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Conspicuous Display and Social Mobility:  
a Comparison of 1850s Boston and Charleston Elites

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**Conspicuous Display and Social Mobility:  
a Comparison of 1850s Boston and Charleston Elites**

**by**

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**Conspicuous Display and Social Mobility:  
a Comparison of 1850s Boston and Charleston Elites**

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This dissertation compares the conspicuous display of elites in Boston and Charleston during the 1850s. The analysis stems from an interest in the regional differences of the Northern and Southern United States in the years just prior to the Civil War. The two regions had many similarities, including a substantial and ongoing Atlantic influence. Yet at the same time, the differences engendered by the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the South ran deep.

Members of the social and economic elite of both the North and South acted within unique belief systems and sets of personal behavior limits. The major questions of this work arise from the notion that a comparative approach can illuminate both similarities and differences. If the slave society of the South engendered a culture in which social mobility operated differently than it did in

the North, what were the broader ramifications? Did Bostonians and Charlestonians understand class identity in the same way? How did individuals of those cities determine the social status of others and project their own? Did the South's patriarchy, perhaps stronger than that of the North, influence the expression of power through display? And, finally, how did members of the elite use conspicuous display as an interface with lower classes, including slaves, servants, and the recipients of charity?

This research examines five elite families in each city, using their habits of conspicuous display to illuminate regional differences and similarities. The social structure of each city was different, with varying criteria for membership in the uppermost class. However, for those families at the top of the social ladder, public presentation was an important component of identity. Through a comparison of elite families in each city, this study tests the theses of Thorstein Veblen and Eugene Genovese. It asks whether conspicuous display of wealth and style operated differently in the antebellum North and the South, as Genovese argues. It also tests the application of Veblen's systems of social display of wealth as a means of class affirmation to an earlier era of American history than Veblen himself intended.

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## Introduction

This research stems from an interest in the regional differences of the Northern and Southern United States at the time of the Civil War. The two regions had many similarities, including a substantial ongoing Atlantic influence. Yet at the same time, the differences engendered by the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the South ran deep. Slavery had continued into the nineteenth century in the South, though it had faded in the North, due to profound economic structural differences between the two regions. The effects of that continuation permeated in large and small ways the economic and cultural life of Southerners.

The character of Southern slavery has generated considerable debate, from the antebellum era to the present. The way in which contemporaries understood the institution varied with their location, race, and class membership. Twentieth century historical work has offered additional analyses, all also considerably influenced by the social and cultural perspectives of the writer. Some historians have attracted criticism with their apparent willingness to believe in the benign character of slavery that many slave owners preferred to offer for public consumption. Others have denied that Southern planters had any exceptional aspects that differentiated them from bourgeois American capitalists. The most productive answer, perhaps, lies somewhere between those two extremes.

Whether the slave South was truly a pre-modern state in the mold of European feudalism,<sup>1</sup> or an amalgam of purely for-profit enterprises in which

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965).



slaves were no more than economic tools,<sup>2</sup> it was certainly different for having race-based slavery. By comparing two regions that many contemporary citizens believed were innately incompatible, I hope to gain a better sense of the workings of both societies. Members of the social and economic elite of both the North and South acted within unique belief systems and sets of personal behavior limits. In that sense, regional differences went far beyond economic mechanisms, shaping even the smallest gesture of individuals.

Systematic comparison brings similarities and differences between two subjects into better focus, suggesting causality and influence within each setting where it was not previously apparent. Isolating the characteristics of the North and South in relief to each other highlights their originality. At the same time, the comparative method does not deny the presence of either contrasting or analogous evidence.<sup>3</sup> George Fredrickson suggests two strains of intent in recent comparative history: the study of the particularities of specified societies and the elucidation of a set of more generalizable theories.<sup>4</sup> This research leans significantly to that latter sociological tradition, in that one of its goals is to find meaning that extends beyond the actual historical subject of these two antebellum cities. Through a historical comparison of two antebellum regions, I hope to find a better understanding of the application of a particular set of sociological theories about class membership and the outward expression of group identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics Of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Shearer Davis Bowman, *Masters and Lords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 15-16.

<sup>4</sup> George Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1997), pp. 23-24.

The major questions of this work arise from the notion that the examination of a set of related qualities of an important city from each region will provide a new perspective on larger issues. If the slave society of the South engendered a culture in which social mobility operated differently than it did in the North, what were the broader ramifications? Did Bostonians and Charlestonians understand class identity in the same way? How did individuals of those cities determine the social status of others and project their own? The Veblenian theory of conspicuous display provides a crucial window into those mechanisms. Did the South's patriarchy, arguably stronger than that of the North, influence the expression of power through display? And, finally, how did members of the elite use conspicuous display as an interface with lower classes, including slaves, servants, and the recipients of charity?

I have grounded this comparison in a brief descriptive outline of Boston and Charleston in the mid-nineteenth century. However, exceptions existed and in some cases flourished. In Charleston, a small population of free African-Americans wielded unusual power. Their place in the city's racial and economic order defies my model of race-defined social mobility among Charlestonians. For most African-Americans of the region, however, the options of the free were unavailable. Similarly, the notion of Boston's free-labor capitalism is hardly watertight. As David Roediger shows, some groups within the white working class encountered forms of social racialization, so that their true chances of radically bettering their lives were poor.<sup>5</sup> Despite that, the North was a free-labor

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<sup>5</sup> David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1991).

economy in the deeper sense that it did not legislate the enslavement and dehumanization of an entire race.

Although the juxtaposition of two regions of the same nation may presuppose so many similarities as to threaten to produce a slim set of contrasting results, I suggest that the reverse is true. It is *because* there are so many similarities between Boston and Charleston in this period that the differences are so meaningful. While other recent systematic comparisons examine the South in tandem with European counties in which labor systems were analogous to American slavery,<sup>6</sup> I propose slavery as the crucial element on which the contrast turns. With that basic difference at its center, this analysis uses social behaviors of elites in Boston and Charleston to illuminate the diverging regional cultures of antebellum America.

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<sup>6</sup> Bowman; Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).

## **PART ONE: THEORY AND BACKGROUND**

### **Chapter One: Boston and Charleston in the 1850s**

In the 1850s, the North and South of the United States were increasingly culturally and economically divergent. Many of the underlying precepts of society in the two regions had been different since the American Revolution. As the possibility of disunion loomed, citizens of the North and the South had both contrasting social outlooks and a growing sense of regional identity. Among these cultural differences was the use of conspicuous display to affirm personal or familial status. Through the expression of wealth, taste, and knowledge of specific social forms, all nineteenth century Americans demonstrated their class position. Yet the fundamental differences between the North and the South led to differences in both those expressions of status and in their effectiveness.

One of the starting points for this study is the ongoing historiographical debate about the extent to which the slave South was culturally unique. Eugene Genovese argues that the South had more in common, both economically and culturally, with pre-modern agricultural states in Europe than with the capitalistic North.<sup>7</sup> Several other historians, in contrast, have presented convincing evidence of capitalistic tendencies among Southern planters.<sup>8</sup> Although it is clear that planters did act capitalistically and from profit-gaining motives, they simultaneously were entangled, as Genovese argues, in a complex and

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<sup>7</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*.

<sup>8</sup> Fogel and Engerman; Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956).

contradictory culture of paternalism. One of the results of that manufactured aristocratic milieu, Genovese suggests, was that Southern planters were more likely than other Americans to use conspicuous display to maintain their social and economic position. Genovese argues that the consumption of luxury goods was a functional part of the slave south, allowing planters a means of controlling the lower classes.<sup>9</sup> The high social mobility among Southern whites increased the importance of conspicuous display, with the need for control of social inferiors suggesting a relative insecurity among elites. This work tests that theory, examining whether differences existed in the extent to which Northern and Southern elites used display to support their social positions.

The second major starting point for this study is the work of Thorstein Veblen, an American sociologist. In his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen argues that nineteenth-century Americans used complex systems of conspicuous display to assert or increase their social status.<sup>10</sup> According to Veblen, the relationship of elite Americans to the display of material goods and to their public presentation of self was at heart a pragmatic one. Veblen presents a set of mechanistic theories regarding the interactions of the conspicuous display of material goods and personal behavior to power relationships based on gender and class. This paper uses Veblen's functional approach to material culture and social status as an entry point into understanding social hierarchy in the antebellum North and South.

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<sup>9</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899).

This study focuses on two cities as representative of the North and the South in the 1850s. Boston, Massachusetts and Charleston, South Carolina were similar in many ways by mid-century. Yet the two locations had one crucial difference: the social ramifications of contrasting and incompatible labor systems. Boston had a longstanding tradition of free labor, while Charleston rested firmly on the racial slavery of the agricultural South. The comparison of the two cities builds on the work of William and Jane Pease, who examine and compare Boston and Charleston from the 1820s through the 1850s.<sup>11</sup>

This research examines five elite families in each city, using their habits of conspicuous display to illuminate regional differences and similarities. The social structure of each city was different, with varying criteria for membership in the uppermost class. However, for those families at the top of the ladder, public presentation was an important component of identity. Through a comparison of elite families in each city, this study tests the theses of Veblen and Genovese. It asks whether conspicuous display of wealth and style operated differently in the antebellum North and the South, as Genovese argues. It also tests the application of Veblen's systems of social display of wealth as a means of class affirmation to an earlier era of American history than Veblen himself intended.

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<sup>11</sup> Pease, Jane H and William H. Pease, *A Family of Women: The Carolina Petigrus in Peace and War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Pease, Jane H. and William H. Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches: Choice and Constraint in Antebellum Charleston and Boston* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Pease, William H. and Jane H. Pease, *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1843* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

In the 1850s, Boston and Charleston had much in common. Both cities were long-established centers of local trade. Both were cultural centers with strong regional identities. Both were proud of their longstanding political involvement and prominence in their region and the nation. At the same time, however, the two cities embodied the very different ideologies of the North and the South.

The cultural, social, and economic differences between the Northern and Southern United States were at their height in the 1850s, as sectional tensions intensified. While the nation struggled with the political ramifications of states' rights and the potential geographic expansion of slavery, citizens of the two regions were increasingly conscious of their sectional identity. Many residents of Boston and Charleston were strongly aware of differences between regional ways of living, reflecting on the contrasts between their lives and those of people elsewhere in the nation. This comparison of Boston and Charleston during the decade before the Civil War addresses the differences in the daily lives of some Northerners and Southerners. Although some of the fundamental similarities between the two cities, including the economic and cultural importance of the sea trade, garnered less contemporary attention than the looming differences of sectionalism, they influenced the daily experiences of residents as much as those differences.

One of the most basic similarities between Charleston and Boston is the extent to which their settlement and economy were based on geography. Both cities were Atlantic ports whose physical conduciveness to water trade shaped

their economies. Waterways bounded both settlements, generating a long-term economic dependence on sea commerce. Although each city traded different goods, their reliance on commerce had a similar impact on population diversity and regional importance. The sea trade brought ships from Europe, Asia, and the Americas to both ports, giving the cities a perpetual bustle and a cosmopolitan character.<sup>12</sup>

Boston jutted out from the mainland to the north, with only a narrow land connection at its southern end. To the west was the Charles River and to the east were Boston Harbor and the Atlantic coast. The southern tip of the city dwindled to a single route—Washington Street, which led through marsh to the village of Roxbury.<sup>13</sup> The area now known as the Back Bay, west of the South End between Beacon Street and Tremont Street, was in the early nineteenth century unusable marshland. Between the 1830s and 1880s, local entrepreneurs raised and filled the Back Bay, making it suitable for both commercial and residential building.<sup>14</sup> Despite that improvement, however, the city, which comprised less than two square miles, remained bound by water on its other three sides.<sup>15</sup>

Charleston was a south-facing peninsula. It had the Ashley River on its west and the Cooper River on its east. The city was surrounded by marsh, seasonally blurring the boundaries of usable land. The Battery, along the eastern

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<sup>12</sup> Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, pp. 3-7

<sup>13</sup>In the 1840s, this route was untrafficked enough that it was a local version of a “lovers’ lane.” Caroline Cary Curtis recalls that in her girlhood, the pastoral “neck” around Washington Street was “the resort of couples on the eve of an engagement, though as yet unannounced.” Caroline Gardiner Curtis, *Memories of Fifty Years in the Last Century* (Boston: Privately Printed, 1947), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Back Bay Boston: the City as a Work of Art* (Boston :Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, pp 1-5.



tip, protected the oldest part of the city from floods and hurricanes. Here, the original walled section had stood, protecting the first settlers from the threat of violence from outside. In the 1850s, the rest of the perimeter of the city, even across the northern passage to the mainland, was unstable swamp. The dry land available for building made up only one and a half square miles, all relatively flat and subject to intermittent flooding.<sup>16</sup>

From the time of settlement, both Boston and Charleston organized their economy around trade from their natural ports. Although the two cities had developed different trading strategies by the early nineteenth century, they were both major centers for regional and international commerce. By the 1850s, however, their success in trade was diverging.

Charleston's Atlantic trade was by the mid-nineteenth century far less strong than it had been in the colonial era. The city's initial economy had grown up around the trade of rice and indigo. At the time of the American Revolution, Charleston was the third busiest Atlantic port, trading more actively than New York. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, however, new technology led to the expansion of cotton production throughout South Carolina. The resulting demographic and agricultural changes threatened Charleston's prosperity and dominance over the region.<sup>17</sup>

With Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793, short-staple cotton became the premier cash crop for much of the South. The cotton gin gave planters a cheap and practical way of separating cotton fiber from seeds, making

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 1-6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp. 9-10.

the cultivation of the crop much more profitable. In response, planters adapted the slave labor system that had developed from rice and indigo production to this new crop. Through the enforced labor of African-American slaves, planters were able to cultivate large areas of land for profit. In the nineteenth century, Southern cotton became a major export commodity, representing from the mid-1830s to 1860 more than half of all national exports.<sup>18</sup>

Although the success of short-staple cotton led to increased export traffic from Charleston, it undermined the long-term economic independence of the city. As the Old Southwest (the land which later became Alabama and Mississippi) opened to white settlement after the War of 1812, cotton prices soared.<sup>19</sup> In response, many South Carolinians who had not previously planted on a large scale migrated upcountry to acquire and plant new cotton land. This shift in the economic productivity of the region left Charleston's prosperity dependent on trade from inland sources. Charleston was increasingly a center of trade rather than production, which increased its vulnerability to the economic choices made by upcountry planters who had no financial or personal investment in the city.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the increased importance on a staple crop left the region dangerously reliant on European and Northern capital. A credit system allowed planters to continue to plant cotton even after an unsuccessful year. However, the rotating cost of interest on that credit made it financially prohibitive for cotton planters to

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<sup>18</sup> George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America: a Narrative History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), p. 471.

