More Than the Boston Tea Party: Tea in American Culture, 1760s-1840s

Lisa Lynn Petrovich

University of Colorado at Boulder, petrovich.lisa@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/hist_gradetds

Part of the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.colorado.edu/hist_gradetds/17

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by History at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Graduate Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu.
MORE THAN THE BOSTON TEA PARTY:  
TEA IN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1760s – 1840s  
by  
Lisa L. Petrovich  
BA, Illinois Wesleyan University, 2009

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of History  
2013
This thesis entitled:
More Than the Boston Tea Party:
Tea in American Culture, 1760s-1840s

written by Lisa L. Petrovich
has been approved for the Department of History
University of Colorado at Boulder

____________________
Dr. Ralph Mann, Committee Chair

____________________
Dr. Lee Chambers, Committee Member

____________________
Dr. Virginia Anderson, Committee Member

Date______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Abstract

Petrovich, Lisa L. (M.A., History Department)
More Than the Boston Tea Party: Tea in American Culture, 1760s-1840s
Thesis directed by Dr. Ralph Mann

“More Than the Boston Tea Party: Tea in American Culture, 1760s – 1840s,” a M.A. thesis by Lisa L. Petrovich from the History Department and advised by Dr. Ralph Mann, argues that tea, despite its function in the Boston Tea Party, played other important roles in early American culture. Part of the new consumer economy, tea embedded itself in social customs and allowed for a more democratic means of respectability. It played political roles before the American Revolution and during the antebellum reform movements. Even though men imported and consumed the commodity, society in the new republic considered tea the domain of women, which reinforced negative patterns of thought about women’s place in America. Between the 1760s and the 1840s, Americans claimed tea as a part of their culture and gave it social, political, and gendered meanings, which include but are much more than the Boston Tea Party.
Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Dushan and Nancy Petrovich, who encouraged me in my love for reading and learning since I was very young and who have wholeheartedly supported my passion for history and my dreams of achieving a higher education.
Acknowledgments

It takes a village to create a scholarly work, and I have many people to thank. My family, including my parents, Dushan and Nancy Petrovich, and my brother, Steven Petrovich, has helped to make this thesis possible through the support they have given me.

The staff at two research institutions was very kind and helpful on my first research trip in January 2013. I would like to thank the staff members at the Patricia D. Klingenstein Library at the New York Historical Society and at the Massachusetts Historical Society Library.

Many faculty members from the University of Colorado at Boulder assisted me in the conception and direction of this project. I would like to thank Dr. Ralph Mann for advising me, Dr. Lee Chambers for her guidance and her example as a strong female academic, Dr. Virginia Anderson for helping me find crucial sources on loyalist women, and all three for serving on my thesis committee. Dr. Phoebe Young’s cultural history course provided me with a background of the field that helped me to clarify my own work, and Dr. Mark Pittenger’s intellectual history course led me to rethink some of my textual approaches.

My friends have been more help than I can express. Dave Varel gave me excellent friendship and counsel and was invaluable for his intellectual questioning that often led me to think in new ways. Abby Lagemann gave me advice on the structure of the thesis. Dave, Abby, Chris Foss, Pete Veru, and Rebecca Kennedy de Lorenzini provided me with great conversations over many happy hours and teas during the creation of this work. Back home in Illinois, Bridget Schott, Liz Allison, and Aaron Gierhart gave me their full support and advice during times of trial and joy. To all these professors and friends within the History Department at the University of Colorado at Boulder, my thanks can never be enough to cover my gratitude.
CONTENTS

Title Page ................................................................. i
Signature Page ........................................................... ii
Abstract ................................................................. iii
Dedication ............................................................... iv
Acknowledgements ...................................................... v
Table of Contents ..................................................... vi
List of Images .......................................................... vii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ...................................................... 1

II. TEA’S SOCIAL MEANINGS IN AMERICA, 1760s-1840s .......... 15

III. TEA AND POLITICS IN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1760s-1840s .... 42

IV. TEA AS A GENDERED COMMODITY, 1760s-1840s .............. 68

V. CONCLUSION ......................................................... 86

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................... 98
IMAGES

Chapter One
Image One: Row in Henry Luce Center.................................14

Chapter Two
Image One: Miniature Tea Set, Roswell Gleason....................39
Image Two: “Paul Revere,” John Singleton Copley................39
Image Three: “Devotion,” Francis William Edmonds..............40
Image Four: “The Speculator,” Francis William Edmonds.........40
Image Five: “Taking the Census,” Francis William Edmonds......41
Image Six: “Contest for the Bouquet,” Seymour Joseph Guy.........41

Chapter Four
Image One: “Waiting for Cupid – A Spinster’s Reverie,” Harper’s
Weekly (1869).................................................................83
Image Two: “Waiting for Cupid – A Bachelor’s Reverie,” Harper’s
Weekly (1869).................................................................83
Image Three: “The Little Woman,” Harper’s Weekly (1868)........84
Image Four: frontispiece to Lydia Green Abell, The Skillful
Housewife’s Book; or Complete Guide to Domestic
Cookery, Taste, Comfort and Economy, (1846).................85

Chapter Five
Image One: “Centennial Tea Party in the Rotunda of the Capitol at
Washington on Wednesday Evening, December 16th,”
Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper (1875)....................95
Image Two: “The Tea,” Mary Stevenson Cassatt (1880)............96
Image Three: “Godey’s Fashions,” Godey’s Lady’s Book (1888).....97
I. Introduction

A study of tea in America may at first seem trivial. Then again, a topic or historical question that at first seems insignificant often ends up leading the researcher on a long and winding journey through newspapers, letters, diaries, daybooks, and rolls of microfilm trying to grasp at the experiences of people from the past. In my case, that question and subsequent research journey occurred almost three years ago as I waited for the water kettle to heat up so I could steep my loose-leaf tea. I thought about the tea boycott of the 1770s, and, naturally, wondered what that movement would have been like for an everyday American colonist. If I were he or she, how would a boycott of a beloved beverage change my daily practices, my interactions with neighbors and friends, my relationships with family members, and my identity as a British citizen? Would I, if a patriot or a loyalist, give up or continue to drink, respectively, a much-beloved beverage for the cause? How would periodicals, letters from family and friends, and visual culture impact my decision? I also wondered what happened to tea in American culture after the war. These questions and a wish to understand the everyday experiences of early Americans motivated my initial searches for materials on tea in America.

Primary documents and secondary studies revealed that by looking at how Americans used and perceived tea and its equipage, seemingly mundane and trivial objects at first glance, one can gain an understanding of the economic, cultural, and gender histories of early America and the new republic and can identify the everyday customs and objects that early Americans deemed important. Subsequently, this study looks at the role of tea in American culture through social, political and gendered methods of analysis and considers its relationships with consumption, socio-economic status, and gender roles, among other concepts, between roughly the 1760s and 1840s. The study grounds itself with a goal of digging deeply into the everyday
experiences of people to make the seemingly ordinary objects related to tea speak to larger historical arguments. I argue that tea occupied a substantial place in early American culture that included more than the Boston Tea Party.

The arguments and evidence herein are presented in three thematic chapters. First, Chapter Two captures the place of tea in American culture as this culture emerged and looks at the social aspects of the drink and its equipage. The chapter starts with the eighteenth-century consumer economy and notions of eighteenth-century gentility and ends with the rise of a democratized idea of respectability in the nineteenth century. I argue that tea reveals the change in ideas of respectability from an upper-class-only version of gentility to a more democratic version of upward mobility for anyone. Tea bolstered the new consumer economy, formed an element of socializing, gave employment to merchants and laborers, and lent itself to new cultural changes that allowed the masses to participate in what had once been a social ritual of only the wealthy.

Next, Chapter Three considers the political meanings of tea in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. I argue that tea took on political symbolism during the decade before the revolution and came to represent denied liberty to patriots and rebellion to loyalists. Merchants occupied the harrowing space between the colonists and the combined forces of Parliament and the British East India Company. The involvement of such a domestic item as tea during the revolution allowed women to participate politically, setting a precedent for their nineteenth-century writing, political actions, and calls for women’s rights. For loyalist women, however, the domestic characteristics of tea forced them into a dangerous spot. Men and women became involved in the turmoil over tea taxation, with important consequences, but the Boston Tea Party allows the role of tea to be exaggerated. Tea lost its political meanings until the
late 1820s when Americans used it as a non-threatening and respectable method of gaining support for the temperance and antislavery reform movements. Women, having gained experience before the revolution, reentered the political arena for the temperance and antislavery causes, and were allowed to do so again partly due to the domestic nature of tea.

Finally, Chapter Four considers the gendered implications of tea. It argues that society designated tea a female commodity, which gave women some control over the social custom but also left them vulnerable to blame for what society saw as the ill-effects of tea, namely, the perceived negative affects on the health and industriousness of Americans. I suggest that representations of teapots and the culture of tea in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century fostered a "gendered imagination," Alice Kessler-Harris’s term for gendered patterns of thought, that had a negative effect on society’s views on women’s appropriate places in society.¹ In this case, it reinforced conservative notions of women’s domestic roles and “natural” compositions, thereby strengthening a traditional gender hierarchy with women as second-class citizens.

The focus of this thesis begins in 1767, when Parliament passed the Townshend Act, which placed levies on paper, glass, lead, and paint, and a three-pence tax on each pound of tea imported to the American colonies. Due to this new legislation, tea entered the general discourse in political ways for the first time. While tea has continued to act as a part of American culture until the present, this study ends in the 1840s. This point of termination fits with Richard L. Bushman’s idea that by the middle of the nineteenth century, gentility had thoroughly filtered down into most socio-economic classes and been fully embraced by Americans.² It also seemed


appropriate to end the thesis before the beginning of a new political crisis, the Civil War, and a
new cultural phenomenon, the Gilded Age, with its emergence of wealth and gentility for some
and economic struggles for others.

I base my arguments on research culled from online databases, books, visual materials,
and trips to museums and historical societies. During these searches I found and analyzed
manuscript materials, including diaries, letters, merchants’ daybooks, etiquette manuals,
broadsides, graphic materials such as etchings, prints, and paintings, and physical materials,
especially teapots and other pieces of tea equipage. I tried to gain a view into Americans’
eyeveryday lives, and since women so frequently imbibed tea and had such a unique experience
with it, it made sense to look at women’s letters and diaries to read their experiences in their own
words. Men’s daily experiences came through John Adams’s diary and correspondence, Martha
Ballard’s diary, and other individuals’ letters. Similarly, newspapers were researched because
everyday people read them and we can read what they read. I enjoy using visual culture because
we can get a glimpse of American history from the middle of the eighteenth century to the
middle of the nineteenth and beyond.

I retained the geographic scope of the thesis to New England and the Middle Atlantic
colonies, but within that area I tried to find sources that reflected a diverse range of people.
Research for this thesis was restricted by geography but not by race. By the early nineteenth
century, advertisements for tea and accounts of tea drinking by free blacks appear in African-
American newspapers. Certain groups of people, however, such as slaves and Native Americans,
appeared in very few sources. Slaves most likely did not drink tea. Solomon Northup, a free
black man kidnapped into slavery for twelve years, wrote in his memoir that on Edwin Epps’s
plantation slaves received a few pounds of bacon and some corn, but “that is all – no tea, coffee,
sugar,” and salt only rarely.³ Northup thus indicated that he drank tea when free, or at least had knowledge of it, and that slaves did not. While most or possibly all of American slaves did not drink tea, enslaved individuals might have worked with it as domestics. Joan R. Gunderson notes, “Slaves or women too poor to own [tea services and other commodities] cleaned them for others,” and therefore “the consumer revolution affected nearly all women, whether they bought items or not.”⁴ Certain American Indians might have gained access to tea goods through trade with the English. Gunderson discusses the inventory of Mary Thomas, a Natick Indian who died in 1778. Thomas’s list of objects included teapots and coffeepots, which suggest that she had adopted these goods into her lifestyle.⁵ While some groups did not participate as much or at all in the culture of tea, the commodity’s influence was so far-reaching into American culture that almost every American drank it, worked with it, or had at least some knowledge of its existence and culture.

Whether made in the colonies, later the American states, or imported from abroad, the vast number and variety of material goods reveals much about the importance of tea in America. If one tours the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Henry Luce Center for Visual Storage, in which artifacts not on exhibit are stored in full display for the public, one can suddenly turn a corner and come upon long rows of beautiful tea services, teapots, coffeepots, teaspoons, salvers, tea kettles, and kettle stands, in gleaming silver, pounded brass, and matted pewter. (See Image One, p. 14) Tea services made out of these materials adorned most of the tables of society in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and the surrounding vicinities.

³Solomon Northup, Twelve Years a Slave (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2000), 168.


⁵ Gunderson, To Be Useful to the World, 59.
Important for the credibility of this study is the idea of an explicitly American culture.

This thesis works under the idea that an American culture remained intertwined with that of Great Britain until 1774, when tensions erupted with the closure of Boston Port. This follows Timothy H. Breen’s timeline, in which he proposes that “separation from Great Britain occurred at a precise moment” in spring 1774 with the closure of the port, and not during the Glorious Revolution, at the end of the Seven Years’ War, or after the Tea Act of 1773. It did not come about even after the Boston Tea Party. The change of culture is fluid, of course, in that foreshadowing of a separate culture occurred before 1774 and the culture continued to have many similarities to British culture after that year. The beginning of that full schism set the colonies on a divergent cultural path that patriots and the remaining loyalists would flesh out in the next few years. Therefore, this study will make references to an American culture, while remembering that until 1774 the colonial culture of North America was made up of British and American characteristics, beliefs, and values.

Theories from the fields of cultural and social histories informed this thesis the most. The ideas that one can use visual and material culture to make larger arguments and that historians can cull from everyday people or objects to answer historical questions form the basis of this study. Inspiration came from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Timothy H. Breen, Bryant Simon, and David Jaffee. Empathy acts as a driving force of my work. Stephen Oates defines empathy in one way as “an effort to experience other human beings, by seeing the world from their view,

---


feeling their feelings, and thinking their thoughts.”

This thesis will show how a cultural artifact such as a teapot can reveal to us the culture of everyday Americans and their experiences, views on class and social mobility, and “gendered imagination.” Mainly, I wanted to get into the everyday experiences of people who lived between 1767 and about 1850, for “Sometimes the most useful insights come from pondering the harness and treadles that move the interlocking threads of daily life.”

This topic inherently lends itself to many different facets of American history, which gives it an eclectic historiography. Primary sources from cultural, material, intellectual, economic, political, and social histories were all considered and put into context with historical events taking place during the generations from just before the American Revolution up to a decade before the Civil War. Therefore, it tends to act as a synthesis of American cultural history from 1767 to almost 1850, and includes works from American historians in various fields who have looked at tea in America as a part of their arguments.

Breen and Carole Shammas have studied the role of tea as part of their works in America’s early consumer economy. Breen argues that a consumer economy existed in the American colonies since the middle of the eighteenth century and that this shared consumer experience provided one method of unifying the colonies during the pre-war conflict because they had the “cultural resources to develop a bold new form of political protest.” People throughout the colonies sympathized with Boston’s troubles because they, too, used the goods in question and therefore united to use consumer goods for a new purpose in the tea boycott.

---


Breen’s work highlights “the significance of imported goods on the eve of independence” that he feels American historians have for too long downplayed.\(^\text{11}\)

Like Breen, Shammas argues for the existence and importance of the early American consumer economy. She compiled statistics on goods in England and in America and concludes that in America “the Industrial Revolution, at least as far as consumption is concerned, is not the watershed it was once thought to be,” but represented an additional wave of a pre-existing consumer economy.\(^\text{12}\) Shammas analyzes consumer demand, standards of living, and distribution of goods, and contends that consumer interest occurred across a range of class levels. Tea played a large role in this early American consumer economy, and Breen and Shammas’s works give detailed information on the state of consumption of tea in America that help put this project into its proper economic context. This thesis confirms Breen and Shammas’s arguments that early Americans placed importance on consumer goods and connects their economic work to other social, political, and gendered meanings these early consumers gave to tea.

