British Consumer Products in Late Eighteenth Century America

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Learning Objectives

- Understand changing attitudes toward British consumer goods in late eighteenth century Harvard/America, through a focus on objects of fashion and personal adornment
- Consider more broadly the importance of material culture in daily life and identity.

Time

- 15-20 minutes (can be extended)

Recommended Number of Participants

- Minimum of 6 students

Materials

- Handouts
  - Mid-Century (2 pages)
  - Pre-Revolution (3 pages)
  - Post-Revolution (3 pages)

- From left to right:
  - 2014.14.815
    - Cufflinks
    - Pewter, gem-shaped cut glass on both faces
    - 1700-1820
  - 2014.14.769
    - Shoe buckle
    - Frame fragment, lead alloy, molded design
    - 1680-1790
  - Wig Curler (Reproduction)
    - 18th Century
    - Modeled after original found in colonial Williamsburg
Procedure

- Lay out objects. Have class walk around and look closely at the objects, trying to guess what they are and noting features such as materials, design, etc. (1-2 minutes)
- When everyone is finished looking, go through the objects one by one and get students to decide as a group what each one is and provide their rationale. As each object is discussed (and if projecting equipment is available) project an image of the object so that everyone can see it clearly. When group has come up with an identification for each object, reveal what each one actually is. (3+ minutes)
- Ask class to decide as a group where they think these objects were made and what period they are from, and to explain why they think this. Reveal they were made in Britain but were excavated in Harvard Yard, and discuss how American manufacturing was not particularly developed in the eighteenth century (and was more expensive) so most consumer products came from Britain. (1-2 minutes)
- Introduce learning objective. Ask students to think about the value of investigating objects of fashion and adornment as opposed to other consumer products. (2 minutes)
- Divide class into three groups. Assign each group a time frame: Mid-Century, Pre-Revolution, and Post-Revolution. Provide them with the handouts that apply to their time frame. Using the information provided in the handouts, have each group discuss how they, as Harvard students of that time period, would have viewed these three objects, and whether/with what feelings they would have used/worn them. (4-5 minutes)
- Have each group briefly present the attitude during their time frame toward these three objects, sharing examples from the handouts. (3-4 minutes)
- Ask students for their reactions to the attitudes toward these objects that existed during these three time frames. Did anything surprise them? If students are surprised by the popularity of British imports after the revolution and if time permits, this could lead to a discussion of the role of material culture in national identity, both in America as a new nation after the revolution and in the world today. (2-3 minutes; can be extended if time permits)
- Conclude by reinforcing that these objects of fashion and adornment were imbued with very different meanings at different points in the late eighteenth century due to political changes, and that as pieces of fashion and adornment these particular objects came to be both tools of personal expression and political ideology. (1 minute)
Object Photograph:
Wig Curler
(Reproduction)
About a Boy and a Wig Curler

Fashion
Diana DiPaolo Loren
September 8, 2017

Archaeological small finds can tell us a great deal about how status, gender, and identity are situated in and on the body.

In December 1759, John Page noted in his diary that after studying his bible in the morning, he traveled to residence of one Mr. Wallen. Page paid Wallen 15 pounds for his first great coat, a new pair of breeches, a pair of knee buckles, and half a cake of soap. From there, he returned to Harvard, to conclude his studies on “an exceedingly cold day.” Page was 21 years old upon purchasing his new coat and in his second year of study at Harvard. He received his AM in 1764 and later became a minister in Danville, New Hampshire. His diary includes bits of intriguing detail about his daily life as a student—the amount he owed to the college butler for his consumption of coffee, tea, and chocolate; medicines used for alleviating his sore throat; his time spent attending lectures; and the nine shillings he paid to a Mr. Merrill for a pair of curling irons for styling his wig.

How one covers and adorns the body is a powerful statement of political and personal identities.