<sup>19</sup> Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), pp. 22-23.

<sup>20</sup> Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, p. 10.

rest their land by rotating crops. Without careful agricultural practices, soil quickly became depleted of nutrients and good tilth. Without widespread agricultural diversity and significant industrialization, Charleston, like the rest of the South, was leaking capital to the Northern U.S. and to Europe.<sup>21</sup>

One area in which Charleston continued to enjoy robust trade was in its strong market for slaves. With the success of short-staple cotton cultivation came a new market for enslaved labor throughout the South. Issues of economic scale had long confined slavery to the largest and wealthiest plantations. The potential profit to be gained by cotton planting, however, made slavery an attractive labor solution for smaller operations run by less wealthy whites. Charleston was a major point of entry for the Atlantic slave trade, supplying slaves to trading networks that stretched through the South. Although the slave trade was lucrative to individuals, it was politically volatile. By the early nineteenth century, the Charlestonian planters who engaged in the slave trade just prior to its end were highly sensitive to criticism of the institution. In July of 1804, John James Negrin, an immigrant printer, was arrested for selling the pamphlet *A Declaration of Independence of the French Colony of Santo Domingo by Dessalines*. Negrin spent eight months in prison, where he lost his livelihood and health entirely. Through censorship of this kind, Charleston's city officials actively sought to "wall off the city from people and ideas perceived as threatening to slavery."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> Walter J. Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston!: The History of a Southern City*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1989), pp. 188-189.

Boston, in contrast, was a center of diversified regional trade, making it financially more stable than Charleston. With more varied trade opportunities, and without a reliance on a system of financial credit, Boston was less vulnerable than Charleston to economic fluctuations. Like other major North Atlantic ports of the United States, Boston traded both raw materials and manufactured goods generated from the region. The lumber, fiber, and animal resources of the region offered Northerners consumable goods as well as raw goods for transformation into trade items that appealed to Americans as well as Europeans. The broad nature of both the array of possible goods and the potential purchasing market had long given Boston a more stable trade economy than Charleston, with its reliance on a cash crop system.<sup>23</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, industry was replacing agriculture as the central support of the Northern economy. The region developed and manufactured many of the goods that the South still imported from England. That diverse production reduced Northern economic dependence on Atlantic trade and on the influx of hard capital from outside sources. The factories and textile mills that appeared in the Northeast in the nineteenth century were economically successful in the long term due to their vertical structuring of the treatment of raw materials.<sup>24</sup> The strength of Boston's economy was in its combination of mercantile interests with manufacturing. Despite tensions between artisans and mechanical entrepreneurs in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Boston

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<sup>23</sup> John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America: 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985.)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110.

had by 1838 more than forty-six steam powered manufacturing enterprises. The economy of the region as well as the city benefited from the willingness of Bostonians to accept technological change.<sup>25</sup>

One of the main supports of Boston trade was the city's extensive transportation system. Bostonians had deliberately cultivated the passing trade of smaller cities and towns in the region, including the strong textile industry of interior Massachusetts. That position as middleman had led to an intricate steamboat and stage network around the city. Boston's small boats and land transportation linked the city to coastal towns and the state's hinterland, while larger ships sailed to Europe, South America, and China.<sup>26</sup> In order to compete with New York, whose merchants enjoyed the ease of canal transportation to the Great Lakes, Boston turned to the burgeoning railroads. By the 1830s, Boston merchants had planned a network of rail lines connecting the city to nearby ports and interior towns. With the financial and business backing of the state and city legislature, Boston situated itself as a hub of rail transportation, generating considerable profit for the city as well as individual investors.<sup>27</sup>

Both Boston and Charleston had long been political strongholds of their regions, with active constituencies and strong republican traditions. The mainstream elite cultures of the two cities—Puritan moralism and planterism—influenced their very different political traditions. Despite those differences,

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<sup>25</sup> Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

however, the existence of a tradition of political participation and a prominent national voice was common to both cities.

Bostonians were proud of their city's Puritan heritage and longstanding involvement in United States politics. Although the city was smaller than Philadelphia or New York, its influence on national politics, especially in the abolitionist movement, was disproportionately large. Traditional Puritan moralism had contributed to the anti-slavery movement, whose members argued that the institution was morally corrupt.<sup>28</sup> Although slavery had existed in Massachusetts in the early settlements, the state gradually abolished it after the American Revolution, largely as a response to the egalitarian popular thought that surrounded that conflict. Bostonians were among the first Americans to attempt to legislate against slavery, seeking its total abolition as early as 1766.<sup>29</sup> The successful free-labor system that resulted in the Northeast was a stark contrast to the perpetuating racial slavery of the South, including South Carolina and Charleston.

South Carolinians also had a long tradition of involvement in state and national politics. Charleston was still, in the belief of most planters, the center of political influence in the state, despite the fact that Columbia had replaced it as state capitol in 1790.<sup>30</sup> The political control low country planters wielded within

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas H. O'Connor, *Civil War Boston: Home Front and Battlefield* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), pp. 4-5.

<sup>29</sup> Zilversmit, Arthur, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>30</sup> Although Columbia officially replaced Charleston as the state capitol in 1790, many state offices existed in duplicate, as low-country planters were loath to relinquish their political power. As late as the 1820s, the state treasury office was still located in Charleston, to the displeasure of many Columbians. Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, pp. 72-73.

South Carolina had both formal and informal elements. Prior to the early nineteenth century, the state's constitution significantly favored the low country in its apportionment of power. In 1808, low country legislators allowed some of that power to move to the upcountry and Charleston's city council consolidated the city's thirteen wards into only four. The low country elite still, however, held more than its share of political influence in the state's assembly.<sup>31</sup>

Low country planters held political power by virtue of their traditional kin and business networks as well. One result of this informal hierarchy was that planter politicians believed that they were free from partisan concerns. Their de facto dominion over the non-planter population led them to believe that they were inherently more fit for political influence than lesser citizens. Through biased systems of apportionment, politicians from the low country dominated the state's Assembly in numbers as well as influence. Unlike politicians from states where power was more contested, South Carolina legislators acted almost entirely on behalf of the state's planter elite.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the similar economic and political position that each state held within its region, major differences existed between the two cities in the 1850s. The demography, political opinions, and cultural makeup of the two cities in many ways reflected the contrasts between the economic systems of the North and the South. As these different ways of life diverged under the threat of sectional conflict, citizens became more aware of contrasts and in many cases more determined to uphold their regions' own traditions.

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<sup>31</sup> Fraser, p. 192.

<sup>32</sup> Watson, pp. 114-115.

Both cities had seen increases in population during the first decades of the century, but the change was far greater for Boston than Charleston. By 1850, the population of Boston numbered 136,000: an increase of more than two hundred percent from the 1820 population of 43,000. Charleston, in contrast, had grown only 19 percent, from 25,000 in 1820 to 30,000 in 1850.<sup>33</sup>

The urban growth that Boston experienced in the first half of the nineteenth century led to crowding and high racial and ethnic diversity. Four story buildings and slums had begun to fill a downtown characterized by poor sanitation and occasional rioting. While the rest of Boston was still largely Protestant and of English descent, the slums were filled with Irish Catholics and African-Americans.

Inner Charleston was perhaps even more ethnically diverse than Boston, including in its number French and Spanish-speaking traders, Scotch-Irish, French Huguenots, Germans, Jews, and Caribbean Creole immigrants. More than anything else, many Northern visitors noticed the exotic nature of the communities of African-Americans, who outnumbered whites in the Charleston District by three to one. Almost eight percent of the total population consisted of free African-Americans. Within that group existed a “brown aristocracy,” made up of slaveowning African-Americans and mulattos, whose close economic ties with the white elite had long been objectionable to the city’s poor whites.<sup>34</sup>

The different economic and demographic patterns that prevailed in the industrializing North and the agrarian South led to contrasting patterns of social

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<sup>33</sup> Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Pease and Pease. *Web of Progress*, pp. 4-9; Fraser, p. 242.



organization. In the North, some rural settlement declined, as farming yields decreased, and the financial reward of farming waned.<sup>35</sup> The resulting migration into cities led to increased development of physical infrastructure and local government. In the South, the low-density population distribution that had developed from the plantation economy persisted.

Suffolk County, where Boston was located, relied more on manufacturing than Charleston County. In 1850, 25,296 people in Suffolk County were employed in manufacturing, making up 17.5 percent of the total population. In the same year's census, Charleston County had only 1,413 people employed in manufacturing, comprising 1.94 percent of the total population.<sup>36</sup>

As the importance of agriculture waned in the Northeast, the structure of society changed. People who had lived in small farming communities were increasingly likely to move to cities, where their relationships to their neighbors were often more superficial than they had been in rural settings. As people left their own economic enterprises to join larger businesses, a culture of middle management developed. Class boundaries became more clearly demarcated and more closely associated with employment. Although people lived more closely together in the newer urban settings, their sense of community and the frequency of their interactions with each other did not necessarily increase proportionally.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: the Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> The United States Census, 1850. Data collected and published by The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) as *Study 0003: HistoricalDemographic, Economic and Social Data: The United States, 1790-1970*.

<sup>37</sup> Ryan.

In Charleston, and in the agricultural hinterlands of South Carolina, a longstanding pattern of low population density persisted. In the earliest periods of settlement, planters had purchased as much land as they could work, with frontage sections on waterways. This system led to geographically dispersed homesteads. Although the common locations of planter houses along the banks of a river facilitated travel, the distances prohibited the frequent visits that were possible between family and friends in a city. During their seasonal residence on the plantation, a planter family was isolated from most of their peers. When there was not an extended visit of friends or family organized, members of the household, both white and black, were the only immediate community available to planters.<sup>38</sup>

The seasonal rotation of residency from plantation to city was common to most Charleston planter families. The city's social season began in January, when most families, especially those with young people, moved into Charleston for events including the St. Cecilia balls and the Jockey Ball. The season culminated in mid-February with Race Week, which had since the late eighteenth century drawn even the men who had chosen to miss earlier social occasions. During Race Week, the head of the planter household did his accounting in town, settling bills with the newly gained income from his crop. Planter families returned to the country in March, remaining there until the hot summer weather brought the threat of malaria. In the summer months, women and children, if not the men of the family, moved either to town or to a smaller household in nearby pinelands,

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<sup>38</sup> Joan Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

where disease was less prevalent. When frost came in November, the family returned to the plantation, where they stayed through their Christmas celebrations. Even children who boarded at school followed this pattern, joining family in the country “for a month or so at Christmas and again at Easter.”<sup>39</sup> Mrs. St. Julien Ravenel, in describing this pattern of seasonal relocation, notes that the pattern of moving entire households was so strong a tradition that planters were “as much town folk as country gentlemen.”<sup>40</sup>

The converse was not, however, true of members of Boston’s elite: they were not quite as much country gentlemen as town folk. Although some elite Bostonians were by the mid nineteenth century deliberately pursuing a more agrarian existence, in an attempt to recapture disappearing ideals, they were in the minority. Moreover, the agriculture that Bostonian gentlemen pursued in the 1850s was focused on ornamentation and scholarly botany, rather than profits. The nostalgic impulses that had led some Bostonians to spend time and money on developing country estates in suburbs such as Brookline and Jamaica Plain, developed into the study and presentation of stylized beauty. Where the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture had previously promoted aid to yeoman farming, it turned in the 1830s to more polite ideals, which had more in common with grand European estates than anything related to money-making.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Boykin Chesnut, “Two Years or the Way We Live Now,” Reproduced in entirety in Elisabeth Showalter Muhlenfeld, “Mary Boykin Chesnut: The Writer and her Work” (Unpublished doctoral dissertation: The University of South Carolina, 1978), p. 531.

<sup>40</sup> Mrs. St. Julian Ravenel, *Charleston: The Place and the People* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1929), pp. 385-386.

<sup>41</sup> Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 174-180.

Those Bostonians who were active in the new fashion for presenting themselves as refined country gentlemen developed their suburban estates with manicured grounds, fountains, and greenhouses. Their interest in mimicking European styles is notable as a component of their overall efforts at conspicuous display. However, their identity as country folk was distinctly different from that of Southern planters. Bostonians such as Joseph Cabot, who grew six hundred varieties of tulips on his Salem estate, or Francis Parkman, who published volumes on his roses and ornamental shrubbery,<sup>42</sup> had a different relationship to their land and their agricultural operations than did their counterparts in the Southern elite. Because a country persona was merely a hobby, Bostonian horticulturists were able to focus their energies on work as esoteric as possible. Charleston planters, however, occupied their land as their livelihood.

Boston and Charleston's differing economies strongly influenced their demographic characteristics of sex and race. In Boston's Suffolk County in 1850, there were 142,479 whites and 2,038 free African-Americans. In Charleston County in 1850, there were 24,580 whites, 44,376 slaves, and 3,849 free African-Americans.<sup>43</sup> By 1830, South Carolina was the only state in which slaves outnumbered free people.<sup>44</sup>

South Carolina's racial imbalance, which generated uneasiness among many whites, was the result of two factors. First, South Carolina planters used large numbers of enslaved workers because their plantations were among the

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<sup>42</sup> Thornton, pp 218, 226-227.

