

Sacred Dinners and Secular Teas: Constructing Domesticity in Mid-19th-Century New York

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Sacred Dinners and Secular Teas: Constructing Domesticity in Mid-19th-Century New York

ABSTRACT

In this study, the ceramics from two mid-19th-century middle-class homes in New York's Greenwich Village are analyzed to begin to explore consumer patterns among the women of this group. The analysis suggests that during this period, "domesticity" was defined differently by women at the poorer and richer ends of the middle-class spectrum.

Introduction

When Julia Harkness Lay, a bookkeeper's wife who lived on New York's Allen Street, noted in her diary in November 1852 that she had just "bought some new crockery," she described neither the crockery nor the social and cultural factors that she took into account when she made her selection as a consumer (Lay 1851–1878). In this study, archaeological materials are used to explore some of the issues which she and other women of New York's middle class may have considered in making such consumer decisions in the mid-19th century. The ceramics from two sites in Greenwich Village in New York City—from wealthier and poorer middle-class homes—are analyzed to provide the data for the study.

During the last decade or so, a literature on consumerism and mass-produced goods has begun to appear in several disciplines (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; McKendrick et al. 1982; Bourdieu 1984; Appadurai 1986; Campbell 1987; D. Miller 1987; McCracken 1988). Some of these studies offer subtle and sophisticated approaches to the study of consumer behavior and make several important points which are used as the underlying assumptions in the present study. Foremost, goods are regarded as texts that are open to multiple read-

ings (cf. D. Miller 1987:176). Consumers actively decode these texts and thereby help to "produce" them in the act of their appropriation (cf. Bourdieu 1984:100). In selecting and appropriating goods, consumers use them to transform the world into an intelligible universe (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1979:102). Goods do not merely *reflect* various aspects of culture; rather, they *constitute* the very fabric of culture itself.

In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) shows that tastes in goods and other phenomena helped to create and maintain the power structure among socioeconomic classes in France in the mid-20th century. When entertaining, for example, French working-class women tended to set their tables with earthenware plates and ordinary glasses, while executive and professional families tended to use china plates and crystal glasses (Bourdieu 1984:198). Bourdieu suggests that the rationale behind these differences does not reside simply in the cost of these commodities. Rather, for the working-class family, necessity prevailed outside the home, but domestic life inside the home was the realm of freedom. Working-class people stressed the substance of the food over the form of the service and restricted invitations to a meal to family or those who could be treated as family—people they felt "at home with." For Bourdieu's bourgeois family, in contrast, the order, restraint, and propriety of the outside world could not be abandoned in domestic life. The form of the meal was stressed over its substance, and professional or business acquaintances were often entertained at home (Bourdieu 1984:175–200).

In this paper, two ceramic assemblages from households in Greenwich Village are used to explore the appropriation of goods from a similar perspective. Unlike Bourdieu's households, however, the households here would all be defined as members of the middle class. The question is whether women at the wealthier and poorer ends of the middle-class spectrum were using goods to construct similar or different domestic worlds in New York in the mid-19th century. While it is obviously "reaching" to examine a subject as complex as this one with data from only two sites, this study shows the potential of using data gener-

ated by historical archaeology for addressing questions of this nature.

Archaeological Context

The domestic materials analyzed for this study come from backyard features at two sites in Greenwich Village. One assemblage came from the uppermost domestic deposit in a privy (Feature 9) in the backyard of 50 Washington Square South at the Sullivan Street Site (Salwen and Yamin 1990). The assemblage has a *terminus post quem* of 1854 (Rebecca Yamin 1989, pers. comm.), indicating the materials were deposited during or after that year.

The other assemblage came from a cistern in the backyard of 25 Barrow Street (Bodie and Wall [1991]). Here, a coin with a date of 1863 provides a *terminus post quem*. The feature also contained several drug bottles embossed with the name and address of a druggist who moved from his Bleecker Street address in 1870 (Geismar 1989), suggesting that the materials were probably not deposited too long after this year.

Both the nature of the soil matrices and the consistency of the dates of the materials from each level within each deposit suggest that the materials were dumped into each of the features in single episodes.

Cultural Context

As Stuart Blumin (1989) has recently shown, the 19th century was the period which saw the emergence of the urban middle class as known today. Although the middle class was defined ambiguously in the early part of the century, it was described in the 1860s in an article in *The New York Times* [NYT] as including “professional men, clergymen, artists, college professors, shopkeepers, and upper mechanics” who presumably owned their own businesses (NYT in Blumin 1989: 247). This broad definition suggests that for men in the mid-19th century (as now), a broad spectrum of cultural experience was subsumed under the ru-

bric of “middle class.” This may have been true of their wives as well.

