistics for them would have been somewhat trivial.

⁵³ Adam Black quoted in Ralph Fastnedge. *English Furniture Styles from 1500-1830*. London: Penguin Books, 1955, p.223.

would have had to provide some sort of seating, and something where the equipment could be placed and around which the guests could gather. When a decedent met all of these requirements, or else owned anything classified as a tea “set,” he or she was included in the category of being able to serve a “complete” tea. Certain exceptions were made, however, in the case of implicit wealth and potential for ownership. An individual could have also been included if he or she owned a tea canister, waiter, caddy, or some other very high-end item of tea equipment which would have been completely superfluous without an actual tea set to back it up. The incidences of this were rare, with only a handful of such examples among the 410 inventories; most people who owned such items also demonstrated ownership of a complement of the more basic tea equipment.

Concrete examples of what types of decedents were considered as being the owners of a relatively complete tea service will help to clarify these issues. The easiest type of individual to classify were decedents like Jonathan Holmes of New York. Holmes’ occupation is not listed in his inventory, nor does it specify exactly where in New York he lived, but the first item to notice is that his estate was valued at a very comfortable 371 pounds, 17s, 6d. His inventory includes the trappings of a very elaborate tea equipage including: two tea kettles, three tea pots (one of them silver), three different sets of teacups and saucers (one set of 11 matching pieces, one of 7, and one of 5), six silver tea and table spoons, two coffee pots, silver milk pots and sugar pots, a mahogany tea board, a japanned tea chest, and two tin tea canisters.⁵⁴ There is no question that Holmes and his wife could have served several guests a very formal tea. Moving down a notch, a farmer in Southampton County, Virginia provides an example of the most typical type of person who made it into this category. William Bynum, whose estate was appraised at just over 441 pounds owned several kettles, two tea pots, and six teacups and saucers.⁵⁵ These items included everything Bynum owned that was specifically labeled for tea, however, other items give

⁵⁴ Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, vol.2, pp.1107-11.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.1328-29.

additional weight to the idea that a semi-formal tea could have been served in the Bynum household. The family also owned six spoons, a milk pot, a sugar box, a table and several chairs. All of these items taken together create a fairly complete tea equipage.

Other individuals did not show as much direct evidence of tea equipment, but the things they did own imply the ability to adequately serve tea. In Salem, Massachusetts, John Higginson, Esquire, fits this description. The only items Higginson owned which were directly labeled as being used for tea were an unspecified number of waiters and teaboards (some of them japanned), and a tea chest.⁵⁶ The nature of these few items alone indicates that Higginson would have been serving tea because they are the types of items that would have been nearly useless without other tea equipment to use with them. Furthermore, the value of Higginson's movable property was appraised at approximately 270 pounds, putting him into the category of "wealthy." The last pieces of the puzzle were his ownership of several pounds worth of fashionable mahogany tables and chairs, as well as an astonishing 58 pounds worth of plate silver. It seems a safe assumption that John Higginson's wife Mehetable would have been able to serve a proper tea to her family and friends, in spite of the lack of explicit evidence for the ritual.

The statistics for individuals meeting the standard of "complete" tea services were remarkably similar to those numbers related to the examination of coffee. For the entire survey, the percentage was identical to coffee: 21.95% of the decedents in Massachusetts, New York and Virginia appeared able to serve a respectable tea. (Refer to Column P, p.53, in the Appendix) The implications of this number correspond to previously-held ideas regarding gentility and the amount of people who were able to aspire to such ways of life. If, for instance, probate inventories do indeed cover only half of the entire population in these areas, additionally assuming that none of the uncounted half would have owned elaborate tea equipment, then these findings indicate that barely 11% of all colonists were able to serve a fashionable tea to others. A percentage in the range of 10% of the population matches quite well with other scholarship on

dining habits and foodways in early America; it is even a bit high in terms of who could have truly been considered “elite.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, controlling for high wealth levels, the percentage moves even higher. Using the same 225-pound standard for being considered “wealthy” and adding in all those who rise to that level (but were not counted due to lack of specificity in their inventories), the total percentage for the three colonies becomes just over 30%. Taking into account how pervasive tea was in the early American lifestyle, especially among the middling and upper classes, it makes sense that nearly one-third of the inventoried population would have been able to sit down to a somewhat formal breakfast or afternoon tea.