Studies of colonial America before the 1760s were reviewed to gain knowledge of what preceded the time period that formed the focus of this thesis. Lorinda Goodwin researched merchants in colonial Massachusetts and “focused principally on the social realm of the merchant community, how it was created, expressed, sustained, and reproduced through mannerly behavior.”\(^\text{13}\) She finds that seventeenth and eighteenth-century merchants played a crucial role in importing goods and manners to the American public. They understood and exploited the notion that “At the same time that the individual as a social construct was emerging,

\(^{11}\) Ibid, xvii.


manners allowed the expression of individuality while preserving the means of communication between individuals and groups.”\textsuperscript{14} The skill of merchants at understanding the motivations behind the demand of goods in America continued well into the early years of the new republic. This thesis continues Goodwin’s work by considering merchants’ experiences with tea after 1767.

Studies of women’s place in the American Revolution include sections on the political impact of the tea taxes on women. Mary Beth Norton and Joan R. Gunderson, for example, view tea through the lens of women’s roles and activism during the revolution. Norton wrote \textit{Liberty’s Daughters} to understand women’s experience during the American Revolution and she outlines women’s dilemmas over the tea boycott in her chapter on female activism. She argues that “women’s domestic roles took on political significance” when the economic boycotts began and that “the activism of female patriots found particular expression in their support of the colonial boycott of tea and other items taxed by the Townshend Act of 1767.”\textsuperscript{15}

Gunderson suggests that the American Revolution “appears as a series of trade-offs” for women in terms of what they gained and lost.\textsuperscript{16} For instance, American women were lauded when they became politically active through the spinning matches and tea boycott because “Protest leaders could not afford to ignore women,” but at the same time their activism “did not create a feminist consciousness.”\textsuperscript{17} This thesis adds to these works by looking at women’s positive experiences with tea and at how this domestic item allowed them greater leeway to write

\textsuperscript{14} Goodwin, \textit{Archaeology of Manners}, 13.


\textsuperscript{16} Gunderson, \textit{To Be Useful to the World}, xiv.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 174, 199.
and act politically, but also by developing an argument on the negative implications of the
gendered aspects of tea.

Other historians have studied tea as a politicized object through its highlighted place in
the Boston Tea Party. Benjamin L. Carp suggests that “American consumer habits, including the
colonists’ love of tea, played a role in the way the resistance unfolded,” effectively combining
early American consumerism and the Boston Tea Party.\textsuperscript{18} He argues that Americans wrestled
with the legacy of the destruction of the tea. “Some found the story of the Tea Party to be
inspiring and democratic,” he writes, “but other called it riotous, disorderly, and disturbing.”\textsuperscript{19}
Due to this ambiguity, Americans set the event aside until the 1830s when for various reasons,
including national patriotism and the rise of the working class, some reclaimed the incident. Carp
partially attributes the more palatable version of the event to women, whose stories of that fateful
night “helped to humanize, sentimentalize, and domesticate the Boston Tea Party story, making a
destructive act more acceptable to nineteenth-century audiences.”\textsuperscript{20}

Alfred F. Young delves into the life one Boston Tea Party participator, George Twelves
Hewes, while looking at the incident in American memory. Similar to Carp, Young argues that
due to consternation over the rebellious nature of the incident Americans neglected the
destruction of the teas until the 1830s, when conservative and radical Americans contested over
the memory of the Boston Tea Party until the conservative, non-threatening transformation of the
destruction of the tea into a “tea party” won.\textsuperscript{21} Carp’s and Young’s comprehensive works on the

\textsuperscript{18} Benjamin L. Carp, \textit{Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America} (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 2010), 3.

\textsuperscript{19} Carp, \textit{Defiance of the Patriots}, 5.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 227.

\textsuperscript{21} Alfred F. Young, \textit{The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution} (Boston: Beacon
Press, 1999), 161, 163.
Boston Tea Party allowed me to spend more time researching other issues, and this resulting work adds more material culture, especially the domestic and gendered aspects of tea, to the discussion of everyday Americans’ experiences before and after December 16, 1773.

A major part of the historiography of tea in American history originates from studies of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century material culture and domestic life. David Shields argues that teatime, one of what Shields calls “culturally powerful modes of communication,” mattered for the polite discourse of the late eighteenth century because it provided a forum “where women asserted prerogative.”

22 Jaffee studies the history of early American material culture in *A New Nation Of Goods* and “highlights the significant role of provincial artisans in four crafts – chairmaking, clockmaking, portrait painting, and book publishing – to explain the shift from pre-industrial society to an entirely new configuration of work, commodities, and culture,” and the “cultural work of nation-building.”

23 Tea and its equipage, according to Jaffee, formed an important part of the new domestic goods during the eighteenth-century consumer revolution and “signaled the new commodity culture of the British Atlantic World.”

24 Bridget T. Heneghan combines the studies of race and material culture in antebellum America in *Whitewashing America*. She argues that white Americans took on racial attitudes that led them to prefer white goods, such as white ceramic teapots, to dark goods, mimicking their preferred racial hierarchy. 25 Her work was useful to compare to the experiences of free blacks found during my research.

---


24 Ibid., 9.

Certain scholars have identified a change in American social practices during the early nineteenth century. Bushman and John F. Kasson use tea as evidence in their arguments that Americans increased their attention to manners, gentility, and respectability by the early nineteenth century. Kasson argues in *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* in 1990 that manners, of which table etiquette is a part, “are inextricably tied to larger political, social, and cultural context and that their ramifications extend deep into human relations and the individual personality.”26 Two years later Richard Bushman argues in *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* that ideals converged with material goods to change the American environment and reshape American culture. He suggests that the upper-class focus on gentility, or inward grace, became democratized so that by the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth the middle class, which included “smaller merchants and professionals, ordinary well-off farmers, successful artisans,” and shopkeepers, came “to believe that they should live a genteel life” like the upper classes.27 By the middle of the nineteenth century, this democratized gentility also became known as refinement and this idea of refining one’s self, house, and city diffused into most parts of society. Kasson also notes that “originally denoting the gentry and more broadly the well-born,” the words “genteel” and “gentility” “came increasingly in the nineteenth century to refer to elegance, grace, and politeness.”28 Thus, gentility kept its connotations of the higher class but became so much adopted by the middling classes in the nineteenth century that it morphed into respectability. All


27 Bushman, *Refinement of America*, xii-xiii.

28 Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility*, 34.
of these terms are used fluidly by Kasson and Bushman and are used in this thesis in the same way.

This work, then, brings together these various historiographies that use tea as evidence of other historical phenomena. A study of tea in American culture connects works by scholars as different as Breen and Bushman. It connects studies of the pre-Revolutionary War consumer economy to the implications this early trade had for women during the Revolution and to how social practices developed around material culture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This study of tea in early America also gathers material and substance that can be added to a chapter on America in global histories of tea.

Tea exists as a surprisingly versatile vehicle for revealing the beliefs held by Americans between the 1760s and 1840s and for teasing out the larger historical issues at play. The Asian philosopher, Okakura Kakuzo, acknowledges that “the outsider may indeed wonder at this seeming much ado about nothing,” and “What a tempest in a tea-cup! he will say.” [sic]29 Kakuzo explains, however, that “when we consider how small after all the cup of human enjoyment is, how soon overflowed with tears, how easily drained to the dregs in our quenchless thirst for infinity, we shall not blame ourselves for making so much of the tea-cup.”30 Tea was a domestic consumer commodity that melded itself into American social practices, standards of gentility, and proper etiquette, and Americans used it as a symbol of various meanings in the decade before the revolution, in the rise of middle-class respectability after the war, and into the nineteenth-century.

29 Okakura Kakuzo, Book of Tea (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1926), 2.
30 Ibid.
Images – Chapter One

Image One: Row in the Henry Luce Center, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
II. Tea’s Social Meanings in the United States, 1760s-1840s

Tea originated in China and moved west. The Dutch brought tea with them to New Netherlands in the middle of the seventeenth century and tea became an intimate part of the social and domestic rituals of the American colonies. American society attached many meanings to tea, but between the 1760s and the 1840s the social meanings remained the most consistent characteristic. In the colonial American culture of the mid-1760s, tea formed a vibrant sector of the new consumer economy and a means of employment to merchants and artisans. Thousands of colonists purchased tea and its accoutrements and gained the ability to make choices and fashion identities while doing so. Women and men considered tea a social marker of wealth and refinement and as an important part of their visits with family, friends, and acquaintances. At this time tea remained a genteel symbol of status for a select group of colonists, although more middling families were starting to gain a few pieces of tea equipment as time went on.

By 1784 Americans had resumed importing and drinking tea at the same time as they solidified the roles for men and women in the new nation. Americans used tea in the new republic as an instrument by which to portray the ambitions of respectability and refinement that had demographically expanded to the middling and lower classes. Respectability, like equality, was theoretically open to all, and drinking tea and purchasing its accoutrements proved to be one way in which an American could acquire it.

The importance of tea in early American culture can be gauged on one hand by the colonists’ vast consumption of the beverage and its equipage. Probate records for Suffolk County, for example, which includes Boston, reveal that out of 96 records, at least 50 of them included at
least one good related to tea.\textsuperscript{1} Carole Shammas’s research supports the idea that caffeine drinks, such as tea, coffee, and chocolate, constituted a large sector of the newly formed consumer economy by the 1740s. A statistical table by Shammas lists the legal tea imports between 1768 and 1772 as 2.9\% of the total value of imports, and she notes that if one included smuggled tea in the calculations, this figure could be as high as 10\% of the total value.\textsuperscript{2}

Shammas notes that “Colonials’ allegiance to caffeine drinks can be measured by the amount of equipment – tea kettles, teacups, tea tables, coffee and chocolate pots – they bought to accompany their consumption,” and that tea was consumed more than coffee.\textsuperscript{3} Another table by Shammas shows the percentage of inventories in the colonies that recorded new tableware commodities from 1660-1774, which confirms that the use of tea in the colonies was more widespread than coffee. Keeping in mind that some households might have consumed both tea and coffee, she found that in 1774 Massachusetts, 55.4\% of the population kept tea equipment and 23.5\% had coffee equipment. For the low-income group, with an income of under 20 pounds per year, the ratio of tea to coffee equipment was 49.7\% to a much-lower 18.8\%.\textsuperscript{4} Newspaper advertisements further verify the enormous amount of tea wares imported into the American colonies in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. In 1767 alone, newspapers in Massachusetts printed at least 630 advertisements that included tea in their lists of goods.\textsuperscript{5}


\textsuperscript{3} Shammas, \textit{Pre-Industrial Consumer}, 64.

\textsuperscript{4} “Table 6.11: Percentage of inventories with new tableware commodities, the Colonies, 1660-1774,” in Shammas, \textit{Pre-Industrial Consumer}, 184.

\textsuperscript{5} See \textit{Boston Gazette}, \textit{Boston News-Letter}, \textit{Essex Gazette}, \textit{Boston Chronicle}, \textit{Boston Evening-Post}, and \textit{Boston Post-Boy & Advertiser}. Note: All newspaper sources, unless otherwise noted, were found using the database: “America’s Historical Newspapers, Series I (1690-1876),” \textit{Readex: A Division of NewsBank, Inc.}, University of
One colonist implied the high rate of colonial tea consumption in a short article weighing the benefits of tea against alternatives, such as hot water mixed with milk and loaf sugar or homegrown Labrador tea. The author presumed “a few plain Observations on its Use will not be disagreeable to the Public because “Tea being an Article of such vast Consumption, as to render it important in many Respects,” comments on it would be interesting to readers. Colonists brewed Labrador, or Labrador, tea from the *Ledum groenlandicum* evergreen plant that grows in New England, the Middle Atlantic, and the Midwest, and which was, according to Botanist James E. Nellessen, used by Native Americans tribes like the Chippewa. While ultimately concluding that alternatives to tea constituted the healthier option, the author acknowledged the immense number of tea drinkers in the colonies, thereby revealing tea as an important commodity of early American culture.

Criticism further implies the extent to which tea had infiltrated the American culture because those colonists that worried about tea only had to be concerned if many people habitually imbibed the drink. Some critics railed against tea as an unnecessary luxury, inadvertently reinforcing the notion of tea as a commodity of the elite that was unsuitable for humble Americans. One contributor to the *Boston Post-Boy* pleaded with colonists to stop using “the most luxurious and enervating article of BOHEA TEA,” for which “so large a sum is expended by the American colonists,” and asserted that they could be just as well supplied with

---

6 “Consumption; Respects; Public; Article; Diet; Preservation; Mind; Course,” *The Boston Gazette*, Issue 662, 12/7/1767, 3.

domestic Labrador tea grown in the North.⁸ By substituting this tea for Bohea and Souchong, the author thought, the colonists might “effectively preserve our virtue and our liberty, to the latest posterity.”⁹ Combining the use of tea with republican ideology, the author believed that imported teas made Americans less virtuous because they invested their money in needless goods that benefited Britain and China, which did not help them remain self-sufficient or concerned for the good of American society.

Some Americans worried that the stimulation induced by tea physically harmed the body. One author claimed that “many persons are determined to use their influence in putting a stop to the destructive and pernicious foreign Teas, which must otherwise render us a poor, weak, & debilitated people,” and argued that the “Hyperion or Labrador Tea is much esteemed, and by great numbers vastly preferred to the poisonous Bohea.”¹⁰ It is difficult to gauge the extent to which Americans drank Labrador tea, but mentions of it appear frequently in the newspapers during the pre-war crisis of the late 1760s and early 1770s when self-sufficiency became in vogue. While many colonists must have tried it, it most likely never reached the level of consumption held by imported teas and critics were as suspicious of it as they were of imported tea. Andrew Marvell wrote that the Countess Dowager of Diddleton “fell into a violent fit of the histeries, on taking a sip of the Hyperion or Labrador tea,” and “expired in her coach” the next day.”¹¹ Tea, whether imported or homegrown, would never be completely immune from questions of its impact on the human body, but the criticism of it implies its vast consumption.

---

⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Boston Evening Post, Issue 1674, 12/14/1767, 2.
¹¹ Boston Gazette, Issue 683, 5/2/1768, 2.
Another measure of the inroads tea made into American culture is its appearance in children’s toys and domestic articles. Children acquired the practice of drinking tea alongside their parents and pretended to drink tea and have tea parties as part of their play. Shopkeepers and fashionable retailers, such as John Morton of New York, who also stocked India and English teapots, imported and sold miniature “tea-table sets” to furnish children’s dollhouses.\textsuperscript{12} George Ball advertised “Complete tea table sets,” including teapot stands and large and small teapots, but also “Complete tea-table toys for children.”\textsuperscript{13} These sets included the same accoutrements as the children’s parents would include in their collections of tea artifacts, down to a miniature tea table. American artisans like Roswell Gleason also created these miniature sets. One of Gleason’s nineteenth-century sets in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts includes a miniature teapot, sugar bowl, teacup, salvers, and four miniature cups and saucers with teaspoons, all made out of pewter.\textsuperscript{14} (See Image One, p. 38) Articles that gave domestic advice reveal that children drank tea alongside adults because the articles often advised parents not to give the tea to their children. In the \textit{Colored American}, for example, the author of a newspaper article declined to give his thoughts on whether adults should drink water instead of tea and coffee, but adamantly recommended that children should be given little to no tea or coffee.\textsuperscript{15}

Together, the vast amount of people who drank tea and the numerous equipage they purchased produced what Timothy H. Breen argues constituted the existence of a colonial


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{New York Journal}, Issue 1259, 2/19/1767, 3.


\textsuperscript{15} “Selected Domestic Education – Habits,” \textit{The Colored American}, 3/2/1839. Note: All African-American newspaper sources are from the “Accessible Archives” database, University of Colorado at Boulder subscription. For non-CU Boulder access: http://www.accessible-archives.com/.
consumer economy after the 1740s. Furthermore, he designates the colonists’ shared consumer experience as an important factor for the move towards revolution. Similar to the idea that colonists had a shared political experience before the war, he believes the colonists had an easier time relating to and uniting with each other because most of the colonists participated in the consumption of goods across the colonies. Colonists shared the experience of choosing a teapot or a table that perfectly fit with his or her identity. The newfound option of choosing which tea to buy and what objects to acquire along with it possibly gave colonists a sense of empowerment through the choices one had the liberty to make on style and sometimes color of teapots.

