
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 African American traditions. Some cultural survival coffins were in New England, nailed shut with proving that a distinctive enslaved and pattern that free Black echoed West communities African maintained cosmologies; distinct cultural others contained practices even objects like clay under the pipes and glass shadow of beads that oppression. suggested a The "ABC" syncretic belief Pattern in system. This Artifacts material Deetz also evidence rewrote developed a the story of famous

mnemonic: the a jug or a
 "ABC" of casket). This
 artifacts—Alter, simple
 Behave, and framework
 Contain. He helped
 argued that most archaeologists
 objects in think
 colonial systematically
 households could about how
 be categorized artifacts related
 by their primary to human action
 function: altering and belief. In
 raw materials small things
 (like an axe), forgotten, the
 shaping behavior ABC pattern
 (like a chair or a reveals that
 book), or colonial life was
 containing organized
 substances (like around practical

needs but also He championed around symbolic a meanings. A multidisciplinary butter churn, for approach that instance, does combined careful more than make excavation with butter; it enacts anthropological a set of theory and a gendered roles deep reading of and culinary historical values.

METHODOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS AND INFLUENCE

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

documents. This approach, now known as historical archaeology, was in its infancy when Deetz began his career. His book helped

legitimize the anthropology—c field within an be traced academia and directly back to made it Deetz's accessible to the influence. public. Today, Moreover, historical Deetz's archaeology is a accessible robust discipline, writing style and many of its made **In Small** foundational **Things** principles—atten **Forgotten** a tion to everyday staple in life, use of undergraduate material culture courses and a as primary favorite among evidence, non-specialist integration of readers. He history and avoided jargon

and instead told could be both
compelling scientifically
stories about the sound and
people of deeply human.

colonial America:
the Pilgrims at
Plimoth, the
planters at
Flowerdew
Hundred, the
enslaved families
at Parting Ways.
This storytelling
approach,
grounded in
rigorous
scholarship,
demonstrated
that archaeology

CRITICISMS AND ONGOING DEBATES

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

all regions or sites neglects ethnic groups the material adopted the cultures of the Georgian Spanish, French, mindset at the and Dutch same pace or to colonies, which the same had their own degree. Native distinctive American and trajectories. African American Nevertheless, communities, for even critics instance, often acknowledge resisted or that **James Deetz In Small Things** reinterpreted **Forgotten** these changes. Others have pointed out that opened up new Deetz's focus on avenues of English colonial inquiry. The

book's core remains a insight—that starting point for everyday objects any serious are rich with examination of cultural how things meaning—has shape and reflect been refined and human lives.

expanded, not discarded.

Subsequent research has examined how gender, class, and race intersect with material culture, building on the foundation Deetz laid. His work

RELEVANCE FOR TODAY'S READERS

Why does a book about 17th- and 18th-century artifacts still resonate more than four decades after its publication? The answer lies in its message about the power of the

ordinary. In an age of mass consumption and disposable goods, **In Small Things Forgotten** Deetz's methodology encourages us to look at the objects around these us with new contemporary eyes. The landscapes, smartphone in your pocket, the layout of your kitchen, the way your neighborhood is organized—all For history

lovers, the book remains a model offers a of how to think refreshing critically about antidote to the material dry, document- evidence. And heavy narratives for anyone who that dominate so has ever much of the wondered what field. It shows life was really how a broken like in early piece of pottery America, **In** or a rusty **Small Things** horseshoe can **Forgotten** tell a story every provides a vivid, bit as compelling tangible as a letter from a connection to Founding Father. the past. For archaeology CONCLUSION students, it James Deetz's **In**

Small Things individuals who **Forgotten** is far left behind no more than an written words academic but left behind a monograph; it is world of objects. a testament to His work reminds the idea that the us that every most important artifact, every histories are arrangement of often hidden in space, every plain sight. By worn handle and shifting focus chipped plate is from the great a living and the grand to memory—if only the small and the we learn to read seemingly them. For insignificant, anyone seeking Deetz gave voice a deeper, richer to countless understanding of

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