Virginia’s statistics are once again found to be significantly lower than the survey average. Demonstrating only 14% of an inventoried population that was able to put together a formal tea service is well below the average for the entire investigation. With wealth controls added, Virginia’s percentage jumps 12 significant percentage points, to 26%, but this is still nearly five points behind the average for all three colonies with wealth considered as a factor. (Refer to Column R, p.53) Clearly, Virginia was not a colony where a wide variety of people could put together the trappings for a high tea. One must keep in mind, however, that Virginia does demonstrate ownership of the three varieties listed earlier – the clear-cut luxury type, the basic set owner, and those whose equipment required a bit more piecing together. The absolute numbers of people who met any of these standards were simply lower than the other colonies, perhaps owing once again to Virginia’s more agrarian and rural nature. A large percentage of slaves, servants and poor white farmers would not compare as favorably with the northern colonies where more of a middling class was established. Finally, it is also important to keep in mind that the selection of inventories from Virginia is not as wide as one might hope for – 76 total versus the 311 in Massachusetts.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp.704-6.

⁵⁷ For more information on such issues, please refer to Chapter 2 in Barbara Carson’s *Ambitious Appetites*, entitled “Ways to Take a Meal: A Ranked Order.”

New York may have been considered to be one of the more fashionable places to live in early America, as it is today, but the numbers for this category of consideration do not really demonstrate that point. The inventories that Jones used from the colony of New York only display approximately a 13% portion of decedents for whom serving an adequately equipped tea would have been possible. The addition of any other wealthy individuals brings the percentage up to 17%, but this is still seven points behind Massachusetts' flat rating and fifteen points behind its wealth-controlled statistic. It seems that sample size once again is a critical factor to take into consideration. New York's total amount of inventories in Jones' *American Colonial Wealth* only amounted to twenty-three. Granted, there were problems finding more inventories than that for use, but this sample is only a fraction of the 311 used for the colony of Massachusetts. For this reason, any numbers from New York must always have some sort of asterisk by them in the reader's mind. This is not to say that they are totally inadequate; on a person-by-person basis and in consideration of the colonies as a whole they are useful, but colony-wide percentages are bound not to be completely faithful to what the situation in 1774 really was. Taking a more conservative view, however, perhaps New York is just an example of the strict estimations regarding early American wealth that scholars have already proposed. If only five or ten percent of the population around the turn of the nineteenth century could really be considered "elite," then New York's results are just holding more strongly to that estimation than others. Once again, we are able to see some of the problems that can arise from making statistical judgments based on probate inventories.

Moving northward to Massachusetts, however, brings the researcher to a colony with none of these same statistical problems, as well as the highest percentage of ownership for complete tea services. Relying solely upon more explicit evidence, 24% of the inventoried population in Massachusetts could be said to have been able to serve a full tea. This number is higher than the numbers for the other two colonies, and more than two full percentage points above the survey-wide statistic. Even the lowest percentage in the colony, 20% in Worcester

County, was higher than either New York or Virginia's total showing. Adding in any formerly not-counted wealthy individuals raises the percentages even higher. The statistic for the colony rises to 32% ownership, and the numbers for Plymouth County reach the highest of any county in this investigation at nearly 46%. The 26% ownership level in Essex County with wealth controls is the lowest in Massachusetts, which is fairly surprising.

In most other considerations throughout this study, Essex and Suffolk Counties, with the highest absolute number of inventories and what appears to be a more urban population, usually scored higher than any other county, whether compared to Massachusetts or the other two colonies. In this category of complete tea services (with a control for wealth), however, Essex and Suffolk Counties scored the lowest of the five in Massachusetts, perhaps indicating what a varied and comprehensive sampling of a relatively urban population can do to the statistics. These two counties include Boston, Salem, Marblehead, and others among the cities and large towns in the colony. Urban settings always have their share of poorer groups of people, and perhaps their presence lowers the percentages for these two normally affluent counties. In general, both counties appear wealthier than their neighbors, but when it comes to the highest degrees of wealth, their varied population starts to show itself.