They also shared a confirmed sense of British identity at first. Besides wishing to participate in the exciting new market of goods, colonists felt motivated to acquire goods such as teapots, cups and teakettle stands due to a desire to emulate the sophistication and culture of Britain. Breen argues that “tea provides an especially revealing example of the impact of Anglicization on consumer taste,” due to its elaborate household rituals, acquisition of accoutrements, and equipage. Colonists were motivated to emulate the British as their fellow countrymen and because of the country’s perceived sophistication. Thus, it was not unusual that the Boston Evening-Post printed an article that included the hunger-curing habits of English women in which the author stated that English women ate “at nine, breakfast, tea and hot rolls,” meat with porter at eleven, a hot dinner at one in the afternoon, rum or brandy at three, and “at five tea or coffee with muffins” before dinner at nine in the evening. Aware of their customers Anglicized demand, merchants felt compelled to advertise the location from which their goods

---


17 Breen, Marketplace of Revolution, 170.

originated, especially London. This occurred before the American Revolution in a time period when the colonists still considered themselves British, and equal in character to anyone in Great Britain.

None of tea’s impact on American culture would have been possible, of course, without the merchants who imported and sold the commodity. Breen writes that “common goods once spoke to power,” and tea goods gave power to merchants because they were the lifeblood to the trade routes through which imported goods traveled and, as such, had the most control over the amount of tea to order from abroad. On the other hand, merchants’ position as the middlemen of the tea trade subjected them to increased scrutiny from colonists who worried over the moral impact of commercial goods. Goodwin observes, “As both the consumers of newly available manufactured goods as well as the agents in providing these things to the general public, merchants were at the center of controversy about the relationship between material goods and morality.”

Since tea was such a vastly consumed commodity, merchants developed a sharp business acumen in order to keep their profits from tea flowing. Jonathan Clarke from the house of Richard Clarke & Sons, like other merchants, shrewdly wrote to the British East India Company for permission to sell its teas, “I now beg leave, gentlemen, to make a tender to you of the services of a house in which I am a partner, Richard Clarke and Sons, of Boston, New England, to conduct the sale of such teas as you may send to that part of America…and give me leave to add my assurances that the interest of the East India Company will always be attended to by the

---


house of Richard Clarke and Sons, if you think fit to repose this confidence in them.”

Clarke confirms, “Richard Clarke’s son Jonathan won the EIC’s tea contract for the family firm.”

Besides trying to establish business, merchants also had to deflect and make up for low Dutch prices and tea smuggling. For example, one author wrote, “So much tea has been imported from Holland, that the importers from England have been obliged to sell for little to no profit…The Company must keep theirs nearer the prices in Holland. The consumption is prodigious.”

In regards to smuggling, another Boston merchant wrote, “We have delayed answering your last enquiries relative to the tea concern [tea smuggling’s effect on prices], in hopes of being able to form a better judgment, but to no great purpose…We have set [our tea prices] so low we shall have no profit from this years [sic] adventure, yet there are 50 chests still on hand.”

Merchants were businessmen whose livelihoods depended not only on Americans’ demand for tea but also on their besting the competition and prevention of smuggling.

Merchants’ wives enjoyed benefits from their husbands’ profession, namely the access to imported goods. The 1774 probate record for Boston merchant John Mico Wendell presents a long list of goods the appraisers completed for Katherine Saltonstall Brattle Wendell, the estate’s administratix and the wife of the deceased. The husband’s estate amounted to £1343, 6 shillings and 3 pence by his death in 1773. The inventory listed two China tea cups, one copper tea kettle, two of brass, and one of unspecified material, one square mahogany tea table with a set of burnt

---


China, one round tea table “with China upon it,” one tea chest each of tin and mahogany and accompanying tea cannisters, and three japanned tea chests.25 The descriptions reveal that not only could the Wendell’s access imported goods, but also that they could import goods with a level of sophistication that included “japanned” edges and “burnt” China.

Craftsmen and artisans played a crucial role in the production of the consumer economy and in the continued dispersion of tea equipment in America because they physically manufactured the goods to satisfy the demand. Bushman notes, “craftsmen shaped and decorated an endless array of forms in ceramics, glass, pewter and silver to facilitate formal entertainment: elaborate tea equipage, plates, tumblers…and on and on.”26 Perhaps the best-known silversmith from this time period is Paul Revere, Jr. John Singleton Copley painted a portrait of Revere in 1768 that portrays the silversmith in his work clothes and holding a teapot.27 (See Image Two, p. 38) The painting highlights Revere’s identification with everyday artisans despite his higher-class rank because he is dressed in his working clothes and has laid out his tools for the portrait. It also highlights the teapots he made for colonial society and the importance of the artifact to society because Copley painted the teapot in such a way that the eye is drawn to it first. There are many other lesser-known artisans’ works that still reside in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, such as works by George Richardson, John Coburn, Jacob Hurd, and Roswell Gleason, and their work enabled tea to establish a presence in America because they worked in the colonies and provided the material resources people needed to make tea in their homes.


The consumer economy gave new meaning to gentility, a notion that includes upper class standing, a certain manner of physical stature, good morals and superiority over others. The ability to display one’s higher class through material goods motivated the purchase of tea and its accoutrements in the eighteenth century. The idea of gentility and the refinement of one’s self and one’s house originated in the European courts, argues Richard Bushman, and influenced Americans even when it sometimes “ran at cross-purposes with religion, republicanism, and the work ethic” of early Americans.28 Aware of consumers’ demand for goods that would show class, John Gillespie advertised that he had just imported from London “A Genteel Assortment of English Goods,” including tea, brimstone, and manna, to be sold at his house in Boston.29 Tea served as an example of gentility because it had foreign origins and made stops at sophisticated countries on its way to America, and because one had to have excess cash to spend on it, especially if its equipage was made out of more expensive materials like silver.

Even though “tea drinking began as an exclusively elite practice,” it was “rapidly adopted by ordinary people” by the end of the eighteenth century.30 An individual of a middling class, therefore, might have sought out tea equipment due to the meaning of tea that it constituted a social practice of the affluent. Breen notes that “imported goods reflected cosmopolitan tastes and manners, so that an American who managed to purchase a porcelain teacup or a modest pewter bowl could fancy that he or she partook of a polite society centered in faraway places such as London or Bath.”31

28 Bushman, *Refinement of America*, xii, xvii.
29 *Boston Post-Boy & Advertiser*, Issue 532, 10/26/1767, 3.
30 Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 52.
While some colonists viewed tea as a gateway to sophistication, others saw it as a door to social vices, such as gossip. The stereotype partially holds truth, for gossip did come up during social visits during conversation or the sharing of news. Anna Cabot Lowell recorded in her diary, “Aunt Gardner and Mrs. Bigelow took tea here. Aunt G. says that poor Aunt G[illegible] Lowell is in a most dreadful state, near if not actual insanity.”\(^{32}\) This sort of family news may have been seen by others as inappropriate or not tactful, but it occurred. Breen notes that women might not only gossip about other people, but about issues above female matters. “Tea talk raised other concerns. Within a discourse of threatened masculinity, men worried that the gaily dressed tea drinkers might be gossiping about manly affairs.”\(^{33}\)

Bushman cautions that labeling emulation the root cause of conspicuous consumption simplifies the issue too much because “imitation as explanation seems shallow.”\(^{34}\) Emulation only formed one reason for colonists who wished to purchase goods. The freedom of choice and the wish to embrace a new culture of goods, for example, gave another reason for why individuals wanted to enter into the new consumer economy. Breen notes that “for many of them – and one thinks of the poor farmers who purchased ‘smoke trifeles’ from the peddler in Maine – the act of choosing could be liberating, even empowering, for it allowed them to determine for themselves what the process of self-fashioning was all about.”\(^{35}\) Indeed, late eighteenth-century Americans had many choices to make when it came to tea. Shopkeepers sold many various types of tea, including Bohea, hyson, green, gunpowder, or Congo. They stocked teapots, teakettles

---

\(^{32}\) Entry for 8/24/1840 in *Anna Cabot Lowell Diaries, 1818-1894*, Massachusetts Historical Society, Box 5, Ms. N-1512. Used with permission from the Massachusetts Historical Society.


\(^{34}\) Bushman, *Refinement of America*, 403.

and stands, and salvers in a range of materials, including silver, pewter, ceramic, brass, and tin. Consumers even had choices to make in terms of how ornate the teapot should be, what material and color in which the handle was made, and even whether it should be monogrammed or include a design such as a bird or foliage. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection of tea artifacts provides a sample of tea equipage, with the knowledge that the sample might be skewed towards finer pieces since these objects were the ones patrons chose to donate. The collections website lists over five hundred tea artifacts created between 1600 and 1800, and over two hundred created between 1800 and 1900, in brass, ceramic, silver, tin and pewter.36

Colonists had to decide the number of accoutrements, including furniture, to purchase alongside the teapot. Social pressure added to the inclinations to choose to buy more items. A disgruntled husband, actually Benjamin Franklin writing satirically, wrote in the Boston Gazette in early 1767 that his wife, “being entertained with tea by the good women she visited, we could do no less than the like, when they visited us, and so we got a tea-table with its appurtenances of china and silver.”37 Unfortunately for his spouse, while she was away for a fortnight he made alterations to her household changes and “disposed of the tea-table,” putting in its place a spinning wheel he thought was pretty. Franklin made clear that tea was the type of consumer good that brought a lot of choices – and extra equipment – with it and promoted idleness and wastefulness over the better values of frugality and industriousness. His article also reveals the extent to which the early consumer economy existed near Boston, so that goods could be acquired as wanted.


37 [Benjamin Franklin], “To the Printers,” Boston Gazette, Issue 626, 3/30/1767, 4.
Colonists who resided in rural areas had less access to tea equipment but still had ways to acquire it; vendues, or short-term public sales similar to a bazaar, supplemented shops as a place in which to purchase goods. “Vendue sales and peddling may have brought more British manufactures into colonial homes than did urban shops and country stores,” according to Breen, for “peddlers linked those who could not conveniently reach country stores with an excited European marketplace.” Advertisements for vendues followed the same format as those of shops, and reveal that their organizers held vendues to reach to a wide-range of people but also to sell excess stock. For example, a New York City vendue put on by debtors at M’Davitt’s Vendue Room advertised that it had four chests of green tea to sell. In an interesting twist, the Boston Post Boy & Advertiser ran an advertisement in 1770 to inform the public of a vendue set up to sell “all the genteel House furniture,” including a mahogany tea tray, of Sir Francis Bernard, the Governor of Massachusetts Bay who had Loyalist sympathies. Vendues therefore gave more people better access to high quality upper-class goods in addition to the everyday goods that would be sold in stores.

Once embraced by Americans, tea engrained itself into American culture by the 1760s and 1770s in one way by playing an integral role in the social practice of calling on friends, family and acquaintances. Women’s diaries give us the best indication of this phenomenon. The evidence of women’s social tea customs unfortunately repeats a lot; the statements have little variety, but the proof is in the quantity of recordings about tea. Martha Ballard’s diary gives hundreds of instances between 1785 and 1812 when she recorded her tea drinking and any news

38 Breen, Marketplace of Revolution, 140, 143.
she learned, but a few examples will suffice. On July 4, 1799, she wrote, “mr’s Densmore here to Tea,” and noted on the next day, “we took Tea at mr Hamlins. am informd Daniel Foster had a Son Born y’ morn.” Ballard, and many other women, made a point of recording the people with whom they took tea and kept up a lively social network through these meetings with friends and family.

Formality often increases the importance of an activity, and tea drinking was no exception. In addition to dropping by one’s friends, neighbors and acquaintances asked each other to tea by invitation. In June 1822, Elizabeth Williams Heath wrote in her diary, “Mary and I drank tea with Julia Wright,” and noted that they were called there “by invitation.” If invitations had not been issued and one called on an acquaintance, he or she ran the risk of being turned away. The person in question could be busy with other duties or not in the mood to entertain, as Heath’s family found out. She wrote on June 19 that her sisters “Hannah and Ann walked down to see Mrs. Wild, but she refused to see them;” undeterred, they simply moved on and “stopped at Mrs. Goddards as they returned and took tea,” at the Goddards’ house instead.

Women’s diaries suggest that in addition to spontaneous calls and visits by invitation, many households made a habit of setting a time for tea, perhaps when they knew they could take a break from their household duties. Martha Ballard recorded many instances when something occurred after tea, as if it was a set habit or practice. Her neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Bullin, ate dinner with Ballard; the husband went to meeting and the wife “tarried till after tea.” Similarly, her daughters one day “went to mr Livermores after tea,” and another day Ballard “went to See

---


43 Ibid.
Polly Densmore after tea.” The idea of a set time for tea hearkens back to the British practice of high tea, which usually occurred in the afternoon; perhaps the American custom of setting a time for tea was a method of emulation. Hohenegger notes that the Dutch and English learned to take an afternoon tea from the Portuguese Queen Catherine, although the practice of what we now call “high tea” is attributed to Lady Anna the Duchess of Bedford who consumed tea and small snacks to curb mid-day hunger. On the other hand, maybe in Martha Ballard’s case taking tea in the afternoon was a way to stay awake while working as a midwife at all hours of the night.

Early Americans also considered tea important for medicinal purposes. Martha Ballard recorded many instances of alleviating the ailments of her neighbors, family members, and even herself with tea. In early 1799, for example, Polly Town felt unwell, so Ballard “made her a Tea of Camomile,” and a few months later Mr. Heartford’s wife felt sick so Ballard “gave her Some Tea which reliev’d her.” In May 1800, Ballard wrote “I have been So unwell that I Could not Sett up till 2 or 3 o Clock aftern, whin Jonas wife Came in and got water for me to bath my feet and made me a dish of Tea.” Colonists considered medicinal uses of tea so crucial to maintain that even the patriotic fervor against taxes on tea could not stop their uses. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich recounts a story in which Ballard’s brother alleged that during the tea boycott Ballard “made a cup of tea in the cellar for some sick mother in the neighborhood whose sufferings

patriotism and loyalty failed to heal.”48 Colonists continued to use both homegrown mixtures like sage tea and imported teas during the war to treat health maladies because tea was their medicine and the health of one’s family sometimes trumped politics. Even in the “Ladies Agreement” of 1770, in which women agreed to “totally abstain from the Use of” tea, meaning Bohea, Souchong, and other imported teas, they made sure to include the note: “Sickness excepted.”49

After the American Revolution, the role of tea in American culture reverted back to its prior meanings as a component of socializing with friends and family and a marker of social status. Jaffee suggests that tea “came to be valued as a mark of gentility,” in the late eighteenth century, “and its use spread through all the ranks of society,” and inspired a range of new commodities dedicated to the preparation, service and consumption of tea.50

Once again, women’s diaries and letters record their extensive use of tea as a part of their social calls. Martha Ballard wrote of her midwifery practice and kept a daily ledger in her diary that included a substantial network of neighbors and friends who called on her and whom hosted her in the 1780s. By her the style of writing, these seem to be informal calls and a gesture of hospitality rather than tea by invitations. Ballard wrote, “Jenny Coole here, drank tea,” or “mrs. Town & I went to mr. Dexters, Drank Tea there.”51 These recordings appeared regardless of the weather. Some days on which Ballard recorded tea consumption she listed the weather as “Clear


49 *Boston Gazette*, Issue 775, 2/12/1770, 3.


& Cool,” but she even drank tea on days that were “Clear & hot.” This notation of drinking tea on hot days suggests that she drank tea with friends as a social practice rather than simply to get warm on a cold day. It is important to remark again on the rural aspect of Martha Ballard’s diary; she did not live in a large city, but rather in a small town in rural Maine. The distance between her house and those of many of her friends could explain why her entries for seeing acquaintances and drinking tea appeared on average every one to two months, but also why she usually saw the same group of people. Had she lived in a large city, she might have seen even more people or had tea with them more often, but her entries also show the distribution of tea outside of cities. Her descriptions of tea drinking suggest that the practice continued largely as before the revolution, even in rural areas.