<sup>43</sup> ICPSR, *Study 0003*.

<sup>44</sup> Watson, p. 113.

largest and most labor-intensive in the South. Second, the importation of approximately 39,000 slaves to the state in the first decade of the nineteenth century, in response to the fact that Federal law deemed that reopening of the slave trade illegal after 1808, replenished the African-American slave population.<sup>45</sup>

The social and economic differences between the North and the South translated into widespread cultural differences. The racially based slavery that had existed legally in South Carolina since 1669 made it impossible for an entire segment of society to improve its financial position<sup>46</sup>. Many Northerners, however, believed that their capitalistic economic system allowed an equal opportunity to all members of society. Without laws governing the potential social and economic rise of any individual, the possibility for personal advancement was theoretically unlimited.<sup>47</sup>

The capitalist economy of the North was not a pure meritocracy. By the mid-nineteenth century a significant portion of the manual labor force in the Northern U.S. was Irish. As David Roediger suggests, the Irish working class in the North was in some ways culturally comparable to the African-American slave class in the South. Both groups experienced social marginalization and stigmatization, which prevented them from improving their economic and social situation. The Northern Irish, however, were not bound in the legal slavery that

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<sup>45</sup> Stamp, p. 25. The slave trade from Africa was closed in South Carolina in 1787. Nevertheless, the state reopened the trade in 1803, importing 39,000 additional laborers. Federal law ordered the South Carolina trade closed again in 1808.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

prevented most African-Americans in the South from owning property and making choices about their own welfare.<sup>48</sup>

Eugene Genovese argues that the antebellum South was a unique cultural and economic construct that had a closer resemblance to European pre-modern feudal societies than to the industrialized North. The slaveholding South was held together by a culture of reciprocal privilege and obligation, he argues, which influenced all classes, including non-slaveholding whites.<sup>49</sup> Genovese describes Southern planters as having “aristocratic pretensions” that they expressed through conspicuous display.<sup>50</sup> According to Genovese, “Every dollar spent by the planters for elegant clothes, a college education for their children, or a lavish barbecue contributed to the political and social domination of their class.”<sup>51</sup>

Genovese’s notion of a pattern of conspicuous display that was as peculiar to the South as its culture and economy is at the center of this comparison between Boston and Charleston. He argues that Southerners used display to generate for themselves an aristocratic persona. Yet Northerners were also consumers of luxury goods and were deeply entrenched in a culture of social status signs. Genovese’s suggestion that South planters imitated European feudal dynamics is useful here because it brings the question of self-construction to the analytic foreground. Elites in the two regions did perceive themselves differently

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<sup>48</sup> Roediger; See also Richard Abbott, *Cotton and Capital: Boston Businessmen and Antislavery Reform* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), pp. 7-8. Abbott suggests that Boston abolitionists were aware of the “deficiencies of their own wage-labor system...but regarded slavery as a far worse form of labor exploitation” which they sought to end before addressing the problems of wage labor.

<sup>49</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy*, pp. 3-4. Many historians have debated Genovese’s notion of paternalism in the slave South, including Stamp, Fogel and Engerman.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

and did deliberately seek to project different personas. Those styles of public and private behavior were the result of longstanding patterns in politics and daily life.

Politics in the North and South were characterized by very different styles of argument. The methods of the Boston and Charleston politicians owed much of their political style to their cultural ideas about the affirmation of social status. The wealthiest Charlestonians, even more so than other Southerners, approached the public arena of politics with great care for the outward appearance of personal honor. Elite Bostonians, in contrast, did not seek the personal spotlight, but relied on behind-the-scenes community actions to accomplish political goals.

The Southern ideal of honor permeated Charleston's culture. In the 1850s, as the conflict over slavery escalated, many prominent Southerners made public spectacles of themselves in national and local courtrooms. According to the protocol of elite Charleston society, unbending political beliefs were nothing to be ashamed of, even if those beliefs themselves were unpopular. One of the Charleston elites of this study, James Petigru, was vehemently opposed to secession. Although he was vastly in the minority among Charlestonians, his vociferous public statements for his cause did his personal reputation no harm. Instead, his peers respected him for his unabashed public presentation of his personal ideals.<sup>52</sup>

One reason for the political arrogance of some Charlestonians was the unique power that elite South Carolinians held in the South. South Carolina was the only state in the region that did not have a significant portion of non-

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<sup>52</sup> Lacy Ford, "James Louis Petigru: The Last South Carolina Federalist," in Michael O'Brien and David Moltke-Hansen, eds., *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1986).

plantation land. Planters met little opposition as they controlled the state through their kinship and land ownership networks. As a result, they had no experience with political compromise. For many South Carolinians, including John Calhoun, political compromise was equivalent to defeat.<sup>53</sup> Such defeat was devastating not only for the sake of political agendas, but because it threatened ideals of personal honor.

In Boston, political involvement was less public and was less likely to lead to personal grandstanding. Members of the elite sought civic involvement for its economic pragmatism, not for the opportunities it offered for the expression of personal honor. Influential Bostonians refused to tolerate impassioned personal politics if such displays threatened the public peace. Boston politicians carefully built organizations such as fire departments and schools, deliberately developing a network of institutional control and social calm, rather than one of dramatic personal conflict.<sup>54</sup>

One reason for the different character of politics in Boston and Charleston was the makeup of political strength in each city. In South Carolina, planters dominated the state legislature. During the battle over nullification in the 1820s and 1830s, only 12 percent of Charleston's representatives in Columbia were merchants. The rest were planters and professionals. In contrast, Boston's delegates to the State House in the same time period were an equal mix of professionals and merchants or entrepreneurs. As Charleston planters occupied a

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<sup>53</sup> Watson, p. 248; Kenneth S Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

<sup>54</sup> Pease and Pease, *The Web of Progress*, pp. 82-88.



secure social and economic position in their state, they could afford, they believed, to use politics to fight personal battles. Bostonian legislators were more preoccupied with attaining and preserving their economic success through that of the community, so their political style was more oriented toward financial pragmatism.<sup>55</sup>

Southern antebellum culture was peculiarly overt in its determination of power relationships. The perpetual contention between masters and slaves influenced all interactions, so that continual testing and affirmation of personal power became common to daily experience. The Southern tradition of dueling to arbitrate personal quarrels developed from the ubiquitous personal violence in the region. The primary way in which masters controlled their slaves was through personal violence, or the threat of violence. As Southerners grew up in a cultural climate where physical coercion was possible, they constructed ways of rationalizing that violence into a set of rules.<sup>56</sup>

The emphasis on personal power relationships that pervaded Southern culture led to a regional pattern by which elites expressed their class membership. The formal rules of negotiating a duel were one way in which Charlestonians found for themselves a measure of control in the face of uncertain class distinctions. As membership in the planter elite was largely due to the ownership of land and slaves, which could change for an individual at any time, social relationships were uncertain. Elite whites found that through frequent exhibitions

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pp. 88-89.

<sup>56</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1979); see also Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

of their knowledge of the complex forms of their class they could maintain their place in the social order.<sup>57</sup>

Another social force that shaped public and private expressions of identity in the mid-nineteenth century was the rigidity of socially acceptable gender roles. Both the substance of gender roles and the extent to which they were inescapable were significantly different in the North and South.

Many historians have outlined a cultural model of “separate spheres,” in which middle- and upper-class men and women operated in different, gendered circles of influence. According to this model, only men worked outside the home, involving themselves in politics and business. Women remained at home, where their sphere of influence extended over their family and household. The separation of daily activities by gender developed in Colonial America, as the burgeoning market economy reduced the necessity of middle-class women as producers of goods and instead led to their adoption of the role of main consumers of purchased items. As a result, American culture increasingly emphasized the role of women as mothers and caretakers of domestic morals.<sup>58</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, however, some American women were actively seeking more control over their own lives and over public policy. Nancy Cott suggests that the most important avenue by which New England women of the nineteenth century raised their political consciousness was through traditional women’s groups. When women in local groups met to discuss religion or

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<sup>57</sup> Bruce; see also Steven Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

<sup>58</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

education, or when they gathered to accomplish handiwork as a group, they generated a sense of sisterhood that provided them with a sense of strength and identity. For some, that female subculture was a springboard for political activism and the expansion of the female sphere of influence.<sup>59</sup>

In the antebellum South, patriarchy was central to planter culture. Southern women were less likely than their Northern counterparts to enter the public sphere. The demographics of plantation life, according to which many white planter families mixed more with slaves than with their social peers for most of the year, prevented elite white women from forming the social groups that were increasingly popular in the North. While planter families were in residence in the country, there were few opportunities for women to meet with each other and generate mutual support for new personal roles. During the winter, however, when most planter women resided in the city, social interaction increased. Nevertheless, Southern women were unwilling to challenge the existing patriarchy and seek more public roles for themselves.<sup>60</sup>

The fundamental economic, demographic, political, and cultural differences that existed between the North and the South garnered varying levels of awareness from the citizens of Boston and Charleston. Some of the contrasts between the regions were subtly ingrained in daily life, receiving little overt attention. Other differences, such as inherently incompatible economic strategies and increasing political combativeness, found frequent public and private voice.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Although Southern women attained new levels of empowerment during the social disruptions of the Civil War, most willingly relinquished it at the end of the crisis. See Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

Within the increasingly divided North and South, two contrasting models of social hierarchy developed. In Boston and Charleston, membership in the highest social and economic classes was achieved through different means, with different results. Charleston planters emphasized land and slave ownership in the identification of members of the social elite. Bostonians were more likely to emphasize family history and personal connections. The cultural constructions of individual social status in Boston and Charleston led to contrasting levels of class permeability in each city. With that different social fluidity came different public expressions of class membership. Pease and Pease suggest that conspicuous consumption, like all public expressions of status, was less ostentatious in Boston than in Charleston. In Boston's less permeable society, elites experienced less pressure to prove themselves in public than their Charleston counterparts.<sup>61</sup>

Although expressions of personal identity among the elite may have been less public in Boston than in Charleston, they surely existed in both cities. Those mechanisms of display both reflected longstanding cultural values and reinforced them. If, as Genovese argues, Southern planters bolstered their social and economic position through display, they simultaneously weakened their own power by making elite identity something quantifiable and purchasable by other whites. Yet their system inherently preserved the distinction between races. In Boston, the greater subtlety surrounding expressions of elite status reinforced the closed nature of the upper echelon. Bostonians were more likely to direct their conspicuous display to their peers, who might be the only audience that

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<sup>61</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*.

understood certain encoded signs. In both cities, these systems were at their height in the 1850s. After the Civil War, these self-reinforcing systems of expressed identity could not sustain their quality of social stasis, as they ultimately required not only the players but an audience that could (or would) distinguish at least in a rudimentary way where power lay.

## **Chapter Two: Elite Families in Boston and Charleston in the 1850s**

Both Boston and Charleston developed a system of social stratification in the early years of their founding. By the 1850s, that system of social differentiation was both established and well defined. Most elite families in Boston and Charleston had a well-known lineage and name, financial prosperity, and political involvement. However, the emphasis that members of the upper orders placed on each of these parameters was different in the two cities. In the South, land and slave ownership were the primary indicators of high social status. In the North, personal wealth, a vaunted lineage, and community involvement took precedence over the ownership of land as a status identifier.

In Charleston, as in the rest of the plantation South, the economy rested on the export of agricultural staple crops, such as rice and cotton. The South lacked the freshly developing industries of the North, where new pathways to fortune were constantly opening. In a primarily agricultural economy, land and export goods were the surest route to wealth for both the established elite and social newcomers. The plantation, with its responsibility of land stewardship, was the best-respected source of income in the region in the nineteenth century. However, many social newcomers made their fortunes by other means, or in other regions of the United States, then transplanted themselves to this agrarian, slaveholding setting, by which they hoped to gradually increase their social standing. As Genovese notes, “The road to power lay through the plantation.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Genovese, *Political Economy*, p. 29.

Boston, in contrast, was a city of social and economic change. Like New York and Chicago, Boston experienced an influx of immigrants and industry in the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike other growing American cities, however, Boston continued its established reputation for staid gentility and social conservatism. Elite Bostonians advertised their feelings of superiority toward the citizens of the newer city of New York, where English influence was weaker, and intellectual and artistic pursuits were inferior. As New York began to eclipse Boston in commercial wealth, many upper-class Bostonians reacted defensively, closing their ranks against newcomers by placing increased importance on family lineage and involvement in social and economic networks.<sup>63</sup>

With the contrasts in the importance of specific status indicators came a different attitude to social mobility in the two cities. In Charleston, land and slave ownership were the most important characteristics of elite identity. Jacob Motte Alston described any “well born and well educated planter” as an “an owner, master, or mistress, of a large number of Negroes.”<sup>64</sup> “Since financial prosperity from planting held more social sway than family lineage, social mobility was possible through increased land wealth. If a humble Southerner learned the correct social forms, achieved a high professional status, and became a planter and slave owner, he might cement his new class membership through marriage to a woman of good family.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1973) pp. 111-112.

<sup>64</sup> Arney R. Childs, ed., *Rice Planter and Sportsman: The Recollections of J. Motte Alston, 1821-1909* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1953), p. 61.

<sup>65</sup> James Louis Petigru did so on marrying Jane Amelia Postell. He had already risen socially and economically from his unsavory backcountry beginnings, but he cemented his membership in the Charleston elite with the kin ties he gained through his marriage.