In the mid-19th century, the mistresses of middle-class households were in charge of domestic life. Their role had been increasingly sanctified in the early part of the century and, by mid-century, was defined around the two interrelated ideals of domestic duty and refined gentility (Blumin 1989). Women not only used material goods to exert their influence in shaping the domestic environment, but also were active in procuring these goods (Blumin 1989:187–188). Contemporary diaries show that New York women shopped for household goods at least as early as the turn of the century. Elizabeth Bleecker, for example, noted in her diary the multitude of shopping expeditions she undertook to buy the furnishings and dishes she needed to set up house after her marriage in 1800 (Bleecker 1799–1806). Julia Harkness Lay, the bookkeeper’s wife referred to at the beginning of this study, also recorded many purchases of household goods, including dishes, in the diary which she kept at mid-century (Lay 1851–1878). Although New York’s middle-class husbands shopped for the family’s food at the city’s large public markets in the early part of the century, by mid-century their wives had taken on this role, shopping in the smaller neighborhood retail shops that proliferated in this period (Dudden 1983: 137).

The ceramics from the Greenwich Village sites were used by families at opposite ends of the middle-class spectrum. The houses at 50 Washington Square South and 25 Barrow Street were both built in the 1820s, during the period when the Village of Greenwich was being developed into one of the city’s first suburbs; it was soon to be swallowed by the lower city. Both sites lie to the east of the area of the 18th-century Hudson River village, and were part of farm or estate lands until their development in the early 19th century. The sites lie in separate neighborhoods to the east and west of the present Sixth Avenue (Figure 1).

These neighborhoods are similar in that they were both among the city’s first residential areas, marking the end of the “walking city” with its pattern of integrated homes and workplaces (Wall

