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PREVIEW

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St. George, Robert Blair

**A RETREAT FROM THE WILDERNESS: PATTERN IN THE DOMESTIC
ENVIRONMENTS OF SOUTHEASTERN NEW ENGLAND, 1630-1730**

University of Pennsylvania

PH.D. 1982

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PREVIEW

A RETREAT FROM THE WILDERNESS: PATTERN IN THE
DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENTS OF SOUTHEASTERN
NEW ENGLAND, 1630-1730

ROBERT BLAIR ST. GEORGE

A DISSERTATION
in
FOLKLORE AND FOLKLIFE

Presented to the Graduate Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor
of Philosophy

1982

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Robert Blair St. George

1982

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In memory of Benno M. Forman (1930-1982)

PREVIEW

Acknowledgements

As I have worked on this study, I have sustained many debts. Two art historians have been of constant help: Abbott Lowell Cummings and Robert F. Trent, whose knowledge and generosity in the respective fields of seventeenth-century New England houses and furniture have helped guide my thinking about specific patterns that appeared within these two groups of material evidence. Two colonial historians have been of similar inspiration. David Grayson Allen's careful study and willingness to learn about material culture have helped me immensely. David D. Hall's insights and writings about expressive culture in seventeenth-century New England have persuaded me that easy attempts to dichotomize past reality must be avoided. Three additional scholars--Cary Carson, Dell Upton, and John Brooke--have suggested different ways in which history and artifacts can be used together. My greatest debts, of course, are to colleagues in my own discipline, for while I treat historical materials, I treat them with an interest above all in how old artifacts embody powerful discourse on socially upheld values. Robert Horan has, without knowing, taught me much concerning the appearance of discontinuities in overall patterns. Henry Glassie, above all, has urged me to focus on artifacts only when a perspective on other expressive forms has been attained. His own powerful writings--especially on what correctly constitutes responsible ethnographic history--have influenced the present work greatly. Alice Gray Read has patiently listened to por-

tions of this study in draft and made sobering comments throughout.

This study is dedicated with respect and love to the memory of Benno M. Forman. I will always value his enthusiasm as a teacher, his generosity as a critic, and his warmth as a friend.

PREVIEW

Table of Contents

	<u>Page</u>
Acknowledgements	iv
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	ix
PREFACE	xv
 CHAPTER	
1. THE CONTEXT OF THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT	1
NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE	34
2. ARTISANS OF POWER, ARTISANS OF CHANGE	40
NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO	99
3. FOLK HOUSING AND THE SOCIAL SHAPE OF ARTIFICE	112
NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE	212
4. FOLK FURNITURE: ICONS OF REASON	224
NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR	298
5. FRAMING A PERFORMANCE IN PAST LIFE	305
NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE	360
 APPENDIX	
1. WOODWORKING ARTISANS IN SOUTHEASTERN NEW ENGLAND, A CHECKLIST	369
2. HOUSES RECORDED IN ROOM BY ROOM INVENTORIES FROM SOUTHEASTERN NEW ENGLAND, 1630-1730	416
3. HOUSES BUILT IN SOUTHEASTERN NEW ENGLAND, 1630-1730, WHICH SURVIVE TO THE PRESENT	442
SHORT TITLE LIST FOR APPENDICES	453
INDEX	460
BIBLIOGRAPHY	482

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	Page
1. Land holdings, Medfield, Massachusetts, 1652.....	11
2. Shop Generations, 1620-1700.....	44
3. Percentages of adult male householders working in the woodworking/building trades in the Plymouth Colony area during the first two generations.....	49
4. Ages at death of first- and second-generation artisans.....	49
5. Migration distances during working lifetime.....	56
6. English regional origins of first-generation artisans in southeastern New England.....	59
7. English regional origins of first-generation immigrants to five towns in southeastern New England.....	59
8. Training the second and third generations.....	66
9. Migration distances of family-trained second- and third-generation artisans from their place of training.....	66
10. Migration and aging of first- and second-generation artisans.....	73
11. Number of trades practiced: occupational identity trends, 1620-1700.....	77
12. Amount of yearly farm labor of Thomas Minor, 1654-1684.....	82
13. Property profile of three Medfield carpenters, 1652..	90
14. Breakdown of woodworking/building trades by generation.....	92