In Boston, however, a prestigious family name was the most important sign of high social status. Economic considerations were secondary, creating a situation of relatively low social mobility through intermarriage. Many of the most prominent Bostonians of the mid-nineteenth century were the descendants of the English settlers to New England two centuries earlier. Others came from families that had established roots in the region in the late eighteenth century. Marriage more frequently joined two people of similar social status than it acted to validate the respectability of a newly acquired fortune.<sup>66</sup>

Despite its power in the 1850s, the barrier that Boston elite society maintained against those without impressive ancestry was a relatively new construct. Less than a century before, in the colonial period, the Boston upper social stratum was highly permeable. Frederic Cople Jaher finds that between 40 and 45 percent of the sixty largest property owners in Boston in 1771 were self-made men. He suggests that, during the colonial era, Boston's wealthy elite was more accessible to newcomers than was South Carolina's elite. After the Revolution, loyalists returning to England left a gap in Boston's social system. Some of the families that were in the 1850s firmly entrenched in the city's upper echelon were descendents of the entrepreneurs who moved into the social positions that the Revolution had left open. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, Bostonians of the highest social status were determined that no more such mobility should take place.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Pessen, pp. 111-117.

<sup>67</sup> Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston, New York, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 21.



Although status identifiers other than family name exist for men, little other historical evidence directly illuminates the social status of nineteenth-century women. A prestigious family name for a woman, either before or after marriage, suggests high social status. With that surname may come information about the family's land and property holdings, as well as a sense of daily life and behavior. Yet no information exists about occupational status, or in most cases about the personal wealth of women. Few elite women had an occupation outside the home. Those who did, such as writers Julia Ward Howe of Boston and Susan Petigru King of Charleston, derived their social position not from their work, but from their lineage and marriage connections. By the mid-nineteenth century, elite women were increasingly active in the public sphere, but their work on the community, whether paid or charitable, did not establish their social status. Rather, women who came from backgrounds of wealth and education were those who were most likely to become involved in community, church, or political pursuits.

Although the women in this analysis are identified primarily through the status-bearing activities of their husbands and male relatives, their actions are important in understanding the establishment and maintenance of an elite identity. In the use of conspicuous consumption and leisure as conveyors of high social status and power, women play a more significant role than men. As vicarious displayers of the wealth of their male relatives, elite women played an important, if not empowered role, in these negotiations.

Among the male-dominated ways in which elite families strengthened their kinship ties was the creation of economic and occupational networks. In Boston, family connections and personal contacts were central to the success of business ventures and partnerships. Generational ties and intermarriage created a network that extended beyond business into social life. For most Bostonians, the connection between the two modes of life acted as a barrier to membership in the true elite of the city. For the upper class, however, that connection provided a method by which the social and economic status quo was easily conserved for both personal and group benefit.<sup>68</sup>

In Charleston, family and personal connections were important components of being an economically successful planter, but they were not crucial. The best sections of land often changed hands between members of the elite, or were passed down within families. Credit for a season's planting, or for storage of a crop at port, was easier obtained with the right connections. However, personal networks only greased the wheels of a planter's business—they were a means to a business end for Charlestonians, not as important in themselves as status markers as they were for Bostonians.<sup>69</sup>

The occupations of those in the richest segment of antebellum Boston society provide clues to the city's economic networks. However, occupations given in city directories or censuses were often generalized or euphemistic. For example, the designation "merchant" conveyed high status. For that reason, both a small retail dealer and a fleet-owning wholesaler were likely to describe

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<sup>68</sup> Jaher, p. 23.

<sup>69</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, pp. 120-125.

themselves as merchants. Similarly, a man who described his occupation as “gentleman” might have been a scion of a wealthy family who was commonly called by that title in society, or he might have been a self-made man who believed that he deserved the honor and so bestowed it upon himself.<sup>70</sup> Edward Pessen notes that in Boston in 1845, the most common occupation among the rich was the broad designation of “merchant” or “broker,” which comprised 66 percent of the richest segment of the city. Second, making up 10 percent, were “attorneys.” The major difficulty in interpreting the importance of occupation as a social status identifier is that a causal relationship between occupation and fortune is not clear. Many rich men did not actually practice the profession that they listed in the census or in city directories—rather it was a code that conveyed their education, interests, and perhaps their source of wealth to their peers.<sup>71</sup>

Another way in which both Bostonians and Charlestonians constructed networks among themselves was through national and local politics. Most local and state public offices gave little or no financial compensation, so those positions were especially attractive to men who had no need of earning a living through their own labor. Moreover, they emphasized the educational advantages that were a defining characteristic of members of the elite in both cities, but particularly in Charleston.<sup>72</sup>

In Boston, the wealthy manufacturing and mercantile elite dominated local and state politics from the Revolutionary era until the mid-nineteenth century.

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<sup>70</sup> Pessen, p. 49.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, pp. 50-52.

<sup>72</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, pp. 122-123.

Under the politics of both the Federalists then the Whigs, the rich merchants of Boston created and maintained a strong degree of political control. When the Whig Party dissolved in the 1850s, however, much of its local political power was lost to the ethnic, working-class constituency that would characterize Boston through the early twentieth century. Prior to that downturn, however, Boston's elite maintained a strong hold on the politics of the region, making sure that public policy reflected the economic interests of the rich.<sup>73</sup>

In antebellum Charleston, planters dominated local and state politics. The concentration of land-based wealth in the low country was so strong that planter control of political issues was virtually uncontested. As a result, South Carolina legislators acted almost entirely on behalf of the state's planter elite. Involvement in politics was for elites a sign of their impartiality and their freedom from the individualistic concerns of the less wealthy.<sup>74</sup>

As each city's elite class strengthened and became more cohesive, its members sought to reshape their urban landscape. The tendency toward controlling the character of public spaces was more pronounced in Boston, however, where elites maintained a presence in the city almost year-round. In Charleston, planters directed improving energies to their plantations, where they spent most of their time<sup>75</sup>. Such improvements included the building of levees to control flooding (for aesthetic purposes as well as agricultural) and the

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<sup>73</sup> Betty Farrell, *Elite Families: Class and Power in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 32-35.

<sup>74</sup> Watson, pp. 114-115.

<sup>75</sup> Isabella G. Leland, *Charleston: Crossroads of History* (Woodland Hills: Windsor Publications, 1980), p. 31.

development of expansive English-style gardens. In town, Charlestonians improved public spaces near the most elite neighborhoods. The marshland at the tip of the city's peninsula became a fashionable park when private developers filled in the land at the end of the eighteenth century. The result, White Point Gardens, became a popular site for strolling and open-air concerts, which the City Council partially subsidized.<sup>76</sup>

In Boston, the strengthening business elite purchased land in large quantities, speculating on the real estate market. One consequence was a form of control of the developing public spaces of the city. Beacon Hill and the Back Bay, both bastions of upper-class housing in the middle and late nineteenth century, were the pet projects of Boston Brahmins. Similarly, sections of South Boston and the Waterfront, as well as Boston Common and Faneuil Hall Market, were significantly developed or improved under the direction and financing of the elite merchants.<sup>77</sup>

One way in which Boston's elites signified their class membership was through the location of their houses in the city. Beacon Hill was a fashionable location for housing as early as the late eighteenth century, when several imposing family mansions appeared there. Charles Bulfinch, the most famous Boston architect of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, designed massive homes for Harrison Gray Otis and Samuel Parkman. With Jonathan Mason, Otis and Parkman were among the original proprietors of Beacon Hill, deliberately planning a fashionable district where intercourse with the less elegant

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<sup>76</sup> Fraser, pp. 120, 192.

<sup>77</sup> Jaher, pp. 23-25.

adjacent neighborhoods would be minimized.<sup>78</sup> Residential proximity to other members of the elite and the preserved inheritance patterns of family homes were important methods by which Bostonians of the highest social status distinguished themselves from newcomers.<sup>79</sup>

The geographical concentration of the houses of elite Bostonians had as much to do with family tradition as financial prosperity. Each family gathered around a particular neighborhood or square as much as was possible. Caroline Cary Curtis describes the way in which Boston's elite society organized itself from the 1830s to the 1850s:

Summer Street was the home of the Sam Gardner family; Lees, Jacksons and Putnams, all related to each other, congregated about Chauncey Place and Bedford Street; Perkinses in Temple Place; Lawrences and Masons in the part of Tremont Street between West and Boylston, then called Colonnade Row; Eliots in Park and Beacon; Amorys in Franklin Street...the head of the Sears family lived in the house of the Somerset Club...and their married children lived on each side; Curtises and Loringes were in Somerset Street.<sup>80</sup>

Curtis, writing in 1909, remarks that in her girlhood there was “a certain narrowness” in the clannish way in which the society of her youth had identified its members. She notes that people no longer focused as much on “who people are—if they are agreeable and well-behaved, then they are worth knowing.” In 1850s Boston, however, family connections were more important in deciding social status than either wealth or agreeableness.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Pessen, pp. 192-193.

<sup>79</sup> Jaher, p. 25.

<sup>80</sup> Caroline Gardiner Curtis, *Memories of Fifty Years in the Last Century*. (Boston: Privately Printed, 1947), pp. 11-12.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

### **The Charleston Families of this Study**

The five Charleston families of this study were all landowners and slave owners. They had in common some degree of economic dependence on plantation income, although both the scope of that dependence and the overall wealth varied among families. Most of these families had a member that had been of a lower status and had risen to greater social prominence with marriage. At the same time, however, all of these families had at least one relative whose lineage was impeccable, and whose connection they emphasized when possible. Connection through kin networks was, however, less important in Charleston than in Boston. In Charleston, the acquisition of that stamp of social approval was secondary to an up-and-comer's personal identity as a landowner and his adoption of the manner of a gentleman.

The John Berkley Grimballs of South Carolina were a planter family with strong ties to their land. Although the Grimballs spent their summers in Charleston, they were most comfortable in the country setting of their plantation home, The Grove. The Grimballs were longstanding members of the social elite. However, despite having long held their land and their wealth, they were not so rich that they did not have to think about money. John Grimball's papers contain many references to his modest cash flow. In 1850, he described his "pecuniary affairs" as "not flourishing, [but] sufficiently easy to permit us to enjoy all the comforts and many of the luxuries of life."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> John Berkley Grimball Diary, March 10, 1850, The South Carolina Historical Society.

John Berkley Grimball (1800-1892) and Margaret Ann Meta Morris Grimball (1810-1881), whom her family called “Meta,” married in 1830 and produced a large family. From her twelve confinements, Meta Grimball bore nine living children. During the 1850s, the educational, financial, and social activities of the children were at the center of the family’s affairs. Among the most important family members for this research are Meta and her eldest daughter Elizabeth, who formally entered society in 1850. The nine children of the Grimballs were: Elizabeth (1831-1914), who married William Munro; Berkley (1833-1899); Lewis (1835-1901), who married Clementina Legge; William (1838-1864); John (1840-1922), who married Katie Moore in 1876 and Georgina Barnwell in 1885; Arthur (1842-1894); Gabriella (d. 1924); Charlotte; and Harry, who married Helen E. Trenholm in 1876.

John Grimball planted rice on several plantations in Saint Paul’s Parish in South Carolina’s Colleton District. His land holdings included the plantations The Grove, Pinebury, and Old Fort Plantation. Grimball was the son of John and Eliza Berkley Grimball, both members of the South Carolina elite. He was a descendant of Paul Grimball, who had come to South Carolina from England in 1682 and was secretary and receiver general of the province. John Grimball was involved in South Carolina politics for many years, serving as a state senator for two terms, from 1838 to 1842. In addition, he spent many years as the president of his local agricultural society.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Grimball Family Papers, Inventory Aid, Manuscripts Department, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Meta Grimball was a descendant of Lewis Morris, who had been a Continental Army General, member of the Continental Congress, and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Her parents were Colonel Lewis Morris of Morrisania, New York, and Elizabeth Manigault Morris of South Carolina. Meta Grimball's personal financial holdings in New York were sizable enough that they alone supported the family for many years after the Civil War, when their land in the South was relatively unproductive.<sup>84</sup>

The Grimballs belonged securely among the elite of Charleston as a result of their family connections and their sizeable land and slave holdings. Their ancestors were prominent Americans, with long backgrounds of political service. They numbered the elite families of the Manigaults and Lowndes in their relations. The family's plantations were on low country, rice-bearing land, which was more prestigious than cotton plantations, due to the longer traditions associated with South Carolina rice planting. Moreover, rice grew only in the periodically flooded lowlands and was not subject to the transplantation and adaptation to the cheaper upcountry lands that cotton had undergone. Finally, the Grimballs owned numerous slaves, some of whom worked and lived at each property. In 1861, Grimball's tax return in Saint Paul's Parish listed among his property 1,065 acres and 133 slaves.

The Cheves of South Carolina were among the most politically prominent families in Charleston and South Carolina. They were members of the region's elite by virtue of their longstanding political involvement and their large land and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

slave holdings. Langdon Cheves was a wealthy man who shared his fortune with his children during his lifetime. The Cheves family had several blood connections to other members of Charleston's elite, including the Dulles family.

Langdon Cheves (1776-1857) was a planter, lawyer, and politician. His political achievements in Washington included stints as a member of Congress in 1810, as a Judge in 1816, and as the President of the United States Bank in 1819.<sup>85</sup> He returned to South Carolina in 1829 to spend his time cultivating rice there and planting his land in Georgia.

Langdon Cheves and his wife Mary Elizabeth Dulles Cheves married in 1806, eventually producing seven children. Mary Elizabeth Dulles was the daughter of a Charleston merchant, himself of wealthy Irish merchant stock. Her family was well-educated, musical, and held membership in the exclusive St. Cecilia Society. After their marriage, Mary Cheves furnished her new house on George Street (formerly a stark bachelor residence) in a luxurious style.<sup>86</sup>

By the 1840s, Langdon Cheves owned several rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia. His low country South Carolina holdings included Lang Syne, Delta, and Goshen. In Georgia, Cheves owned two plantations: Southfield and Grove Point, comprising nearly 1,600 acres on the Great Ogeechee River near Savannah.<sup>87</sup> At Lang Syne alone, there were 137 slaves in 1850.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Letter from Mrs. S.G. Stoney to the South Carolina Historical Society, included with "Recollections of Louisa McCord Smythe" at the South Carolina Historical Society. Cheves had mixed success as President of the U.S. Bank and was widely criticized for his handling of the Panic of 1819. Watson, pp. 38-39.

