
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 analysis of the Parting Ways cemetery in Plymouth, Massachusetts, a burial ground used by African American families in the late 18th and early

19th centuries. Traditional historians had little to say about these individuals; written records were sparse. But Deetz and his colleagues excavated the graves and discovered that coffin shapes, burial orientations, and grave goods showed a blend of African and European traditions. Some coffins

were nailed shut with a free Black communities distinctive pattern that maintained distinct cultural echoed West African practices even under the cosmologies; others shadow of oppression.

contained objects like clay The "ABC" Pattern in
pipes and glass beads that Artifacts

suggested a syncretic Deetz also developed a
belief system. This material famous mnemonic: the
evidence rewrote the story "ABC" of artifacts—Alter,
of African American cultural Behave, and Contain. He
survival in New England, argued that most objects in
proving that enslaved and colonial households could

be categorized by their things forgotten, the ABC primary function: altering pattern reveals that raw materials (like an axe), colonial life was organized shaping behavior (like a around practical needs but chair or a book), or also around symbolic containing substances (like meanings. A butter churn, a jug or a casket). This for instance, does more simple framework helped than make butter; it enacts archaeologists think a set of gendered roles and systematically about how culinary values.

artifacts related to human METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS AND INFLUENCE
action and belief. In small James Deetz's work in **In**

Small Things Forgotten infancy when Deetz began was not just about content; his career. His book helped it was about method. He legitimize the field within championed a academia and made it multidisciplinary approach accessible to the public. that combined careful Today, historical excavation with archaeology is a robust anthropological theory and discipline, and many of its a deep reading of historical foundational documents. This approach, principles—attention to now known as historical everyday life, use of archaeology, was in its material culture as primary

evidence, integration of avoided jargon and instead history and told compelling stories anthropology—can be about the people of colonial traced directly back to America: the Pilgrims at Deetz's influence. Plimoth, the planters at Moreover, Deetz's *Flowerdew Hundred*, the accessible writing style enslaved families at Parting made **In Small Things** Ways. This storytelling **Forgotten** a staple in approach, grounded in undergraduate courses and rigorous scholarship, a favorite among non-demonstrated that specialist readers. He archaeology could be both

scientifically sound and the Georgian mindset at deeply human. the same pace or to the

CRITICISMS AND ONGOING DEBATES

No influential work is American and African without its critics. Some American communities, for scholars have argued that instance, often resisted or Deetz's concept of reinterpreted these "Georgianization" is too changes. Others have sweeping, oversimplifying pointed out that Deetz's the diversity of colonial focus on English colonial experiences. Not all regions sites neglects the material or ethnic groups adopted cultures of the Spanish,

French, and Dutch colonies, which had their own distinctive trajectories. Nevertheless, even critics acknowledge that **James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten** opened up new avenues of inquiry. The book's core insight—that everyday objects are rich with cultural meaning—has been refined and

expanded, not discarded. Subsequent research has examined how gender, class, and race intersect with material culture, building on the foundation Deetz laid. His work remains a starting point for any serious examination of how things shape and reflect human lives.

RELEVANCE FOR TODAY'S READERS

Why does a book about the objects around us with 17th- and 18th-century new eyes. The smartphone artifacts still resonate more in your pocket, the layout than four decades after its of your kitchen, the way publication? The answer your neighborhood is lies in its message about organized—all are small the power of the ordinary. things that encode cultural In an age of mass values, histories, and social consumption and relations. Deetz's disposable goods, **In Small** methodology provides a **Things Forgotten** toolkit for decoding these encourages us to look at contemporary landscapes,

making his book not just a history lesson but a guide to understanding the present. every bit as compelling as a letter from a Founding Father. For archaeology students, it remains a

For history lovers, the book offers a refreshing antidote to the dry, document-heavy narratives that dominate so much of the field. It shows how a broken piece of pottery or a rusty horseshoe can tell a story model of how to think critically about material evidence. And for anyone who has ever wondered what life was really like in early America, **In Small Things Forgotten** provides a vivid, tangible

connection to the past.

CONCLUSION

James Deetz's **In Small Things Forgotten** is far

more than an academic monograph; it is a testament to the idea that the most important histories are often hidden in plain sight. By shifting focus from the great and the grand to the small and

the seemingly insignificant, Deetz gave voice to countless individuals who left behind no written words but left behind a world of objects. His work reminds us that every artifact, every arrangement of space, every worn handle and chipped plate is a living memory—if only we learn to read them. For

anyone seeking a deeper, passionate amateur, or a richer understanding of the curious reader, Deetz American past, this slender invites you to look down, volume remains an examine the small things, indispensable guide. and discover the forgotten Whether you are a stories that shaped a professional historian, a nation.