Women’s diaries and letters suggest that in addition to having tea with neighbors and friends, tea parties became a more common mode of tea drinking. Mercy Otis Warren wrote wryly to Abigail Adams, “we miss you at the little tea parties.” Anna White recorded in June 1783 that she hosted company over to tea with a resulting group of at least 25 guests. In the same vein, in her entry for November 10, 1790, Martha Ballard stated that 15 ladies came over to help her girls quilt a bed quilt, and in the evening “there were 15 Gentlemen took Tea. They [sic] Danced a little while after Supper, behavd Exceeding Cleverly.” Despite the continuing tradition of taking tea with only one or two friends, these tea parties foreshadow the transition to the more genteel role of tea in the nineteenth century.

---


54 Entry for 6/1783 in Anna White’s Diary, Massachusetts Historical Society, Heath Family Papers, Box 14. Used with permission from the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The change in the social role of tea after the revolution was its inclusion in the accelerated push towards refinement that flowed down from the upper ranks of society to the middling and even to the poor households. New technology in the post-war period, which Paul Revere, Jr. used, for example, hastened the amount of goods available for middling classes to purchase. After the war, “the output of Revere's shop increased and became more standardized, aided by equipment such as the flatting mill he acquired in 1785, which simplified the production of sheet silver.”56 This increased production lowered the prices of tea goods, thereby increasing the number of individuals who could purchase them and the spread of refinement. Kasson argues that nineteenth-century civil dining practices was part of a larger striving of individuals to use etiquette to “acquire the habits and knowledge that would lead to a better life.”57 Bushman argues in tandem with Kasson that the spread of gentility as a code of manners prized by Americans compelled the practice of accumulating objects and luxuries at home and it “created an unprecedented mass market for hundred of individual items.”58 Both historians see a connection between gentility – or the striving for it – and possessions, in which tea equipage was included.

Tea drinking’s new connotations of respectability spurred new roles of social etiquette that one could easily break if not careful. A man who instructed gentlemen on how to behave at tea parties explained that he was taught different manners as a boy, “But la! in this genteel age,


58 Bushman, Refinement of America, xviii.
we understand manners better.”59 Eliza Leslie exemplifies the heightened focus on manners in a story in which the central figure of the plot is a woman, Helen Wittingham, who makes a faux pas during teatime. Mr. Stuart Snellgrave notices that a woman always asks for a glass of water right after receiving a cup of tea – a most inopportune time for the servers. Snellgrave had previously thought of Wittingham as a goddess, until his friends no longer observed him “gazing with delight on” the woman, because, as Snellgrave sheepishly explained, “one very little thing has lowered my admiration of Helen Wittingham.”60 Leslie indicated to her readers that a woman’s peers examined her behavior at her own home and when she was a guest. One performed respectability correctly, or the mistake was easily noticed, to the detriment of one’s reputation and perhaps future marital happiness.61

Mid-nineteenth-century paintings and prints show that Americans connected status to the accumulation of goods and believed in the idea that refinement had become figuratively available for all due to the mass of goods now available. David Jaffee argues that as social mobility became possible for more people, middle-class Americans used material goods made by these producers to signify their rising rank. “The new middle class announced their arrival by display,” he writes, “fashionable clothes and elaborate furnishings set the middle class apart from their poorer neighbors.”62 Teapots and their accompanying artifacts serve as symbols that consistently repeated themselves in nineteenth-century visual sources of middling and rich households. Three paintings by Francis William Edmonds and one by Seymour Joseph Guy, for


61 Leslie, “Helen Wittingham,” 57.

example, use the teapot as a symbol of high status and of the attempt by middling household to achieve such a status.

In “Devotion,” Edmonds’s 1857 painting, the artist portrayed the connection between respectability and goods by portraying a man who had made a comfortable affluent life for himself. (See Image Three, p. 39) The man resided in a simple home, but one that was large, clean, and well stocked with glassware and high quality textiles like the nice tablecloth. A teapot resides on a bright white tablecloth, and a kettle sits on the hearth. A seemingly devoted servant, perhaps a slave, helps to feed the man soup from a pretty ceramic bowl.63 The painting implies that wealth could be displayed by showing teapots and other goods that the man had acquired, because Edmonds painted the teapot on a gleaming white tablecloth that draws the eye to it. It also reinforces the idea that the servant or slave would have had knowledge of tea through her work in the household, even though she could not drink it.

Similarly, in “The Speculator,” a teapot sits on a bright mantle in the upper-center portion of the painting. (See Image Four, p. 39) The wish for nice things and the tension between lack of funds and the existence of objects was present as the speculator attempted to convince the couple, who appeared to have a number of possessions but who did not yet live in a nice home, to purchase land. The couple most likely was trying to raise its status, but to so it had to occupy a place in the new consumer economy, even if they risked losing what few material goods they owned in speculation.64 Edmonds had a dual career in art and banking in New York, which adds meaning to this painting because he would have seen many individuals and families lose their


fortunes in the shaky nineteenth-century era of banking and would be aware of the dangers of speculation and consumerism.

Edmonds’s 1854 painting, “Taking the Census,” shows a middling family giving their information to a census taker. (See Image Five, p. 40) The ceiling in the family’s dwelling consists of open beams and the floor is made of stone, but a floor covering rests on the hearth and among the family’s possessions are a clock, signifying their punctuality and modern way of life, respectable clothing, a wardrobe, and a trunk or chest. Besides these objects, the family shows their push for respectability by their engraving of George Washington that hangs above the fire, the large pewter tea kettle that rests on the hearth, and the rust-colored, perhaps ceramic, teapot that sits upon the mantle and contrasts with the grey stone fireplace.65

Finally, one of Guy’s genre paintings of children, “Contest for the Bouquet,” shows a scene in which upper-class children struggle for a bouquet of flowers.66 (See Image Six, p. 40) The décor reveals the family’s class ranking because dozens of portraits hang on the walls, ceiling beams and the floor are covered, and the family members wear very nice clothing. In the center of the painting next to the action of the kids, a silver teapot sits next to a coffeepot, and one can spot chinaware in between two of the children. The placement of the tea on the table, rather than the sideboard, indicates that this family regularly used their nice tea service. Like “Devotion,” this painting reinforces the relationship between class and tea because the presence of the tea service and the materials from which it is made are part of visual signals around the room that aim to portray an upper class family. As a genre painting of children, it aims to show


their daily experiences; here it shows them playing in front of goods on their table, which indicates that they were not ignorant of these kinds of commodities and that the tableware did not distract them from having their fun.

Despite their lack of presence in visual sources, print sources from the early nineteenth century reveal that free African Americans participated in selling and drinking tea, both moves towards respectability. A man named L. H. Nelson from New York ran an ad in *The Colored American* publicizing his services as a grocer and tea dealer, and made sure to specify that the goods he sold were free from slave labor.67 Knowing some of its customers would drink tea, a boardinghouse in New York City advertised its available rooms and stated, “gentlemen can have Breakfast, Dinner, and Tea in their apartments.”68 This room advertisement reinforced the connections between tea, respectability, masculine gender roles, and African Americans by speaking of the prospective customers as “gentlemen.” Like white Americans, black Americans set aside time for tea, especially as a way to restore energy. In a poem, “Saturday Night,” the author stated that when the work is done it is time to have the “weekly treat of toast and tea.”69

Bridget T. Heneghan studied the connections between material culture and race in antebellum America and argues that material goods represented the racial consciousness of Americans. By the early nineteenth century, white Americans favored whiter goods and laid down the color line on materials so that darker goods represented darker-skinned, inferior people.70 Heneghan does not define whether she considers tea a white good in the figurative

---


sense, but her arguments tend to focus on the white goods as important because of their physical white color and on the separation of races through material culture.

Nineteenth-century Americans’ focus on appearances encouraged the continuing attacks of tea as a nefarious social commodity. One author in the *Ladies’ Magazine* wrote of “This evil,” the practice of emulation through goods, “which assumes so many and such varied forms, which here meets us under the name of *fashion*, there of *gentility*, and again, under the more humble, but not less injurious ones, *of regard to appearances, doing as others do, maintaining one’s status in society!*” The belief of some Americans that the new republic promoted the characteristics of simplicity, democracy, and less aristocratic style choices than Europe can be seen in the new federal style of teapots that emerged at the end of the revolution, in which artisans produced tea equipage with simpler, sleeker, but elegant designs reminiscent of ancient Greece and Rome and incorporated columns, eagles, and classic figures instead of the ornate swirls of the previous style of Rococo teapots. These sleeker teapots seemed to negate the aristocratic and previously ornate connotations of tea in favor of more democratic designs.

Tea most frequently played a social role in America. Beginning around 1740, tea and its accoutrements permeated American society and continued to do so at an accelerated pace through the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. As an important commodity of the new consumer economy, tea gave men and women the opportunity to make consumerist choices, from the types of tea to purchase to the styles of teapots and teacups. Tea influenced how men, women, and children spent their time, provided means of employment for

---


merchants and artisans, and created social customs and ideas on class and social mobility. It promoted an essence of gentility in the eighteenth century and a more democratic respectability in the nineteenth, and individuals, both white and black, from most walks of life participated in this culture of tea.
Images – Chapter Two

Image One: Miniature Tea Set, Roswell Gleason, 1821-1871, Boston Museum of Fine Art,

Image Two: “Paul Revere,” John Singleton Copley
Image Three: “Devotion,” Francis William Edmonds

Image Four: “The Speculator,” Francis William Edmonds
Image Five: “Taking the Census,” Francis William Edmonds

Image Six: “Contest for the Bouquet,” Seymour Joseph Guy
III. Tea and Politics in American Culture, 1760s-1840s

Tea leaves and a teapot may not seem to be very political at first glance, but the commodity and its accoutrements that seem trivial at first held political meaning before the American Revolution. This politicization had consequences for merchants, whose livelihoods changed in meaning and property threatened by the subsequent tea boycotts. The domestic nature of the newly-politicized commodity allowed women to participate in the political realm through their actions and their writing. During the 1830s, reform movements once again made tea political by using it as a non-threatening means of promoting temperance and abolition. If we put the destruction of the tea into a broader political context, we can see how even at its most political, tea’s story in America encapsulates more than that night in Boston Harbor.

The colonists’ political angst towards Great Britain started when the latter ended its policy of salutary neglect with the creation of revenue taxes in 1765 and 1767. The 1765 Stamp Act, which placed a tax on all paper goods that required stamps, created an uproar until the act was repealed in March 1766. Shortly after, the 1767 Townshend Taxes imposed taxes on paper, glass, lead, “painter’s colours,” and tea, which greatly upset the colonists, and with these duties tea transformed from a social good to a politicized commodity. Breen acknowledges that the structure of the marketplace enabled this change. “In a colonial marketplace in which dependency [on producers outside the colonies] was always an issue,” he writes, “imported goods had the potential to become politicized, turning familiar imported items such as cloth and tea into symbols of imperial oppression.”¹ The Townshend legislation and the colonists’ anger continued after the repeal of the duties on the first four commodities due to the continuation of

the tax on tea, the most important quantity to the colonists out of the goods taxed. The tea boycotts ultimately held importance because since colonists consumed such vast quantities of tea, they made quite a sacrifice when they pledged to no longer drink it.

Patriots responded to the Townshend Act with concern. Francis Hopkinson penned a political allegory under the pseudonym Peter Grievous, esq., in 1774 in which he recounted the colonists’ version of the perceived abuse by the British Parliament by making it into a story about an old farm, England, owned by an old gentleman, the King, from which a group of settlers departed for a new farm, America. After the allegorical version of the Stamp Act, “The Inhabitants of the new Farm began to see that their Father’s Affections were alienated from them.”2 When “another Decree [the Townshend Act] was prepared and published, ordering that the new Settlers should pay a certain Stipend upon particular Goods…for the express Purpose of supporting” the old farm, “this new Decree gave our Adventurers the utmost Uneasiness.”3 Hopkinson’s account suggests that colonists spun a narrative in which the extra money they paid for tea only served Britain’s interests. To be fair, the principle of revenue taxation caused the uproar, not tea, but the uneasiness swept tea into its undertow and made it into a political symbol.

Each month in 1770 the situation got more tenuous. Updates on rumored repeals of the tea tax appeared in newspapers that claimed to know of “reports generally believed that a Repeal will take Place and that the Article of Tea will be included,” or of a report that, for sure, the “Act imposing Duties on Paper, Tea, &c. was totally repealed,” on May 25, 1770.4 Other reports ran more cautiously and stated “We cannot give our Readers any thing that can be dependent on as

---


to the Article of the Duty on Tea.”⁵ Still others were certain that they had “undoubted intelligence on no repeal of tea and repeal on [paper, glass and painter’s colours] not to be taken off before December,” and therefore the “non-importation agreement, to answer the end, must necessarily subsist.”⁶

The concept of performance put power behind these notions of tyranny. Tea drinking inherently lends itself to performance by the ritual of arranging the tea things, heating water and pouring it into a teapot, steeping the tea leaves, and then pouring the resulting colored water into teacups of whatever material one has at one’s disposal. After one fills the cup, the performance continues by the act of drinking. Besides the physical act of performing the tea “ceremony,” colonists before the American Revolution performed their politics through tea. Tea drinking especially became the symbol of tyranny and the boycott a sign of strength to patriots. Breen suggests that these performances united the colonists because “goods became the foundation of trust, for one’s willingness to sacrifice the pleasures of the market provided a remarkably visible and effective test of allegiance.”⁷

Tea gave colonists a source of power with which they could vent their frustration with Britain. Regarding a teapot with “No Stamp Act” printed on its side, Breen writes, “For a brief moment, a delicate teapot transported many thousands of miles and sold in a local shop became a vehicle for helping provincial consumers protest the policies of the British government. It survived the violence of war and the abuses of time, reminding those who reflect on such matters today that common goods once spoke to power.”⁸ These common goods gave American

---

⁵ _Boston Gazette_, Issue 795, 7/2/1770, 2.
⁷ Breen, _Marketplace of Revolution_, xvi.
⁸ Ibid.
consumers power because they thought the boycott of these goods would give them leverage against Great Britain. Hopkinson’s narrative suggests that the colonists thought they made a great impact on Britain when they “bound themselves in a solemn Engagement not to deal any more at their Father’s Shop” [with Britain] until the repeal of the Townshend taxes, for “in a few months the Clerks and Apprentices in the old Gentleman’s Shop began to make a sad Outcry” against the new settlers.\(^9\) An article in the *Essex Gazette* reported, “to instance only in *Bohea Tea*, several great Retailers of that Article have declared they do not now sell *one fifth Part* of what they did lately.”\(^{10}\) Anyone who said otherwise had “cook’d up” the story “to prevent the successful Operation of the Patriotick Resolutions of the Merchants, respecting a Non-Importation of Goods.”\(^{11}\) Like others, Hopkinson recognized that while “water gruel,” or tea, in his allegory, was ingrained into the American culture, it was “not absolutely necessary to the Comfort of Life,” so the new settlers “were determined to endeavor to do without it.”\(^{12}\) 

Merchants and everyday men targeted tea, though a simple commodity, as a source of power by their ability to refuse to import it with the hopes of hurting Britain’s economy.

Perhaps because of conflicting information and a sense of ominousness over the future due to the tea tax, unease and tension mounted among the merchants of Boston. Merchants were the middlemen between the colonists and the English Parliament during the non-importation agreement and so had the most control over whether tea arrived in America. In the 1768 most of the merchants in Boston “agreed not to Import any Tea, Lead, Paper, or Painter’s Colours”

---

\(^9\) [Hopkinson], *Pretty Story*, 40.

\(^{10}\) *Essex Gazette*, Volume I, Issue 27, 1/24-1/31/1769, 110.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) [Hopkinson], *Pretty Story*, 41.
between at least January 1, 1769 and January 1, 1770.\textsuperscript{13} When Boston merchants chose to no longer import tea and pleaded with those in the neighboring towns and colonies to do the same, positive responses came from near and far. Towns like Sudbury, Massachusetts and colonies from New York and Connecticut to Virginia and Georgia agreed to stop the importation and consumption of tea.

