

Beyond Domesticity: Material and Spatial Expressions of Gender Systems in Deerfield, Massachusetts

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1/8/03

Invited paper prepared for the symposium “Memory, Power, and the Archaeology of Rural New England”, organized by R. Paynter for the Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology in Providence, Rhode Island, January 15-19, 2003.

Abstract

The cult of domesticity has been the most widely studied of all gender systems. However, additional ideologies – such as equal rights feminism, domestic reform, and others – also shaped gender relations during the second half of the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Architectural changes and ceramic assemblages from three homelots on the village landscape of Deerfield, Massachusetts were examined to understand the structure of human interactions during this time in this location. This research considers the separation of gender roles, the codification of gender ideals in this rural setting versus that which was occurring in urban areas, the articulation of gender with developing class systems, and the many spatial scales at which these social relations were expressed.

Introduction

A multitude of social, political, and cultural changes accompanied the transition from an agrarian-based economic system to one under capitalism in the eastern United States. As individuals and families were repositioned within the economy, relationships between employers and workers, men and women, parents and children were redefined. New ideologies regarding family structure, gender roles, and appropriate social interaction emerged and were expressed through the built environment.

Three modes of thought dominated the structure of gender roles during the late eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. The first of these was the cult of domesticity, the prevailing ideological force for most families. This ideal mandated

separate spheres of activity – the public arena for men and the private domestic residence for women.

The second mode of thought was domestic reform, which sought to professionalize aspects of women's work and thereby elevate their status. These reformers redefined domestic arenas to overlap with public ones by creating communal networks such as housework cooperatives, day nurseries, and kitchen gardens. Utopian societies and communitarian experiments fell under the rubric of domestic reform since they were challenging mainstream gender roles and relations.

Finally, equal rights feminism, largely a reaction against domesticity, was based on the principle of equal political participation. Those who espoused these ideals were concerned about women's dependency and oppression and actively sought equality under the law. Together, these organizational subcultures provided the foundation for American feminism.

In this paper, I explore the material and spatial expressions of gender ideologies in the rural nucleated village of Deerfield, Massachusetts. This paper begins with a brief history of Deerfield and proceeds with an analysis of the separation of gender roles, the codification of gender ideals in this rural setting relative to that which was occurring in urban areas, and the articulation of gender with developing class systems, all of which were illustrated through individual households within the village. This analysis concludes by suggesting ways in which gender research can move “beyond domesticity.”

Deerfield, Massachusetts: A Dynamic Rural Nucleated Settlement

The residents of Deerfield Village experienced the effects of intensified agricultural production and industrialization, with eventual decline as industry bypassed the Village, and canals and railroads opened the vast agricultural regions to the west (see Rotman and Hautaniemi 2000; Rotman 2001; Hautaniemi and Rotman 2003). The ways in which the men and women in this rural village responded to these changes were reflected in their social and material worlds.

Deerfield Village in the Connecticut River Valley was founded in 1671 and had a tumultuous beginning (Sheldon 1972:29). As an isolated settlement on the frontier, the village was vulnerable to attack by Indian warriors and French soldiers (McGowan and Miller 1996:xix). This initial period in Deerfield's history lasted for almost 60 years, until around 1730 (Paynter et al. 1987:6-7). Once firmly established, the village was a prosperous, agriculturally based component of the British world economic system through the American Revolutionary period. In the Connecticut River Valley, this period was characterized by the rise in social and political power of the local gentry – seven prominent families known as “the River Gods” (St. George 1988:338).

The years between 1785 and 1865 witnessed the intensification of agricultural production and the waning influence of the River Gods. Through the 1820s, local farmers increased tillage and grain production, raising and fattening hogs and cattle for the Allston stockyards serving the Boston area (Clark 1990:80-87). Broomcorn, grown for local industry, became a staple crop, and various other specialized crops, such as hemp and mulberries, were tried over the decades without success (Clark 1990:84, 281). By the 1850s, some farmers had turned to supplying local demand for perishable foods

from nearby, rapidly growing industrial towns (Clark 1990:294-295). Tobacco markets also proved volatile, and onions and cucumbers were grown as alternatives beginning in the 1890s (Clark 1990:328).

