
James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten

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UNEARTHING THE PAST: THE ENDURING LEGACY OF JAMES DEETZ'S "IN SMALL THINGS FORGOTTEN"

In the vast landscape of historical scholarship, it is often the grand narratives—the rise and fall of empires, the battles of famous generals, the lives of presidents and kings—that command

the loudest attention. Yet behind the pageantry of official records lies a quieter, more intimate story: the story of everyday life as lived by ordinary people. No work has done more to bring this hidden history to light than James Deetz's groundbreaking book, **In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life**. First published in 1977, this compact volume transformed the way historians, archaeologists, and the general public

understand the colonial American past. By focusing on the material culture that surrounded early Americans—ceramic dishes, fence posts, building orientations, and even the placement of a single nail—Deetz demonstrated that the most profound insights about a society are often found in the smallest, most overlooked details.

This article explores the enduring influence of **James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten**, unpacking its key themes, methodological innovations, and lasting legacy in historical archaeology and beyond. Whether you are a student of history, an archaeology enthusiast, or simply someone curious about how the past is pieced together, Deetz's work offers a compelling reminder that the objects we leave behind speak

volumes—if only we learn to listen.

WHO WAS JAMES DEETZ?

James Deetz (1930–2000) was a pioneering American historical archaeologist and anthropologist. Educated at Harvard University, he later taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Brown University, where he directed the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology. Deetz was not content to let archaeology remain a discipline of elite monuments and grand architecture. Instead, he turned his attention to the more humble remnants of colonial life: the broken clay pipes, the worn-out spoons, the patterns of fence placement in early New England settlements. His approach was profoundly humanistic, blending

anthropology, history, and archaeology into a seamless narrative.

Deetz's most famous book, **In Small Things Forgotten**, grew directly out of his fieldwork at sites such as Plimoth Plantation, the historic 1620 settlement of the Pilgrims, and Flowerdew Hundred, a 17th-century plantation in Virginia. Rather than simply cataloging artifacts, Deetz used them to reconstruct the mentalités—the shared habits of thought and perception—of people who left few written records. This made his work revolutionary for its time and continues to inspire new generations of scholars.

CORE THEMES OF "IN SMALL THINGS FORGOTTEN"

The Power of Material Culture

At the heart of **In Small Things Forgotten** is the conviction that the physical objects people create, use, and discard are not just passive residue but active expressions of culture. Deetz argues that everyday artifacts—whether a ceramic jug, a house foundation, or a coffin shape—reflect deeply embedded cultural patterns, beliefs, and changes. By reading these objects with the same care a historian reads a manuscript, the archaeologist can recover aspects of life that texts ignore: the rhythm of daily chores, the evolution of family structure, the spread of new ideas about privacy

and individualism.

For example, Deetz demonstrates how the shift from communal to individual dining in colonial America can be traced through changes in ceramic sets. Early 17th-century households owned a few multipurpose vessels used for eating, drinking, and storage. By the late 18th century, matched sets of plates, cups, and saucers appear, indicating a new emphasis on personal place settings and formal meals. This small change in pottery, Deetz argues, is a material footprint of a larger cultural transformation—the rise of the individual as a distinct social unit.

Georgianization and the American Mind

A cornerstone concept in **James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten** is "Georgianization." Deetz observed that around the mid-18th century, the material culture of the American colonies underwent a profound shift, aligning with the British Georgian aesthetic and its underlying worldview. This manifested in everything from symmetrical house facades to paired grave markers, from orderly fence lines to matching dinnerware. Deetz argues that this change was not merely decorative; it

reflected a deeper move toward order, symmetry, hierarchy, and individualism—values that would eventually underpin the American Revolution.

Deetz traces Georgianization through the seemingly trivial arrangement of houses in New England villages. Early colonial homes were often irregularly placed, oriented toward the sun or the road without a consistent plan. After 1750, houses were increasingly set in neat rows, facing a central street, with symmetrical facades and formal front doors. This shift in spatial organization mirrored a shift in social organization: from a communal, church-centered society to a more commercial, individualistic one. By paying attention to these "small things," Deetz reveals

the material roots of modern American identity.