The refusal of most merchants to import these goods allowed an unscrupulous few to capitalize on the situation, for if they continued to import tea and other contraband they could raise the prices after the loss of competition. Therefore, it was in the non-importing merchants’ best interests to force compliance to the agreement so that they would not lose a profit to someone who disregarded the merchants’ agreement. To do so, they most often relied on the public naming of names in the newspapers. In September 1769, the \textit{Boston Evening-Post} included news for the “Merchants and others in Connecticut who have agreed not to import any goods from Great Britain,” that the inspection committee in that colony discovered on a ship a chest of tea imported by Thomas and Elisha Hutchinson and sent to Hartford, Connecticut. The captain of the sloop confirmed that the chest came from the Hutchinsons and that he paid for it.\textsuperscript{14} Thomas and Elisha were Boston merchants and sons of the Boston Governor Thomas Hutchinson, whose actions during the disputes over taxes destroyed his reputation among the patriots. Hutchinson carried out orders from London against the wishes of Boston patriots, who ransacked and burnt down his house, and Mercy Otis Warren wrote two plays, \textit{The Group} and \textit{The Defeat}, that disparaged the governor.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} “Boston, August 13,” \textit{Boston Gazette}, Issue 698, 8/15/1868, 1.

\textsuperscript{14} “Boston, September 18, 1769,” \textit{The Boston Evening-Post}, Issue 1773, 5/18/1769, 3.

Bostonians believed the governor complicit in his sons’ allegedly illicit activities. The *Essex Gazette* published a report that “the Lieut. Governor is a Partner with his sons in the late extraordinary Importations of tea.”\(^{16}\) The authors of the *Boston Evening-Post* news, regardless of – or perhaps because of – the distinction of the brothers, published the news so that the “Merchants in Connecticut may conduct with respect to this Matter as they think proper,” a sentence with heavy implications of pressure to do the “right” thing.\(^{17}\) The public pressure might have made an impact on the Hutchinsons’ business decisions, for on October 9, 1769, the *Boston Evening-Post* reported a meeting between a committee of merchants and the brothers, during which the brothers “acceded to every Article of the Agreement of the Merchants, and had engaged to deliver up the Eighteen Chests of Tea, they imported…as also any other Goods that they might receive by any other vessels,” thereby surrendering their imported tea.\(^{18}\)

The enforcement of non-importation agreements by public shame awarded an opportunity to individuals who wished ill on their contemporaries, and false accusations allegedly occurred. John Hancock, whom Americans remember as one of the most important revolutionaries and leaders of the new American government, was accused of importing banned goods, including tea, in 1769. A counter article ran in an early 1770 issue of the *Boston Chronicle*, calling out the “Committee‘ who have entertained the “base” design of deceiving the Public,” by publishing false reports of importing merchants. The counterattack designated men who should be absolved of any wrongdoing. “Surely the following” names of men, including John Hancock, “cannot be

---


\(^{17}\) “Boston, September 18, 1769,” *The Boston Evening-Post*, Issue 1773, 5/18/1769, 3.

\(^{18}\) *The Boston Evening-Post*, Issue 1776, 10/9/1769, 1.
of their number.”19 Hancock reaffirmed his patriotic commitment himself by offering his vessel freight-free to reship imported goods back to London.20

The threat of public shame motivated a change in the wording of tea advertisements published by merchants. In August 1769 John Gerrish ran an ad in the *Boston News Letter* that informed the public of the “superfine tea” that he had acquired to sell in his shop. He preceded this news with a caveat that the tea “shipp’d in London for Boston, last September & October,” or before the non-importation agreement went into affect.21 In order to save himself from false accusations and patriot anger, Gerrish made sure to cover his bases and issue his news with full disclosure of the location from which the tea shipped and when it left port.

The merchant house of Richard Clarke and Sons provides a good example of merchants caught between the colonists and the British Parliament but who were reluctant to give up their business profit. In a letter from Boston dated November 1, 1773, a patriot author threatened the family:

> “The Freemen of this Province understand, from good authority, that there is a quantity of tea consigned to your house by the East India Company, which is destructive to the happiness of every well-wisher to his country. It is therefore expected that you personally appear at [the] Liberty Tree, on Wednesday next, at twelve o-clock at noon day, to make a public resignation of your commission, agreeable to a notification of this day for that purpose. Fail not upon your peril.”22

Apparently the patriots made good on their threats for three days later a letter reported that enraged colonists “marched down in a body to Mr. Clarke’s Store, where we were, and not

---


20 *The Boston Evening-Post*, Issue 1805, 4/30/1770, 3.


receiving such an answer as they demanded, they began an attack upon the store and those within, breaking down doors, flinging about mud, &c., for about an hour.”

A merchant’s profession also exposed his wife to the dangers he encountered during the pre-revolutionary conflict. Elizabeth Drinker recorded in her diary on December 2, 1773, that her husband and his partner sent a “paper” to the coffeehouse in which they agreed not to land their tea, for they had come under suspicion even though they had posted a bond in order to be allowed to sell it. Perhaps more revealing of her nervousness, in May 1775 she wrote that an acquaintance, William Brown, “drank tea with us,” but the word tea is crossed out and the word “coffee” written above it. Perhaps Drinker accidentally wrote tea out of habit, or perhaps she had written it truthfully and thought it would look better to write coffee instead in case her diary fell into the hands of adversaries.

Non-merchant colonists also changed the way they interacted with tea. After the confirmation of English taxes, tea lent itself to the colonists’ home manufacturing movement. At the end of 1767 and beginning of 1768, New York and Boston newspapers began printing notices of the availability and benefits of Hyperion, or Labrador, tea. Americans produced this tea, like other goods, at home, and therefore its value increased tremendously as an alternative to imported teas. A report came from London that individuals in the city had tried the Labrador tea and found it “pleasant to the taste,” and expected a reduction “of the duty on tea in consequence of the celebrated Labrador, lately discovered in America.”

25 Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, 54.
 Gazet e falsely maintained that even Bohea tea could be grown in America, and wrote, “the culture of Bohea TEA, in the colonies, is no romantic scheme, but easily practicable and deserves the attention,” of the colonists. Col onists considered tea such an important part of their lives that some of them went to great lengths to try to cultivate it at home so they could continue to drink it and still abide by the boycott.

 These available alternatives to foreign teas influenced what Americans drank when meeting in social groups. An anonymous author wrote in the Boston News-Letter on March 3, 1768, that when some Barnstable ladies visited, “dres’d all in Homespun, even to their Handkercheifs and Gloves, and not so much as a Ribbon on their heads,” the ladies were “entertain’d with Labrador Tea – all innocently cheerful and merry,” and the gentlemen who arrived later drank this same type of tea with them. Similarly, a gentleman of high rank invited to his house some ladies from South Kingston, Narragansett, to celebrate the New Year “in a festival manner,” for which “they all appeared in homespun Manufactures,” except one from Boston. The author found it important to mention that “though a most genteel Repast was the Entertainment of the Company, yet no foreign Tea, either Bohea or Green, was set before them, nor was it even expected,” and claimed “this intelligence is published as Example to all Lovers of Decorum and Oeconomy.”

 The political meanings attached to tea after 1767 had important implications for women because the domestic nature of tea formed an entry into political participation during the tea boycott. The domestic role of women did not keep them from being drawn into these political


 29 Boston Gazette, Issue 668, 1/18/1768, 3.

 30 Ibid.
performances, but in fact made it possible for them to do so. The boycott of tea enabled women to participate because it was a commodity considered to be under their control and used in their domain. Mary Beth Norton claims that “the activism of female patriots found particular expression in their support of the colonial boycott of tea and other items taxed by the Townshend Act of 1767,” and suggests that they responded eagerly to calls for their help in what Linda K. Kerber notes was “a relatively mild way of identifying oneself with the patriotic effort.”

Women responded vigorously, however, and the performance of their political leanings was printed in newspapers. The *Boston Gazette* printed an example of “oeconomy,” wherein “ladies dressed for social visit in home-made dresses…tea was excluded.” Another article praised a lady who, “being pregnant…[was] craving Labrador tea.” Women made a point of substituting Labrador tea for imported tea, or from abstaining altogether; these women all performed their political sympathies.

Mercy Otis Warren recognized how women’s place in society affected whether and how they could participate in the political activism of the late eighteenth century. Warren wrote to a friend that she “had determined to leave the field of politicks to those whose proper business it is” but explained her continuation of political writing by insisting, “the occurrences that have lately taken place are so alarming and the subject so interwoven with the enjoyments of social and domestic life as to command the attention of the mother and the wife.”

---


33 *Boston Gazette*, Issue 675, 3/7/1768, 3.

Patriot women mirrored the merchants’ non-importation agreements by making a pact of their own to abstain from tea, which they named the “Ladies Agreement.” In early 1770, these women in Boston published their pledge in which they resolved that, “particularly, we join with the very respectable Body of Merchants and other Inhabitants of this Town,” who made their declarations in Faneuil Hall eight days earlier, “in their resolutions, totally to abstain from the Use of TEA.”

To prove the importance and credibility of the statement, the authors added a note that 300 mistresses of Boston families had agreed to the statement, including “the worthy Ladies of the highest Rank and Influence.” This action was mild but probably important to the women so did so because “signing such a petition was surely their first political act.” It also put their names out into the public as taking a political stance.

When fatigue would set in later in the war, Esther de Berndt Reed would remind women of their prior domestic contributions to the political crisis. She wrote to women in 1780, “the time is arrived to display the same sentiments which animated us at the beginnings of the Revolution, when we renounced the use of teas, however agreeable to our taste, rather than receive them from our persecutors; when we made it appear to them that we placed former necessaries in the rank of superfluities, when our liberty was interested.” Reed portrayed patriot women as distinct actors who participated eagerly at the beginning of the revolution, and confirms that women contributed their efforts to the boycott of goods that they had once deemed necessities out of loyalty to the patriot cause. She presented a list of “historical role models” from Europe and the Bible, including Deborah, Judith, Esther, and “the Catharines,” to inspire

35 *Boston Gazette*, Issue 775, 2/12/1770, 3.

36 Ibid.


38 [Esther de Berndt Reed], “The Sentiments of an American Woman” (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1780), np.
women. While Reed had to draw upon heroes from outside of the colonies because there were few visible female American heroines, in the nineteenth-century women’s movement these tea-boycotting colonial women became the idols for American women. These American heroines acted politically but did so in the domestic sphere; they remained proper while still expanding their roles as women.

The domestic nature of tea also gave a small group permission to write politically for the first time. This newfound activity resulted in important consequences for the women who chose to partake in it. Mercy Otis Warren suggested that women held an important role in the boycott in her allegorical poem, “The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs, or the Sacrifice of the Tuscararoes,” in which she compared King George to Neptune and the British Parliament to Titans who plundered Columbia’s coast. She penned the lines:

Nor wives, nor mistresses, were useless things,  
Ev’n to the gods of ancient Homer’s page;  
Then sure, in this polite and polish’d age,  
None will neglect the sex’s sage advice,  
When they engage in any point so nice,  
As to forbid the choice nectareus sip.  
And offer Bohea to the rosy lip.”

Warren allegorically suggested that tea formed an important part of the political conflict and that women held an important role in contributing to its resolution.

Historians of women’s history guard against overstating the extent of women’s efforts, though. Joan R. Gunderson argues that one should not confuse women’s political participation

39 Ibid.

during the boycotts with real political changes for women.\textsuperscript{41} Similarly, Norton concludes that female participants in the boycott “simply made different decisions about what items to purchase and consume; they did not move beyond the boundaries of the female sphere.”\textsuperscript{42} While they did not make grand changes in gender roles, some women underwent significant internal changes and the political conflicts that arose around taxation moved many women to enter a new domain with which they previously had little to no experience. Women participated in the boycotts, but while at home they also wrote letters and sometimes even literature for public consumption because “The place to display female political consciousness would be, naturally enough, on their own turf, at home, in the woman’s domain,” according to Kerber.\textsuperscript{43}

They did not move the earth, but women’s unique roles as mothers and daughters gave them greater allowance to act out in the struggle against tea, and therefore against British tyranny, and they used the gender constructs at their disposal to participate if they wished to do so. Women like Mercy Otis Warren wrote on political subjects for the first time. Warren believed that Britain had put America into a yoke by its taxes, and wondered, “what fatal infatuation has seized the parent state?”\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, Warren defended her writings because of her gender roles, since “But as every domestic enjoyment depends on the decision of the mighty contest, who can be an unconcerned silent spectator? – Not surely the fond mother or the affectionate


\textsuperscript{42} Norton, \textit{Liberty’s Daughters}, 163.

\textsuperscript{43} Kerber, \textit{Women of the Republic}, 105.

wife.”45 She would go on to write and to anonymously publish allegorical plays in response to the political events happening near her and, later, would pen a history of the American Revolution.

Similarly, in 1774 Jemima Condict Harrison, a very religious young woman who never wrote about politics, posited that “It seemes we have troublesome times a Coming for there is great Disturbance a Broad in the earth & they say it is tea that caused it.”46 Judith Sargent Murray, who would go on to write significant essays on equal rights for women, first wrote politically when she reported to her brother, “The political World’s in a ferment – the Tea ships have long been a standing subject,” and explained that when the controversial ships remained moored longer than the inhabitants wished, “At length a number of disguised persons assembled…they however accomplished the destruction of the tea.”47 These steps out of traditional roles and political activism through conventional means like writing letters at home resulted in heroines that women of later generations could emulate. Norton argues that not every woman participated in the boycott of imported goods, and some women fervently supported the loyalist cause, but for “members of the postwar female generation political discussion and even activism was never to be as alien as it had been to women born before 1760.”48

Some sources indicate that patriot women who felt reluctant to give up their beloved beverage may have used the same argument as the women who wished to take a political stance

---


47 Judith Sargent Murray to Winthrop Sargent, January 8, 1774 in *Judith Sargent Murray: Her First 100 letters* Transcribed by Marianne Dunlop (Gloucester: The Sargent House Museum, 1995), 29.

for the boycott. An author claiming to be a woman named Arabella, for example, wrote in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* that she supported the Whig cause and had seen her son off to fight, and stated that “I like patriotism very well.” However, she disagreed that patriotism had to keep her from her “necessities and comforts of life,” for, she did not know, “what have we women to do with these matters?” The author may have been a disgruntled man in disguise, of course, but possibly it was a patriot wife and mother who did not agree with the tea boycott. Martha Ballard allegedly felt the same way, according to her descendent, Clara Barton, who heard from family members that Ballard and her sister, Barton’s grandmother, snuck into the latter’s cellar to surreptitiously partake in tea parties during the revolution. As we have seen, tea informed a major part of Ballard’s social interactions with friends, family members, and acquaintances. Thus, the motivation to participate in the boycott of imported tea inspired many women but was by no means universal, and not all women strictly adhered to it.

Female loyalists held a dangerous place in this environment wherein one’s actions performed meaning and in which their actions signified a minority political persuasion. An *Essex Gazette* article proclaimed that “Gentlewomen” were “lovers of liberty, including [the] liberty of drinking tea with their bread and butter.” Anne Hulton came to the American colonies from England in June 1768 to live with her brother, Henry Hulton, Commissioner of Customs in Boston. Forced to escape to Castle William in Boston Harbor for a time soon after her arrival, Hulton had a poor opinion of the Sons of Liberty. “It is not the case of one, but every faithful Officer & Loyal Subject here,” she wrote, “to suffer abuse persecution calumny [sic] & reproach.”


51 *Essex Gazette*, Issue 59, 9/18/1769, 27.
from “the Sons of Violence.” On the other hand, Hulton took pride in her time at the castle. She was not banished, she believed, but in fact lived luxuriously and thought that “every body seems much happier in their exiled state than on the Land of Liberty.” The castle’s leadership assigned her “steward of the Household, & Mistress of the ceremony of the Tea table,” which, taking place “Morn⁸ & Even⁸ is no little business I assure you.” Furthermore, Hulton drank tea with unpopular Massachusetts Governor, Sir Francis Bernard. Due to the politicization of a relatively common domestic item, most women, patriot or loyalist, participated one way or another in the politics of tea regardless of which side of the conflict, if either, they supported.