<sup>86</sup> Archie Vernon Huff, Jr., *Langdon Cheves of South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 36-38.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 240-241.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 203.

From 1841 to 1849, Cheves gradually divided his land among his children, taking care to provide for them all. Each of the children received land tracts, with the exception of Alexander, for whom Cheves simply endorsed the notes for \$21,000 that he had given his son years earlier to buy land in Alabama. Alexander had long been a disappointment to his father, who would have preferred that he take over family land. Cheves left his plantation home, Lang Syne, to his daughter Louisa and her husband, David McCord.<sup>89</sup>

Louisa Cheves and David J. McCord were married in 1840 at Lang Syne. The bride was thirty years old and the groom was forty-three. In marrying McCord, Louisa Cheves became the bride of her brother Langdon's father-in-law. Although the wedding of the younger Langdon Cheves only five months before had been a lavish event, the second Cheves-McCord wedding was a simple affair, with just family and a few neighbors in attendance. McCord was a lawyer and banker in Columbia.<sup>90</sup> Only a day after the ceremony, his business obligations called the new couple back to the state's capital city.<sup>91</sup>

The McCord family, whether in residence at Lang Syne or Columbia, had strong ties to the Cheves' planter legacy. After Langdon Cheves had dispersed his property among his children, he spent most of his time at Lang Syne or at his newly purchased home in the Sand Hills near Columbia. He doted on his grandchildren, giving them coffee and treats that they were otherwise not allowed

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, pp. 208-211.

<sup>90</sup> Letter from Mrs. S.G. Stoney, included with "Recollections of Louisa McCord Smythe" at the South Carolina Historical Society.

<sup>91</sup> Huff, Jr., p. 210.

to have.<sup>92</sup> Under the influence of her extended family, Louisa McCord Smythe, the daughter of Louisa Cheves McCord and David McCord, and the granddaughter of Langdon Cheves, was a child of both Charleston and Columbia. The family felt the influence of plantation life even at their town home in Columbia, which slaves from Lang Syne built in 1849.<sup>93</sup>

James Louis Petigru is another well-known planter in the region. Petigru was an example of the power of education and personal friendships in increasing social status in Charleston. Although he came from a humble upcountry family, Petigru became a wealthy land and slave owner, gaining the education, political prominence, and personal connections to allow his admission into the state's social elite. The Petigru family's immersion into the elite of the city was not entirely seamless; members of older families remembered late into Petigru's life that he had not been born one of them. Yet his firm friends from the upper class were eager for the infusion of energy that the "self-styled aristocrat" brought with him into their ranks.<sup>94</sup> The respect he and his family gained among Charlestonians demonstrates the permeability of the city's upper class, in which plantation ownership and qualities of personal refinement were more important to the determination of status than birth membership in the city's elite lineages. Nevertheless, Petigru and his descendants rushed to make advantageous marriage alliances.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 242.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 244.

<sup>94</sup> Ford, p. 159.

James Louis Petigru was born to a Huguenot mother and an Irish father. Petigru's mother, Louise Gibert, was from a prosperous Charlestonian family. She spent most of her childhood in the city, where she acquired an urbanity that contrasted with the backcountry ways of her husband. Petigru's father, William Pettigrew, was an alcoholic gambler who had inherited his father's land in the southwest corner of the state. Although his patrimony caused William Pettigrew to be among the richest 20 percent of the region, it soon passed from him to his gambling creditors. Throughout his life, James Petigru sought to distance himself from his father's history and even his name.<sup>95</sup>

With his mother's help, James Petigru succeeded in his aspirations to a better life than his father offered him. Louise Petigru found the money to send her eldest son first to Moses Waddel's academy, then to South Carolina College, where he made friends among the state's low country elite. Soon after graduating from college and gaining admittance to the bar, Petigru adopted the French spelling of his name. In doing so, he not only honored his mother's Huguenot heritage, but re-packaged himself in preparation for an attempt to enter the state's elite. His altering of the spelling of his name did not go unnoticed among Charleston's elite. As Mary Boykin Chesnut said wryly of Petigru, whom she counted as a friend, he "Huguenotted his name but could not tie up his Irish."<sup>96</sup>

As a young man, Petigru impressed his friends from college, Daniel Huger and James Hamilton, with his quick mind and gained their social acceptance. In

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<sup>95</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>96</sup> C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 365-366.

1816, Petigru married Jane Amelia Postell, confirming his new status. Postell was the daughter of a low country planter and the granddaughter of the Revolutionary War Colonel James Postell. She had connections to other Charleston elites, including the Porchers. Only two years earlier, when Petigru's social status was less secure, Postell had spurned his advances. She was a polished belle who brought him the social respectability he needed to finish his transition into the most powerful class in the state.<sup>97</sup>

During the next decade, James Petigru brought his sisters to Charleston from his father's rural home and managed to marry them off to a North, a Porcher, and an Allston. All three men were professionals, planters, or both, whose family names were counted in Charleston's finest.<sup>98</sup> In his desire to form stronger kin ties with other members of the city's upper class, Petigru demonstrated that although social climbing was possible for a keen young man such as he had been, he wanted to have more lasting assurances of social status in the long run.

The children of James Petigru and the children of the married Petigru sisters came of age from the 1830s through the 1850s. Petigru's own daughters, as the eldest, were already navigating the new waters of marriage and children of their own by the 1850s. Petigru's two daughters, Caroline and Sue, made what he thought at first would be good marriages. Caroline married a much older rice planter, William Carson in 1841. She later regretted her choice bitterly, as her husband steadily lost money and her own health failed after bearing two

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<sup>97</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 12-18.

children.<sup>99</sup> Sue married Henry Campbell King, a wealthy lawyer and a good friend of her father. Sue's headstrong nature, which had caused her parents to try to marry her off before she became embroiled in scandal, later served her in her career as an author of semi-autobiographical fiction that exposed many of the idiosyncrasies of her class.<sup>100</sup>

The Robert Allston family was perhaps the most successful of the Petrigru connections. Robert Allston, a well-connected Charlestonian, married James Petigru's favorite and youngest sister Adèle, in 1833. Adèle, like her brother James, had consciously fashioned herself into the mold of the low country aristocracy. Born Adeline, she chose as a young woman to be called Adelle, then changed her first name once again after her marriage, spelling it Adèle.<sup>101</sup>

Robert Withers Allston was the son of a Georgetown rice planter, a politician, and an engineer. He became a representative in the South Carolina senate at the age of only twenty-seven. In 1850, the senate elected him president of their ranks. In 1856, he became governor of the state. Although Allston came from an excellent local lineage and was a prominent and successful politician, his fortune was not great. His family's affairs had fared poorly under his widowed mother's management, leading him to ask the help of James Petigru in his legal disputes.<sup>102</sup> Even when he had made his plantation, Chicora Wood, profitable again, Allston continued to have financial trouble. That trouble, however, had little effect on the family's high social status.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-53.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, pp. 54-55.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Adèle Petigru and Robert Allston had seven children who survived infancy. Her eleven pregnancies took place over the period from 1832 to 1852; by the last, difficult pregnancy, she was forty-one.<sup>103</sup> One of the best known of their children was Elizabeth Allston Pringle (1845-1921), who ran her family's rice plantation as a widow after the Civil War. The Allston children spent their time in Charleston, at their plantation in Georgetown County, Chicora Wood, and at their summer house on Pawley Island. They enjoyed close social connections to some of the most influential families in South Carolina, including their Alston cousins<sup>104</sup> and the Cheves family.<sup>105</sup>

Following his election to the state Governorship, Robert Allston felt compelled to demonstrate his personal wealth. He bought a mansion on Meeting Street in Charleston for his family at the cost of \$38,000. In addition, he bought a pair of carriages with matching gray horses and a plethora of decorative items, including an extensive collection of paintings. During the 1850s, however, Allston fell deeply in debt, so that even the spendthrift James Petigru worried about his brother-in-law's finances.<sup>106</sup> By the end of the Civil War, the Allstons were virtually ruined. In 1869, when Adèle Allston and Elizabeth Allston Pringle, both widows, received a gift of \$5,000 from their New York cousin, John

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>104</sup> The one "I" Alstons were cousins of Robert Allston. They were of older, more established lineage, and, according to the beliefs of Adèle Allston, "looked down" on their two "I" relations. Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>105</sup> Emma Cheves was the lifelong best friend of Elizabeth Allston Pringle. Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 139.

<sup>106</sup> Pease and Pease, *A Family of Women*, pp. 110-111.



Earl Allston, they were overjoyed at the difference it made to their lives on the war-scarred Chicora Wood plantation.<sup>107</sup>

The fifth Charleston family of this study is that of Mary Boykin Chesnut and James Chesnut. The Chesnuts are most famous for their social and political importance to the Confederacy during the Civil War. Both came from politically active families of privileged financial and social status. Together, they were near the center of Confederate power during the war, traveling within the South as James Chesnut took different positions in the government and under Jefferson Davis. The Chesnuts both came from families of South Carolina's uppermost elite. Their experience during the war, and their hardships after, were the culmination of their prior lives as preeminent members of the region's ruling class.

Mary Boykin Chesnut (1823-1886) was born in Statesburg, South Carolina, the daughter of Mary Boykin and Stephen Decatur Miller. Her father had risen from yeoman beginnings to become a wealthy cotton planter and lawyer who strongly favored Nullification. Miller served at different times as a U.S. Congressman, state Senator, Governor, and U.S. Senator. Mary's maternal grandparents, the Boykins, were of Virginia plantation stock and had been active in the Revolutionary War. As a child, Mary spent her time at her grandmother's plantation and at that of her own parents, Plane Hill. In those environments, she received an early education about the running of a plantation as a home and a profitable business. While her family traveled through their various plantation

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<sup>107</sup> Pringle, pp. 344-345.

lands, Mary attended an elite boarding school in Charleston, Madame Talvande's, from the ages of twelve to fourteen.<sup>108</sup>

James Chesnut (1815-1885) was the son of one of the states' wealthiest land and slave owners and the sole heir of a large fortune.<sup>109</sup> His parents, who were in their sixties at the time of his marriage, owned an imposing cotton plantation, Mulberry, in Camden, South Carolina. Although Chesnut's father was a devoted South Carolinian, his mother Mary Cox Chesnut was from an elite Philadelphia family.<sup>110</sup> James Chesnut was a lawyer by profession, serving in the state legislature, eventually as its president. He entered the U.S. Senate in 1858, although he resigned soon after in 1860 upon Lincoln's election to the Presidency

Mary and James Chesnut married on April 23, 1840. They occupied an unusual social situation during their marriage, as they lived with both his parents at Mulberry. The senior Chesnuts lived until the mid 1860s, creating at times a difficult environment at Mulberry for their daughter-in-law, who had little in the way of household duties or power. The young couple had no children, which further distanced Mary from the role of elite Southern womanhood that her girlhood had taught her to expect. When James Chesnut Senior died in 1866, his will stipulated that the Chesnut lands and remaining wealth were to pass from his son to his Chesnut grandsons, leaving Mary without assets if she outlived her husband. In response, the couple used old bricks from part of Mulberry to build a

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<sup>108</sup> Mary A. DeCredico, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Confederate Woman's Life* (Madison House: Madison, 1996), pp. 3-16.

<sup>109</sup> C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, *The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. xx.

<sup>110</sup> DeCredico, p. 22.

house in Camden that would be Mary's alone. During the two years that she outlived her husband, the house was virtually all she had left of the two families' prewar wealth.

Mary Boykin Chesnut was in many ways a typical elite white plantation woman of South Carolina. She came from a privileged background and entered into a very similar one on her marriage. She was for many years a social belle and trendsetter, both as a young unmarried woman, then more so as a visible political wife. Yet she was known also for her incisive social commentary and intellectualism. Chesnut was the product of a highly attuned political life that led her to question the institution of slavery. At the same time, however, her understanding of race and class was ultimately that of the world of the South Carolina plantation.<sup>111</sup>

### **The Boston Families of this Study**

The five Boston families of this study were all closely connected through lineage and community involvement to other members of the city's elite. They had in common financial security, ranging from very rich to merely comfortable. Most of these families had gained their wealth from Boston's sea trade or from real estate speculation at least a generation ago, although perhaps not much earlier than that. For these Bostonians, intermarriage was more important as a status identifier than it was for the Charlestonians of this study. Without the necessary kin ties, Bostonians could not enter the uppermost class of the city. With them,

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<sup>111</sup> Woodward and Muhlenfeld, pp. xvi-xxv; Elisabeth Muhlenfeld. *Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

however, elite society might overlook smaller sins, such as wealth that was only recently derived, or the presence of a few less savory characters in one's family tree.

The David Sears family was one of the wealthiest and most prominent in antebellum Boston. Sears (1787-1871) had inherited a large fortune from his father, a shipping merchant and land speculator. His mother was Ann Winthrop, a daughter of one of the most famous New England families. The Sears family traced its ancestry to Richard Sears, who had emigrated to Yarmouth from England in 1630.<sup>112</sup> Although David Sears' great wealth was relatively recent, his blood ties, particularly on his mother's side, gave his family a secure position in the city's elite.

In 1809, two years after graduating from Harvard, David Sears married Miriam Clarke Mason, the daughter of Jonathan Mason, a U.S. Senator. Despite having inherited a large fortune, Sears preferred to work rather than "cultivate elegant uses of leisure."<sup>113</sup> He was an attorney who had studied in the office of Harrison Gray Otis, one of the most powerful Bostonians of the early nineteenth century.<sup>114</sup> Sears did not practice law, however, but pursued several commercial interests, including overseas shipping and land speculation.<sup>115</sup> In addition to being a businessman, Sears was a philanthropist and politician. He served at

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<sup>112</sup> Pessen, p. 113.

<sup>113</sup> Pessen, p. 158.

