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## Introduction

When E. P. Thompson wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* he sought to produce a history of people enmeshed in a struggle for self-determination and self-realization against great opposition. His was not a work of abstraction. It described real individuals in real situations and placed them all in a context rich enough to make the book accessible to the working-class people of his own day. The success of his effort was built not on its analytical brilliance as a piece of Marxist history, but rather as a narrative of events and engagements that brought the reader almost step by step through a tumultuous period in English history. His narrative, more than eight hundred pages long, never lost sight of either the individual or groups as agents of historical change. Indeed, its greatest strength may be that the reader is presented with concrete examples of what early industrial capitalism was like in Britain, the manner in which it contributed to the growth of a working-class consciousness, and the way that consciousness emerged from the intellectual and cultural handiwork of a generation of workers and activists. It was not, as he would later say, “steam power plus the factory system equals the working class” (Abelove et al. 1983:7). Instead Thompson was able to weave together a multitude of local and national strands of thought into a coherent picture of historical change.

The goals of this book are more modest in scope. In it I present a series of intimate portraits of individual and corporate households in eighteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island and nineteenth-century Lowell, Massachusetts that serve as vehicles for exploring the changing face of class during a period of major transformation in the evolution of capitalism. By focusing on Newport and Lowell, I have chosen communities whose histories were dominated by particular political economies, merchant or mercantile capitalism and industrial capitalism respectively (Fig. 1.1). This study places the experiences of individuals and households into the cultural-historical fabric of their particular communities through documentary research, a common practice in historical archaeology. Where this study cultivates new terrain is in viewing this period of change as a set of overlapping cultural, historical, and biophysical spaces. By examining the meaning behind the existence of these spaces and the manner in which they changed between the eighteenth and early twentieth



Fig. 1.1 Regional map of New England showing the locations of communities discussed in this study.

century, I hope to bring a new perspective to our understanding of this period and the forces that shaped it.

In the same manner that the discourse surrounding working-class interests in Britain was constructed in a variety of vernaculars (see Thompson 1963:712–723), this study explores the multidimensional character of class as contested space, an element of individual and group identity that emerges at the nexus of social and material experience. Given that class, like all forms of identity, is discursive as well as multifaceted, it exists simultaneously as a physical, mental, and cultural-historical reality. And often these realities are contested. When work space becomes the arena for social protest, then space designed for one purpose becomes contested by those who seek to employ it for a purpose very much at odds with its original conceptualization (Beaudry and Mrozowski 2001:128). The same is true of mental and cultural

spaces such as middle class or working class. As the results of this study will demonstrate, cultural sensibilities thought to define the middle class were shared by many, including those who would have been viewed by others and themselves as working class. In this study mental self-image and its communication through dress, eating practices, and the landscape are all viewed as seamless spaces that were nevertheless subject to subtle, but sometimes open tension.

By linking the experiences of individual households to broader streams in the history of capitalism I am taking up the challenge recently voiced by Alison Wylie: “If the archaeological study of capitalism is framed as a series of narrow case studies with no movement beyond concrete particularities, and no analysis of the encompassing and structural conditions that give rise to these particularities, it cannot be expected to provide an understanding of these subjects as capitalist” (Wylie 1999:26). Wylie is echoing earlier calls by both Lenin and Marx to ground our understanding of capitalism in studies that move from the abstract to the concrete (1999:43).

Wylie’s challenge raises a host of interpretive and historical issues surrounding the ability of archaeologists to shred the dense structural apparatus of an economic system such as industrial capitalism in search of evidence of those who accepted its precepts or resisted them through individual or group action. Despite the relative consensus concerning the essential elements of a capitalist economy, there remain ambiguities concerning the articulation of these structures with individual practice within specific cultural-historical contexts. There are also ambiguities surrounding the role of class in shaping individual and group identity that in a study such as this obviously need to be addressed. There is, however, still a third problem that has received much less attention by historical archaeologists: the potential pitfalls of relying solely on material culture analysis in examining a history as complex as that of capitalism. Each of these questions holds particular relevancy for this study and its aspirations for having its case studies further the development of an archaeology of capitalism.