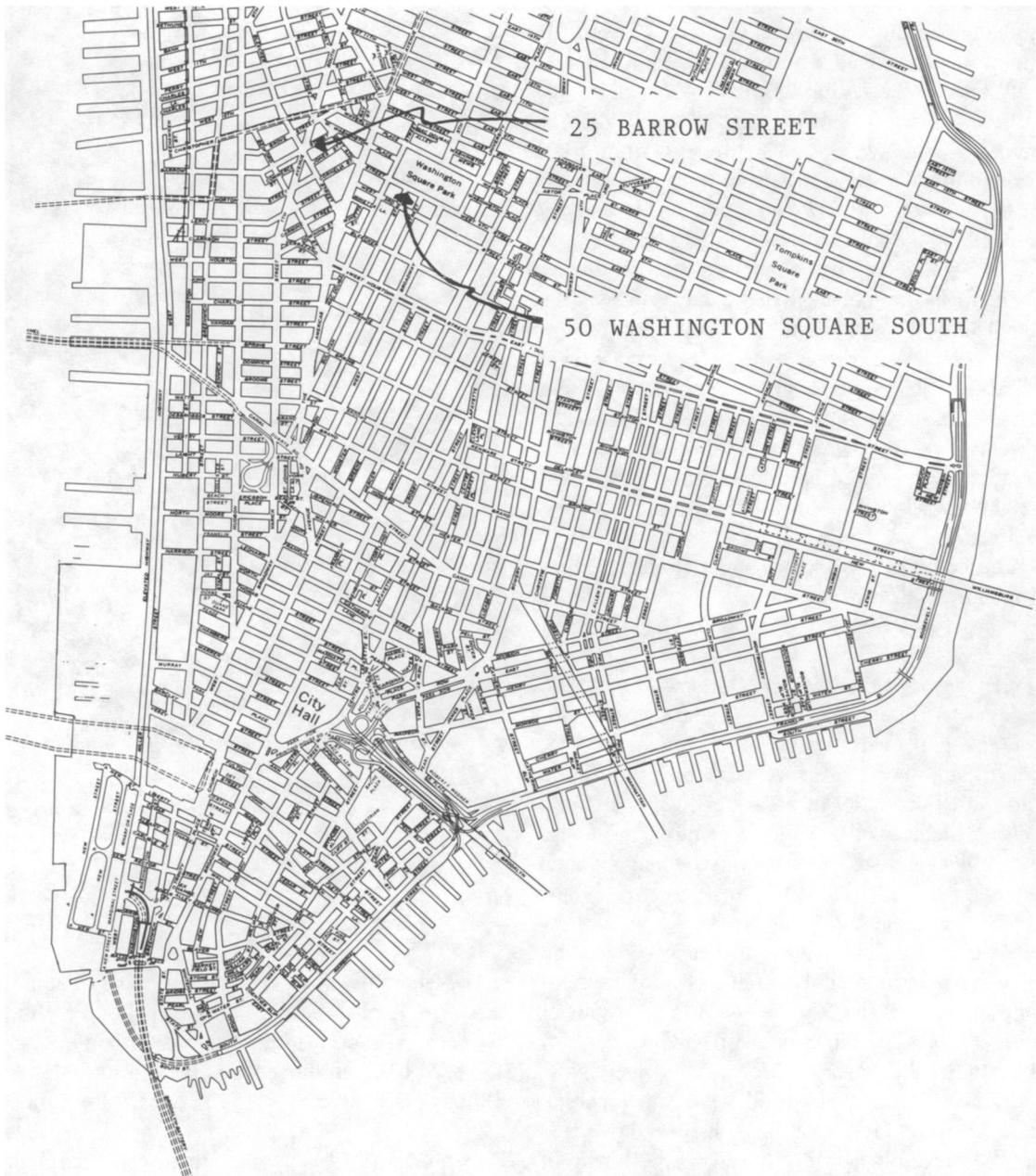


FIGURE 1. Map of southern Manhattan, showing the 25 Barrow Street and 50 Washington Square South sites in Greenwich Village. (Courtesy of the City of New York, Department of City Planning.)

1987). Throughout much of the 19th century, Greenwich Village as a whole remained a relatively exclusive enclave for the wealthy and mid-

dle class—in the 1860s, fewer than a quarter of the buildings there were tenements. With the exception of those working as domestic servants, work-

ing-class German and Irish immigrants (the most numerous immigrant groups in the city) were for the most part excluded from these neighborhoods until later in the century (Ernst 1949:45, 235).

In other ways, however, these two adjacent neighborhoods were quite different from each other. Fifty Washington Square South was located to the east of Sixth Avenue and, as its address implies, on the south side of Washington Square, a parade ground and park which had been developed as the focus of an enclave of wealthy homes in the late 1820s. The southern side of the square was somewhat less expensive than the northern side because of its proximity to a poorer neighborhood which was developing immediately to its south. Twenty-five Barrow Street, to the west of Sixth Avenue, was located in a middle-class residential neighborhood composed of artisans, shopkeepers, and clerks.

The house at 25 Barrow Street (Figure 2) was originally built by a mason in 1826 as a 2½-story Federal-style house. The property had a small gangway leading from its backyard to the street (Perris 1854), which was probably used as a passageway for horses. Tax assessment records indicate that in the early 1870s, the house was altered, and the top-most half-story was converted into a full third floor (City of New York [CNY] 1873). During the second half of the century, the house was home to two and sometimes three separate families.

The date range for the assemblage from 25 Barrow Street suggests that the domestic goods were used in one or more of the middle-class households whose members lived in the house in the 1860s or early 1870s. Like most of their neighbors, all of the families that have been documented as living in the house during this period were either native-born or were Protestant English-speaking immigrants from England or Scotland (U.S. Bureau of the Census [USBC] 1860, 1870, 1880; Bodie 1989).

Throughout this period, the house was owned by an absentee landlord. The tenancy pattern suggests that there may have been a primary, long-term tenant, living perhaps on the ground and basement floors, and one or two other, transient families,

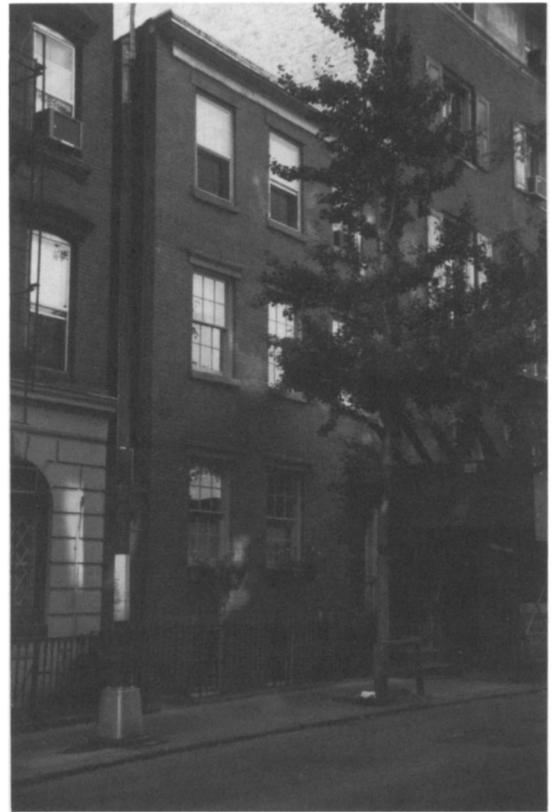


FIGURE 2. 25 Barrow Street, New York City. The sloping roof and dormer windows of this late Federal-style house were removed when the full third story was added in the 1870s.