<sup>114</sup> In the 1820s, Sears built his imposing Beacon Hill house next door to that of Harrison Gray Otis. Allen Chamberlain, *Beacon Hill: Its Ancient Pastures and Early Mansions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925), p. 176.

<sup>115</sup> Pessen, p. 158.

different times as a state senator, U.S. Congressman, as well as Harvard Overseer.<sup>116</sup>

David and Miriam Sears had nine living children. Among those children were the most important members of the Sears family for this research. Their eldest child, Anna Powell Mason (1813-?), is a central figure in this analysis. She married William Amory, a new Harvard graduate, in 1833. William Amory not only had important family connections in Boston but he displayed what was perhaps the second most important quality in determining membership in the city's elite: a lifelong tie to Harvard. After his retirement from law, Amory served as an Overseer of Harvard from 1877 to 1883.

The third daughter of David and Miriam Sears was perhaps the best known of the family in her lifetime. Ellen Sears (1819-?) became famous throughout American society for her scandalous separation from her husband, Paul Daniel Gonsalve D'Hauteville, of Switzerland. She had married D'Hauteville in 1837 for love, against the initial disapproval of her parents, who did not want to see their daughter severed from her Boston roots. When the marriage soured due to the different backgrounds and expectations of the couple, Ellen Sears faced the humiliation of public scandal. She returned to the United States, separating herself from her husband, but was shocked when her husband filed against her for a European divorce.<sup>117</sup> From the time of the engagement, her family had emphasized the importance of her ties to her Boston community to her

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<sup>116</sup> Mary Caroline Crawford, *Famous Families of Massachusetts* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1930), p. 367.

<sup>117</sup> Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, pp. 93-97.

happiness.<sup>118</sup> Ellen D’Hauteville’s continued acceptance by Boston’s elite, even as a divorcée, indicates the close-knit quality of the society. Although she had broken many of their rules, her peers re-admitted her into their ranks. To them, her identity as a member of the Sears family was more important than her scandalous misfortune.<sup>119</sup>

David and Miriam Sears were generous in sharing their wealth with their children. They had made a sizable marriage settlement on the D’Hauteville couple on their marriage, and added an annual stipend to that when Ellen’s husband’s family was not forthcoming with their traditional portion of support.<sup>120</sup> When Anna Sears married William Amory, David Sears gave the couple the house at 43 Beacon Street, next door to his own residence.<sup>121</sup>

The Sears family is notable for its fashionable and expensive real estate in and near Boston. Many contemporaries regarded the David Sears house on Beacon Street as one of the finest in the North.<sup>122</sup> Sears purchased the land in 1818 for twenty thousand dollars, apparently from the painter John Singleton Copley. By 1822, Sears had demolished the existing Copley house and completed his new mansion. The house, designed by Alexander Parris, showed the influence of the Mount Vernon Street home of Sears’ father-in-law, Jonathan Mason. In

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<sup>118</sup> Farrell, pp. 90-91.

<sup>119</sup> In 1852, the divorced Ellen D’Hautville appeared at a ball at the home of Elizabeth Mason. Although her hosts were her cousins, D’Hautville was mixing with all of Boston’s elite society, not only her own close relatives. Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, February 22, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>120</sup> Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, p. 94.

<sup>121</sup> Crawford, pp. 129-130. Although Crawford notes that the Amorys moved into 41 Beacon Street after their marriage in 1833, they may not have done so until 1852. Chamberlain states that the Amorys lived at 43 Beacon Street, the David Sears residence, from 1834 to 1852, when they moved into Number 41. Chamberlain, p. 178.

<sup>122</sup> Pessen, p. 159.

1831, Sears and his neighbor, Harrison Gray Otis, expanded their houses to cover what had been empty land between the two structures. Sears' building resulted in the new home that he presented to his daughter Anna and her husband as a wedding gift.<sup>123</sup> In addition to his Boston home, Sears owned several summer properties outside the city. He was one of the first Bostonians to take up summer residence in Nahant, Massachusetts. By 1845, however, he built a house in Newport, Rhode Island, citing the climate at Nahant as too rough.<sup>124</sup> The Amorys had another country house at Longwood, just outside of Boston, which Anna Sears Amory named for Napoleon's house in St. Helena.<sup>125</sup>

The Mason family of Boston was, through the connection of Miriam Mason Sears, cousins of the David Sears family. The Mason family originally derived its wealth not from commerce in goods, as had so many other Boston families, but almost solely from real estate. Like David Sears, William Powell Mason possessed wealth that dated largely from his father's efforts of the late eighteenth century. Mason had inherited most of his wealth from his father, both in cash and in land. Jonathan Mason (1756-1831), the father of William Powell Mason, was a U.S. Senator and one of the original Mount Vernon proprietors who made fortunes developing and selling prime Beacon Hill property. The Mason family had many connections with Boston's wealthy and elite. Among Jonathan Mason's other children were Miriam Mason Sears and Mary Mason Parkman,

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<sup>123</sup> Chamberlain, pp. 176-178.

<sup>124</sup> Crawford, pp. 367-368.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 130.

who had married Samuel Parkman, joining one of the richest and most elite families of the city.<sup>126</sup>

William Powell Mason (1791-1867) and his second cousin Hannah Rogers Mason (1806-1872) had only three living children. The eldest, Elizabeth Mason Cabot (1834-1920), is one of the main characters of this study. The Masons also had two sons, William Powell Mason, Jr. (1835-1901) and Edward Bromfield Mason (d. 1863). The children were the contemporaries of the youngest children of David Sears and of the children of Ellen D'Hauteville and Anna Sears Amory. One of Elizabeth's closest friends was Anna's daughter Harriet Sears Amory (1836-1865).<sup>127</sup> When Elizabeth Mason married Walter Cabot (d. 1904) in 1860, she created yet another tie between the upper class families of Boston.

The Mason family had strong kinship ties with other elite Bostonians and were significantly wealthy. When William Powell Mason died in 1867, his estate was valued at \$1,450,000. Elizabeth and her brother William Powell, Jr. shared the bulk of the fortune. Her portion was \$600,000 as a lump sum. At the time, her brother estimated that Elizabeth would have \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year in income from that principal.<sup>128</sup>

The Mason family followed the seasonal travel patterns that were common to Boston elites. They summered in Nahant and traveled to Europe every year or two. The family owned three homes: one in Boston, and two country homes, which they maintained through most of Elizabeth Mason Cabot's childhood and

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<sup>126</sup> P. A. M. Taylor, ed., *More Than Common Powers of Perception: The Diary of Elizabeth Rogers Mason Cabot* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 32; Pessen, p. 114.

<sup>127</sup> Farrell, p. 92.

<sup>128</sup> Taylor, p. 8.



young adulthood as vacation homes. Their Boston residence, at 63 Mount Vernon Street, was a row house with a deceptively large interior. In this house, the family hosted balls and concerts with apparent ease of space in the 1850s. The house at Walpole, named Boggy Meadow, had ten bedrooms, including the servants' quarters<sup>129</sup>. One of the family's other homes, Blue Hill, near Canton, had four bedrooms, not including the servants' quarters.<sup>130</sup>

The third Boston family of this study, the Thomas Carys, was related to Elizabeth Mason Cabot's husband, Walter Cabot. The Carys were had strong ties to other elite families and institutions, but were not wealthy on the scale of families like Sears'. The Cary wealth came mostly from the Perkins family, which had amassed its fortune in trade, then moved into law.

Thomas Cary, an attorney, married Mary Perkins in 1820, gaining for himself the unofficial title "the fortunate husband of Thomas H. Perkins' daughter." Much of Cary's personal wealth and social stature came from that connection to the Perkins family, which had an older name in Boston and a far wealthier purse.<sup>131</sup> The rise in prosperity of Thomas Cary as a result of his marriage is similar to that of James Petigru of Charleston. In each city, it was possible to rise socially through marital connections.

Thomas H. Perkins had a large and prosperous law firm in Boston in the early nineteenth century, which eventually employed the husbands of his three daughters. One of the Perkins daughters, Eliza, married Samuel Cabot and

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<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, September 21, 1848. At the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>130</sup> Taylor, pp. 9-10.

<sup>131</sup> Pessen, p. 56.

eventually counted among her children Walter Cabot, the husband of Elizabeth Mason Cabot.<sup>132</sup> After his marriage, Samuel Cabot joined the Perkins law firm.<sup>133</sup> Thomas Cary began his law career first in Vermont, then in New York City, where he joined his brothers in a firm they had established there. Upon an invitation from his father-in-law, Thomas H. Perkins, to join the Perkins law firm in Boston, Cary moved his young family back to his home city.

Mary Perkins and Thomas Cary had six children. Even while the family lived outside of Boston, several of the children were born there, as Mary went home to her Perkins relatives for her confinements. The Cary family consisted of Mary, Elizabeth, Tom, Caroline, and Sally, and Richard.<sup>134</sup> One of the central characters of this study is Caroline Cary Curtis (1827-1917), who was a young bride in the 1850s. As children, the Carys were close to their cousins, the Cabots and the Gardners. The three households had, during Caroline's childhood, twenty-one children in all, making a formidable peer group and creating lifelong ties.<sup>135</sup>

The Cary family, and the large extended family to which they belonged, moved in the elite Bostonian worlds of Boston, Cambridge, Brookline, and Nahant. The Carys spent their summers in Nahant, although the Cabots and Gardners summered in Brookline. The Cary home in Nahant was famous among locals as the first cottage built there by Bostonians. Caroline Cary's grandfather Thomas H. Perkins had built it in the 1820s, then her aunt Eliza Cabot used it for

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<sup>132</sup> Taylor, p. 34.

<sup>133</sup> Curtis, pp. 3-4.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-15.

only two or three years before deciding that she preferred to summer in Brookline.<sup>136</sup>

As adults, the Curtis daughters formed strong connections to Harvard University. The eldest Cary child, Mary, married Mr. Felton, a professor of Greek at Harvard. The second daughter of the family, Elizabeth, known as “Lizzie,” married Louis Agassiz, a Swiss geologist who spent the latter half of his career at Harvard. After Agassiz’s death in 1873, Lizzie Agassiz taught at Radcliffe, and was President of the college for twenty years.<sup>137</sup>

Caroline Cary Curtis married Charles Curtis on April 22, 1852. Charles Curtis’ wealthy father, Thomas Curtis, had made his fortune through shipping, then invested it in the Curtis and Loring law firm. Cary and Curtis became engaged in 1850, but saw several delays of their wedding through 1851, due to young Curtis’ business and financial difficulties.<sup>138</sup> As the young couple had little money of their own, their first household was a modest country house in Winchester, ten miles from Boston. The Curtis’ new abode had only “one woman in the kitchen and one man on the place.”<sup>139</sup> Although the new circumstances of her married life seemed daringly modest to Caroline, she remained connected to her old life through the luxurious material goods that furnished the new house, and through visiting with other members of her class. The young Curtises

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, pp. 124-125.

<sup>138</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis Diary, January 9 and June 2, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society

<sup>139</sup> Curtis, p. 99.

continued to summer with their parents in Nahant, and travel to Europe with their families.<sup>140</sup>

The fourth Boston family of this study is that of Benjamin and Annie Rotch. The Rotch family had longstanding ties to New England, having been prominent both politically and financially since the Colonial era. Although the Rotch fortune had originally derived from the shipping trade, it was by the 1850s no longer tied to merchant activity.

William Rotch, Sr. (1734-1828) was known in his lifetime as “the richest man in Nantucket.” He made his fortune in the whaling business and through his ownership of several ships. At the Boston Tea Party of 1773, one of the ships from which the rebels threw tea was Rotch’s own. William Rotch was a devoted Quaker and pacifist.<sup>141</sup>

In 1846, William Rotch’s grandson, Benjamin Rotch (1817-1882), married Annie Bigelow Lawrence (1820-?). Although Benjamin Rotch had come from a locally prominent family, he increased his social status with the marriage. Annie Lawrence was the daughter of Abbott Lawrence (1792-?). Abbott Lawrence and his brother Amos Lawrence had begun as dry goods merchants and increased their fortune and reputation, becoming textile manufacturers in Lowell, Massachusetts.<sup>142</sup> Although the Lawrence brothers were “self-made men” in the great scope of their fortune, they had been born into a family of comfortable finances and political prominence.<sup>143</sup> Abbott Lawrence was one of the founding

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<sup>140</sup> Curtis, pp. 98-101.

<sup>141</sup> John M. Bullard, *The Rotches* (New Bedford: Privately Printed, 1947).

<sup>142</sup> Pessen, p. 67.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, p. 115.

members of Boston's most exclusive social club, the Temple Club. His cohorts in the early membership of the club included Thomas Curtis and Francis Cabot Lowell.<sup>144</sup>

Benjamin Rotch and Annie Lawrence Rotch had seven children: Edith (1847-1897), Arthur (1850-1894), Aimee (1852-1918), Katherine (1856-1856), Annie (1857-), William (1858-1859), and Abbott Lawrence (1861-1912). In 1873, Aimee married Winthrop H. Sargent, whose family connections included the Winthrops and Olmstedes.<sup>145</sup>

The final Boston family of this study is that of Francis Cabot Lowell II. The Francis Cabot Lowells were among the best-connected elite families of Boston. Through a complex network of kinship and occupational ties, the Lowells and their cousins the Gardners spent the nineteenth century expanding their social and economic influence in the city. Their economic success, and their resulting contributions to Boston's educational and cultural interests demonstrates the close linkages between kin ties, finances, civic involvement, and social class during the period.

Francis Cabot Lowell II (1803-1874) was the son of the textile manufacturing pioneer Francis Cabot Lowell and Hannah Jackson Lowell. Francis Cabot Lowell Senior came from a well-established mercantile family in Salem, Massachusetts. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, he had studied textile factories in England, then reproduced and improved those designs at his

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<sup>144</sup> The club began in 1829 as the Temple Club, became the Tremont Club in the 1840s, then the Somerset Club after the Civil War. Pessen, p. 224-225.