The overall economy of Massachusetts may play a role in these findings. When considering the exchange rates for the local currencies of these three colonies to the British pound sterling, Massachusetts has one of the most favorable rates. According to Alice Hanson Jones, in Massachusetts the exchange rate was 1.33 local pounds to one pound sterling, versus 1.32 in Virginia and 1.79 in New York.⁵⁸ This means that of the three colonies, Massachusetts and Virginia had to turn over much less of their own currency to receive one pound sterling from the British, thus indicating that their currencies were stronger and could purchase more per unit. With this in mind, it makes sense that Massachusetts has fared well in all of the measures of tea-related wealth in this investigation. What does not follow, conversely, is the role that Virginia

has played in every question asked so far. Why would a colony with a relatively strong currency come out so far behind another colony with a comparable rate of exchange? Perhaps this is another situation where the urban versus rural characteristics of the two come into play. Even in the eighteenth century, Massachusetts was on more of an industrial path than was Virginia, whose economy was much more closely tied to tobacco crops and farming in general. These exchange rates also help to clarify why New York has not performed as well as might have been expected. The colony's currency was worth approximately one-third less than its two counterparts. Exchange rates, however, are only one piece of the large economic puzzle of which the thirteen colonies were all part.

At this point, it has been established that approximately 75% of these inventoried populations owned some form of tea equipment, 22% owned fairly thorough kits of equipment for the tea ritual, and another 22% demonstrated ownership of coffee equipment. Now we may consider what *types* of tea equipment the decedents in Virginia, New York and Massachusetts owned in 1774. A discussion of this sort might begin with approximations of how many of the inventories demonstrated matching sets of equipment. Determining a method for judging what does and does not qualify as a "matched set" is not simple. For the purposes of this study, I decided to look for the most basic levels of matching equipment. To qualify as having owned "matching equipment" the decedent need only have had two or three of any particular item grouped together in his or her inventory, or have had an entry described as, for instance, "a set of teaware." Under these circumstances, one cannot be totally sure that the items involved were a matching set, but it is the most feasible way to make a judgment based on the nature of the inventories.

Among the entire survey, approximately 17% of the decedents demonstrated some level of matching equipment. (Please refer to Column T, p.54, in the Appendix.) When the statistics are divided up among the three colonies, the numbers are fairly consistent. Massachusetts, as

⁵⁸ Alice Hanson Jones, *American Colonial Wealth*, vol.3, pp.1706.

might be predicted, leads the group with 17.68%, but Virginia is very close behind with 17.32%. New York showed only 13% percent of its decedents as having owned any sort of matching equipment. When corrected for wealth, the overall totals rise several percentage points, with the survey total jumping up to 25%. (Column V) There are several factors to keep in mind when trying to draw conclusions from these findings. The first is that these numbers may actually be underestimates, considering that I only counted items that were either grouped together with specific numbers of pieces, i.e. “six cups and saucers,” or items that had the adjective “set” attached to the entry. At various points throughout the inventories, there were also listings for “parcels” of earthenware, delft or china, but I considered that term to be fairly vague and chose not to include them in the statistics for sets. Furthermore, these numbers do not necessarily indicate an entire matched tea *service*, but rather, *parts* of a set. The number of decedents who actually owned complete sets of tea equipment, spanning everything from the teapot to sugar tongs, would correspond more directly to the statistics discussed earlier in this paper, and not even all of those entries could directly be perceived to have matched. Therefore, the examination on this issue seems to indicate that most of the decedents who owned tea equipment throughout these three colonies owned a variety of items for the tea ceremony, some of which matched in small segments, but may not have matched with each other as a whole.