who perhaps lived on the upper floors. Samuel Hirst, an English-born baker, his wife, Emeline (who was also born in England), and their six native-born children moved into the house in 1858. Although Samuel died in 1860 or 1861, his family stayed on in the house for more than a decade. They presumably supported themselves through the earnings of Emeline (who became a nurse and later ran a boardinghouse) and the older children, who were in their 20s when they moved in. Other tenants in the house were there only briefly. David Sinclair, a Scottish locksmith, his wife, Selina (who was born in New York), and their two children lived there for only a few years, from 1858

until 1862. Sinclair had his shop in the neighborhood, on Bleecker Street. The Sinclairs were probably succeeded in the house by other families or boarders taken in by the widowed Emeline Hirst. However, their presence in the house has not been documented.

The Hirst family was followed in 1870 by that of Edward M. Seaman, a native-born expressman (or delivery man) who also ran a feed store. He lived there until 1883 with his New York-born wife, Mary, and their three children, who ranged in age from 14 to 28 in 1870. Seaman had his store nearby, on West Fourth Street. Their two documented co-tenants both lived in the house only briefly. David Andrews, a Scottish shipping clerk, his American-born wife, Catherine, and young son apparently lived there for only about a year, in 1870. Theodore Thorp, a painter, his wife, Ann, and their grown son, Theodore, who was also a painter, lived there from 1870 through 1874. All of the Thorps were born in New York. Thorp had his shop downtown, first on Centre Street and later on Fulton Street (USBC 1860, 1870, 1880; Trow 1858–1874).

These families were members of the city's middle class. Most of the household heads had their own small businesses (as inferred from their listing their business addresses in the city directories, implying they were business proprietors) or described themselves as "clerks," the quintessential middle-class occupation in the late 19th century. However, the families apparently belonged near the bottom of the middle class. They rented, rather than owned, their homes, which were apartments, not houses. The value of the house itself was assessed at only \$2600 in 1860 (CNY 1841–1873). None of the families enjoyed the services of live-in domestic help, unlike many middle-class New Yorkers at mid-century. The personal estates of David Sinclair, the locksmith, and Samuel Hirst, the baker, were assessed at only \$600 and \$300, respectively (USBC 1860).

The presence of a toy teacup and saucer and three china dolls in the artifact assemblage (Figures 3, 4) suggest that the domestic materials excavated from the cistern may well have belonged at least in part to the Hirst or Seaman families.

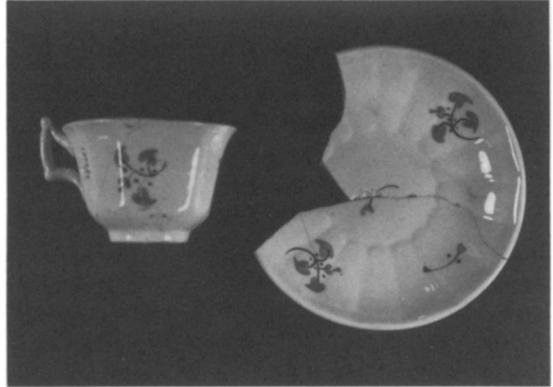


FIGURE 3. Miniature cup and saucer, painted and molded whiteware, from 25 Barrow Street. The saucer's diameter is $4\frac{1}{4}$ in.

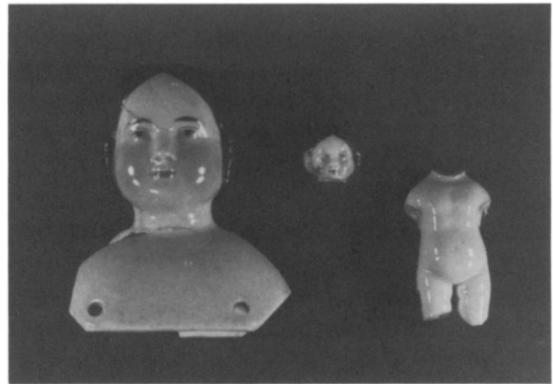


FIGURE 4. Parts of three dolls from the 25 Barrow Street site. The doll torso is $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. high.

These are the only families with young daughters documented as living on the property during the period in question: Emma and Catherine Hirst, who were approximately six and 11 years old, respectively, in 1860 at the beginning of the period in question, and Ada Seaman, who was 14 when her family moved on to the property in 1870—as calculated from the USBC (1860, 1870). All of the other families either had young boys, grown children, or were childless. In subsequent sections of the text the people associated with the Barrow



FIGURE 5. The Old Merchant's House, a house-museum on Fourth Street a few blocks east of Washington Square, is similar in style to the late Federal-period house at 50 Washington Square South, which was torn down at the turn of the century.