In their pursuit of this goal, historical archaeologists have relied heavily upon the analysis of material culture in constructing a rich set of archaeologies of capitalism (e.g. Beaudry and Mrozowski 1987a & b, 1989; Casella 2005; Delle 1998; Delle et al. 2000; Hall 1992, 2000; Johnson 1989, 1996; Leone 1982, 1988, 1995; Leone and Potter 1999; Little 1994; McGuire 1988; McGuire and Paynter 1991; McGuire and Reckner 2005; Mrozowski 1991, 1996, 1999a & b, 2000; Mullins 1996, 1999a & b; Orser 1988, 1996a & b; Paynter 1988, 2000a & b; Shackel 1993, 1996; Shackel et al. 1998; Tarlow and West 1999; Wurst and Fitts 1999; Wurst and McGuire 1999). The longevity and productivity of this approach speaks for itself. One of the drawbacks of its success has been to limit the growth of alternative or complementary approaches (Mrozowski 1996, 2006). This book presents just such an alternative in underscoring the importance of drawing upon multiple lines of evidence in constructing ecologies

of class that complement more traditional portraits constructed primarily through the analysis of material culture.

These ecologies of class are constructed through environmental archaeology. Here the goal is to move beyond the reconstruction of past conditions by focusing on space as the nexus of society, nature, and capitalism. Other historical archaeologists, most notably Johnson (1996) and Delle (1998), have explored moments in the history of capitalism through the examination of space. Each approaches it as a form of material culture (Delle 1998:36–40; Johnson 1996:10–19). I am quite comfortable with this idea and see many forms of material culture, including the landscape, as mediums of expression and communication that are sensitive barometers of historical change. In this book I expand on this notion by viewing space as being characterized by a nature, or natures, that are best explored through a different set of analytical tools. In practical terms this involves comparing the results of material culture analysis with those obtained from the examination of various classes of biological data and situating both within the particular histories of individual communities constructed through documentary research. Theoretically it means navigating the emergent terrain of an epistemology that seeks to transcend dualisms such as nature and culture by examining the articulation of biology and history (e.g. Benton 1996; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Escobar 1999; Goodman and Leatherman 2001; O'Connor 1998).

The researches of Johnson and Delle are part of a larger examination of the transformative power of capitalism that has been central to the work of a generation of historical archaeologists. This effort has seen a variety of approaches that have evolved in a nonlinear, sometimes eclectic manner. Many have stressed the global reach of capitalism and its role in shaping modernity (e.g. Hall 1992, 2000; Johnson 1996, 1999; Little 1994; Orser 1996b, 1999; Paynter 2000a & b; Schuyler 1978, 1988). Others have chosen to emphasize the volatile nature of a capitalist political economy that leads to cycles of contraction and expansion driven by crisis (Leone 1988; Paynter 1988, 2000b; Shackel 1993; Delle 1998). Paynter has suggested that these periods of expansion and contraction may rest behind some periodization evident in the archaeological record (1988, 2000a:8–9, 2000b:174–175), while changing patterns of consumption and the rise of consumerism during the eighteenth century, for example (e.g. Brewer and Porter 1993; McKendrick 1982), may provide an additional explanation for patterns in material culture use identified by Deetz (1977, 1996), Miller (1991), and Martin (1994, 1996). Delle (1998) has made a similar argument in suggesting the crisis created by the end of slavery and the shift to wage labor resulted directly in changes in the spatial layout of the plantations he examined in Jamaica.

These top-down approaches have sought connections between larger trends in the transition between pre-capitalist and capitalist (Orser 1996b; Paynter 2000a), pre-modern and modern (Johnson 1999) social formations. Others have explored

these larger forces through a bottom-up or inside-out approach that, despite the criticism of some (e.g. Orser 1996b:178–182), has proved to be a successful vehicle for exploring the manner in which forces such as capitalism have shaped notions of class identity (e.g. Beaudry and Mrozowski 2001; Mrozowski et al. 1996; Wurst and Fitts 1999). This book continues this approach by exploring the manner in which class was manifest in the lives of a relatively small number of people. By focusing on the period between the middle of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century I have also chosen a period when notions such as class were being transformed by larger social and economic forces. It is also a time when spatial practices that had remained unchanged for centuries began to be supplanted as part of a new spatial order linked to needs of industrial capitalism.