The next logical step to take in this realm of inquiry is to ask what specific kinds of ceramics and metals the decedents owned among their tea equipage. The possibilities range from the finest silver and china to the most basic pieces of stoneware or earthenware. While traveling through the northeastern colonies in 1744, Dr. Alexander Hamilton took particular note of one family’s tea equipment. With his travelling companion, Mr. Milne, he noted

This cottage was very clean and neat but poorly furnished. Yet Mr. M____s [Milne] observed several superfluous things which showed an inclination to finery in these poor people, such as a looking glass with a painted frame, half a dozen pewter spoons and as many plates, old and wore out but bright and clean, a set of stone tea dishes, and a tea pot. These Mr. M____ls [Milne] said, were superfluous and too splendid for such a cottage, and therefor they ought to be sold to buy wool to make yarn; that a little water in a pail might suffice for a looking glass, and wooden plates and spoons

would be as good for use, and when clean, would be almost as ornamental. As for the tea equipage it was quite unnecessary, but the man's musket, he observed, was as usefull a piece of furniture as any in the cottage.⁵⁹

Dr. Hamilton's diary entry provides insight into the issue of tea in multiple ways. Most directly, he brings the discussion back to the idea of whether or not tea was indeed a luxury, and how the people of higher rank in society viewed their social inferiors. His description is also quite useful because he used two key words when mentioning the tea equipment: "set" and "stoneware." From these two terms we not only learn the type of ceramic this particular family purchased, but that they owned several matching pieces.

Many of the 410 probate inventories from the three given colonies also include adjectives describing the types of tea equipment the decedents owned. Simply from cataloguing the contents of these inventories, I found that silver, china and delft were the three most common adjectives applied to the tea equipment. Silver was the most frequently noted of the three adjectives used in relation to tea, appearing in 22% of the documents. When that statistic is corrected for wealth, silver usage can be presumed to hover around 30%. (See Columns X and Z, pp.54-55 in the Appendix.) Without taking wealth into consideration, the three colonies followed the general wealth pattern set in most of this study. 25% of Massachusetts residents owned some piece of silver related to taking tea, with New York at nearly 22% and Virginia just below 8%. None of the counties in Virginia reached the 20% mark, while Suffolk County, which includes Boston, had the highest percentage in the uncorrected category, with 37%. When wealth is taken in consideration, Suffolk jumps to an astounding 46%. Once again, the reader must keep in mind that these statistics do not represent entire silver tea services, but rather the simple presence of at least one piece of silver tea equipment, whether that appearance describes half a dozen silver teaspoons, or one silver teapot.

⁵⁹ Carl Bridenbaugh (ed). *Gentleman's Progress: The Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973, pp. 54-55.

Somewhat surprisingly, the numbers for the two ceramics were much lower than those for the more expensive silver. Mentions of china teaware only reached 15% for the entire 410 inventories, and Delft was just under 15%. The numbers for china may actually be inflated if one takes into consideration that the word “china” did not necessarily mean actual Chinese porcelain, but was perhaps “Queen’s china,” which originated in Europe, not Asia. The same phenomenon could apply to the delft; the term may simply have been used within the inventories as a descriptor rather than a factual notation of tin-glazed earthenware. Even if one takes the numbers at face value, being satisfied with just the mention of the word “china,” the range from 8.7% in New York to 16.7% in Massachusetts seems low in comparison to the presence of silver in this same set of inventories. (Refer to Column AB, p.55) Adjusting the numbers for china and delft for a wealth standard raises them both to approximately 23%, well below the corrected estimation for silver. It is interesting to note, however, how consistent the numbers are from one colony to another for each of the two ceramics. The low findings for delftware are not all that strange, considering that the glaze on delft will crack and damage the vessel when used with hot beverages. Delft is an appropriate material for slop bowls or milk containers, but not for teapots and other items that would have to bear the heat of boiling water.

To what can we attribute these findings regarding silver and ceramic tea equipment? At first it seems fairly surprising that so much silver should be present in relation to china and delft. Silver was indeed expensive, but it also has a much longer potential lifetime of usefulness than ceramics. Silver items will not immediately crack and break if they are dropped or knocked over, and therefore can last from generation to generation with care. Silver’s expense would also seem to predicate that its owners would indeed try to take very good care of the silver tea equipment in a family, and it would most likely get passed down from one generation to another. The breakable nature of ceramics makes this scenario much less likely. Perhaps this factor explains part of the discrepancy between the two types of equipage – new silver did not need to be

purchased quite as often, therefore meaning that each decedent did not necessarily have to lay out the cost of whatever silver appeared in his or her inventory.