In the years before the American Revolution, then, male and female colonists centered tea squarely within the tensions over liberty, freedom, and tyranny. In May 1773, Parliament passed Lord North’s proposed Tea Act, which removed the tax on tea traveling from India to Britain in an attempt to revive the struggling British East India Company. This lowered the overall tax that Americans paid on tea. American colonists felt that this was just another way for Britain to take advantage of them by convincing them to break the boycott for the cheaper tea. Merchants and tea commissioners especially became disconcerted over the landing of tea after the Tea Act. Abraham Lott of New York wrote to Wm. Kelly in London, dated 5th November 1773, “A little time will determine…if the tea comes out” to America, and “if it does, I hope it may come free of duty, as by that means much trouble and anxiety will be saved by the agents. I

---

53 Anne Hulton to Mrs. Adam Lightbody, in Letters of a Loyalist Lady, 16.
54 Ibid., 16.
55 Anne Hulton to Mrs. Adam Lightbody, 4/10/1769, in Hulton, Letters of a Loyalist Lady, 17.
do assure you they have all been very uneasy, tho’ at the same time determined to do their duty, but in the most prudent & quiet manner.”

Tensions culminated in November when Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson refused to let three tea ships, the *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor*, and *Beaver* return to London without unloading their cargo. He planned to wait the customary 20 days before the ships would be forced to unload the tea. The colonists, according to Hopkinson’s allegory, “saw clearly that the Gruel was not sent to accommodate them, but to enslave them,” and they wished to destroy the cargo. The larger meaning of the Boston Tea Party concentrated on principles, to be sure, but tea held a place front and center during the commotion, and specifically drew the colonists’ ire, which led to the decision to dump the tea leaves into Boston Harbor.

During the night of December 16, then, the day before the ships crews would have had to unload the tea, groups of men disguised as Native Americans boarded each of the ships and threw the tea chests overboard. Benjamin Woods Labaree claims that “most witnesses agreed that the active participants numbered between thirty and sixty and were divided into three groups, each with a competent leader,” and that “Family tradition has claimed a role in the Tea Party, for men of all ranks,” of life from businessmen to artisans. The destruction of the tea in Boston Harbor proved a decisive event on the colonists’ journey towards revolution because, as Benjamin Carp argues, “To Americans, the Tea Party became an emblem of their faith that a determined and organized group can accomplish momentous political change, culminating in


57 [Hopkinson], *Pretty Story*, 41, 46.

independence."59 As a result of the Boston Tea Party, the British closed the port of Boston, and the colonists moved one step closer towards unity.

Due to the extent to which tea touched the lives of many types of people and took on a political meaning in the midst of heightened emotions, tea held a highlighted and mythologized place in American society. It had become “at present a subject of conversation,” instead of an instrument in the creation of conversation.60 Carole Shammas, for example, defines tea as “the commodity that began the American Revolution.”61 While this thesis argues for tea’s importance in American culture, the Boston Tea Party allowed – and still allows – the political role of tea in the American Revolution to be exaggerated. The tea tax did act as a catalyst that helped to propel the colonists towards revolution because it hit a wide swath of American people who vastly consumed the beverage, but the colonists’ anger originated from disagreement with the principle of taxation without representation, not over the commodity of tea itself.

After the start of the American Revolution, there is evidence that at least some patriot individuals resumed drinking tea and that tea lost much of its political symbolism. John and Abigail Adams participated in the normal functions of tea drinking in the early years of the revolution. Abigail Adams wrote to her husband in 1778, “I had the pleasure of drinking tea a few days ago with Sir James Jay and Mr. Diggs,” and her husband sent her tea when he could.62


60 Boston Evening-Post, Issue 1793, 2/5/1770, 3.


Therefore, the first use of tea for a political purpose in America largely declined during the early years of the war.

Tea had no political identity after the revolution until the second quarter of the nineteenth century and the antebellum reform movements. Indeed, it was only in the nineteenth-century that individuals decided to finally wrestle with the rebellious nature of the destruction of the teas, which for Americans to celebrate would condone a lawless act of vandalism. Alfred Young recognizes the importance in even the name given to the Boston Tea Party. From the time the event occurred until the 1830s, colonists simply called it the destruction of the tea in Boston Harbor. “The contest over names,” or the title to give to the destruction of the tea, that occurred in the nineteenth century “is part of a larger contest for the public memory of the Revolution,” Young found.  


At the same time as Americans dealt with the legacy of the Boston Tea Party, advocates of the temperance movement, antislavery movement, and other reform efforts used tea as part of their platform for promoting their cause. The antebellum reformers supported a platform of internal improvements, such as canals, a central bank, and railroads, and extended their ideas on improvement to include individuals as well. One author wrote that “intemperance produces
idleness, confusion of affairs, debt and embarrassment, and these feed directly, if not to fraud and embezzlement, to penury, want, and the limits of a jail,” hardly creating a harmonious society. 65 To create a strong nation, they thought, the country had to implement internal transportation and currency improvements, but individuals in society also had to improve themselves or be improved by reform measures because stronger and more moral individuals would create a stronger, more moral nation.

While some individuals continued to warn against tea’s supposedly bad effects on society and on the body, other members of society saw in tea a positive alternative to the negative effects of alcohol on peoples’ bodies and on families’ domestic lives and financial resources. Alcohol existed as a legitimate problem in antebellum America. Early Americans drank much more alcohol than today, as much as 7oz. per day for a free white man, according to Shammas, and this custom opened the door to a number of social vices such as desertion, adultery, bankruptcy and death that left other family members, especially women and children, in a bind. 66 It caused individuals to engage in the abuse or desertion of their families, and brought about a host of other social vices. Even children drank, in full eye of their adult chaperones. Anna Green Winslow wrote in a diary entry of January 17, 1772, that she attended an assembly with her friends at age 12 and recorded, “our treat was nuts, raisins, Cakes, Wine, punch, hot & cold, all in great plenty.” 67 Therefore, temperance advocates signed pledges not to drink, and created societies like the American Temperance Society, begun in Boston in 1826 by Presbyterian ministers Dr. Justin Edwards and Lyman Beecher.


66 Shammas, Pre-Industrial Consumer, 63.

Temperance movements sprang up around the country in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and promoted sober lifestyles that made substitutions for alcohol. The Washington Total Abstinence Society held a tea party in Faneuil Hall in 1843 and “since then,” the author wrote, “similar parties have been held for a similar object, in several of the adjoining towns.”68 “The bringing together of large masses of people, of both sexes,” he or she continued, “of all professions and conditions, uniting them in one object…produces in the end the best and most desirable effects.”69 African Americans used tea for temperance objectives as well, as shown when a contributor to The Colored American recommended inebriates drink “cold pure water” instead of liquor, and advised that “Prepared with tea and coffee, it is also agreeable and harmless.”70

Supporters of the temperance movement had to find non-threatening ways to spread the word and bolster new teetotalers. Tea parties were one method of creating a fun gathering without alcohol. The Vermont chronicle reported that the Manchester Temperance Society in England held a tea party in 1832. At the meeting, a man suggested that his wife never minded if he went to temperance events with tea because, she told him, “‘I shall be quite comfortable when thou’rt out, for I shall know where thou art, and that thou will come home sober.”71 The use of tea as a substitute for alcohol made the lives of some individuals much better. The New York Tribune sent an announcement to the Cleveland Herald that “The Temperance Societies of our city think of celebrating the approaching anniversary of Washington’s birth day by a general tea party.”

---

69 Ibid.
70 “Reformation of Inebriates,” The Colored American, 6/5/1841.
party, over which the Ladies of the Martha Washington Society will preside.”

American temperance advocates were inspired by reports from the *Liverpool Courier* of a grand temperance tea party in Preston, Lancashire. The Preston Temperance Society, the leading organization of the radical teetotalism movement, held a tea party to celebrate Christmas Day, 1833. 1200 guests attended the party, at which a 200 gallon boiler served as a tea kettle and “forty reformed drunkards” acted as wait staff. They sang temperance songs and “The contrast between this company, says the Preston Chronicle, [sic] and those where intoxicating liquors are used, is an unanswerable argument in favor of Temperance Associations.”

Even though the temperance movement advocated the consumption of tea, women’s experience with it paralleled that of women during the tea boycotts. While some people deemed inviting women to temperance meetings as overkill because “it is a very rare occurrence to find a female addicted to the vice of intemperance,” the majority of sources used gendered ideas to recruit women to the cause, thereby making it easier for women to act politically. The Providence Association for the Promotion of Temperance wanted to “interest the ladies” in their cause because “There is no error in the habits of Society, which female influence can go farther to correct, then the injurious practice of habitually using ardent spirits in the social intercourse of society, and at the private side board.” Temperance advocates impressed upon women the importance of their influence, and eased the path for women to join them by using their domestic

---


roles as a reason, just like before the American Revolution. When asked if it would be proper for women to attend temperance meetings, an advocate in Salem responded by writing, “it is perfectly proper, inasmuch as there is work for mothers as well as fathers to perform in the promotion of temperance, and the former have not by any means the least important portion of the task.” Recruited in this manner, many women responded with fervor.

Women responded to circulars by attending meetings and lectures, helping to make one such lecture in New Hampshire “more numerous and respectable, than was ever known to have been collected in the town of Deerfield on a like occasion.” Perhaps remembering the actions of women from previous generations, they also signed pledges to abstain from alcohol. “The young ladies in Berkshire co.,” Rhode Island, for example, “have formed a Temperance Society and pledged to abstain from the use of spirituous liquors; this is doing the thing that’s right.” Female workers at the factories in Lowell, Massachusetts, “have taken the field in earnest, on behalf of the good cause of temperance,” and sent a petition with 2500 signatures to the Massachusetts House of Delegates. The author who reported the Lowell women’s actions connected it to marriage, writing that the House printed the names of the petition so that “the young men will now have a list of the temperance girls of Lowell, and will know where to find genuine temperance wives.” Even so, women’s actions in the temperance movement continued.


80 Ibid., 2.
the precedent of women’s political involvement set during the revolution and gave crucial
distance that would come into play after the Seneca Falls convention for women’s rights in
1848. As important as their contributions were, women were not the only marginalized group,
however, to find a voice in the temperance movement.

Free black Americans also participated in the temperance movement. An alleged scene of
discrimination published in *The Colored American* reinforced the facts that black Americans
drank tea, that tea was connected to the temperance movement for blacks as well as whites, and
that antebellum race relations remained strained. While the colonists had felt like second-rate
citizens to the British, so, too, did free blacks feel to white men when they experienced racial
discrimination. Samuel E. Cornish, the editor of *The Colored American*, experienced
discrimination firsthand at Mr. H. Pattinson’s Temperance house, when “Mr. P.” refused to serve
him a cup of tea. Mr. Pattinson’s reasoning lay in his patron base, for he concluded, his
“CUSTOMERS would not admit of it;” Cornish wrote that Pattinson “would be glad to
accommodate us. He had no objections, but his CUSTOMERS!!”81 Cornish criticized the
customers, then, who betrayed their religious leanings, for “Is it possible that these disciples of
the meek and holy Saviour, with whom we have so often sat in council, refuse to drink a cup of
teak with a minister of Christ, merely because GOD, in His wisdom, dyed his face darker than
their own?”82 Cornish blamed the customers, but believed that Mr. Pattinson should have
reflected more on his principles. 83 The white, religious customers of this temperance house did
not want to share tea with persons of a darker skin color. Bridget T. Heneghan argues that white

---

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

Americans preferred physically whiter commodities, but this scene suggests that there was a figurative whiteness to tea as well. Taking tea could have been seen as a white person’s custom, to the exclusion of African Americans.

Tea gave the antislavery movement, a more political effort than the temperance movement, a method of gaining support because its supporters also held tea parties for the cause. The political strategy of holding tea parties in opposition to slavery continued into the 1840s. In 1844, a New Hampshire group, Friends of the Slave, held a tea party for “the sale of useful and fancy articles.” In 1847 the Ladies of the Union Anti-Slavery Society held an antislavery tea party in Upton, Massachusetts, at which four ladies spoke on slavery and sixty dollars were raised. The contest for control of the antislavery movement between radicals, moderates, and conservatives centered on how far to push their agenda in mainstream politics, but tea parties, in the same way that they made the destruction of the tea appear less rebellious, made the antislavery cause seem more approachable and less threatening.

Tea held a major political role before the American Revolution that began with the Townshend Act of 1767 and fit neatly into colonists’ narratives of British tyranny. Merchants acted as the middlemen in this tenuous situation. Many women used the politicization of a domestic item as an opportunity for political writing or activism that had lasting results, but the same situation made life difficult for loyalist women. The Boston Tea Party was a decisive moment in the path towards American independence, but allowed tea’s place in the maelstrom to be misconstrued.

---


In the 1830s, the temperance and abolition movements used tea and tea parties strategically. Women’s involvement in politics, which occurred first before the revolution, took place again during the temperance and anti-slavery movements due to the inclusion of domestic items in the reform movements. Tea, like other commodities, had the ability to take on symbolic meanings and to represent ideas and political leanings. The Boston Tea Party helped to give tea even more symbolism as an object of tyranny than did the Townshend taxes, but was not the whole story. We may remember the destruction of the tea as a pivotal moment, but should also remember that tea held political meanings before and after the Boston Tea Party.
IV. Tea as a Gendered Commodity, 1760s-1840s

While early American men and women both consumed tea, they gendered the commodity and its equipage and practices as female-oriented and declared the spaces in which they drank tea as female spaces. The categorization of tea as part of women’s domain gave women a small amount of control and formed a key element of their social gatherings. However, certain ideas about tea, such as its effect on health and its usefulness as a social custom, brought up questions about women’s influence and place in society. The eighteenth and early nineteenth-century stereotypes concerning tea masked the participation of men in the social habits surrounding the commodity and reinforced negative stereotypes about femininity, women’s bodies, and women’s proper gender roles. Writers and artists attributed the negative aspects of tea – its effect on the body and its promotion of leisure – to women and reinforced in society what Alice Kessler-Harris labeled a “gendered imagination,” or the gendered patterns of thought that exist in a culture or group, that hampered the advancement of women’s place in American culture.

Women and tea existed in a reciprocal relationship in terms of society’s categorization of each. During the later decades of the eighteenth century society considered tea and its materials as feminine objects, meaning it thought that knowledge of tea and its accoutrements, rituals, and etiquette was the province of women, and women were affected by the culture of tea in positive and negative ways. Most of the women in this relationship with tea were not of a high class of leisure, but were women who actively worked in or managed a household and who aspired to gentility. Society’s definition of tea as a part of the female sphere excluded, however, women of color and those of the lower classes, none of whom could participate in the tea culture to the extent that women who were white and who lived in a middling to high-class household could do so.
While men could – and did – enjoy the beverage just like women, the domestic, aesthetically pleasing, expensive, and graceful nature of the drink and its customs defined it as part of the domain of women. During the debates over tea taxes, one contributor to the *Boston Gazette* gave a “hint to the fair sex,” that duties on tea were over 300 pounds sterling.¹ This statement meant to educate women on the cost of “their” luxury. Society designated tea tables women’s tables, such as when a disgruntled colonist wrote that if women would “in general apply their Hands to the [illegible], instead of the idle Apparatus of the Tea Table, perhaps we need not always be beholden to Asia for our Food, or Europe for our Clothing.”² Reciprocally, late eighteenth-century ideas on gender ideals drew upon tea to form the image of the perfect woman. The writer of a poem in the *New York Gazette* listed the “The Mental and Personal Qualifications of a Good Wife,” and insisted that women must have a “GREAT good nature and a prudent generosity / A lively look, a proper spirit and a cheerful disposition.”³ She also must have “To tea and coffee no objection,” and be “Well, but not critically, skilled in her own tongue.”⁴ Genteel activities must not take up all of her day, however; she should be “Ready at her needle, but more devoted to plain-work than to fine,” and be “Not always in the parlour, but sometimes in the kitchen.”⁵ The ideal gender roles for women included knowledge of and a penchant for tea and coffee, and the skills in the art of conversing, perhaps sometimes over a tea table, in addition to the more practical skills of keeping house.