Dress was a notable part of Page’s life, as much as it is often notable in our own. We all wear clothes: to survive the environment, for bodily comfort, to distinguish “self” from “other,” for modesty and allure. Dress is personal, symbolic, and multifaceted; it is tied to taste, emulation, production, and consumption. How one covers and adorns the body is a powerful statement of political and personal identities. Page’s great coat must have been a welcome sight after trudging through the streets on that exceedingly cold day, but it also marked him as a young scholar in Cambridge, where a modest uniform was prescribed by college rules that reflected the institution’s Puritan beginnings.
Advertisements from Boston Gazette, 29 June 1761 (Massachusetts Historical Society)

WHEREAS this Province labors under a heavy Debt, incurred in the Course of the late War; and the Inhabitants by this Means must be for some Time subject to very burdensome Taxes: And as our Trade has for some Years been on the decline, and is now particularly under great Embarrassments, and burdened with heavy Impositions, our Means very scarce, and the Balance of Trade greatly against this Country:

WE therefore the Subscribers, being sensible that it is absolutely necessary, in Order to extricate us out of these embarrassed and distressing Circumstances, to promote Industry, Oeconomy and Manufactures among ourselves, and by this Means prevent the unnecessary Importation of European Commodities, the excessive Use of which threatens the Country with Poverty and Ruin, DO promise and engage, to and with each other, that we will encourage the Use and Confinement of all Articles manufactured in any of the British American Colonies, and more especially in this Province; and that we will not, from and after the 31st of December next, purchase any of the following Articles, imported from Abroad.

Loof Sugar, Cordage, Anchors, Coaches Chairs and Carriages of all Sorts, Horse Furniture, Men and Women's Hats, Men and Women's Apparel ready-made, Household Furniture, Gloves, Men and Women's Shoes, Sole-Leather, Sheathing and Deck Nails, Gold and Silver and Thread Lace of all Sorts, Gold and Silver Buttons, Wrought Plate of all Sorts, Diamond Stone and Paffe Ware, Snuff, Mustard, Cheeks and Watches, Silversmiths and Jewellers Ware, Broad Cloths that cost above 10s. per Yard, Musf Furs and Tippets, and all Sorts of Millinary Ware, Starch, Women and Children's Stay, Fire Engines, China Ware, Silk and Cotton Velvets, Gauss, Pervopers, hollow Ware, Linseed Oil, Glas, Lawns, Cambrics, Silks of all kinds for Garments, Malt Liquors and Cheeses——And we further agree strictly to adhere to the late Regulation respecting Funerals, and will not use any Gloves but what are Manufactured here, nor procure any new Garments upon such an Occasion, but what is absolutely necessary.

Boston, October 28, 1767.

John Churchman
John Soper
Robt. Webster
Paul Revere

John Storer
John Pitcher
Richard Bright
Peter Braddy
John Talling

John McLean
Mary Fray
John Polk
Jonathan Cory
Andrew Osborne
Clement Clink

Mary Parman
James Park
Ozra Collett

Jane Greenhill

Wm. Maugray
Alexr. Chamberlain

John Armstrong
John Soper
Robt. Webster
Paul Revere

John Storer
John Pitcher
Richard Bright
Peter Braddy
John Talling

John McLean
Mary Fray
John Polk
Jonathan Cory
Andrew Osborne
Clement Clink

Mary Parman
James Park
Ozra Collett

Jane Greenhill

Wm. Maugray
Alexr. Chamberlain

John Armstrong
Excerpt from a letter to the publisher in the Boston-Gazette, Dec. 28, 1767

(This Gentleman, and another, who in the B. Gazette of November 2d, signs Henry Flynt, adovises us to “lay aside our present Cloathing, and Dress” intirely and universally in “the Manufactures of America”. How far this is practicable, at present, we shall leave to the Gentlemen to determine. How far (if practicable) it is prudent, we must take the Liberty to judge ourselves, since we do, or at least ought to know, what our own Circumstances as to the Means of Purchasing are; or in other Words, whether we can afford to let our Garments lay useless, and buy new in their Room. As yet we are inclined to think we cannot evince a more discreet Conduct than to wear our old Cloaths, as long as by good Housewifery we can make them look decent, sparing no Pains to clean and to mend them, and when any are worn out, supply their Place with the Produce of our American Manufactures, altho’ meaner, and at the first dearer than those of foreign Places, reversing that Part of the old Proverb, “Far fetch, is Food for Ladies”.

