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"The Relationship Between Social History
and Historical Archaeology: The Mercantile
Community of Middletown, Connecticut."

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The Relationship Between Social History and Historical Archaeology:
The Mercantile Community of Middletown, Connecticut, 1780-1820.

This paper is intended as a complement to Stephen Dyson's paper. Expanding on his discussion of the progress of archaeology in Middletown, I would like to give the historical background to some of the work that we have been doing.

Historical archaeology and social history are two disciplines which can be effectively combined. Some of the assumptions which are made about archaeological material are useful in validating the more general theories of history. The historical record, in turn, provides a framework for seemingly random archaeological data. I am interested in the successes and failures involved in the combination of archaeology and social history, and my research has been centered around the use of these disciplines to study a specific group of people--the merchants--within the larger society of Middletown, Connecticut from 1780 to 1820.

Middletown was founded in 1650, primarily as an agricultural community. As it grew, Middletown was able to exploit its favorable location on a bend of the Connecticut River, centrally located between Hartford and New York. The early history of Middletown resembles that of other small New England towns--politically conservative, religiously Congregationalist, and socially close-knit. With the advent of the shipping boom, in the mid-eighteenth century, the social and political composition of Middletown was drastically altered.

The historical and archaeological record is rich in Middletown, due to the large volume of commerce which was conducted

there. Merchants in the central Connecticut area were involved in direct trade with the West Indies, and the coastal trade which supplied the goods for these ventures. Products from New England farmers and craftsmen were shipped to the West Indies, where the demand for staples was the greatest. These items were then exchanged for sugar, molasses and rum, as well as occasional foreign goods (English and French ceramics) that found their way to West Indies' ports. The direct commerce with the West Indies, and the variety of commercial enterprises that formed its backbone, was the major source of employment for Middletown residents in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Middletown merchants were limited to the West Indies trade for several reasons. First, they could not compete with the ports of New York and Boston, where the largest volume of the European trade was conducted. Second, the physical limitations of the Connecticut River made impossible the entrance of large, transatlantic vessels. Middletown's natural, if shallow, harbor was perfect for the small sloops, ketches and schooners that were used in the West Indies trade.

Growing rapidly, Middletown became the customs port for Connecticut in 1795, taking over for the port of New London. This meant that each ship which carried goods on the Connecticut River had to be registered at Middletown, and had to produce a cargo listing, or manifest, for each voyage. These manifests still exist, in the National Archives in Washington, D. C. and in Waltham, Massachusetts. Although they are difficult to decipher in their original forms, they offer a great deal of

historical material that could not be obtained otherwise. The volume of trade benefits the archaeologist as well as the historian, for Middletown's wealth drew investors and merchants to the area, and a considerable number of elegant home sites remain to be excavated.

Middletown's central position in the West Indies trade also makes the artifact assemblages of the sites there a little less tedious, if hopelessly confusing. The ceramics which we have uncovered on each of the four sites mentioned by Professor Dyson have been of good quality and of surprising variety. It is logical to attribute the diversity of these artifacts to the introduction of new ideas and new commodities through trade routes.

One of the first tasks of my research into the merchants of Middletown was to define this group. Mercantile activity in the late eighteenth century was extremely diverse, and it is difficult to find clearly defined occupations. The task was made somewhat easier by the fact that Middletown served as the County Seat, and while most of the records which were kept in Middletown are now dispersed throughout New England, they still exist for those who are willing to track them down. From an analysis of tax lists, census reports, church records, diaries, ledgers, account books, maps and newspapers, I have assembled a collection of one-hundred and fifty plus persons, each of whom was connected in some way with the sea.

Trying to define specific roles within the larger grouping of "merchant" has been one of the more difficult, and time-consuming, aspects of the thesis. Most merchants of this period did not confine themselves only to shipping of goods, or to ship

ownership. The average person involved in mercantilism was a ship owner, a ship's captain, and possibly a storekeeper as well--all at the same time. From an analysis of vital records relating to merchants, I have also found that most members of the mercantile community were married to, or related by birth, to other mercantile families--forming a huge commercial network.