¹ *Boston Gazette*, Issue 703, 9/19/1768, 2.
³ *New York Gazette*, Issue 1295, 10/29/1767, 1.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
Records at the Massachusetts Historical Society in Boston indicate that men and women would most often pass down their tea sets to their female relatives. The probate record taker for Elizabeth Hughes, a singlewoman, recorded that she gave “to Mary Walker, a minor daughter of Richard Walker, [a] silver cream pot…silver teaspoons, and tea tongs.” Thomas Greenough allotted “my daughter Elizabeth Brooks £30 and a silver tea pot.” Finally, merchant Warren Goddard gave his sister, Lucretia Goddard, “110 dollars to be appropriated for a handsome silver teapot and other articles.” Members of society allotted their tea things to women, reinforcing the female-oriented place of tea.

A contributing factor to society’s equating women with tea was the idea that spaces were gendered. Coffeehouses were for the most part the domain of men. Lorinda Goodwin notes that “coffeehouses were almost exclusively devoted to a male clientele where, in addition to coffee, tea, chocolate, and other refreshments, business was transacted, information exchanged,” and views discussed. It stands to need further research, but coffee might have taken on a male connotation. Caroline Butler’s husband wrote her from Caracas that according to his daily rituals, he would “Rise at 6 O’Clock, take my coffee, breakfast at 9,” drink more coffee at breakfast and

---

6 Probate record for Elizabeth Hughes, 5/24/1771, in Anne Haven Thwing, Boston Estates Research Materials, 1630-1822, Massachusetts Historical Society, Manuscripts REF. F73.1 T45. Used with permission from the Massachusetts Historical Society.

7 Probate record for Thomas Greenough, 8/23/1785 in Anne Haven Thwing, Boston Estates Research Materials, 1630-1822, Massachusetts Historical Society, Manuscripts REF. F73.1 T45. Used with permission from the Massachusetts Historical Society.

8 Probate record for Warren Goddard, 6/30/1795, in Anne Haven Thwing, Boston Estates Research Materials, 1630-1822, Massachusetts Historical Society, Manuscripts REF. F73.1 T45. Used with permission from the Massachusetts Historical Society.

then again at 4pm.\textsuperscript{10} Thomas Carnes planned to open a coffeehouse for both men and women, but even then he proposed it as a “Tea and Coffee-House,” with “a fine Fruit Garden – with fine green walks – to pleasure the ladies.”\textsuperscript{11} Carnes’s definition of the establishment as a place for tea and coffee, as opposed to a coffeehouse that also served tea, made it more approachable for women.

Sources resoundingly indicate that for women, tea at home was their version of men’s coffeehouses, for they had few alternative spaces. Indeed, Joan R. Gunderson suggests that tea parties were possibly “women’s answer to the male coffee house.”\textsuperscript{12} David Shields similarly notes, “Women’s embrace of tea must be understood as a reaction to the masculine infatuation with coffee and all that it implied.”\textsuperscript{13} The domestic nature of tea affected women at this time because it was a period of changing boundaries for the female sex, in which “clear lines of demarcation” for public and private spheres solidified, which contributed to the identification of women “with virtue and economic/legal dependence, while defining the public sphere as male.”\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, women had slightly more free time in which to enjoy tea at home. Susan E. Klepp argues that due to changing ideas of femininity and family the late eighteenth-century generations of women slowly reduced the number of children they had by engaging in family planning practices and other methods of birth control. Thus, “there were many fewer

\textsuperscript{10} Edward Butler to Caroline H. Butler-Laing, Caracas, 10/8/1828, New York Historical Society, Butler-Laing Family Papers, Folder 1, MS 94.


\textsuperscript{13} David Shields, \textit{Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 113.

\textsuperscript{14} Gunderson, \textit{To Be Useful to the World}, 168-9.
limitations on women’s ‘sphere of operation,’ especially if family limitation was practiced.”

Women mostly had to drink tea at their homes or at those of their acquaintances, but had slightly more time to engage in such social activities.

Acknowledging how the cultural patterns surrounding tea reinforced gender roles does not mean that tea only affected women, however. The eighteenth-century feminine label given to tea effectively masks the participation of men in the custom; they, like women, drank tea with friends and acquaintances, sharing news and conversing and some also included tea in their daily rituals. Men had access to both coffeehouses and the homes of their friends, as opposed to women who usually did not make appearances at coffeehouses, but they still partook in the cultural customs surrounding tea. Caroline Butler, a woman from New England living for a time in Charleston, wrote her sister letters that described with whom she visited, and noted that one day “Uncle B., &c, drank tea with me.”

Martha Ballard recorded the names of the persons with whom she shared tea alone or in groups, and due to her records we can read several instances in which her husband, Ephraim Ballard, drank tea. Sometimes he joined her and their acquaintances, like on June 20, 1791, when Ballard wrote, “mrs Davenport here, Shee & I went to mr Livermores, mr Ballard & y6 Girls there allso to Tea.”

At other times, her husband drank without her, such as three days later, when “mr Ballard returnd [home], mr Liverm Drank Tea with him.” At one point in the diary Ballard wrote that her husband could work during the day but had to sleep in the jail at night on a debtor’s charge; even then they would meet during the


16 Caroline H. Butler-Laing letter to Mary Butler, September 16th, 1824, in Butler-Laing Family Papers, New York Historical Society, Folder 1, MS 94.


day for tea. One day during this period of confinement, Martha Ballard met with her husband at Mr. Thwings’s home and later recorded, “my husband Came and Spen’ aftern with me, he Dind and took Tea there, but must go up the hill a‘ night.”\(^{19}\) Three months later, she recorded, “I then walkt to Shubl pittss. Saw my Dear husband there, partook of a dish of Tea with him. then to my great mortification, he left me and wen’ to his place of destination,” the jail.\(^{20}\) Domestic rituals remained strong even during periods of disjunction.

Due to the nature of gender roles in the late eighteenth century, men produced the equipment that accompanied tea. Artisans learned their trade young, often from their fathers. Prospective employers placed advertisements in the newspapers for apprentices. For example, an employer “wanted immediately at the new factory in New-Boston, four Boys for Apprentices to learn the art of making Tortoise shell, Cream, and Green coloured plates, dishes, Coffee & Tea Pots, Cups, and Saucers.”\(^{21}\) Much more so than women, early American men were intimately connected to the tea industry as merchants, artisans, and shopkeepers.

Buying was sometimes the province of women, but was more so of their husbands. Ballard recorded the names of the individuals from whom her family received their tea. She kept this diary from 1777 to 1815, and her records suggest that she rarely went to buy tea or tea equipment. She recorded in 1787, “I went to Col’ Norths and got 2 lb Butter, 2 Do of Sugar, &- 1/2 lb of Tea.”\(^{22}\) On the other hand, most references to acquiring tea involved her husband and sons. Ballard noted in June 1785, “I was at home all Day. mr Ballard Bought 1/2 a Barl of Pork & a Tea Kettle,” in November 1786 that “mr Ballard Br’ home 1 lb of Tea,” in 1788 that one day


\(^{21}\) *Boston Evening Post*, Issue 1778, 10/23/1769, 4.

Jonathon bought a “tea pott,” and two months later that he bought 3 pounds of tea. This pattern continued into the nineteenth century, for in January 1806 Ballard recorded that “Cyrus been down to ye Settlement, bot 4_ lb Chees, 2 of Sugar, _ Shoue⁹ [Souchong] Tea.”

Other times, Martha Ballard received tea as payment for her work from the husbands of her patients. Ballard worked as an experienced midwife in Hallowell, Maine. Sometimes Ballard framed her neighbors’ payment of debt as a gift, such as when she noted, “mr Weston made me a pres¹ of 2 lb sugar & 1/4 of Tea.” These gifts or payments compensated Ballard for her work, but the majority of purchased tea came through the actions of her husband and sons.

Leonard Lawrence, a merchant in Flushing, NY, before the American Revolution, listed the people to whom he sold tea and coffee, the majority, if not the total number, of which were male customers. On December 7, 1773, Lawrence sold Moses Morse tea at four shillings and ten pence for a total of five pounds and sixteen shillings, coffee at one shilling for a total of six shillings, and one café of brandy for a total of two pounds and five shillings. In March of 1774 he listed a sale to Joseph Lawrence of a tea chest for eight shillings and six pence. None of the records researched between December 1773 and April 1774 listed women as the buyers, although presumably women would consume much of the tea purchased from Lawrence.

Women’s participation in the tea boycott before the American Revolution continued the gendering of tea. For example, in the “Address to Ladies,” women were entreated to wear “No more Ribbons wear, nor in rich dress appear, / Love your country much better than fine things,” and the author suggested that if women acted patriotically in the only ways that women properly


could do so, men would find them more beautiful, and it goes without saying, a good choice for a bride.  

Women decided, as written by Milcah Martha Moore, that “Rather than freedom we part with our tea,” but they were asked to do so in very feminine terms.  

Even though tea was part of the patriot efforts that formed the “beginning of a female political role that integrated the traditional domestic domain into the political world,” society’s depictions of tea reinforced negative ideas about women, their bodies, and their place in the new America after the war. Women’s bodies, although strong enough to do domestic chores and pick up their children, received negative connotations through the discussion on tea’s influence on the body. In his essay, “Sermon on Tea,” David Ramsay connected tea’s effects on the body to society’s ideas on women’s physical characteristics. He stated that due to tea, “the Histeria…once peculiar to the fair sex, is now become common to both; and has reduced the robust masculine habit of men, to a feminine softness.”

According to some Americans, tea had a debilitating effect on the body because it supposedly attacked the nervous system through its “stimulation,” which we know to be the result of an intake of caffeine. The author of an English article reprinted in the Boston Gazette claimed that tea “irritates and frets the nerves and fibres, [sic] exciting the expulsive faculty; so that the body may be lessened and weakened.” Some thought that imbibing hot beverages was bad for the body overall. Often authors of these ideas used language unkind to women to express their “observations.”

---


Late eighteenth-century women got caught in the middle of debates over the usefulness of tea as a social custom, due to its promotion of leisure and discourse. Some authors considered tea a trivial pastime, the proponents of which lacked substance and intelligence. According to one author, in order to “unlearn knowledge,” he stated that “the most approved method of becoming an agreeable trifler” was “to attend at the tea-table of celebrated beauties, and assiduously to copy the manners of those that are favourably received.”31 If some members of society connected tea with women and with trifling people, it suggests that they castigated women as inconsequential and vapid. David Shields recognizes that some of these critics might have had underlying worries about strong females engaging in discourse. “Those who felt anxiety about the consolidation of women’s power in Anglo-American culture,” he writes, “attacked tea and its female devotees.”32

Stereotypes regarding women and tea were stronger in the early nineteenth century. In the 1869 engraving, “Waiting for Cupid – A Spinster’s Reverie,” and “Waiting for Cupid – A Bachelor’s Reverie,” for example, a man and a woman each sat beside a fire, pining into the flames. (See Images One and Two, p. 82) The woman held a cat, had books on her table, and lived in a room with nice furnishings. The objects in the man’s room support the arguments of this chapter because while the engraving depicts the trappings of bachelorhood, including a dog and a musical instrument, many of the objects have a strikingly domestic, feminine character, such as the teapot that sits upon his table. The engraving of the bachelor suggests that the best


32 Shields, *Civil Tongues*, 104.
home – for which the man pines – would be a feminine, domestic space, and that the man already included tea in his inventory of household goods and in his daily rituals.\footnote{33 “Waiting for Cupid – A Spinster’s Reverie” and “Waiting for Cupid – A Bachelor’s Reverie,” Harper’s Weekly, 2/1869.}

The importance of respectability that grew during the early republic and into the nineteenth century had consequences for women as well. Richard L. Bushman argues, “With the help of enterprising industrialists, middling people found ways to assemble the requisite accoutrements of what might be called vernacular gentility,” and tea sustained a crucial portion of this spread of gentility.\footnote{34 Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York: Knopf: Random House, 1992), xiii.} Since women were considered the presiders over tea, the gendered aspects of the increased appearance of respectability affected them. Good manners and a solid knowledge of etiquette surrounding social customs necessarily brought increased scrutiny on women and increased the importance of keeping a proper house.

While women were deprived of social interactions in most public places, and therefore rendered less powerful than men, they had some control over the interactions at home and assemblies where tea was concerned due to its categorization as a female-centered entity. Indeed, “the ability of early modern women below elite status to change their domestic environment may have been limited to the table and meal-taking.”\footnote{35 Carole Shammas, The Pre-Industrial Consumer in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 187.} Tea allowed women the ability to hold men to standards of social etiquette, for example. An author who gave instructions for young men at a tea party implied that women knew the correct codes of etiquette and that men would stumble without proper guidance. He wrote, “Young men, especially those who are not much acquainted with the \textit{polite world}, are apt not only to appear, but to feel, exceedingly awkward in the
company of ladies, for want of some plain directions how to behave themselves.”

The author compared gentlemen new to tea parties to “raw recruits in an army,” who need several weeks of training “before they are fit for active service.”

The army leaders, in the scenario, would be the women at the tea table.

At the same time, women only held a limited amount of power through their roles as the enforcers of tea etiquette because this role did not change ingrained ideas about women’s worth or need for education, but often led to mockery of their social rules. The same author of the “Directions to Young Gentlemen at a Tea Party,” instructed men that they should “Never say anything to a lady, which will lead her to suspect you take her for a rational being. Treat her like a doll, or parrot.”

Young gentlemen, he continued, should abstain from broaching topics of scientific or literary natures, or issues of much importance, for “It is exceedingly impolite, and shows you are no gentlemen.”

Women’s superior knowledge of etiquette and tea may have given them control of the drawing room and tea service, but these gains did not change ingrained ideas on their characteristics, ambitions, and mental faculties as women because of their collusion with the frivolous rules of etiquette.

The more authors discussed rules of tea etiquette and the more respectability spread to an increased number of people during the first half of the nineteenth century, the more women were affected by how they were represented during this period. The depictions of tea in nineteenth-century visual sources reveal the gender ideals of the early republic, which solidified in the early 1800s. The ideals that remained largely labeled the maintenance of the home and the teaching of

---


37 “Directions to Young Gentlemen,” np.

38 Ibid., np.

39 Ibid., np.
domestic skills to family members as women’s main duties, without any of the value previously awarded to such tasks. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich claims that, “As a changing economy and a new political order drew men into the contentious worlds of commerce and politics, women could continue to model the domestic virtues of piety, thrift, hard work and concern for the welfare of neighbors,” if they adhered to this ideal. Overall, these sources promoted scenes in which women acted out domestic, respectable, and motherly roles.

The combination of women and household goods in nineteenth-century domestic scenes often reinforced this ideal of an industrious woman who worked at home and performed domestic duties and child-rearing. An 1868 *Harper’s Weekly* engraving, “The Little Woman,” depicted a young girl practicing household chores in imitation of her mother, whom the artist placed in the kitchen beside a teapot and other household items. (See Image Three, p. 83) The engraving captures the mythology of the late eighteenth-century, in which the household and economy were one and Americans valued female industriousness and women’s domestic teaching of daughters. According to Ulrich, the nineteenth-century attraction to the mythology of the colonial self-sufficient household developed in part due to the eighteenth-century household’s containment of economy and household in one space. Tellingly, the artist drew the mother in the center of the drawing, but with her back to the viewer so that her face is unidentifiable. The central place of the teapot in the kitchen reinforced the domestic nature of the object and its inclusion in the goods of a woman’s domain. The drawing of the woman next to the teapot signifies that she is in her proper sphere, but is not an individual to be named, because her face is unidentifiable.

---


Similarly, the 1853 engraved frontispiece to the etiquette book, *The Skillful Housewife’s Book: or Complete Guide to Domestic Cookery, Taste, Comfort and Economy*, authored by Mrs. Lydia Green Abell, reinforced the nineteenth-century conception of women’s work by depicting the ideal domestic activities of a women surrounded by her necessary household items. (See Image Four, p. 84) This book, a courtesy manual, supposedly espoused the correct roles, techniques, and lifestyles that women should maintain. The woman, in a nice dress and with her hair neatly pinned up, stood beside a table rolling dough while her children are occupied on the floor beneath her. The teapot sat on her work table and was one of the many domestic objects in the woman’s kitchen. This image, published on the frontispiece of an etiquette book, therefore implied that the correct female etiquette was to focus on their domestic and child-rearing duties while surrounded by domestic goods, and showed the idealized perception of the respectability that came with women in their “natural” space.\(^4\)  

Abell’s book converged the themes of the rise of respectability and women’s place in the creation of refinement because it was an instruction manual for how women should act in order to fulfill their prescribed gender roles and the requirements for respectability and how to learn skills in all manners of feminine tasks. Its mission was to “promote the temporal comfort and spiritual interests, of families.”\(^3\) Tea seemed to be a commodity of which women should have knowledge, since sections of Abell’s “household directory” instructed women on serving tea, making tea biscuits, caring for tea kettles, and on tea in general. “When the tea is to be sent around,” Abell directed, “let everything be well arranged and in perfect readiness.”\(^4\)

---


\(^3\) Ibid., 13.