Excerpt from “Harvard College on the Eve of the American Revolution” by Sheldon S. Cohen

One reflection of the Stamp Act Crisis was recorded by an undergraduate [at Harvard] on 18 March 1768: “This being the day of the Year the Stamp Act was repealed [Thomas] Colman went about and collected Money and they bought a quantity of Fagots and made a Vast Number of Crackers and Serpents and set them on Fire in the Evening.” The previous autumn Harvard seniors, in protest against the Townshend Duties, voted to abstain from tea drinking and wearing imported British clothing at their commencement. The theses and Quaestiones at the 1768 commencement were even printed on paper manufactured in New England. The following year the seniors repeated those actions and also gave notice of their refusal to do further business with John Mein, a bookseller and printer of the Boston Chronicle who had opposed nonimportation policies and their advocates. It was also apparently as a result of the Townshend crisis that a militia company was organized at the college in 1769 or 1770. And, on 1 March 1775, the protests of a considerable number of students caused Harvard’s administration to warn against bringing India teas into the Commons.

[…] Yet it would be inaccurate to infer from these reports that political considerations dominated student concerns. Despite their proximity to the center of crucial events, there was apparently no organized participation by Harvard students in episodes such as the Stamp Act riots or the Boston Tea Party. (176-178)


Non-importation agreement retrieved from:
JUST IMPORTED,
AND TO BE SOLD BY

JOSEPH GREENOUGH, Jun.
A THIS CHEAP SHOP,
A LITTLE BELOW THE FERRY-WAY,
NEWBURY-PORT.

SUPERFINE, middling, & low
priced Broad-Cloths, of various
colours.
Coatings.
Cockle-hunter and Drapery Baizes, of all
colours.
Blankets.
Capes.
Corded Poplins.
Denmark Linens.
Double Cambrics.
Striped and plain Cambelteens.
Black Laffings, and Sattinetts.
Durants.
Tammies.
Calharncoes.
Corduroys, of all prices.
Men's plain black and white silk Hole.
Ladies' fine Cotton, ditto.
Men's fine and coarse Thread and Cotton, ditto.
Plain black Worsted, ditto.
Patent rib'd and plain, dark and light grey, ditto.
Qualities.
Coat and Shoe-Binding.
Black and white Gauzes.
Black and white Gauze Handker-
chiefs.
½ yard wide black silk fringed, ditto.
Bandanas.
Printed Linen Handkerchiefs.
Cotton Shawls.
Satins.
Modes.
Luftings.
Ell wide: Taffeties.
½ Ell Perfians.
Sarcoceets.
Tiffanies.
China, Saracen, and Sattin Rib-
gins.
½ Shop open at all hours, and the smallest favour gratefully acknowledged.
A letter addressed “To the Working People of Maryland,” penned by Sidney, opined, “I should be sorry . . . if the threads in your garments being somewhat larger might distress such men as you who lately, being poorly clad and directed by a Man so plain that almost all his family wear homespun, rescued your children from the high-dressed armies of Great Britain.” Whereas working people had grown luxurious in the postwar period, great men such as George Washington retained their humble habits, Sidney claimed. Washington’s example was powerful enough to be used by a hatter in an advertisement claiming that the leader, the officers in the Continental army, and most “ladies and gentlemen of consequence in the United States” had patronized him for years. Others, however, were not so convinced of the leader’s sartorial virtue. Although not mentioning him by name, a piece from New York clearly targeted Washington: “When we see a citizen who has frequently exposed his life in the cause of freedom, dressed in the manufactures of foreign nations, have we not reason to suppose that either he does not understand the welfare of his country or that he totally disregards it?” Despite his eloquence in stressing patriotic duty, “almost every article which he wears is repugnant to his words,” the author argued, leveling a charge of hypocrisy at the newly elected president.

Washington responded by donning a suit made of domestic cloth from Connecticut for his inauguration on April 30, 1789, just two weeks after the critique appeared. Newspapers now rejoiced in the hope that “this laudable example in the first and best of men” would make “industry and economy fashionable in the United States.” Yet there was no need to sacrifice elegance, for Washington’s “complete suit of homespun cloathes” was of “so fine a fabric and so handsomely finished that it was universally mistaken for a foreign manufactured superfine cloth.”

Portrait of John Adams by John Singleton Copley, 1783