TABLE	Page
15. Urban-rural migration of artisans.....	94
16. Size and value of Medfield households, 1652.....	133
17. House sizes of first-generation immigrants to southeastern New England whose English regional origins are known.....	133
18. Sizes of yeomen's houses in southeastern New England, 1630-1730.....	133
19. House size and geographic distribution by towns, southeastern New England region, 1630-1730.....	136
20. Numbers of livestock owned, Medfield, 1652.....	141
21. Numbers of livestock owned, Warwick, 1700-1730.....	166
22. Average furniture holdings in Yetminster, Dorset, 1576-1677.....	230
23. Dedham house valuations, 1648-1677.....	323
24. Room dimensions in Fairbanks house, 1668.....	331
25. Location of furniture in Fairbanks house, 1668.....	331
26. Mean dimensions of furniture in Fairbanks house, 1668.....	334
27. Semi-fixed feature overlap in Fairbanks house, 1668.....	336
28. Semi- and unfixed feature distribution in Fairbanks house, 1668.....	343
29. Artifact value distribution and material quality space, Fairbanks house, 1668.....	345

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	Page
1. Detail of farmyard from John Worlidge, <u>Systema Agriculturae</u> (London, 1669).....	15
2. Four New England farmsteads.....	19
3. Mark Quilter's house and barn, Ipswich, Mass.....	20
4. Structural typology of farmstead plans.....	22
5. Areal view of Cushing farmstead as it appeared, ca. 1700.....	22
6. Cut-away view of Cushing barn.....	24
7. Plan of Cushing barn.....	24
8. Bent sequences in two early New England barns.....	28
9. Plan and bents of Cushing corn barn.....	28
10. The southeastern New England region: incorporated towns and the progress of settlement.....	42
11. The farmer-craftsman's annual work cycle.....	53
12. The English regional origins of woodworking artisans who migrated to southeastern New England..	58
13. Peak house, Medfield, Mass.....	64
14. The North River at Marshfield, Mass.....	84
15. The evolution of English houses in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.....	115
16. The farming regions of England.....	118
17. A single-cell, lobby-entry lowland house.....	120
18. An upland cottage plan.....	120
19. A hall-parlor, lobby-entry lowland house.....	123

FIGURE	Page
20. A Welsh long-house plan.....	123
21. The physical geography of southeastern New England.....	136
22. Dedham, Mass., in the seventeenth century.....	142
23. Plan types, southeastern New England region, from 1630-1730.....	144
24. John Northey house, Scituate, Mass.....	146
25. Bent types, southeastern New England region, from 1630-1730.....	147
26. Jonathan Fairbanks house, Dedham, Mass.....	148
27. Plan of William Harlow house, Plymouth, Mass.....	149
28. Joseph Churchill house, Plymouth, Mass.....	150
29. John Bradford house, Kingston, Mass.....	151
30. Smith-Hoxie house, Sandwich, Mass.....	152
31. Plan and section of Aptucket Trading Post site, Bourne, Mass.....	154
32. Mitchell-Howland house, Plymouth, Mass.....	156
33. Isaac Winslow house, Marshfield, Mass.....	158
34. Failure of Type A2 bent when used for story- and-one-half house.....	160
35. Clapp house, Scituate, Mass.....	161
36. Roger Mowry house, Providence, R.I.....	163
37. Miles Standish site house plan, Duxbury, Mass.....	165
38. Distribution of "open" plan types.....	165
39. Plan of Jonathan Russell house, South Dartmouth, Mass.....	168
40. Eleazer Arnold house, Lincoln, R.I.....	168

FIGURE	Page
41. Thomas Fenner house, Cranston, R.I.....	170
42. Development of Georgian plans in Eleazer Arnold and Thomas Fenner houses, 1677-1730.....	171
43. Ballou-Brown house, Saylesville, R.I.....	172
44. Bishop house, Plymouth, Mass.....	175
45. The English regional origins of woodworking artisans in Dedham, Medfield, and Hingham, Massachusetts, during the seventeenth century....	180
46. The English regional origins of woodworking artisans in the southeastern New England region (coastal and western zones).....	182
47. East Anglian roof frames in the New World.....	189
48. Roof frame of the Sparrow-Leach house, Plymouth, Mass.....	190
49. Roof types used by artisans working in the southeastern New England region, 1630-1730.....	190
50. Roof framing, Sparrow-Leach house, Plymouth, Mass.....	193
51. Roof framing, Isaac Winslow house, Marshfield, Mass.....	194
52. Plank-frame house, Swansea, Mass.....	196
53. Studded end bent of Clemence-Irons house, Johnston, R.I.....	196
54. Wall types used by artisans in southeastern New England, 1630-1730.....	199
55. North Providence lime kiln.....	203
56. The domestication of the chimney stack.....	205
57. The domestication of doors and windows.....	206
58. Changing methods of joining floor joists and sill.....	208