In situating the present work into the fabric of the larger project of historical archaeology, and in particular the archaeology of capitalism, I have chosen what for some may seem a circuitous route. For these readers I ask your patience as I lay out what I see as the intellectual threads that connect this study to this larger enterprise. By starting with the material cultures of capitalism I am laying the groundwork for the interpretation of what I will call material identities. These constructed realities were given texture through the acquisition and use of material culture. Space, both its production and use, also served as an element of these material identities. I then move to a discussion of the biophysical realities, or what I refer to as natures, that were also part of the fabric of daily existence for the individuals and groups examined in this study. These material and biophysical realities were dimensions of a broader cultural-historical space that formed the context for daily life during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### **Material cultures of capitalism**

Starting in the 1980s historical archaeologists began to explore alternatives to the structuralist paradigm of James Deetz exemplified by his research on the changing cultural mindsets of colonial New England and Virginia (1977, 1996). In particular, Deetz argued that the symmetry that characterized material practices in both regions was indicative of a grammar of order. Reflected in Georgian architectural styles, the growing popularity of matched sets of dishes, and landscapes such as gardens, this cultural mindset was predicated on the principles of balance and individualism (1996:63). Deetz envisioned this grammar of order as a “set of rules for the creation of artifacts mutually accepted by the members of the culture producing them. Such rules definitely exist, even if they cannot be explicitly stated by their users” (1996:154).

Although Deetz never envisioned his research as contributing to an archaeology of capitalism, the material patterns he identified nevertheless served as the point of departure for others interested in the same period. Over the past twenty

years historical archaeologists have sought evidence of the same material patterns with mixed results (see Hall 1992; Johnson 1993; Leone 1999a:203–204; Paynter 2000a:8; Shackel 1993). For some the problem has been less a failure to discover similar patterns, than the limitations of structuralism to explain their appearance or their rather fractal spread through both time and space (Hall 1992, 2000:44; Mrozowski 1996). Others accept the empirical validity of the material patterning Deetz describes, but question its origins and genealogy (Johnson 1993, 1996:206–208; Martin 1994, 1996; Miller 1991; Miller et al. 1994; Mrozowski 1988). Many of these same researchers also question whether these patterns spread uniformly from city to country and from cultural elite to those situated lower in the social hierarchy as Deetz suggests (1996:157–158, but see Bell 2002; Leone 1988, 1999a; Martin 1994, 1996; Shackel 1993).

Ceramic historian George Miller, for example, agrees with Deetz concerning the uniform popularity of matched sets of dishes, but does not attribute the growth of their popularity to the adoption of a new cultural grammar. Instead he argued these patterns of ceramic purchases were spurred by the British ceramic industry's increased production and marketing sophistication (see McKendrick 1982:100–145; see also Miller 1991; Miller et al. 1994). Matching sets of dishes became more popular because prices continued to drop as the nineteenth century progressed (Miller 1991; see also Miller et al. 1994). Miller assumes that households that had previously been unable to afford finer table ware began purchasing matched sets as lower prices made them accessible (1991:3). Elsewhere Miller (see Leone 1999a:199) has argued that dropping prices were more important than social emulation of the wealthy or cultural elite. He did not dismiss the idea that ceramics could have served as a medium for social emulation, but for Miller the correlation between the drop in prices and the documentary and archaeological evidence of their popularity (see Miller et al. 1994; Martin 1994) was too compelling to ignore.

Ann Smart Martin also explicitly cited the influence of the elite and dropping prices in what she has described as the “Creamware Revolution” (1994:169–187; see also 1996). Martin provides a convincing argument for how the combination of low prices and design made creamware so popular that it changed the consumption patterns of elites and the middling ranks. Drawing on the work of economic historian Neal McKendrick (see 1982:100–145), Martin provides empirical evidence that the popularity that Josiah Wedgwood sought for his “Queen’s Ware” was realized in Virginia. Wedgwood acknowledged that his success was owing in large measure to the patronage he received from the royal family and the nobility in general (McKendrick 1982:100–110) and consistently asserted that the key to a healthy business was not lower prices, but quality goods. He also expressed his global ambitions when he reveled in how quickly the use of his Queen’s Ware had “spread over the whole Globe” (cited in McKendrick 1982:100). Eventually Wedgwood realized his dream



of global reach as the British ceramic industry came to dominate the world market in the nineteenth century.

The power of the British ceramic industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been linked by some to the growth of a consumer culture. Those who have focused on the English manifestations of this movement tend to identify its origins in the sixteenth century (see Johnson 1996; Weatherill 1988). In the British colonies of North America, the evidence points to its formation in the eighteenth century (see Leone 1988; Martin 1996; McCracken 1988; Shamas 1990). Some historians who have examined the issue have implicitly accepted this scenario (Bushman 1992; McKendrick 1982:112) as well as the assumption that social emulation was the driving force behind the process.