From the beginning, the Connecticut River Valley region, including Deerfield, was an integral part of the world economic system. Early on, lumber and grain from the valley helped fuel the sugar plantations of the West Indies and drove demand for manufactured goods from England (Paynter 1982:72-81). By the mid-nineteenth century, much agricultural production was focused on provisioning the growing number of regional industrial workers producing textile, cutlery, and other goods for exchange in global markets (Paynter 1982:81-81; Clark 1990:284-190). The latter third of the nineteenth century saw agricultural production again focused on distant markets through less perishable items, most notably tobacco and onions (Clark 1990:327-328).

From the end of the Civil War to nearly the turn of the twentieth century, however, economic life for Deerfield residents faltered. Competition from the west had destroyed markets for corn and cattle, the early bulwarks of Deerfield's agricultural economy. The adoption of labor- and capital-intensive crops, such as tobacco, tended to concentrate profits in the hands of a smaller number of farmers, while maintaining a labor-force of low-paid agricultural laborers. Industrialization shifted production away from individual households and out of the village. The growth of manufacturies that supported the prosperity of nearby towns such as Greenfield, Northampton, and Holyoke bypassed Deerfield Village entirely.

Over the first two centuries of Deerfield's existence, the focus of economic activities turned from the extraction of raw materials and staple foodstuffs for the

Caribbean, to a focus on local and regional markets, and then to specialized production for distant markets. For the past century, Deerfield Village has sought economic revitalization through the Arts and Crafts movement, education, and the commodification of the past (Bograd 1989:16).

The research presented here focused upon the material and spatial aspects of three households in the village – the field investigations of which were largely accomplished through archaeological field schools conducted by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Dr. Thomas and Esther Williams represented Deerfield's elite during the last half of the eighteenth century. The material culture from and spatial organization of their homelot provided glimpses into expressions of class and gender by the local gentry. Furthermore, this late eighteenth-century family pre-dated the nineteenth-century gender ideology of the cult of domesticity.

Ebenezer Hinsdale and Anna Williams, also a wealthy family in the village, occupied their home during the early decades of the nineteenth century, providing good temporal continuation with Dr. Thomas and Esther Williams. After Ebenezer Hinsdale's death in 1838, the house served as rental property – occupied by long-married lower class family of David and Eliza Barnard and the newly married middle-class couple of the Reverend John and Esther Moors. Therefore, the archaeological record of this site expressed experiences of both elite and working class families in the village.

The final data set in this study was the home constructed by Reverend Moors and his second wife, Eunice. This property was later occupied by the middle class families of the Reverend George and Anna Hovey and Arthur and Frances Ball. This parcel provided good temporal continuation with the E. H. and Anna Williams home,

representing the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, as a Gothic Revival cottage, the house was the most visible expression of the cult of domesticity along the Street and, therefore, was of particular interest to this study of gender ideologies. (For a summary of the archaeological data from these households, see Rotman 2001.)

The Separation of Gender Roles

The separation of public and private spheres was an important aspect of the cult of domesticity. Therefore, identifying and measuring this separation was critical to interpreting archaeological assemblages in Deerfield. Anne Yentsch (1991) proposed a model in which the distribution of different ceramic types and vessels were analyzed across space and time. She linked women's activities (e.g., cooking) to the household spaces in which their work was conducted (e.g., the kitchen) and to the types of objects (i.e., ceramic vessels) utilized in the completion of various tasks. In the gendered foodways of the medieval world, women prepared and served food that was eaten communally. Over time, food preparation and dining became increasingly associated with private and public aspects of social reproduction as well as increasingly gendered (i.e., associated with women and men, respectively).

Yentsch (1991:214-215) concluded that, over time, whiter wares were increasingly used for food distribution and consumption, while earth-toned vessels were used almost exclusively for tasks such as food preparation. This differential useage had spatial consequences; that is, earth-toned vessels were utilized in the kitchen (a private

space) while white-toned vessels appeared on the dining table (a public place, relative to other spaces within the home).

