

**ARTIFACTS OF AMBITION: HOW THE 17<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY MIDDLE  
CLASS AT PORT ROYAL, JAMAICA, FORESHADOWED THE  
CONSUMER REVOLUTION**

A Dissertation

by

TIMOTHY D. TRUSSELL

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2004

Major Subject: Anthropology

## CHAPTER XI

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Consumer Revolution was a profoundly transforming event, which in many ways ushered in the modern world of globalization and international trade. It lay the foundations of our modern world of fashion-consciousness and conspicuous consumption on a mass scale, a process that has, in turn, resulted in a sustained period of unparalleled consumption of resources to the degree that the long-term sustainability of such cultural practices may be seriously called into question. The consumer revolution also appears to have been an essential ingredient in, and major impetus for, the Industrial Revolution and all of the massive technological, economic, political, and social changes to the western world created by that phenomenon. In short, this study of Port Royal is significant because it deals directly with the question of the origins of some of the most important events in modern world history.

Documentary and archaeological evidence supports the contention that the middle class of Port Royal was engaged in conspicuous consumption, aggressive social climbing, and the use of material culture for symbolic display – all hallmarks of the consumer revolution – at least as early as the 1680's. Thus, one major conclusion of this study of Port Royal is that it appears to provide specific support for the causal explanation of the rise of consumer behavior throughout the English colonial world put forth by Cary Carson (1994).

As noted earlier, Carson posited that increasingly mobile populations post-1660 lessened the utility of traditional local markers of status such as land, family, and reputation. With increasing population movement, “newcomers and travelers inevitably found themselves measured against perfect strangers. Alas, the old yardsticks were nowhere near at hand” (Carson, 1994:523), spurring the use of items as tools for negotiating and asserting membership, or aspirations to membership, in particular social groups or classes. If Carson’s causal explanation is correct, would it not follow that citizens of communities with the fewest established “yardsticks”, meaning the weakest traditions in terms of established hierarchies, families, or reputations, would be among the earliest to adopt such practices?

Port Royal in the 1680’s was above all a boomtown community, a place that literally didn’t exist prior to 1655. It was a place where the exclusionary power of the traditional social and economic hierarchies present in English villages, towns, and cities appears to have been weakened considerably, and where some customary English social norms were plainly modified by local circumstances. Virtually every contemporary description includes some variation of the “wickedest city on earth” theme, and though the stereotype is clearly overdrawn given the primacy of mercantilism and trade, it reflects the contemporary impression that social norms in Port Royal were considerably looser than the observers were used to seeing in England. This was, after all, an extraordinarily fluid society where a brawling pirate like Henry Morgan could be knighted by Charles II and named Lieutenant Governor of Jamaica.

The extent to which the middle class of Port Royal was engaging in consumer behavior, and the timing of this behavior (seemingly well-represented in the 1680's), suggests that dynamic urban colonial societies like Port Royal facilitated aggressive social climbing and the use of material culture as a tool for making a claim to status or group membership. These were more easily accomplished in a fluid society and, presumably, were more directly rewarded, than within areas where long-established tradition and more rigid hierarchies retarded or hindered such behaviors or the perceived payoff from such behaviors.

In addition, the shortened life-span and likelihood of an early death for most colonists ensured that many who manned traditional positions of authority and power in this society were younger and less established than those in similar positions in England. The death rate would also have contributed more pressure for people to adopt strategies of high-risk/quick-reward, creating an aggressive group of self-made climbers. All told, the net effect of these particular contexts and pressures was to create an atmosphere where consumerist behavior, aggressive social climbing, and conspicuous display, all made sense as personal strategies for advancement. People would have clearly perceived the opportunity, and were in a position to act upon this knowledge.

It is possible that, in addition to Port Royal, other urban colonial outposts may have offered a combination of circumstances that were favorable to a "fast-forwarding" of middle class consumer behavior as well. It would appear that many of the conditions identified in this study as being important factors in facilitating consumerist behavior at

Port Royal would presumably have been present in other colonial urban settings, to varying degrees. If such evidence for similar advancement of consumerist behavior could be found in other colonial urban settings, it would provide strong confirmation for Carson's causal explanation. This examination of Port Royal certainly supports Carson's framework, by identifying multiple ways in which aspirations to membership in social groups played out within the particular historical cultural context of Port Royal, Jamaica, and by demonstrating the presence of the material manifestations of those behaviors – consumer luxury goods.