Street assemblage are referred to as a "household" for clarity of style. It should be remembered, however, that it is unclear which particular family (or families) used the objects in question. The identity of the particular household that used the objects is not relevant, however, because all of the households documented as living on the lot during the period when the materials were disposed of fit neatly into the socioeconomic group examined here: the poorer members of the middle class.

The house at 50 Washington Square South (Figure 5) was built in 1826 on a parcel of land which had been owned previously by John Ireland and

Alfred Pell. Both men were local landowners who had been active in petitioning the city for the creation of the square which subsequently enhanced the value of their property. The house changed hands several times in the late 1820s and 1830s, as its owners speculated on the northward growth of the city (Salwen and Yamin 1990).

In 1841, Benjamin R. Robson, a physician, purchased the property and moved into the house with his wife, Eliza, and her brother James Bool. The Robsons' grown daughter, Mary Sage, lived next door with her husband, Francis, a South Street flour merchant, and their children. The Robsons continued to live on the property until Benjamin's death almost four decades later (Longworth 1842; Doggett 1843, 1844, 1845–1849, 1851; Rode 1852–1854; Trow 1853, 1855–1874). Throughout this period, the family had a series of live-in Irish female domestics (a pair at a time) and, at least in 1850, an African-American coachman, Samuel Stevens (USBC 1850, 1860, 1870). Before they moved to Washington Square, the Robsons had lived downtown on East Broadway, where Benjamin had conducted his practice out of the family home (e.g., Longworth 1835). After they moved, the doctor continued to run his practice from his old downtown office (e.g., Longworth 1842) and presumably kept the coachman and carriage for his commute. He probably kept his horse and carriage in his stable, which was located at the back of the property, fronting on Third Street.

The Robsons were clearly among the wealthier families in the middle class. They lived in the relatively exclusive enclave of Washington Square in a 3½-story brick single-family home that they owned themselves and that was assessed for \$10,000 in 1855 (CNY 1841–1873). They consistently had live-in domestic help and even kept a carriage and a coachman for at least part of the period that they lived there (USBC 1850, 1860, 1870). On his death, Benjamin Robson left an estate worth \$300,000 (NYT 1878).

The persistence of the Robson family in this house throughout the entire period when the domestic materials may have been deposited in the backyard privy allows one to infer that the domestic materials, in fact, came from their home.

TABLE 1
THE TABLEWARES FROM THE TWO GREENWICH VILLAGE SITES

Decorative Type	Site Distribution				Relative Value ^a			
	50 Washington Square South		25 Barrow Street		Table Plates		Twifflers	
	n ^b	%	n	%	1846	1850s	1846	1850s
Plain/cc	4	12.1	5	38.5	1	1	1	1
Edged	5	15.2	1	7.7	1.14	1.12	1.13	1.11
Sponged	—		—		—	1.2	—	1.25
Willow	—		1	7.7	—	1.6	—	1.5
White granite	19	57.6	6	46.2	1.93	—	2.22	2.0
Printed	5	15.2	—		2.11	1.6	2.42	1.5
Dark blue printed	—		—		2.29	—	2.63	—
Flown	—		—		2.64	2.4	3.03	2.5
Total	33	100	13	100				

^aAfter Miller (1988); 1853 is the year quoted for the relative value of the edged plates, 1858 is quoted for the white granite ones, and 1855 is used for all other plates.

^bThe frequencies are derived from the minimum number of table plates and twifflers of each decorative type in each assemblage.

Note. A chi-square test of association corrected for continuity (Siegel 1956: 107–110) comparing the distributions of the white granite versus all of the other wares combined yielded a value of .14, with a significance level of $p < .05$ and df 1. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the distributions of these two samples. These data follow:

	Molded granite/ ironstone	Other
25 Barrow Street	6	7
50 Washington Sq. So.	19	14

The Ceramics

This study examines the ceramics in the assemblages from these two sites to see whether these poorer and richer middle-class women were using their choices in household furnishings to construct domestic worlds that were similar to or different from each other's. To do this, the vessels used in two different domestic arenas are examined: tea, where non-family members were entertained, and family meals, where participation was usually limited to family members.

The ceramics from the households are divided into three groups: tablewares, teawares, and other vessels. The vessels in the tableware and teaware categories are compared for this study. Vessels in the tableware category consist of larger plates like

table plates and twifflers (or medium-sized plates), while cups and saucers make up those in the teaware category. Serving dishes like platters, sauceboats, teapots, and creamers are not included, because they could have been made of silver or silver plate, and therefore might not have been discarded to form part of the archaeological record. Vessels of other forms were not analyzed further for this study. Small plates or muffins present a problem as they could have been used both in family meals and for serving desserts at tea parties. Therefore they are not included in the main part of the analysis, but are discussed separately below.