FIGURE	Page
59. Changing profiles of vertical posts.....	208
60. Covering up interior structure.....	209
61. Changing methods of joining chamber floor joists to summer beam.....	209
62. Dedham and Medfield, Mass., in the southeastern New England region.....	233
63. Chest with one drawer, Medfield, Mass.....	239
64. Two joined chests from the Dedham or Medfield, Mass., shop of John Thurston.....	240
65. Structural layout of a Dedham or Medfield, Mass., chest.....	242
66. The Medfield panels.....	245
67. Two joined chests from the Dedham shop of John Houghton.....	246
68. The coastal towns of the Plymouth Colony in the southeastern New England region.....	248
69. West Country chests in Old and New England.....	251
70. Detail of Inlay work on chest, probably St.Olave's Parish, Southwark, Surrey.....	254
71. Chest of drawers with doors, Boston, Mass.....	255
72. Integration and disjunction in chest design.....	261
73. A Scituate chest with drawers.....	264
74. Cut-work designs used by artisans working in Marshfield and Scituate.....	265
75. Two Scituate board chests.....	266
76. A Marshfield board chest with drawer.....	267
77. Frontality in chest design.....	269
78. Frontality in cupboard design.....	270

FIGURE	Page
79. Two south shore chests with drawers.....	271
80. Frontality in board chest design.....	272
81. The transformation of a tree into usable stock.....	274
82. Bottom-board joint and tenon types used in chests made in the coastal towns of the Plymouth Colony....	275
83. The intersection of lower drawer rail and front right stile, Dedham or Medfield chest with drawer...	276
84. The intersection of lower drawer rail and right front stile, south shore chest.....	276
85. Another solution to the south shore lower drawer rail tenon design.....	279
86. Distribution of tenon types in the southeastern New England region.....	279
87. Two Marshfield chests with drawers that use spline joint.....	280
88. Distribution of bottom-board joints in southeastern New England region.....	282
89. Attaching the medial drawer rail to the lower rear rail.....	282
90. Methods of finishing the rear of the medial drawer rail joint.....	283
91. Distribution of medial drawer rail joints.....	285
92. Distribution of drawer types.....	285
93. Drawer types used by artisans working in the southeastern New England region.....	287
94. Attaching the bottom boards of the drawer or chest..	287
95. Till inscriptions from coastal Plymouth Colony.....	289
96. Geometric layout of a Thurston panel.....	291
97. Carved decoration repertoire of John Thurston, Dedham and Medfield, Mass.....	293

FIGURE	Page
98. Applied-molding decoration repertoire of artisans working in the coastal towns of the Plymouth Colony.....	295
99. Kinship structures embodied in the inventory event...	326
100. The derivation of semi-fixed feature types from furniture made in southeastern New England.....	333
101. Space occupied by furniture, Fairbanks house, Dedham, Mass., 1668.....	338
102. Space occupied by furniture, Lapham house, Scituate, Mass., 1648.....	341
103. Fairbanks family sundial, probably London, 1650.....	348
104. The structure of the 1668 Fairbanks inventory.....	353
105. Levels of seventeenth-century New England society embodied in the meetinghouse.....	358

Preface

As its title suggests, this study moves forward in a spirit of distrust about how most history has been written and with a spirit of optimism concerning its future as a socially responsible form of discourse. My title purposefully alludes to these two directions. In one way, my concern to describe the everyday life of seventeenth-century New Englanders as a "retreat from the wilderness" flies directly in the face of Perry Miller's brilliant work Errand Into the Wilderness (1956). As many historians writing since the mid-1960s realize, much of Miller's argument depended on a careful reading of ministerial tracts; there was simply no way to discover what typical yeomen were thinking, let alone try and occasion specific qualities of lay piety, when Miller was writing. Or was there?