There are reasons for this flexibility of occupation and system of intermarriage. In the 1780's, the entire process of shipping goods profitably involved high risks and not a little luck. A ship's owner had to know the sea, the markets, and the abilities of his men. He could not remain on land, allowing others to supervise his investments, and hope to be successful. Failing all else, he could maintain family ties with those persons in his employ. A ship's master was rarely only the captain of a vessel for this reason, and was usually a part owner of the cargo or even the ship. Including the captain, and even the crew, in the success or failure of the voyage was a good guarantee that he would choose the best possible market.

Once I began to collect information on the members of the mercantile community in Middletown, certain relationships between the merchants appeared. The family size of most mercantile homes was greater than that of the average citizen in Middletown in 1790 and 1800. This can be attributed to several factors, such as the inclusion of apprentices, who were learning the trade of shop-keeper or captain; or the addition of married children into the nuclear household, since merchants arranged their social relationships in a way that reflected their economic interests.

Most of the leading figures in the West Indies trade in

Middletown can be found in the rosters of the Congregational and Episcopalian Churches. This fact led me to an erroneous conclusion--that the successful merchants were the long-standing, conservative members of the community. But, despite their religious preferences, the successful merchants were not necessarily members of the older families of Middletown. From the sample of over a hundred merchants, I selected a group of fifty persons for in-depth study. This selection was based upon the amount of information available on these persons, and on the social and economic networks that surfaced. The information on family history is scarce, as few genealogies exist for most of the mercantile families, but church records show that only eight families out of the sample of fifty were positively identified as having resided in Middletown for more than two generations. It is apparent that it was not the founding families of Middletown who were prospering in overseas trade, but those newcomers who had enough versatility, along with enough capital, to succeed in new ventures.

Marriage among members of the mercantile class also appears to be economically regulated. The most prominent merchants in Middletown were related by marriage, and this is not surprising due to the unstable nature of commercial activity. Out of the sample of fifty merchants, thirteen groups were related by blood, with at least as many related by marriage. Investments in overseas ventures were sufficiently risky that relatives were often business partners. The greater the diversification, the less the individual loss should the voyage fail.

Historical records provided a good deal of information on family size and kinship structure, but I was still interested

in the daily lives of the merchants, and in their standing in the greater community. At this point, I turned to the archaeological record as a check on the historical sources, and hopefully to find out more about the personal lives of the people in my sample group.

In the Spring of 1974 and 1975, an excavation was conducted by Wesleyan University at the site of the home of an early Middletown sea-captain, Charles Magill. Magill started out as a fairly prosperous merchant, but was listed as bankrupt by 1800. He owed much of his success to his brother Arthur Magill, who was a ship-owner, ship's captain and a partner of merchant Stephen Clay. While Charles Magill led a relatively undistinguished life, his brother Arthur was quite successful--fitting into all the predictable patterns of activity. Charles benefitted from his relationship to his brother Arthur, since Arthur was careful to secure all the proper alliances for a wealthy merchant. (All three of Arthur's daughters married the three sons of Benjamin Williams, a prosperous merchant; Arthur's closest associates, in business and society, were the leading mercantile and political figures in Middletown..etc..)

The excavation of the Charles Magill site was useful as an indicator of the problems that can result from a too-literal interpretation of the artifacts recovered. Magill, from the quantity and type of ceramic and glass material that we found, appears to have been quite wealthy. From the historical record, we learn that this wealth, even when it did exist, was mostly attributable to his brother, Arthur Magill. The fact that Charles Magill dies with very little to his name is not reflected

in the archaeological record, while his periods of wealth are not reflected in the historical record. Only the combination (and a guarded combination) of historical and archaeological material produces a full picture.