<sup>145</sup> The Lamb Family Papers, Inventory Aid, the Massachusetts Historical Society.

own mills in New England. By his death in 1817, he had left behind being a merchant and become a textile manufacturer.<sup>146</sup>

Francis Cabot Lowell II graduated from Harvard in 1821, then continued his father's work with the Boston Manufacturing Co, significantly increasing his own fortune. He also helped to organize the Phoenix Glass Works of South Boston and the Glendon Iron Company of Pennsylvania. During the 1850s, he was the actuary of the Massachusetts Hospital Life Insurance Co, where he was influential in directing capital into the textile industry.<sup>147</sup>

Francis Cabot Lowell married Mary Lowell Gardner (1802-1874), his first cousin. Their marriage cemented the relationship between the two families. Mary Gardner's siblings married into the Peabody and Grey families, creating links with other important mercantilists. The couple raised four children: George Gardner Lowell (1830-1885), Mary Lowell (1833-), Georgina Lowell (1836-1922), and Edward Jackson Lowell II (1845-1894).<sup>148</sup>

The Lowell family was known in Boston for its cultural contributions as well as its wealth. Francis Cabot Lowell II's uncle John Lowell created the Lowell Institute in his will, endowing it as a free lecture organization for the public. Additional endowments increased the scope of the Institute, so that by 1860, it was by far the foremost of its kind. The family retained a close control over the organization as well as in its older counterpart, the Boston Athenaeum.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Farrell, pp. 40-41.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, pp. 120-122. The Francis Cabot Lowell II Papers, Inventory Aid, the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>148</sup> Farrell, Appendix: Lowell-Gardner Genealogy.

<sup>149</sup> Ronald Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard and the Boston Upper Class, 1800-1870* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), pp. 13-16.

All of the families described here, whether in Boston or in Charleston, were among the most prominent of their era. That power and visibility came from a number of sources, to which each family owed in different measures. Their elite backgrounds were based on combinations of factors including wealth, kinship ties, business alliances, land or slave ownership, and most importantly, the ability to convince others of their worthiness for upper class membership. The varying degrees of importance of each of these components of elite status, and the different ways in which those characteristics influenced the behavior of individuals and groups in the North and the South is the subject of the next chapters.

### **Chapter Three: Social Mobility and Conspicuous Consumption in 1850s America**

In the eighteenth century, Americans measured their social status according to the traditional English system of orders. Within that system, an individual's social class was almost entirely a function of the social class of his family of origination. Occupation and family wealth were closely related. There were three central professions that conveyed high social status: ministry, medicine, and law. The most important quality of these professions was the absence of manual labor. Entry into these strains of work required pre-existing family money and connections. A member of the highest-status professions had to begin with an excellent education and a secure outside income. According to this method of social ordering, status was largely hereditary, as a young person needed the financial and social support of a well-known family to enter the ranks of the professions.<sup>150</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, however, new methods of measuring social status were emerging. Occupational mobility increased, partly as a result of the decreasing importance of traditions of professional deference. The political democracy that characterized Andrew Jackson's administration extended throughout American culture, causing individual opportunity to flourish, at least for white males.<sup>151</sup>

As the class system in the United States became less rigidly ordered in according to the European model and evolved into a more fluid system, indicators

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<sup>150</sup> Haber, Samuel, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>151</sup> Watson, p. 13.



of personal status acquired a new importance to members of all classes. Americans no longer relied entirely on heredity to ascertain social status, yet without that rigid system, class identification was difficult. For rural up-and-comers who were benefiting from the new social mobility, the absence of easy signposts was perhaps a boon. Members of the old elite, however, erected an impressive array of barriers to the social incursions of outsiders. Although the new rules of social ordering appeared to indicate that occupation or wealth were the only requirements for entry into the upper echelon, other means of making social comparisons became more important.

One of the most important qualities that marked members of the hereditary upper classes in the European system was their “gentility.” The word, which dates to the thirteenth century, originally indicated that a person had been born into a prominent family. Among the English, it was “gentle” or “genteel,” from the French “gentil,” and indicated a connection with courtly and civil ideals. The word came, however, to identify anyone who had the personal characteristics commonly associated with gentle birth.<sup>152</sup> By the early nineteenth century, as members of the American middle class found new entry points into the upper classes, the concept of gentility had come to mean a myriad of admirable personal traits, such as “polite,” “tasteful,” “well-bred,” or “refined.”<sup>153</sup> Under that definition, gentility was acquirable by any person who applied himself to personal improvement. In its original aristocratic European setting, the word had conveyed

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<sup>152</sup> Bowman, p. 28.

<sup>153</sup> Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities*, (New York: Knopf, 1992), p. 61.

a sense of one's position in regard to the nobility. In the United States, however, the ideal of gentility became a personal trait.

At the same time, the association of gentility with aristocratic standing persisted in American thought. Personal gentility involved not only a code of behavior. It also indicated wealth large enough to preserve one from the practice of manual labor. Particularly in the agrarian South, gentility was linked to landed wealth and the resulting freedom from physical work.<sup>154</sup> Just as it was for members of European aristocracies, being a "gentleman" was an employment in itself. In both the North and the South, many members (or perhaps would-be members) of the upper class listed their profession in local directories as "gentleman." For some, it was a title that others had bestowed on them; for others, it was a more wishful self-declaration.<sup>155</sup> The title's desirability, however, is a testament to the social lure of the quasi-aristocratic. In America, it was theoretically possible for a social climber to internalize the behavioral precepts of gentility and at the same time pursue that identity as a full-time occupation, as it was for elites in Europe. Entwined with this notion of social advancement through self-definition was the problem of the conveyance to others of the increases in one's status. The answer was social display.

An important sociological work on emulative display in America is that of Thorstein Veblen, who coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption" at the turn of the nineteenth century. Veblen argues that Americans of the Gilded Age based their social behavior on ideals of social emulation and competitive display.

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<sup>154</sup> Bowman p. 29.

<sup>155</sup> Pessen, pp. 49, 70.

Although he formulated his theories for the late nineteenth century, when the exploits of the very rich riveted the middle class, and wealth disparity increased, Veblen's analytic principles are applicable to the 1850s, half a century earlier. Certainly, fortunes of the antebellum era were not on the same vast scale as those of the Gilded Age. However, similar social distinctions existed among the upper class and middle class, so that behavior and material display were central to personal identity. Veblen's argument describes a social class system that uses no formal titles or aristocratic hierarchy, but rather rests at least partially on wealth and commerce. The tension between the ideals of a commercial meritocracy and a pervasive admiration of European aristocracies characterized American culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>156</sup>

Veblen's theory of "conspicuous consumption" states that people assert social status through the purchase and display of material goods. The purchase of goods is, in many cases, more closely related to the subsequent display than to a particular aesthetic enjoyment of those goods. The less utility the goods have, the greater the status conferred.<sup>157</sup> According to Veblen's theory of "conspicuous leisure," the display of personal freedom from manual labor also increases social status. People who are rich enough to have "industrial exemption" from physical work may display their free time through vacations, entertainment, or hobbies that require a large investment of time. Leisure becomes for some individuals a form of daily employment by which they express their wealth.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1864).

<sup>157</sup> Veblen, pp 60-61.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, pp. 41-43.

The relationship between displays of wealth and displays of taste is complex. Veblen's primary focus on pecuniary emulation suggests that the display of wealth is enough to assert social status. However, he does suggest, with his "pecuniary canons of taste," that subtler categories of distinction exist. Although he gives much less attention to specific forms of cultural capital than does Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>159</sup> Veblen suggests their existence through his construction of conspicuous leisure. According to Veblen, a person displays wealth effectively not only through the purchase of expensive items, but through the leisured development of good taste, which relies on qualities other than economic cost.<sup>160</sup>

Veblen stresses that conspicuous leisure is not equivalent to idleness. Rather, it is in itself an activity that must result in a displayable product. That product may be tangible, as in the accumulation of awards for sporting events, or it may be intangible, as in the development of acute familiarity with the nuances of fashionable behavior. Thus, knowledge of good manners and decorum are among the most visible results of conspicuous leisure. Veblen suggests that although these social gestures may have originated as expressions of the time spent acquiring them, they have developed in America an "intrinsic utility." Thus, personal decorum is desirable on two levels: first, it facilitates personal interaction, and second, it advertises the long practice that has gone into its acquisition.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>160</sup> Veblen, p. 100.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

Veblen's theories are strongly rooted in gendered behavior patterns. He describes the male head of the household as the director and main beneficiary of conspicuous consumption and leisure. Although other household members and dependents are the main actors in many forms of conspicuous display, the male head of the household gains the resulting increases in social status. Veblen argues that women are the foremost actors in social display. Married women, at the time he wrote, were likely to aspire to a schedule of conspicuous leisure through which they declared the wealth of their husband. Even among those classes where most forms of conspicuous consumption and accumulation were so out of reach as to be unimportant, the vicarious leisure of the woman of the household remained necessary to conventionality. Although these gender roles are not as applicable to the twenty-first century, they are useful in understanding the 1850s.<sup>162</sup>

According to Veblen, other household members are also important in vicariously displaying the wealth of the male head of the household. Children, servants, and even pets are instrumental in displaying wealth and status. Even if the woman of the house performs outside labor for pay, the children are likely to exhibit conspicuous leisure. In that free time, children might be involved in high-status occupations such as intensive education and preparation for adult society. The employment of servants in a house is both another form of conspicuous consumption, as the presence of employees in ornate livery constitutes a display, and a form of conspicuous leisure, as their presence also makes clear the distance between the employers and manual labor.<sup>163</sup> Finally, Veblen classifies household

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, pp. 67-68.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p. 66-67.

pets according to their intrinsic utility, which is inversely proportionate to their value as displayers of wealth.<sup>164</sup>

Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure suggest the psychological opposition of the self or family unit to the rest of society. In this model, social display can occur anywhere that people meet, whether they are class superiors, peers, or inferiors. However, Veblen stresses the personal psychological gratification of status affirmation, rather than its cultural functionality. As C. Wright Mills argues, the behavior that Veblen describes eases mediation between classes by providing a language of status affirmation. In the absence of a formal hierarchy, whether achieved or hereditary, behavioral clues to status persist in American culture today.<sup>165</sup>

Veblen's theories of conspicuous display and its place in broad patterns of social change have attracted criticism throughout the last century. Critics have focused on several aspects of the work, including its notions of economic progression through barbarianism to utopia, effects of industrialization on individual and collective behavior, and his proposed display-centered mechanisms of social interaction.<sup>166</sup> Although the former two themes of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* are most vulnerable in their logical exposition and the evidence of their political agenda, the latter has fared better over time, becoming the most

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>165</sup> C. Wright Mills, "Introduction," in Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992).

<sup>166</sup> Jerry L. Simich and Rick Tilman, *Thorstein Veblen: a Reference Guide* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1985), pp. x-xvii.

recognizable of Veblen's ideas, and stimulating discourse on twentieth- and twenty-first- century patterns of conspicuous consumption.

The cultural progression that provides the framework for *The Theory of the Leisure Class* has drawn criticism for its abstraction from verifiable anthropological evidence. Veblen traces the movement of Western culture from "peaceable savagery" through the "quasi-peaceable" then "predatory" stages of industrialization and capitalism, ending with the suggestion of a possible utopian future.<sup>167</sup> He argues that the transition from one stage to another is a gradual, spiritual process, rather than relying solely on changes in technology or economy. He states that these modes of being are psychological constructs, rather than empirical patterns in ethnology.<sup>168</sup> Veblen's critics have questioned his foundations for his evolutionary models, noting his liberal adaptation of the theories of Charles Darwin and Lewis Henry Morgan.<sup>169</sup> From that scientific perspective, Veblen developed the notion that economics could be treated as an evolutionary science. Although he was critical of Marxism and other modes of economic theory that began with a normalized, ideal state of being and projected that onto other temporal periods, Veblen also relies heavily on historical conjecture.<sup>170</sup> Despite his outcry against teleology in others' work, Veblen himself created a system of contrived temporal explanations.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Veblen.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>169</sup> Tilman, 1996; see also Stephen Edgell, *Veblen in Perspective: His Life and Thought* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), p. 88.

<sup>170</sup> Joseph Dorfman, *Thorstein Veblen and his America* (London: Victor Gollancz Limited, 1935), pp. 162-165.

<sup>171</sup> Alvin S. Johnson, "Review of The Instinct of Workmanship," *Political Science Quarterly* 21, pp. 631-633.

The key problem that Veblen finds throughout the cultural and economic evolution that he describes is the negative effect of capitalism on human behavior. Veblen outlines a constant tension between “workmanship” and the predatory. In periods characterized by “workmanship,” humans are natural laborers, driven to production for its own sake. Under the influence of personal property and authority over others, however, humans become “predatory,” seeking to build their own success at the cost of that of others. Veblen’s condemnation of both industrialized labor and personal property sparked criticism from conservatives who upheld that aggression was not a natural product of business interests.<sup>172</sup>

The most successful aspect of Veblen’s thesis is the notion that conspicuous display is a tool for social expression and negotiation. Contemporary authors including William Dean Howells and John Dos Passos praised *The Theory of the Leisure Class* for its portrayals of class-based habits.<sup>173</sup> During the twentieth century, many authors expanded on Veblen’s concept that class tastes were closely associated with pecuniary motivations rather than with pure aesthetic enjoyment.<sup>174</sup>

Much of the historiographical analysis of American class barriers relies on the Veblenian theory of emulative consumption, in which upper classes erect barriers between themselves and lower classes through a series of social signs involving conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. The desire for

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<sup>172</sup> Abram L. Harris, “Veblen as Social Philosopher—A Reappraisal,” *Ethics* 63, pp. 1-32.

<sup>173</sup> Simich and Tilman, p. xvi.