The infusion of French and English demographic models into American historical method provided an alternative--one that many scholars still do not acknowledge. For now, rather than studying a specific group's comments about other individuals, we could reconstruct and study those individuals' actions themselves, profound and common actions like birth, death, marriage, mobility, and stasis. Here at last was a history representative of all people. Yet even here there was substantial room for progress into other embodiments of past thought, past intention, and past action. For like the facts and figures of the demographer's pen, surviving artifacts that were made and used by past cultures also embody dimensions of consciousness

deeper than those which typically lay in administrative documents-- lay subsidy roles, wills, or inventories. In 1970, John Demos' seminal work, A Little Commonwealth made important gestures to the incorporation of material artifacts into a social history that derived its principal impact from demography. In that book, which has yet to stimulate others of its kind and to which this study is a direct reply, Demos argued simply and powerfully the anthropological significance of the seventeenth-century house as an artificial container that shielded man's fragile, rational world from the inevitable and constant onslaught of chaotic Nature. Houses, he stressed, were safe harbors in a cosmic storm. Or, as I mean also by my title, they were retreats, havens, from a wilderness they created as myth to perpetuate a rationale for settlement. Furniture, Demos suggested, functioned principally as a classification scheme which enabled men to separate or unite their possessions as they thought appropriate.

Yet, as I have suggested elsewhere, Demos' seminal study failed to win complete converts because it lacked a degree of geographic comprehensiveness. Where A Little Commonwealth delved into everyday artifacts it often drew conclusions based on a perusal of only a small fraction of what survived in the field. At this point, the work of cultural geographers, folklorists trained in artifact study, and cultural historians suggest two means of going beyond the controlled limits of Demos' excellent pilot study. After major field surveys had been completed for both pre-1730 furniture and housing made in the southeastern New England region, one path I tread was that being cleared by an intrepid band of historians intent on documenting and

interpreting the mechanics of immigration of yeomen from England's defined regional cultures to the New World setting. In an impressive bibliography ranging from the early twentieth-century work of Edward Eggleston through David Allen's magisterial In English Ways (1981), these historians realize that any attempt to understand social interaction in the past can only proceed when the specific rules for interaction upheld by regional groups--East Anglians, Kentishmen, or West Countrymen, for example--are themselves explained. Among others, Timothy Breen and Stephen Foster have stressed the sub-cultural pluralism of so-called Englishmen in the early seventeenth century, and noted that regional patterns shaped the structure of local custom, politics, society, and speech.

They affected, too, the plan and size of New World housing, and it is here that the study of extant artifactual evidence becomes meaningful for social historians interested in family life, housing density, personal space, and the cultural evolution of such abstract concepts as cleanliness, quiet, light, and privacy. In part, this study attempts to explore the meaning of these conceptual qualities, themselves tools for controlling interaction. If the calculated intersection of studies in the meaning of regionalism and material culture is one way to break new ground in our understanding of seventeenth-century culture, another embraces the concern of modern folklorists who view performance and communication as the foundation upon which the study of artifacts as intentional embodiments of man's spirit should rest. Here the works of Henry Glassie, Robert Plant Armstrong, and Dell Hymes urge us to think about artifacts as fundamental means

of objectifying consciousness and exploring the relationship between alternate social values. In an age when most historians look with scholarly fatigue upon "just one more community study," folklorists are defining the actual communicative meaning of communitas --exactly that quality of intellectual and emotional membership in a group that was missing from studies written by historians. From its inception, then, the present study has had a basic purpose: to think folkloristically about old artifacts while still situating them in an historical framework. While I have been working on this study, many of my fellow folklorists have, I think, viewed it as peripheral to our discipline. "Why aren't you doing an ethnography of how interiors look today?" they would ask. My answer was always simple: "I am."

Of course others have tried this sort of thing before. Henry Glassie's own work on Patterns in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States (1968) certainly explored from a cultural geographic point of view the European regional precedents for regional patterns in America. Importantly, the book described the multiple chronologies that different cultures follow in their way to common, perhaps genetically common, patterns of change. Robert F. Trent's too-brief look at Hearts & Crowns (1977), chairs made during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries along the shores of Connecticut, added fair warnings about how innovation works--always selectively, rarely totally--and offered as well an attempt to integrate the artifacts he studied into the shop practices and working lives of the artisans who made them. Finally, Glassie's Folk Housing in Middle Virginia (1975) and All Silver No Brass (1975) approached two differ-