Both Deetz and Miller appear to accept the idea that the spread of this consumerism was a fairly uniform process moving from the elite down to the middling sorts and thence to the working class beginning in the early eighteenth century while reaching its fullest expression in the nineteenth century. Martin (1996) questions the uniformity of the process and the emulation of wealthier taste by noting how “back-country folk” in Virginia often rejected fashion. More recently Alison Bell has revisited the issue of emulation in a study of rural Virginia in which she argues that farmers sought a level of “cultural accord” with one another through the acquisition of similar material culture (2002:254–262). Bell found evidence that rural Virginia farmers did not solely copy the practices of wealthier planters – some of this took place – but more importantly it seems the chief goal was to construct a common identity (2002:260).

All of these studies implicitly accept the notion that the consumption and use of everyday items are linked to broader cultural forces that influence daily practice. In this sense they are consistent with the precepts of practice theory as outlined by Bourdieu (1984, 1990; see also De Certeau 1984). Whether it is the call to order brought on by the seemingly celestial influence of the Georgian mindset or the allure of cultural formations identified by any number of monikers, be it gentility, polite society, or ornamentalism (Cannadine 2001), daily practice reinforces and reproduces broader cultural forces.

Mark Leone and his colleagues working in Annapolis, Maryland (see Leone 1988; Leone and Shackel 1987; Mullins 1996; Shackel 1993), have explored the spread and meaning of the material patterns that others like Deetz and Miller have outlined, but from a different theoretical position. They have found no evidence of the kind of uniformity in material patterning discussed by either Deetz or Miller. Using an Index of Ceramic Variability (see Leone 1999a:196–197), Leone illustrated that the appearance of matched sets was not a uniform trend among the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century households he examined in Annapolis. Instead the results indicate that ceramic acquisition appears to have been subject to a variety of economic

and social variables including the fluctuation in prices that Miller has identified (Leone 1999a:199). Apparently not all of the households had the disposable income required to purchase these kinds of ceramics, though Leone has acknowledged the possibility that these figures could be skewed by sample differences. Earlier research using documentary sources, probate inventories in particular, confirmed some of the patterns outlined by Deetz (Leone 1999a:203–204). Although the classes of material culture were different from those Deetz examined, Leone (1988; Leone and Shackel 1987) and Paul Shackel (1993) argued that the patterning – a similar sense or order – is the same.

Where Leone parts company with Deetz, Miller, and by extension Martin, is in what lay behind the material patterns the latter three have identified. For both Leone and Shackel neither a new “world view” nor even dropping ceramic prices account for the heightened order. The new dining patterns Deetz (1977) and Martin (1994) described reflect instead new routines of work and time brought about by capitalism (Leone 1999a:200–204; see also Shackel 1993). Leone has suggested that these patterns also measure “the degree to which a household is integrated into the market” (1999a:210). Drawing on the work of both E. P. Thompson (1967, 1974) and Michel Foucault (1979), Leone has argued that the orderliness expressed in formal table settings reflects the ideology of individualism (1999a:212). The emphasis on timeliness and routine embedded in the operation of factory-based industrialism was part of a larger process reproduced in classrooms, hospitals, libraries, and prisons (Leone 1999a:203; see also Foucault 1979:148–151; Shackel 1993). The power of the clock to segment time artificially was perhaps the most obvious expression of this new economic order that, according to Shackel (1993) and Leone (1999a & b), also found expression at the table. The discipline expressed in a well-ordered table was part of a larger program of self-surveillance that situated individuals in a new world created by capitalism (Leone 1999a:203–204).

The reasons behind the patterns of consumption historical archaeologists and historians have identified, their spread through both time and space, and their links to production, all assume some kind of relationship between daily practice and broader economic or cultural forces. There still remain questions concerning the mechanisms that result in the spread of material practices or whether consumer choice really translates into autonomous choice. Wurst and McGuire’s recent discussion of the limitations of consumer models in historical archaeology correctly notes that many such studies focus on individual action and its symbolic meaning (1999:192). They note that the assumptions underlying many such studies tend to reinforce ideologies that obscure social inequalities. The allure of gentility, for example, might be to mask the social inequality that marked class differences (Wurst and McGuire 1999:198). In this regard Wurst and McGuire argue against the notion of autonomous choice since the consumption of goods for the purpose of constructing identity cannot be



separated from the inequalities inherent in the social relations of production. They argue that, while choice exists in daily practice, there is no autonomous choice.