While the artifacts from the Magill site may not have accurately reflected Charles Magill's terminal economic status, they do reflect upon the trade networks in which he operated. One of the more surprising finds was a group of rouen-ware plates. The presence of French ceramics in an English trade network gives evidence for the expansion of markets to include French ports, or of a broader trade network within the English ones. The historical record implies that merchants had more extensive contacts than the average citizen, and the archaeological record upholds this idea.

An excavation of another homesite, that of an early Middletown physician, William Brenton Hall, was also useful for my thesis. I have included this site as a control, since it is essentially unrelated to mercantilism. (insofar as anything in Middletown could be unrelated). The excavation turned up small and scattered amounts of ceramic material, larger amounts of bone, and relatively few "good" or expensive pieces of china. There was virtually no glass. From the perspective of today's society, where physicians have a high social and economic standing, it is hard to imagine that the physician in the 1800's was comparatively poor. Dr. Hall was most probably paid "in kind," for his services, and rarely received cash. The merchants were the one group in society who had the capital.

During the past summer, we undertook two simultaneous excavations: the back and side yards of the William Southmayd house,

(structure, ca. 1750), and the cellar fill of a site attributed to the John Watkinson house. (structure, ca. 1820?). These two sites differed from the earlier ones in that they provided us with large, concentrated trash deposits, as opposed to the scattered backyard fill from the other sites.

The Southmayd site was incorporated into my research, since the Southmayds were long-standing residents of Middletown and were heavily engaged in commercial activity. The trash pit that we discovered appeared to have been timber-lined, with a consistent fill of ceramic, faunal, glass and metal materials. For the first few days, we were amazed by the size and degree of preservation of the artifacts. The fill dated from about 1800 to 1840, and consisted of creamware, blue and green shell-edged pearlware, staffordshire, porcelain, stoneware, cut-glass and old bottles and stoneware jugs. The trash pit contained an unusual number of serving vessels (tea-pots, large platters, large bowls, etc..). The artifacts in general reflect a high standard of living, and this is not contradicted by the historical record.

While excavating the Southmayd trash-pit, our attention was drawn to a bank in a nearby construction site, where ceramic and glass material was literally pouring out. Any sense of stratigraphy was lost at this point, since cement foundation trenches had already been dug through what turned out to be the floor of a cellar hole. The material from this cellar hole was more elaborate, and more abundant, than that of the other sites, and might be attributed to John Watkinson--a merchant whose home stood near the excavation site at one time. The fill of the cellar hole was surprisingly clean, with no bone or metal.

There was a great variety of ceramic material, especially in the chinese-export style pearlware. Tea-pots, chamber-pots, tea-cups and saucers, plates, bowls and serving pieces were found, representing an enormous number of patterns and glazes. The variety of the material was the cause of great speculation among the excavators: were these merely random pieces, or were they representative of broken members of complete sets?

The archaeological evidence supports the documentary information that Watkinson (if the fill is related to Watkinson), was a prosperous merchant. Watkinson ran a store, in which he sold dry goods and other items, and it is also possible that the cellar-hole is in some way related to this store. (an example of one hypothesis: that the cache of ceramic material represents those broken members of china shipments, thus explaining the variety and the closeness in dating). The historical record can only hint at what Watkinson must have owned, and at his place in the community. With a positive identification of the cellar-fill to Watkinson, and a re-interpretation of the data as it relates to other sites in Middletown, the archaeological record could support the historical conclusions.

These types of conclusions, while admittedly generalized, lead to questions about life in the eighteenth century that can be useful to the archaeologist and historian alike. Neither discipline can provide an end in itself, and it is certainly true that combining them requires great caution. ^{But,} If the historical record is used to supplement, rather than to confuse, the archaeological findings; and if the archaeological record is given an integrity of its own, rather than being made to fit into a convenient

historical model, then the combination of history and archaeology is an effective and valuable one.

Bibliography furnished upon request.