For nearly all sites in this study, a separation of public and private tasks and spaces was illustrated through the differential use of earth-toned and white-tone pottery. At first glance, this separation at these various moments in time and across space seemed to indicate that the same ideology structured gender relations in Deerfield from the mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. However, this apparent continuity masks the complexities of social relations operating within the village.

During the mid-eighteenth century, the separation of spheres was attributed to the removal of production from the home with the advent of industrialization (Coontz 1988:117). As the agrarian-centered economic system was transformed into one based on industry, men (primarily) no longer worked in and around their homes. Rather, they spent a significant portion of the day at loci of production (e.g., factories) away from their residences.

By the 1830s, the cult of domesticity had emerged, which further defined the home as a private, female space and reinforced gender separation. Yet, this ideal was meant to resist too complete a separation of these two dimensions of life (Coontz 1988:193). Domesticity has also been interpreted as a means of preserving the new republic from perceived threats. Americans believed that the survival of the republic lay in the character of the rising generation. Child rearing became a concern of the highest order (Halttunen 1982:10) and the home became a haven from the evils of the outside world (Clark 1988:538). In short, the private space of the household became increasingly

important within the larger cultural context during the first half of the nineteenth century as well as increasingly feminized.

As the turn of the twentieth century approached, this separation still existed in Deerfield Village, but the reasons for it had been transformed. The structure of the population had changed due to uneven mortality rates and male out-migration (Miller and Lanning 1994:437). “When financial opportunity left the village, so did increasing numbers of men; as the 19th century progressed, the population along the [main] street became smaller, older, and increasingly female” (Miller and Lanning 1994:436).

This separation of public and private spheres has often been inextricably linked to the separation of gender roles under the ideals of domesticity. Although a separation of public and private was clearly visible in the archaeological assemblages studied in Deerfield village, it was apparent that complex social, political, and economic forces had shaped gender roles and relations through time and across space. Importantly, gender separation preceded the codification of the cult of domesticity. Therefore, it is imperative to be cognizant that other gender systems may possess an element of this separation.

Rural versus Urban

The transformation of the agrarian-based economic system to one based on industry and its effects on the restructuring of class and gender relations has been most frequently studied among the urban middle class. Therefore, it is not surprising that this phenomenon is best understood for this social group in this particular context. However, this economic transformation had implications for rural families as well.

The physical and economic interdependence of home and farm in small-scale agricultural production precluded the establishment of rigid boundaries between the spheres of men and women seen in urban settings (McMurry 1988:57). In addition, women's roles in farm production (such as making butter and cheese for market sale) was economically significant (McMurry 1988:61). The contribution of farm women to the domestic economy created complementary gender relations and resulted in relatively high status for women vis-à-vis men (Rotman 1995:78; Rotman and Nassaney 1997).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, farm production became progressively more specialized. Tasks formerly completed by women, such as butter and cheese making, were appropriated by men as these activities became more significant to farm revenues (McMurry 1988:61). In addition, as standards of housekeeping rose, women directed their energies away from non-mechanized farm work and toward fulfilling new ideals of domesticity. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the separation between work and family on specialized farms grew even more pronounced (McMurry 1988:6).

Diana Wall (1991, 1994) links emerging ideals regarding gender roles and relations, specifically the cult of domesticity, to changes in the decorative motifs used on refined earthenwares. Her research focuses on several households in the urban setting of New York City. She (1994:139) argues that changes in the styles used to decorate tablewares suggests changes in the social meaning of the meal in which the vessels were used. For example, during the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century, plain or minimally decorated vessels were used for more mundane family meals whereas

more highly decorated ceramics (more expensive shell-edged wares) were used for important occasions.