The tableware assemblages from both households are similar to each other (Table 1). Approximately half of the tablewares from each of the households are white granite ironstone with pan-

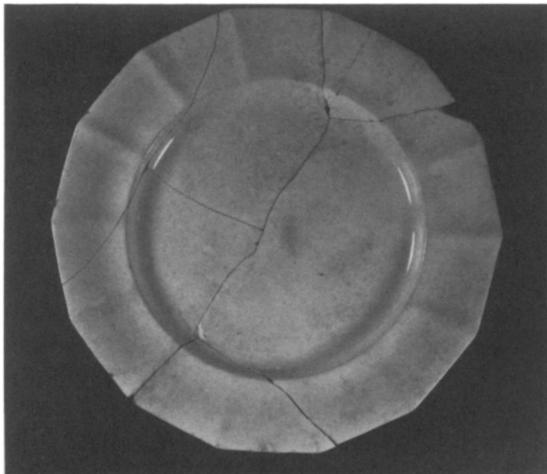


FIGURE 6. White ironstone plate in the Gothic pattern, from the 50 Washington Square South site. The plate's diameter is 10¼ in.

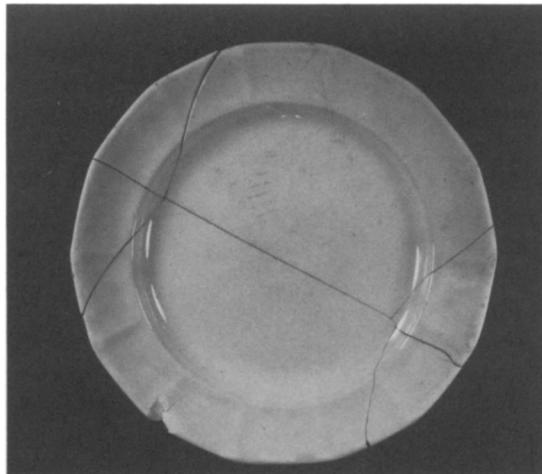


FIGURE 7. White ironstone plate in the Gothic pattern, from the 25 Barrow Street site. The plate's diameter is 8¾ in.

elled rims, a pattern referred to as Gothic in the ceramics literature (Figures 6, 7; Wetherbee 1985: 176). In the Robson household, shell-edged plates and light- and medium-blue transfer-printed plates are the next most common patterns in the assemblage. The printed patterns are not from a single set of dishes, however, but rather are odd, unmatched plates. There are also some plain, undecorated (or cream-colored) plates in the Robson assemblage. For the Barrow Street assemblage, the total sample size is much smaller, and the next most common pattern here is plain, undecorated white. Finally, there is a single plate of edged ware and one in the willow pattern.

The two households show strikingly different preferences in teaware cups and saucers, however (Table 2). Three-quarters of the Robsons' tea vessels are porcelain. Half of these vessels have molded panels and are similar in style to the ironstone tablewares (Figure 8), while the others are pedestalled and decorated with gilt floral bands (Figure 9). Painted whiteware, white granite ironstone, and transfer-printed cups and saucers together make up the remaining quarter of the assemblage.

Almost two-thirds of the teawares in the Barrow Street assemblage, in contrast, are made out of white granite ironstone, and most are panelled to match the vessels in the tableware assemblage (Figure 10). The single porcelain saucer recovered also matches the panelled granite tablewares. The two remaining tea vessels in the assemblage are made of plain, undecorated (or cream-colored) ware.

There is only one vessel for serving tea in either assemblage—a soft-paste porcelain teapot with both molded panels and gilt trim in the Barrow Street collection. The absence of serving vessels in the Robsons' assemblage suggests that they may have used ones made of silver or silver plate. These vessels would naturally not turn up in the archaeological record. They became more accessible to members of the middle class with the discovery of the rich Comstock Lode in Nevada and the development of the electroplating process just before the Civil War (Rainwater 1987).

