
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 Flowerdeew 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.

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