\(^4\) Ibid., 160.
were to serve women first, and, specifically, women should “observe where the most of the elderly ladies are seated and proceed forward, and help one of THEM first.” Once the hostess had seen the women served, she could direct the staff to serve the gentlemen, before sending around the cakes, sweets, or other nourishment. Abell gave advice on caring for the tea equipage women used for their get-togethers. To prevent lime from depositing on the inside of teakettles, for example, women should “put the shell of an oyster in the teakettle and the lime will adhere to it, instead of coating the sides.” These guidelines established a proper etiquette and gave tips that women could follow or, if the household did not employ a staff or have some of the ingredients proposed by Abell, that they could modify to achieve the nearest simulation of the ideal method of serving tea.

Abell also instructed women in their nursing skills in order to take care of sick family members. Martha Ballard relied on tea for multiple illnesses between 1777 and 1815, and this practice continued on into the nineteenth century despite the growth of institutional or professional medical practices. Abell advised a remedy of “beef-tea,” created by boiling beef and salt and straining the concoction, for when a stomach could not keep down any other nourishment. She recommended cold sage “tea” for night sweats and worms in children. Just as tea was gendered, the uses of tea – even if it was made with beef or sage and not Bohea – were also gendered.

---

46 Ibid., 191.
47 Ibid., 67.
48 Ibid., 47.
In conclusion, the relationship between tea and gender encompassed both men and women’s experiences. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century society labeled tea as part of women’s domain, but men also included tea in their social rituals like women did. Women established some control within their homes and the homes of their acquaintances by controlling rules of social etiquette, which they learned from courtesy and etiquette books and from other women; women read instruction books and articles that promoted the manners considered appropriate or needed at the tea table. They also learned how to create home remedies like teas for their or their families’ illnesses. Women were supposed to be knowledgeable in the art of tea preparation and tea drinking. These notions, though, also reinforced certain gender roles for and negative stereotypes of women and defined the domestic sphere as women’s appropriate place. By the middle of the nineteenth century tea remained tied up in the notions of respectability to which men and women attained, which sustained tea’s influence on their social rituals, and continued women’s domestic presence.

Early American men and women lived in a world in which gender ideals played a large role in determining the duties that individuals performed and the spaces in which they performed them. Many everyday items held gendered meanings for early Americans, and tea was no exception. Because of its domestic and dainty nature, it remained a woman’s item, even though men drank tea with them and that connection mostly reinforced restrictive notions of women’s gender roles.
Images – Chapter Four

Image One: “Waiting for Cupid – A Spinster’s Reverie”

Image Two: “Waiting for Cupid – A Bachelor’s Reverie”
Image Three: The Little Woman (1868)
V. Conclusion

Tea carried a multiplicity of meanings in early American culture and played a role in various movements in American history between the 1760s and the 1840s. This thesis brought together multiple issues that have been researched by scholars of American history, including Timothy H. Breen, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Richard L. Bushman, John Kasson, Carole Shammas, and Mary Beth Norton. By focusing on a single domestic item, it connected the topics of consumption, politics, gender, and material culture to reveal larger ideas about early American culture.

Americans of the Revolutionary and Early National period in New England used tea and its wares as symbols of socio-economic status, grace, and refinement. Merchants imported tea to suit American demand, and they themselves enjoyed the goods that they brought over the Atlantic and a livelihood that awarded them power and prestige. Through the newly emerged consumer economy, tea equipage entered the homes of the higher classes, initially. Colonists drew motivation to consume from their newfound abilities to make choices, to acquire goods that came from sophisticated places like London, and to show a certain social standing through those commodities. On the other hand, these consumers’ excitement and vast consumption of imported tea drew condemnation from colonists who saw tea as yet another commodity of wasteful luxury and idleness.

For many men, women, and even children, tea formed a part of their social rituals. Formal or informal teatime with friends at home was especially important for women who did not have access to public places like coffeehouses. Drinking the caffeinated beverage also gave many women a much-needed energy boost throughout their long workdays at home, whether they were spinning, cleaning, cooking, gardening, lending a hand with farm animals, raising
children, or doing any combination of these chores, and helped them and their families treat illnesses.

The connotations of social status continued to give tea an important place in Americans’ lives in the nineteenth century, as upper-class gentility turned into a democratized notion of respectability within reach of more individuals within the middling economic ranks. Thus, the consumer economy gained currency with more Americans than ever before in the nineteenth century than it had in the eighteenth due to methods of mass consumption and by the 1820s even free African Americans had integrated the culture of tea into their lives. They took time out of their days and weeks to take tea, and experienced discrimination when they tried to do so at places in which owners deemed them unwelcome. Many prints and paintings from this period reinforce the connection between tea and status, at least for white Americans, because artists placed tea equipage prominently in paintings of affluent individuals or of middling people “speculating” for wealth, at the risk of losing it all in chase of their dreams.

Americans gave tea political meanings during the turmoil that existed between 1767 and 1776 that at times overshadowed its social and medicinal uses. The Townshend Act of 1767 brought tea into the debates on liberty, sovereignty, and identity, and allowed it to symbolize British tyranny. Subsequently, a simple act of drinking a social beverage turned into a politically charged performance of one’s political leanings. Merchants became embroiled in the proposed boycott of British goods, especially tea, since they were the ones who physically imported the commodity. While many loyalist families continued to import and drink the commodity, thousands of patriot men, women, and children answered the call to abstain from tea. For women, their control over tea in the home allowed them to participate in the boycotts and to write politically for the first time. Tea lost its political meanings after the American Revolution, but
slightly regained them after Americans chose to use tea as a substitute for alcohol during the temperance movement and tea parties as a strategy for gaining support for the antislavery cause.

Tea also held gendered meanings in American culture. Even though men drank tea, American society often labeled it the domain of women, which gave the “fairer sex” some control over the use of the commodity in their homes. However, the feminized meanings of tea also led to the continuation of a “gendered imagination” in American society that had negative results for women. Members of society called for women’s help in the revolution through gendered terms that restricted the ways in which women could assist patriotic efforts. Writers and artists used female stereotypes to advocate that tea was an unhealthy beverage and used negative images – figurative and visual – to denigrate loyalists during the revolution and to promote narrow gender roles for women into the nineteenth century. Artists’ portrayals of teapots in the nineteenth century reinforced conventional notions of women’s roles in their households.

Future expansions of this project should look east and explore the transnational associations of tea in America, including the exchange of trade and cultures between America and China, India and Britain. Global history easily intersects with material culture because many individuals in late eighteenth-century America gained their knowledge of foreign cultures from their decorative wares. In a letter to her mother, Caroline H. Butler-Laing compared Chinese men she saw in her travels to the images she had seen on chinaware. She wrote that their heads were “bald to the crown, from whence they let their hair grow, and braid it into a long queue behind, hanging down almost to their heels – this, with their wide blue trousers, and long loose jackets, complete the reality of all the figures we see, upon their blue China-ware, and it would seem, as if some of those images, had stepped forth in life, from a large China dish instead of a
Butler’s response to her first glimpses of Chinese men shows that tea services could provide not just the physical instruments for tea, but also information on global cultures to which most American could not travel.

A continuation of this thesis could also extend its timeframe because tea’s influence on American culture endured. Tea remained a symbol of respectability during the Gilded Age, a time of growing disparities between the upper and lower classes of Americans during which the upper classes loudly displayed their social statuses through their clothing and actions. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper in January 1875 included an engraving of a tea party celebrating the American centennial in the rotunda of the Capitol building.2 (See Image One, p. 96) The fashionable wear of the attendees and the flags encircling the walls reinforced the message that tea parties were fashionable genteel affairs attended by worldly, sophisticated, and affluent individuals even as their colonial-looking clothing implied that Americans remembered tea as an inherent part of the revolution. It also highlighted the prominent place of women at tea gatherings. An 1880 painting by American painter Mary Stevenson Cassatt reveals that tea continued to be a part of respectable women’s social times.3 Two women in nice but not ostentatious dresses sit next to a silver tea service drinking their tea out of china in a room that is wallpapered and has a gold frame above the fireplace. The tea service Cassatt painted belonged to her, which adds veracity to the scene. The women are socializing over tea in a domestic space just as women did for generations before them, and just as Cassatt herself did. (See Image Two, p. 97) In a final example, a fashion plate from Godey’s Ladies Magazine in 1888 portrays two

---

1 Caroline H. Butler-Laing to Sarah Butler, Ship Roman, Macao, China, 2/5/1837, Butler-Laing Family Papers, New York Historical Society, Folder 1, MS 94.

2 “Centennial Tea Party in the Rotunda of the Capitol at Washington on Wednesday Evening, December 16th,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 1/2/1875, 281.

women in fine dresses pouring tea into teacups.⁴ (See Image Three, p. 98) The print aimed to show the latest fashions at the upper-most part of the spectrum of wealth, but it also reinforced the connection between tea and what seems to be a more genteel version of respectability similar to what we see in eighteenth-century sources.

During the first decade of the twentieth century Americans popularized iced tea and tea bags. Helen Saberi notes that an English tea merchant, ironically, named Richard Blechynden invented iced tea on a sweltering day at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Trade Fair, and she credits New York-native Thomas Sullivan with accidentally creating tea bags around the same year by giving customers their tea in silk pouches that they thought to steep.⁵ Some tea connoisseurs consider these developments destructive to the purity of tea, but one could also see it as a step in the modernization of tea at a time when American society was moving in a modern direction in many other areas of life. Americans also set up polished tearooms in cities across the country. Saberi writes, “Tea rooms, which were run by women, were popular during the 1920s, a decade when alcoholic beverages were outlawed, thus encouraging people to drink tea and coffee in public instead.”⁶ Tea’s relationship with the temperance movement therefore seems to have continued on into the twentieth century, and new spaces opened up to men and women for the purpose of drinking tea.

After the 1920s, the place of tea in American culture seems to have dimmed in favor of coffee. Reasons for this could include the Great Depression, which forced many families to focus on providing only the most immediate needs. By World War II, coffee became a part of


⁶ Saberi, Tea, 117.
American identity. According to economic historians Michelle Craig McDonald and Steven Topik, “Coffee has become identified as quintessentially American as tea is British or Chinese, beer German, and wine French.” They argue that this coffee supplanted tea as America’s drink because it played a “central role as an indelible symbol of independence from British authority,” was a perceived necessity for soldiers during the Civil War, and because it “has been linked to American state building, nation building, continentalism, and globalism.” Whatever the reasons may be, it is clear to anyone who witnessed the rise of coffee conglomerates like Dunkin’ Donuts and Starbucks’s that in the last century coffee has been largely winning out over tea as America’s drink.

Even though it is less popular today than coffee, tea has remained present in twenty-first-century American culture through high teas. Many Americans see high tea as more of a fancy affair than a frequently indulged-in custom and as an eclectic way to reconnect with a historical practice and to perform a reenactment of sorts. A review of afternoon tea at the Fairmont Empress hotel in British Columbia by Lauren Kramer in Tea Magazine, an American-based publication, sums up the feelings and experiences that afternoon teas purportedly give. Kramer observes, “You can’t help but feel important and dignified as you’re seated at an exquisitely laid table and served delicacies on Royal Doulton bone china.” She claims that the afternoon tea at the Empress is “a formal experience” that “feels opulent, dramatic and wonderfully traditional,” and emphasizes in a side note that this hotel’s afternoon tea recaptures “the elegance of times

---


8 McDonald and Topik, “Culture and Consumption,” 2.

gone by.” The author recognizes that afternoon teas draw upon many of the same themes that gave tea its mass appeal centuries ago. Namely, the luxurious, high-class character of tea invites many people to partake in it. Furthermore, Kramer observes that the traditional, historical implication of afternoon teas creates an allure for people who want to relive the past through a custom that feels reminiscent of a bygone era.

At the end of the twentieth century, tea also rose in popularity due to the rise of health consciousness in much of the American population. According to Euromonitor International, “Tea has increased in popularity in the US, due to its many health benefits and lack of calories. Health-oriented consumers are often drawn to tea, since it is naturally laden with antioxidants, catechins and EGCG, all of which are positively linked with health and disease prevention.”

Since then, tea has entered the mass market as a health drink, and companies even bottle brewed tea and send it to grocery stores across the country.

Scientists have tacitly recommended tea as a healthy drink filled with antioxidants after numerous studies on the link between antioxidants and cancer. Studies of the health effects of the catechins in tea have so far proved inconclusive. Amber Bratcher created a study to determine which variety of tea, green, black, or oolong, if any, would inhibit the growth of *Streptococcus mutans* in the human mouth. Twenty-two young men and women were “divided into groups that drank different types of tea or a hot water control for twenty-one days, while saliva samples were collected weekly and bacterial levels determined.” After the experimental period Bratcher concluded that there was no variation among the results of each type of tea, thus disproving her

---


hypothesis that green tea would reduce bacteria far more than black or oolong tea because of the larger amount of catechins present in green tea, but that levels of S. mutans decreased among all groups. Bratcher adds that more research needs to be done to determine if the hot water used in tea caused the decrease in bacteria.

Research on the benefits of polyphenols found in tea has proved more decisive. Augustin Scalbert, Ian T. Johnson, and Mike Saltmarsh claim that although the research is yet too limited to provide specific recommendations to the public, “current evidence strongly supports a contribution of polyphenols,” the “main dietary sources” of which include fruit juices, tea, coffee, and red wine, “to the prevention of cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and osteoporosis and suggests a role in the prevention of neurodegenerative diseases and diabetes mellitus.”\textsuperscript{13} As Americans remain hopeful in search of ways to decrease their cancer risks, scientific research on tea will necessarily continue in order to reach a conclusive evaluation.

Tea will remain the favorite drink of many Americans, whether for its taste, its worldly, refined, and elite connotations, or for its health benefits. One report calculated that in 2011 tea grew 2\% in “total volume terms,” to clock in at 72,278 tonnes and is “projected to increase by 10\% in on-trade volume terms over the forecast period, reaching 35,927 tonnes in 2016.”\textsuperscript{14} Comparatively, “off-trade volume sales of coffee are projected to be flat over the forecast period, steadying at 753,437 tonnes.”\textsuperscript{15} Americans may have popularized iced tea and tea bags, but purists can still find it in loose-leaf form in tea and coffee shops across the nation. Teashops and

\textsuperscript{13} Augustin Scalbert, Ian T Johnson, and Mike Saltmarsh, “Polyphenols: Antioxidants and Beyond,” \textit{American Journal of Clinical Nutrition} 81(suppl) (2005): 215S.

\textsuperscript{14} “Tea in the US,” Euromonitor International.

teahouses are easy to find in most cities and many companies have made tea available online and helped to turn it into a thriving industry.

What we choose to drink has meaning, and like so many other everyday items people enjoy, tea has its own history in America that tea drinkers connect to whether they consciously realize it or not. Looking back almost two hundred and fifty years, one can see that the story of tea in America includes much more than the Boston Tea Party and that this domestic item can actually reveal many larger insights into American culture. American colonists incorporated tea into their culture and used it for political, social, and personal purposes. The story of tea in America encapsulates a history that includes the early consumer economy, gender, class, race, respectability, and politics, and continues on today.
Images – Conclusion

Image One
“Centennial Tea Party in the Rotunda of the Capitol at Washington on Wednesday Evening, December 16\textsuperscript{th},” \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, January 2, 1875
Image Two: “The Tea,” Mary Stevenson Cassatt
Image Three: “Godey’s Fashions,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (1888)
Bibliography

Primary


**Secondary**


*Mull Judith Sargent Murray: Her First 100 letters.* Transcribed by Marianne Dunlop. Gloucester:


Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary,*