If the middle class of Port Royal was significantly ahead of their peers, in England and elsewhere in the colonies, in the use of material culture for aggressive social climbing, then this conclusion could potentially have important implications for general models of the consumer revolution, and specifically, for the rise of consumerist behavior in the wider British and colonial middle classes. Both the Emulation and Flight-and-Chase models discussed earlier explain the process of middle class adoption of consumerism as essentially pan-English, and assume that the most important locus of interaction in this regard was interaction between classes, specifically, the entire English and colonial middle class and the entire English and colonial elite. Though researchers are quick to point out that changing patterns of consumption proceeded much faster in urban areas than rural ones (Carson, 1994: 517), the basic underlying assumption of class interaction as the primary dynamic remains intact. However, if Port Royal was indeed an unusually early example of aggressive middle class consumerism as has been argued here, then it is possible that an important agent for

change within the middle class of England and her colonies could, at least in part, have come laterally, from interaction with middle-class colonists who were already steeped in consumer behavior in colonial urban areas such as Port Royal. Such a model for change could accurately be described as a diffusionist explanation, as the behaviors facilitated in the unique historical context of Port Royal could, under this model, have diffused outwards with subsequent out-migration of the Jamaican middle class.

To a limited degree, some interesting possibilities for the transmission of such behavior are suggested by the exit of the Port Royal middle class and merchant elite during the 1680's and 1690's. The political power of the merchants was being slowly usurped by the power of the grandee sugar planters in the 1680's, and the 1692 earthquake marked the end of the heyday of the middle class in Port Royal. Starting slowly in the 1680's, the middle class began leaving Port Royal and Jamaica, a movement that increased considerably after the earthquake (Claypole 1972: 225-244). The most popular destinations for these colonists were the slave states of North America, especially South Carolina, North Carolina, and to a lesser extent Virginia (Hamilton, personal communication, 2002). It is interesting, though certainly not conclusive, to note that their arrival in the early 1700s' comes immediately before some researchers begin to see a rise in consumer behavior or changing consumption patterns in the North American colonies (Shackel 1992; Carr and Walsh 1994; Yentch 1990). Concomitant with this exit from Port Royal came similar middle class out-migrations from Barbados and the Leeward Islands, again with the Carolinas as the destination of choice (Dunn 1973: 112-116).

It is also interesting to note that a large number of the most successful merchants of Port Royal simply left for England once they had attained a sufficient level of wealth. This practice was so pervasive that Claypole, in his study *Merchants of Port Royal*, found that a large number of the inventories he was seeking were not actually housed in Jamaica, but instead located in London. In fact, so many Port Royal merchants returned to London after making their fortunes that Claypole remarked dryly; "Not all merchants, however, went back to London. A number of them died in Port Royal" (Claypole 1972: 216), presumably before they could return. It goes without saying that wealthy merchants did not leave England for the tropical dangers and short life expectancy of the Caribbean. However, poorer ones did take the risk and many returned rich, re-inserting themselves into English society with the means, and likely the inclination, for aggressive social climbing.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that during the return of newly-risen merchant elites to England and during the exodus of the middle class to the North American Colonies, people would have carried the consumer behaviors and social ideas discussed here. It is rather unlikely, however, that people from Port Royal alone could have had any appreciable effect on the entirety of English society or the middle class. Although Port Royal is just one of many colonial urban areas where circumstances may have been favorable for a "fast-forwarding" of the use of material culture for asserting membership in social groups, such an explanation is still somewhat limited in its applicability.

However, the sea-change of consumer behavior which swept through the English and colonial middle classes in the eighteenth century is unlikely to have been more than tangentially effected by colonials returning home. It is far more likely that specific conditions that made such a strategy an appealing and even potentially lucrative option for member of the middle class at Port Royal (potentially other colonial urban areas as well) may have increased in other areas over time. In other words, it might not be the spread of people, per se, from colonial urban areas amenable to such behaviors, but the increase or spread of certain conditions, which early on made the colonial urban centers more amenable to such behavior, throughout the English colonial world. A dampening of traditional hierarchies, the economic success and buying power of an aggressive middle class, the potential for changing one's social as well as economic position, and the evident rewards for those who successfully played this game, are conditions likely to be credited with the rise in consumer behavior elsewhere. In this light, the historical narrative of colonial urban centers may be one in which such conditions were favorable earliest, and suggests that the rise in similar conditions" throughout the entire English colonial world during the early eighteenth century may lie at the heart of the rise in consumerist behaviors.

The deliberate use of items as social tools, to negotiate social identity and pursue one's aspired-to place in the world, appears to have taken hold in the middle class at Port Royal far earlier than in other areas within the English-colonial world. Obviously, this is not to suggest that cooper's wives dressed in fine silks and gold, parading around the streets of Port Royal, ultimately "caused" the Consumer or



Industrial Revolutions. It does appear, however, that the early appearance of conspicuous display and aggressive social climbing evident in Port Royal was due to specific historical circumstances that made this place especially amenable to fast-forwarding the adoption of consumerist behaviors within the middle class at an early date. It will be the study of these conditions and their effect on the behavior of other individuals, in other areas and different times, which holds the potential for ultimately tracing the arc of consumption through to the present time.