Summary

Examining Massachusetts, New York and Virginia has been enlightening in terms of a discussion about tea habits. Each colony provided a window on its region of the new nation – New England, the Middle Colonies, and the South, respectively. These three colonies varied enough to provide perspectives on different areas of the nation-to-be and the problems or advantages each one faced, as well as being similar enough to yield results that put them in the same league. The samples in the Northeast included the major cities of Boston and New York, and while the Virginia sample did not include its capitol, Williamsburg, Virginia was nonetheless a vital and politically charged colony among the thirteen.

This investigation has demonstrated that approximately three-fourths of the inventoried populations made attempts at drinking tea in a social fashion (as opposed to merely serving it at meals to family), while more than one-fifth of them truly could serve this favored beverage in style. I have tried to make clear that probate inventories are not perfect sources as a basis for these statistics. The results I have unearthed may cover as little as one half of the total population that was living in the counties included here. Probate inventories also privilege the white members of a society; among Jones' 919 documents in her larger study, only one belonged to a black man. In addition to race, gender is also a bias to be taken into account. This laundry list of complaints could stretch on, and each claim is valid, but these problems are also just a fact of life when dealing with an eighteenth-century Anglo-American society that was dominated by white males. To give up on probate inventories as a source would also be to virtually give up on any sort of economic study of the eighteenth century. Scholars, however, are certainly not willing to do this, and simply try and make the fairest estimations possible, given the knowledge of social history that has prevailed in the late twentieth century.

That 75% of the inventoried population was probably drinking tea, an item which just one century earlier was considered an exotic rarity, speaks volumes for the society in question. Even among the poorest of the decedents examined here, tea equipment makes frequent appearances among individuals' moveable wealth. Many of these people at least owned a kettle, the first step toward drinking tea ritually (if one so desired), and most of them owned significantly more tea equipment. That many of the poorest decedents would have chosen to put part of their precious income into tea equipage rather than beds, chairs or tables demonstrates that these tea sets clearly meant something more to people than just being a way to take a hot drink in the morning or evening. An imported service of the finest Chinese porcelain was obviously a mark of status among the wealthy, but even the rudimentary pieces of such a set marked aspirations of status for those who could not afford the entire kit. The results of this study indicate that only between 22% and 30% of the inventoried population owned this total package, but indications are that most of their middling and poor neighbors were striving towards the same goal.

The tea itself was probably not the driving factor behind this behavior. After all, this is a drink that is not high in caffeine and can be fairly bland, if not completely bitter. It is a drink that is not nearly as highly charged as coffee, another beverage that was introduced to Britain at the same time, and also had a significant impact on the society. The British, and by default, British Americans, clung to tea, however, as part of their identity. The objects used to prepare and drink the tea, in combination with the ritualistic actions involved, I would argue, are just as much a part of that identity, if not more so. Almost anyone could have boiled the water for tea in an iron pot and then drank it out of whatever vessel was available, but even the poorest of the poor owned tea kettles and the rudimentary elements of a more comprehensive tea service. It is also possible that three in ten of these decedents could even use silver pieces to proceed with the ritual. Similarly, those with some disposable income could have purchased a variety of ceramics from America, or

from England or Holland, but the Chinese porcelain was what many people really wanted. Little practical difference exists between the two, but fashionable aspirations mandated a difference.

To borrow and manipulate a cliché – you are what you own. Early Americans bought wide ranges of tea equipment, oftentimes in the most fashionable styles available because it sent a message about both who they thought they were, and who they wanted to be. To acquire a desired item changes the way you look at that item once it is finally obtained; the object influences behavior, if only in the sense of moods and happiness. The item's perceived meaning also serves to influence those people around the owner who come into contact with it. Tea equipment is a perfect example of this type of object, because these teapots and cups and saucers and waiters are meant to be used in the presence of others and displayed for all to see and admire. The influence spreads outward from the household, just as the owner picked up his or her ideas from someone else.