Both of the assemblages included small plates, or muffins. As mentioned above, these plates could have been used in family meals and/or for serving desserts or sandwiches at tea parties. The

TABLE 2
THE TEAWARES FROM THE TWO GREENWICH VILLAGE SITES

Decorative Types	Site Distribution				Relative Value ^a	
	50 Washington Square South		25 Barrow Street		Handled, Simple Cups	
	n ^b	%	n	%	1846	1850s
Plain/cc	—	—	2	25	1.55	1.5
Painted	6	13.6	—	—	1.77	1.77
Sponged	—	—	—	—	2.17	2.17
White granite	3	6.8	5	62.5	2.54	—
Printed	2	4.5	—	—	2.77	—
Dark blue printed	—	—	—	—	2.73	—
Flown	—	—	—	—	3.46	—
European porcelain						
Molded only	17	38.6	1	12.5		
Gilded	16	36.4	—	—	4.2	
Total	44	100	8	100		

^aAfter Miller (1988); 1853 is the year quoted for the relative value of the plain and painted cups and 1852 is quoted for the sponged cups.

^bThe frequencies are derived from the minimum number of cups and saucers of each decorative type in each assemblage.

Note. A chi-square test of association corrected for continuity (Siegel 1956: 107–110) comparing the distributions of the molded granite cups and saucers and those of all the other wares combined yielded a value of 12.12, with $p > .05$ significance level and df 1. This indicates that there is in fact a significant difference in the distributions of these two samples. The data used in the X^2 calculation follow:

	Molded granite/ ironstone	Other
25 Barrow Street	5	3
50 Washington Sq. So.	3	41

seven muffins from the Robson assemblage and the single muffin from Barrow Street, however, were all made out of porcelain and had plain, flat rims: several of them were also embellished with gilt overglaze decoration. Both the fabric and the decoration of these muffins suggest that they were used for tea parties rather than for family meals.

Discussion

One way to begin to compare the meaning of domesticity in these households is to examine the similarities and differences in the styles of the ceramic vessels that were used in these two homes.

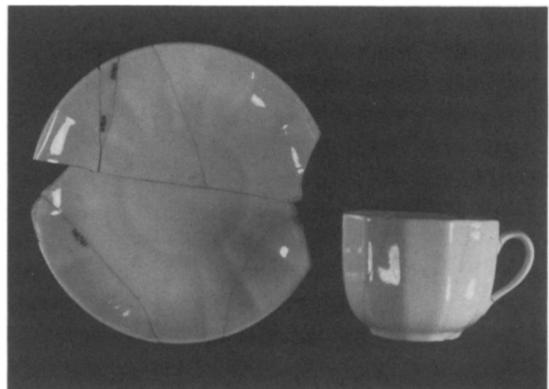


FIGURE 8. Porcelain cup and saucer decorated with molded panels, from the 50 Washington Square South site. The saucer's diameter is 6¼ in.



FIGURE 9. Gilded and pedestalled porcelain cup and saucer from the 50 Washington Square South site. The saucer's diameter is 5½ in.

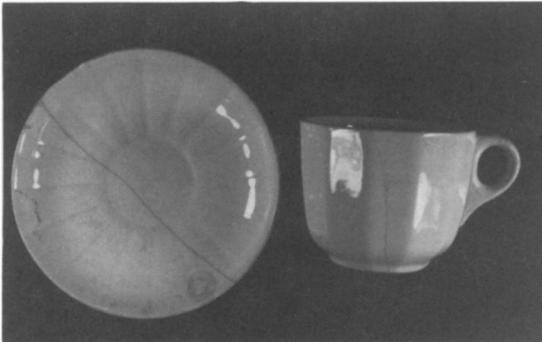


FIGURE 10. Panelled ironstone cup and porcelain saucer from the 25 Barrow Street site. The saucer's diameter is 5⅞ in.

Archaeologists can look on similarities in the styles of objects from similar contexts of use within a single cultural system as inferential evidence that both the objects and the arenas in which they were used had similar meanings. Archaeologists can also look on differences in the styles of objects used in similar contexts as implying that the meaning of both the objects and the arenas in which they were used were quite different.

The similarities and differences in the styles of the ceramic assemblages used in these two households are provocative. They suggest that during this period, women in wealthier and poorer middle-class households were constructing domestic worlds which in some ways were similar to and in other ways were quite different from each other's.

Both of these mid-century families in this suburb used similarly panelled ironstone tablewares for their family meals. The similarity of the ceramics suggests that the meals where the ceramics were used had the same social meaning for the relatively wealthy Robsons as for the poorer Barrow Street family (Figures 6, 7). These dishes were made at Britain's Staffordshire potteries. These women were rejecting for the most part both the cheaper edged, plain, and sponged dishes as well as the more expensive printed and flown plates that Americans were also importing from these potteries at this time (Table 1; G. Miller 1990). Ironstone dishes were made specifically for the North American market and were not sold at all in Britain where they were made (Sussman 1985: 7), presumably because there was no demand for them there. These panelled-ironstone dishes apparently had a cultural meaning for North American consumers that was not shared by their British contemporaries.