CASE STUDIES: BRINGING THE THEORY TO LIFE

The Parting Ways Cemetery

One of the most famous examples in **In Small Things**

Forgotten is the American analysis of the families in the Parting Ways late 18th and cemetery in early 19th Plymouth, centuries. Massachusetts, a Traditional burial ground historians had used by African little to say

about these discovered that individuals; coffin shapes, written records burial were sparse. But orientations, and Deetz and his grave goods colleagues showed a blend excavated the of African and graves and European

traditions. Some others contained
 coffins were objects like clay
 nailed shut with pipes and glass
 a distinctive beads that
 pattern that suggested a
 echoed West syncretic belief
 African system. This
 cosmologies; material

evidence rewrote communities
the story of maintained
African American distinct cultural
cultural survival practices even
in New England, under the
proving that shadow of
enslaved and oppression.
free Black

The "ABC" artifacts—Alter,
 Pattern in Behave, and
 Artifacts Contain. He
 Deetz also argued that most
 developed a objects in
 famous colonial
 mnemonic: the households could
 "ABC" of be categorized

by their primary substances (like
function: altering a jug or a
raw materials casket). This
(like an axe), simple
shaping behavior framework
(like a chair or a helped
book), or archaeologists
containing think

systematically reveals that about how colonial life was artifacts related organized to human action around practical and belief. In needs but also small things around symbolic forgotten, the meanings. A ABC pattern butter churn, for

AND INFLUENCE

instance, does more than make butter; it enacts a set of gendered roles and culinary values.

METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS

James Deetz's work in **In Small Things Forgotten** was not just about content; it was about method. He championed

a historical
multidisciplinary documents. This
approach that approach, now
combined careful known as
excavation with historical
anthropological archaeology, was
theory and a in its infancy
deep reading of when Deetz

began his career. historical
His book helped archaeology is a
legitimize the robust discipline,
field within and many of its
academia and foundational
made it principles—atten
accessible to the tion to everyday
public. Today, life, use of

material culture Deetz's
 as primary influence.
 evidence, Moreover,
 integration of Deetz's
 history and accessible
 anthropology—c writing style
 an be traced made **In Small**
 directly back to **Things**

Forgotten a and instead told
staple in compelling
undergraduate stories about the
courses and a people of
favorite among colonial America:
non-specialist the Pilgrims at
readers. He Plimoth, the
avoided jargon planters at

Flowerdew scholarship,
 Hundred, the demonstrated
 enslaved families that archaeology
 at Parting Ways. could be both
 This storytelling scientifically
 approach, sound and
 grounded in deeply human.
 rigorous

CRITICISMS AND ONGOING

DEBATES is too
No influential sweeping,
work is without oversimplifying
its critics. Some the diversity of
scholars have colonial
argued that experiences. Not
Deetz's concept all regions or
of ethnic groups
"Georgianization

adopted the communities, for
Georgian instance, often
mindset at the resisted or
same pace or to reinterpreted
the same these changes.
degree. Native Others have
American and pointed out that
African American Deetz's focus on

English colonial distinctive
sites neglects trajectories.
the material Nevertheless,
cultures of the even critics
Spanish, French, acknowledge
and Dutch that **James**
colonies, which **Deetz In Small**
had their own **Things**

Forgotten cultural
opened up new meaning—has
avenues of been refined and
inquiry. The expanded, not
book's core discarded.
insight—that Subsequent
everyday objects research has
are rich with examined how

gender, class, starting point for
and race any serious
intersect with examination of
material culture, how things
building on the shape and reflect
foundation Deetz human lives.

laid. His work
remains a

**RELEVANCE FOR TODAY'S
READERS**

Why does a book

about 17th- and message about
18th-century the power of the
artifacts still ordinary. In an
resonate more age of mass
than four consumption and
decades after its disposable
publication? The goods, **In Small**
answer lies in its **Things**

Forgotten layout of your encourages us to kitchen, the way look at the your objects around neighborhood is us with new organized—all eyes. The are small things smartphone in that encode your pocket, the cultural values,

histories, and landscapes,
social relations. making his book
Deetz's not just a history
methodology lesson but a
provides a toolkit guide to
for decoding understanding
these the present.
contemporary For history

lovers, the book field. It shows
offers a how a broken
refreshing piece of pottery
antidote to the or a rusty
dry, document- horseshoe can
heavy narratives tell a story every
that dominate so bit as compelling
much of the as a letter from a

Founding Father. for anyone who
For archaeology has ever
students, it wondered what
remains a model life was really
of how to think like in early
critically about America, **In**
material **Small Things**
evidence. And **Forgotten**

provides a vivid, more than an
tangible academic
connection to monograph; it is
the past. a testament to

CONCLUSION

the idea that the
James Deetz's **In** most important
Small Things histories are
Forgotten is far often hidden in

plain sight. By to countless
shifting focus individuals who
from the great left behind no
and the grand to written words
the small and the but left behind a
seemingly world of objects.
insignificant, His work reminds
Deetz gave voice us that every

artifact, every them. For
arrangement of anyone seeking
space, every a deeper, richer
worn handle and understanding of
chipped plate is the American
a living past, this slender
memory—if only volume remains
we learn to read an indispensable

guide. Whether to look down,
you are a examine the
professional small things, and
historian, a discover the
passionate forgotten stories
amateur, or a that shaped a
curious reader, nation.
Deetz invites you