Perhaps in the twentieth century tea is no longer such a prominent vehicle for these aspirations because we have found other consumer goods with which to replace it. In 1774, trade restrictions limited the amounts of Chinese porcelain to which the colonists had access; even once the nineteenth century began and an influx of such tea services made them much easier to come by, the thirst for them still had not been whetted. By the 1990s, however, Americans have long since discovered other consumer goods that are still just out of common reach, which are the newest indicators of status. The legacy of tea and its equipage still remains, however. We can find it in any toy store, just waiting for a new generation of young ladies to sit down to tea with their friends, real or imagined. The ritual, though modified, continues.

APPENDIX

	A Total Number of Inventories	B General Owners number	C percent of total	D Non-Owners number	E percent of total
<u>Entire Survey</u>	410	307	74.88%	103	25.12%
Virginia	76	40	52.63%	36	47.37%
Charlotte	8	4	50%	4	50%
Halifax	15	7	46.67%	8	53.33%
Southampton	11	4	36.36%	7	63.64%
Brunswick	9	4	44.44%	5	55.56%
Mecklenburg	3	1	33.33%	2	66.67%
Chesterfield	16	9	56.25%	7	43.75%
Fairfax	6	4	66.67%	2	33.33%
Spotsylvania	8	7	87.50%	1	12.50%
New York	23	16	69.57%	7	30.43%
Massachusetts	311	251	80.71%	60	19.29%
Essex	101	92	91.09%	9	8.91%
Hampshire	27	26	96.30%	1	3.70%
Plymouth	35	18	51.43%	17	48.57%
Suffolk	99	78	78.79%	21	21.21%
Worcester	49	37	75.51%	12	24.49%

	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
	Estate Values < 50 pounds		Estate Values > 250 pounds		Total Percentage		Adjusted for Wealth
	(among non-owners)	percentage	(from all inventories)	(among non-owners)	percentage	number	percentage
	number	percentage	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
<u>Entire Survey</u>	36	34.95%	8.78%	34	33.01%	341	83.17%
Virginia	14	38.89%	18.42%	9	25.00%	49	64.47%
Charlotte	1	25%	12.50%	3	75%	7	87.50%
Halifax	2	25%	13.33%	3	38%	10	67%
Southampton	2	28.57%	18.18%	1	14.29%	5	45.45%
Brunswick	4	80%	44.44%	1	20%	5	55.56%
Mecklenburg	1	50%	33.33%	0	0	unch = 1	[33.33%]
Chesterfield	4	57.14%	25%	1	14.29%	10	62.50%
Fairfax	0	0	0	0	0	unch = 4	[66.67%]
Spotsylvania	0	0	0	0	0	unch = 7	[87.50%]
New York	3	42.86%	13.04%	1	14.29%	17	73.91%
Massachusetts	19	31.67%	6.11%	24	40%	275	88.42%
Essex	4	44.44%	3.96%	1	25%	93	92.08%
Hampshire	1	100%	3.70%	0	0	unch = 26	[96.30%]
Plymouth	4	23.53%	11.43%	8	47.06%	26	74.29%
Suffolk	8	38.10%	8.08%	9	42.86%	87	87.88%
Worcester	2	16.67%	4.08%	6	50%	43	87.76%

	M	N	O	P	Q	R
	Coffee Equipment		Complete Tea Services		Complete Tea Services	
	(from survey total)		(from survey total)		Adjusted for Wealth	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
<u>Entire Survey</u>	90	21.95%	90	21.95%	124	30%
Virginia	16	21.05%	11	14.47%	20	26%
Charlotte	1	12.50%	0	0	3	37.50%
Halifax	4	26.67%	5	33.33%	8	53.33%
Southampton	1	9.09%	1	9.09%	2	18.18%
Brunswick	2	22.22%	0	0	1	11.11%
Mecklenburg	1	33.33%	1	33.33%	unch = 1	[33.33%]
Chesterfield	3	18.75%	1	6.25%	2	12.50%
Fairfax	1	16.67%	1	16.67%	unch = 1	[16.67%]
Spotsylvania	3	37.50%	2	25%	unch = 2	[25%]
New York	4	17.39%	3	13.04%	4	17.39%
Massachusetts	70	22.51%	76	24.44%	100	32.15%
Essex	25	24.75%	26	25.74%	27	26.73%
Hampshire	2	7.41%	9	33.33%	unch = 9	[33.33%]
Plymouth	4	11.43%	8	22.86%	16	45.71%
Suffolk	34	34.34%	23	23.23%	32	32.32%
Worcester	5	10.20%	10	20.41%	16	32.65%