These tablewares were used for serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner, meals which were intended to be the focus of family life and which were seen as "constant and familiar" family reunions (Calvert Vaux in Clark 1986:42). They were not seen as appropriate for entertaining guests—dinner parties became common among the American middle classes only later, in the 1880s (Clark 1986:42, 1987:154–156, 162). It is particularly interesting that Eliza Robson, who certainly could have afforded tablewares in more expensive printed and flown patterns, instead consistently chose the ironstone vessels which were middle range in cost for her family's meals (Table 1).

The actual meaning that dishes in this style held for those who acquired and used them can only be surmised. It is suggestive, however, that the style is referred to as Gothic in the ceramics literature. When Gothic revival architecture became popular in New York in the 1840s, it was used predominantly in church design (Landau 1982). As Susan Williams (1985:67) has pointed out, Gothic furniture was also considered appropriate for dining rooms at this time. The presence of both furniture and vessels in the Gothic style could only have enhanced the sacred aspect of women's domestic

role within the ritual of family meals. Like Bourdieu's working-class women, middle-class women in New York also used vessels to distinguish domestic life in the home from commercial life in the marketplace. The New York women, however, apparently defined their domestic role by the cult of domesticity (Cott 1977) and equated private family meals (with both dishes and furnishings displayed in the Gothic style) with the sanctity and community of Gothic churches and contrasted them to the more competitive arena of the capitalist marketplace.

The styles of the teawares in these homes, however, tell a different story. Both families had sets of panelled teawares that were similar to their panelled ironstone plates (Table 2). Most of the tea vessels belonging to the Barrow Street family were made of ironstone, like their plates. Most of the Robsons', however, were made of porcelain. The Robsons (unlike the Barrow Street family) also had a second set of teaware. This set, too, was made of porcelain, but was formed in a pedestalled shape and had gilt-painted decoration—it did not match their dinnerwares at all (Figure 9). This suggests that these families participated in two different kinds of teas. One, where panelled teawares were used, was partaken of by members of both households. The other, where the fancier pedestalled, gilt-painted vessels were used, was indulged in only by the wealthier Robsons.

Teawares were used in two different settings: women served tea (or coffee) at breakfast, which took place at the dining table, and also as the keystone of afternoon tea. Afternoon tea parties were held in the parlor. The parlor was the most luxuriously furnished room in a middle-class home and was the arena where the middle-class members aspired to make their claims to refined gentility (Blumin 1989:184). Tea was particularly important for middle-class women because they otherwise were often isolated from each other in their private homes (Williams 1987:9–11). Unlike family meals at the dining table, where the community of family members was stressed, afternoon tea in the parlor with non-family guests was an occasion where the display of family social status could be important.

The sets of panelled teawares that matched the tablewares were probably used for serving tea with meals in both households. These teawares, like the similar tablewares, may well have embodied the sacred aspects of family and community life of the dining table. The Robsons may also have used their panelled porcelain teacups for intimate, less formal tea parties in the upstairs parlor.

Eliza Robson probably used her fancy gilt-decorated and pedestalled teaware at the more elaborate and formal afternoon tea parties she gave for her friends. Like the china and crystal that Bourdieu's bourgeois families used for dinner parties, these fancier tea vessels suggest that this home was not simply a haven from the competitive world of the capitalistic marketplace—Eliza Robson may well have used her dishes in a series of competitive displays designed to impress her friends and acquaintances with the refined gentility of her family.

The fact that the Barrow Street family did not have such fancy wares, however, does not necessarily simply mean that these women could not afford the fancier cups or that they did not have their friends in for tea. It could also mean that when they entertained their friends at afternoon tea, the meal had a different meaning. Instead of trying to impress and compete with their friends for family status, as Eliza Robson may have done, the Barrow Street tenants (like Bourdieu's working class) perhaps only invited those equated with family and community into their homes for any meal at all. The panelled cups and saucers (whether in porcelain or ironstone) may have served to elicit the almost sacred values of community and mutual help—values which could be very useful for those at the lower end of the middle-class spectrum—among the women who were gathering together for tea.

When Julia Harkness Lay noted in her diary in 1852 that she had gone shopping for crockery, she did not mention what she bought or how she made her choice. But the analysis of the archaeological materials from the middle-class homes of contemporary New Yorkers allows one to begin to explore how the cultural experiences of the women who constructed and maintained domestic life inside

these 19th-century homes may have varied. They suggest that as a bookkeeper's wife who kept house in mid-century New York, Julia Lay may well have bought most of her teaware and tableware in the panelled Gothic pattern, and researchers can begin to understand why she made that choice.

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