There seems little question that individuals are constrained by the opinions of their family members, people for and with whom they work, and the broader cultural values of the society at large. Neither is there any doubt that those with more disposable income have a wider array of choices than do the poor. In this study, however, I hope to move beyond this discussion by linking the social relations of production under three different incarnations of capitalist political economy – merchant, industrial, and managerial – to examine how consumption patterns and their role in the construction of individual, group, or class identity changed over time. These patterns of consumption and use are then compared with evidence of the manner in which space was used as an expression of class differences as well as other data pertaining to the various natures that capitalism spawned. It is by comparing the cultural and biological evidence that this study seeks to move beyond questions that hinge exclusively on consumption by examining the manner in which the social relations of production influence, and in some instances shape, notions of class identity and the broader threads of everyday life.

### **Capitalism and class**

For Leone the ideology of individualism is part of a false consciousness that masks the lack of freedom over daily routines and relations of power resulting from the economic and social inequalities inherent in capitalist social relations (1999a:212). By focusing on individualism Leone is also attempting to link archaeological evidence of individual choices – in this instance bringing order to everyday life in the form of eating habits – to broader structural elements in the manner Wylie has argued (1999). Despite relative consensus on the essential elements of capitalism and their general genealogy, there still remain outstanding issues concerning our ability to move from the abstract to the concrete in a meaningful way. Archaeologists interested in the study of capitalism have, for example, stressed the need to view it less in the abstract and more as a historically contingent reality (Johnson 1996; Leone 1999b; Paynter 2000a; Wilke and Bartoy 2000). There is, for example, broad agreement on the exploitation of labor as a central element of capitalist social relations whether it involves wage laborers, tenant farmers, or slaves (e.g. Delle 1998; Leone 1988, 1999b; Orser 1988, 1996b; Patterson 1993:350–353; Paynter 1988, 2000a:8–9; Wurst 1999).

In his original conceptualization Marx also noted the importance of exploitative labor relations as another element of capitalist accumulation. This was particularly true of slavery as a form of economic exploitation whose links to the African slave trade represented what Marx called the “rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production” (1906:823). Labor is exploited in the production of commodities whose

sale results in a profit that passes only to the capitalist. Compensation for this labor that had long taken the form of use value, now under capitalism took the form of exchange value, with an inordinate amount of power in setting the parameters of this exchange going to those who had the capital to control sizable sectors of the economy.

Historical archaeologists have generally accepted the existence of pre-industrial structural elements of capitalism in sixteenth-century Britain (Johnson 1996), as well as medieval Italy (Mrozowski 1999a; Leone 1999b; Paynter 2000a & b), a position supported by close to a century's worth of research on the part of European historians (e.g. Bloch 1939; Braudel 1967, 1981, 1982, 1985; Dobb 1946; Pirenne 1936; Slicher van Bath 1963; Wallerstein 1974, 1980). Braudel noted, for example, the existence of small capitalists, such as guild masters, artisans, and wage laborers, engaged in exchanges that could, in some instances, lead to the kind of accumulation, what he (1985:562) called "micro-capitalism," necessary to foster larger enterprises. More often it was merchants who used their connections to facilitate exchange on a scale large enough to permit their progeny to become capitalists (Braudel 1967:xiii, 1985:562; Dalzell 1987; Marx 1906:823).

Wolf (1982) argued against the notion of merchant or mercantile capitalism despite Marx's insistence that such a thing existed: "the middle age had handed down two distinct forms of capital, which mature in the most different economic social formations, and which, before the era of the capitalist mode of production, are considered as capital *quand même* – usurer's capital and merchant's capital" (1906:822). Wolf (1982) felt that ambiguities surrounding ownership of the means of production raised doubts concerning the emergence of a capitalist mode of production before the appearance of factory-based industry and the growth of wage labor.

Questions concerning the exploitation of labor, the periods of crises endemic to capitalist economies, and issues surrounding the history of capitalism are all part of the emerging historiography of its archaeological study. For the purposes of this book I would like to approach capitalism from a slightly different perspective. First I accept that questions surrounding labor exploitation and ownership of the means of production are central in defining capitalism. Yet the existence of both slavery and other forms of labor exploitation in pre-capitalist economic forms makes these less compelling measures of capitalism's existence. What then distinguishes earlier pre-capitalist societies, such as feudal Europe and Britain, from the factory-based industrial economies that most scholars accept were capitalist social formations? The key I believe is the cultural ideology, or mental space, that pervaded these different societies. Unlike early industrial capitalism, where factory owners could treat workers as they pleased, feudal lords were obligated to protect their serfs, provide them with enough land – the means of production – to survive, in exchange for their fealty. The factory replaced land as the chief means of production, but