	S		T		U		V		W		X	
	Matched Sets		Matched Sets		Adjusted for Wealth		Silver		Silver		Silver	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
<u>Entire Survey</u>	71	17.32%	104	25.37%	90	21.95%						
Virginia	13	17.11%	21	27.63%	9	7.89%						
Charlotte	1	12.50%	4	50.00%	0	0						
Halifax	5	33.33%	7	46.67%	2	13.33%						
Southampton	1	9.09%	2	18.18%	0	0						
Brunswick	1	11.11%	2	22.22%	0	0						
Mecklenburg	1	33.33%	[unch]	[33.33%]	0	0						
Chesterfield	1	6.25%	2	12.50%	3	18.75%						
Fairfax	2	16.67%	[unch]	[16.67%]	0	0						
Spotsylvania	1	25%	[unch]	[25%]	1	12.50%						
New York	3	13.04%	4	17.39%	5	21.74%						
Massachusetts	55	17.68%	79	25.40%	79	25.40%						
Essex	21	20.79%	22	21.78%	27	26.73%						
Hampshire	5	18.52%	[unch]	[18.52%]	4	14.81%						
Plymouth	3	8.57%	11	31.43%	6	17.14%						
Suffolk	21	21.21%	30	30.30%	37	37.37%						
Worcester	5	10.20%	11	22.45%	5	10.20%						

	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD
	Silver		China		China	
	Adjusted for Wealth				Adjusted for Wealth	
	number	percentage	number	percentage	number	percentage
<u>Entire Survey</u>	123	30%	62	15.12%	95	23.17%
Virginia	14	18.42%	8	10.53%	6	21.05%
Charlotte	3	37.50%	0	0	3	37.50%
Halifax	4	26.67%	3	20%	5	33.33%
Southampton	1	9.09%	0	0	1	9.09%
Brunswick	1	11.11%	0	0	1	11.11%
Mecklenburg	n/a	n/a	0	0	n/a	n/a
Chesterfield	4	25%	4	25%	5	31.25%
Fairfax	n/a	n/a	0	0	n/a	n/a
Spotsylvania	unch	[12.5%]	1	12.50%	unch=1	[12.5%]
New York	6	26.09%	2	8.70%	3	13.04%
Massachusetts	103	33.12%	52	16.72%	76	24.44%
Essex	28	27.72%	23	22.77%	24	23.76%
Hampshire	unch	[14.81%]	1	3.70%	unch=1	[3.7%]
Plymouth	14	40%	3	8.57%	11	31.43%
Suffolk	46	46.46%	25	25.25%	34	34.34%
Worcester	11	22.45%	0	0	6	12.24%

	AE	AF	AG	AH
	Delft		Delft	
	number	percentage	Adjusted for Wealth number	Adjusted for Wealth percentage
<u>Entire Survey</u>	61	14.88%	94	22.93%
Virginia	3	3.95%	11	14.47%
Charlotte	1	12.50%	4	50%
Halifax	1	6.67%	3	20%
Southampton	0	0	1	9.09%
Brunswick	0	0	1	11.11%
Mecklenburg	0	0	n/a	n/a
Chesterfield	1	6.25%	2	12.50%
Fairfax	0	0	n/a	n/a
Spotsylvania	0	0	n/a	n/a
New York	0	0	1	4.35%
Massachusetts	58	18.65%	82	26.37%
Essex	26	25.74%	27	26.73%
Hampshire	2	7.40%	unch=2	[7.4%]
Plymouth	1	2.86%	9	25.71%
Suffolk	25	25.25%	34	34.34%
Worcester	4	8.16%	10	20.41%

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