By the 1820, family meals became more elaborate and specialized. Busy chinoiserie decorations virtually overshadowed the importance of the food being served as dining became an increasingly important social ritual. Two decades later, however, by the 1840s, this trend was reversing itself – ceramics for family meals became predominately white and paralleled the emergence of social changes associated with Gothic Revival architectural styles. Gothic-paneled ironstone, for example, expressed purity and sanctity, reinforcing the woman's role as the sacred guardian of her family's morality (Wall 1991:160). Ceramics for special occasions also underwent a transformation. Although teawares in the homes of elite families continued to be decorated, the busy chinoiserie decorations were replaced by more subtle floral gilding. However, in the homes of lower class families, teawares, like tablewares, were minimally-decorated. The ritual of tea in these households did not serve the function of asserting the family's status within the community, since the individuals invited for such occasions were likely to be from the family's intimate, kin-like social circle (Wall 1991, 1994).

These trends in decorative patterns were observed in virtually all of the assemblages examined in this study. The gender ideals that appeared and were codified in urban settings also appeared to have been codified in the village of Deerfield at about the same time. So, although Deerfield was a rural community, it was well-connected to urban centers such as Greenfield, Boston, and Albany. Therefore, the gender ideologies operating within the village were not profoundly impacted by its rural location.

Gender within Developing Class Systems

The research in Deerfield also illustrated clearly that gender relations are enormously complex. An individual or family's desire and ability to participate in gender ideologies are pulled and shaped by forces such as class position and the point at which they are in their life cycle. So, for example, Hinsdale and Anna Williams were able to participate in a gender system which emphasized separation. For them, they were not only part of the village's social elite, but also had the financial resources available which enabled them to express their participation both materially and spatially.

For others in the village, however, such as Reverend John and Esther Moors, their social position as a middle class professional couple contradicted their financial status. As newlyweds, they were ideologically middle class, but were not yet in an economic position to assert or express their participation through the material world. Therefore, the physical layout of their home appeared very middle class – containing a number of rooms with specialty functions and a degree of gender separation similar to that of Ebenezer Hinsdale and Anna Williams. Yet, the material culture associated with the earliest of the house's occupation was consistent with that of lower and working class assemblages within the village.

Beyond Domesticity

Finally, deciphering the gender relations that were operating at a given archaeological site or series of sites depends in part on where you look. Gender separation under the cult of domesticity can often be clearly seen in the materiality and

spatiality of individual homelots, because the household was the arena in which this gender ideology was operationalized.

The materiality of domestic reform, equal rights feminism, and other alternate gender systems occurred at a level beyond the home; that is, at the level of the Street or village. Suzanne Spencer-Wood (1991) first stressed the materiality of gender relations beyond the home in her eloquent analysis of domestic reform sites in Boston. Some of the activities of Deerfield residents that were categorized as domestic reform – since they often blurred the boundaries of the public and private sphere – can be seen in the materiality of the trolley tracks down the Street (to which women in the village adamantly opposed), the piping and spigots of the municipal water system (for which women actively worked to acquire), and the basketry, jewelry and embroidery produced by women involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement (which enabled the population of single women in the village a means for providing a living for themselves).

Investigations of utopian societies and communitarian experiments are also moving “beyond domesticity.” These studies examine both different contexts (that is, the utopian societies and communitarian experiments) and different scales by using units of analysis larger than a single household (e.g., Kryder-Reid 1994; Savulis 1998).

Concluding thought

There are two important aspects of gender relations that the research in Deerfield has highlighted. First, although gender separation was visible archaeologically for more than a century, the social, political, and economic forces that shaped that separation changed through time. Therefore, it is important *not* to equate gender separation solely

with the cult of domesticity, but rather it is necessary to critically analyze that separation within the site-specific contexts.

Second, not all gender ideologies have expressions within the loci of individual homelots. Therefore, to understand gender ideologies such as domestic reform, equal rights feminism, and other gender ideals, it is imperative to move our level of analysis from the home to the level of the street or village or region.

The material and spatial expressions of gender continue to be an exciting arena of study. As we continue to focus and refocus our attention on gender relations, we will undoubtedly observe that there were other gender systems operating in the nineteenth century whose complexity extends “beyond domesticity.”

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