<sup>174</sup> See John Brooks, *Showing off in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979); Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (New York: Summit Books, 1983); Russell Lynes, *The Tastemakers* (New York: Harper, 1954); and Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: D. McKay Co, 1960).



upward mobility leads to emulative behavior among the lower classes. At the same time, however, lower classes appropriate and change social rituals if it makes them more functional.<sup>175</sup>

Richard Bushman argues that colonial America was a highly imitative society centered on the imported British ideal of gentility. At the end of the seventeenth century, elite Americans aspired to the European style of refined manners. By the mid-nineteenth century, those ideals of aristocratic refinement had percolated down to the middle and lower classes, mutating into a general sense of “respectability,” which all Americans hoped to attain. The new vernacular gentility made material appearances in the homes of the middle class, where a family made an almost theatrical presentation of their social status through goods. Factories filled the new market demand for household goods such as curtains, sheets, and carpets. Typical class-based layouts for public rooms developed, according to which books and ornaments were prominently displayed as proof of high cultural development.<sup>176</sup>

The industrial revolution of the eighteenth century created a new consumer society in England and America. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, imported goods were flooding the American market. During that period, while the population of the United States was doubling every twenty-five years, the per capita consumption of British manufactured goods was increasing even faster. As the variety of goods available increased, so did the precision with

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<sup>175</sup> See Sidney W Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985). Mintz discusses the coexistence of emulative behavior and reformulation of tea and sugar consumptive rituals to suit the practical needs of the lower classes.

<sup>176</sup> Bushman.

which consumers were able to describe them, and the meanings with which they were likely to imbue those goods.<sup>177</sup>

Clothing and other means of personal adornment are, as Veblen states, excellent examples of conspicuous consumption because they are immediately apparent to observers and remain in constant evidence.<sup>178</sup> As the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century generated class conflict, dress was a frequent target for contemporary criticism. Some colonial authors were opposed to luxury itself, which they perceived as dangerous and immoral. Others, however, criticized the popular use of luxury goods, particularly dress, because it obscured class distinctions. Eighteenth century writers complained that the fashions in clothes that followed the newly available mass-produced printed fabric made it impossible to tell at first a person's station in life.<sup>179</sup> The new technology of fabric production allowed the lower classes to have not only the patterns and stripes that were previously the province of the rich, but to follow the swiftly changing fashions of the upper class. In an emulative pattern of class distinction, the rich sought to erect barriers against the lower classes by raising the bar of fashion expectations. As technology advanced, however, popular capabilities for imitating elite consumption advanced as well.<sup>180</sup>

Negotiations between classes became increasingly fraught with tension as manufactured copies of elite luxury goods became more common. In Paris, the

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<sup>177</sup> T.H. Breen, "Meanings of Things," John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (Rutledge: London, 1993), p. 252.

<sup>178</sup> Veblen, p. 119.

<sup>179</sup> Breen, pp. 254-255.

<sup>180</sup> Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire: a History of Commodity Design* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

cradle of the consumer fashions that eventually reached America, guilds legally restricted the production of certain goods. Those items that individual journeymen cheaply copied for sale to the lower classes became the subject of frequent legal battles. The consumer goods most likely to appear as copies were those for personal adornment, such as jewelry, stockings, and umbrellas. Cissie Fairchilds argues that these “populuxe goods” were desirable primarily for their symbolic value, not their direct utility. For example, gold watches were an easily identifiable symbol of aristocracy. By the end of the eighteenth century, the appearance of gold watches in lower class inventories increased greatly, while cheap watches almost disappeared. The symbolism of owning what had been an elite possession apparently meant much more to lower class consumers than the mere ability to tell time.<sup>181</sup>

As the acquisition of high status goods became more prevalent among the lower classes both abroad and in America, the symbolism of such items became more nuanced, to protect their viability as class barriers. Pierre Bourdieu describes an increasingly exclusive approach to the use and display of luxury items and pastimes. In the system he describes, “taste” supersedes wealth as the key ingredient in consumer items that convey high social status.<sup>182</sup> As the parameters for status assertion through the display of goods become more complex, they also become more difficult for members of the lower orders to

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<sup>181</sup> Cissie Fairchild, “Populuxe Goods in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (Routledge: New York, 1993).

<sup>182</sup> Bourdieu.

imitate. Thus, conspicuous leisure becomes more important, as the learning of subtle differences requires an investment of time.

Bourdieu focuses not only on the display of wealth, but on the display of “taste” and its importance in sophisticated invidious comparisons. As Bourdieu argues, personal preferences in apparel, dining, and entertainment, among other things, are part of a learned system of “cultural capital.” The combination of social choices and the ability to appreciate the distinctions therein compose a person’s symbolic identity. Through their publicly expressed identity, members of the upper classes distinguish themselves from others. The impulse among lower classes to emulate the behavior of classes with higher cultural capital is a central theme to Bourdieu’s argument. That emulative drive is twofold: people seek to acquire the expensive material goods that the rich have, while at the same time, they work (perhaps over generations) to acquire the distinction from the masses that the symbolism of “taste” conveys.<sup>183</sup>

In nineteenth century America, an increasingly rigid code of manners was one of the foremost expressions of specialized knowledge or “taste” to class distinction. The new importance that people placed on behavior and daily ritual reflected the increase in occupational and social mobility of the Jacksonian era. As some social barriers weakened, others developed, resulting in the refinement of the qualifications granting membership in the social elite. Some measures of social success, such as professional training and self-made wealth, were becoming

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

more accessible to all Americans. Others, such as refined manners and diction, were too complex to achieve without explicit instruction.<sup>184</sup>

As emphasis on forms of social intercourse increased, prescriptive literature on manners abounded. Printed manuals of etiquette first became popular in the 1830s, and increased steadily in number through the turn of the century. The influx of population from rural places to cities boosted the popularity of such explicit advice. In urban settings, personal propinquity was so common that many people found they lacked the social graces necessary to gain acceptance. For many upwardly mobile Americans who used market connections to achieve economic and social success, personal appearance and manners were crucial.<sup>185</sup>

The etiquette manual itself presents a contradiction in that it demonstrates the collision of two sets of values. From one perspective, a manual of behavior suggests that gentility is learnable, and thus available to anyone. Yet at the same time, the elevation of elite ideals to the subject of conscious and studied emulation merely emphasizes existing social distinctions. The reader of such manuals was far more likely to be the inept but earnest social climber that appears throughout the nineteenth-century novels of William Dean Howells than to be a socially secure member of the elite.<sup>186</sup> American etiquette manuals themselves struggled with that contradiction, simultaneously presenting class as a ladder to be climbed

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<sup>184</sup> John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>185</sup> Kasson, pp. 6-7.

<sup>186</sup> I found no record that any of the elite Boston or Charleston families of this study made reference to etiquette manuals. Certainly they may have, but it is more likely that even the families of this study that had experienced increases in social status prior to the 1850s were by then secure enough that such manuals would seem unnecessary and perhaps even vulgar.

and a concept fundamentally irrelevant to the United States. One such manual, *Miss Leslie's Behavior Book* of 1859, jeers at the notion of "high birth in America," suggesting that while a class system may exist, it ought to be based on genteel behavior, rather than an arbitrary designation that would (although the manual does not explicitly state this) be forever out of reach to readers who were not of high birth.<sup>187</sup>

The growing American habit of offering up personal behavior for constant public appraisal led to a new cultural conception of self. Even simple rituals, such as speaking with family members or meeting acquaintances on the street, were for some a source of anxiety and self-consciousness. Social relationships became fraught with subtle conflict, as people sought to display an external sense of control, while also feeling a constant internal drive to assess the social position of themselves and others.<sup>188</sup>

The new emphasis on public conformation to refined social ideals had consequences that diverged from the original goal of self-improvement. As individuals became increasingly oriented toward the presentation of their public self, they lost a sense of personal coherence. The appearance of gentility, through adherence to specified precepts of behavior, became more immediately desirable than actual, internal gentility. Although the new culture of self-presentation according to half-understood rules had the most immediate impact on the middle class, members of the upper class underwent a change as well. In a culture of

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<sup>187</sup> Eliza Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (New York: T.B. Petersen, 1859), p. 40.

<sup>188</sup> Kasson, p. 7.

fluid class barriers, people of any social status were becoming increasingly aware of their position and what was necessary to maintain it. Members of all classes were aware of the importance of social form as a status divider. On the heels of the new public manners and daily rituals came consumer culture. Public status display became ever more important as it became more purchasable.<sup>189</sup>

Boston and Charleston in the 1850s were in some ways highly subject to the social changes that increased the importance of conspicuous expressions of status. The two cities were growing (Boston more quickly than Charleston), both geographically and in population. As people adjusted to increasingly urban settings, they may have experienced new feelings of class anxiety. In other respects, however, the class structures of Boston and Charleston differed from the scenarios that Veblen describes. Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are rooted in strong assumptions about race, class, and gender. The significant differences in the way the North and the South, and thus Boston and Charleston, understood these concepts led to different patterns of social display.

The existence of slavery in the South caused upward social and economic mobility to be unavailable for all African-Americans, undermining Veblen's thesis of universal pecuniary and social emulation. An emulative social system requires a fluid social structure, in which individuals believe at least on some level that they have the potential to increase their status. Emulation of the outward appearance of members of the upper classes allows people of lesser

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid, pp. 257-260.

status to perceive that they are becoming similar. In the slave South, fluidity of social barriers existed only among whites. Within that subset of the population however, social mobility was high. As the ownership of land and slaves was the primary identifier of the upper class, entry into that milieu was purchasable. Thus, high social fluidity, even within the upper class, may have led to widespread emulative behavior at all levels.

Bostonian society, in contrast, offered little possibility of movement from the lower into the uppermost orders. Although the capitalist values of the urban North afforded in theory the potential for upward mobility to members of all classes, the uppermost social elite was a tightly knit group. The unavailability of entry into the elite may have lessened emulation from below, or it may in fact have increased it, though to no practical end.

The fluidity of social distinctions in each city may have affected the extent to which members of the elite used public display to assert their status. If the motivation for social display was not only the acquisition of greater public status but the maintenance of high existing status, then members of the upper echelon focused their display on those they perceived as a threat. One example of this is the increase in the complexity of personal refinement and manners during the Jacksonian era. For Charlestonian planters, all other whites were potential social competitors, since even the poorest could eventually attain planter status. Expressions of status were more constant, and standards were more exacting. In Boston's elite society, however, where family connections were the most important conveyer of high social status, social interlopers posed a less serious



threat. Elite Bostonians did assert their status through symbolic consumption, but they directed their display within their own ranks.

The necessity of forcible control in Southern slavery presents another facet in the conspicuous consumption of planters. Eugene Genovese suggests that the pecuniary display in which Southern planters engaged was a means of psychologically controlling members of lower classes. He states that the effect of the aristocratic lifestyle that planters constructed was greater than economic power in controlling both slaves and less wealthy whites. The conspicuous consumption of planters was, Genovese argues, a means of separating themselves from their slaves by underscoring their natural right to rule.<sup>190</sup> The effectiveness of displays of wealth in maintaining the fiction of a natural, feudal system relied on the daily proximity of masters and slaves. Particularly when they lived on their plantations, rather than in town, Charlestonian planter families had limited contact with their social peers. Instead, they were in perpetual proximity to their house slaves. Although field slaves had little personal contact with the white planter family that owned them, their impressions about the family came from external sources such as the display of wealth and leisure.<sup>191</sup>

Veblen discusses slavery briefly in his work, noting that the nation's recent association with it had led Americans to be wary of the "imputation of servility." He finds a decline in the requirement of employers or government agencies that employees wear livery or badges of servitude. This, he suggests, has the effect of increasing the importance of other dependents, such as family

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<sup>190</sup> Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery*, pp. 18, 28.

<sup>191</sup> Stampp, p. 325.

members, as vicarious displayers.<sup>192</sup> Conversely, in a slave society, the role of women and children as vicarious displayers of male wealth might be reduced. In the antebellum South, however, slavery coexisted with a strong emphasis on the vicarious display of household dependents. For planters, the existence of an enslaved workforce did not preclude elite white women and children from the role of displayers of high social status through their appearance and actions. Patriarchy was deeply enough embedded in Southern paternalistic culture that it outweighed other patterns of behavior.

Veblen's theories rely on a specific construction of gender roles. He outlines strong patriarchal values both at the community and family levels, which influence the roles of men and women in conspicuous display. In the 1850s, however, there were increasing differences between the extent to which all women in the North and the South accepted traditionally gendered roles.

Many historians have argued that patriarchy was stronger in the nineteenth century in the South than the North as a result of slavery and regional demographic patterns. Women in the South were less likely to join together in social and religious groups than were Northeastern women, who, Nancy Cott argues, found the basis of feminism in such organizations.<sup>193</sup> The plantation system led to a wide population distribution of planters, during the months when they were not in town. The relative isolation that some planter women experienced, with organized visits from friends and family as their only source of

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<sup>192</sup> Veblen, pp. 67.

<sup>193</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

contact with female social peers, precluded the potential development of early feminist ties.

The strict division between masters and slaves in the South created an environment in which personal domination was a cultural currency. Planter women occupied an uncertain position in terms of their social power: although they were white, and thus of the ruling class, they were also subject to the rule of their male family members. Although elite Southern women benefited from the class structure of a slave society, some were simultaneously aware of their own confinement and lack of personal autonomy.<sup>194</sup>

As Anne Firor Scott points out, in the late antebellum period, many Southerners perceived an increasing threat to their way of life and sought to maintain social stability. The institutions of racial slavery and of gendered submission were at the same time under threat by Northern activism, where women were increasingly joining the ranks of strongly spoken abolitionists. Some Southern women also entered public life to speak against slavery. Among these were the Grimke sisters of South Carolina, who left their slaveholding background to speak out against slavery in Philadelphia in the 1820s. Scott suggests that Southern planters equated change in one system with change in the other, perceiving the downfall of either as a threat to the family and society.<sup>195</sup>

Northern women may have been less subject to patriarchy than Southern women, and for that reason less likely to display patterns of conspicuous

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<sup>194</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>195</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 21.

consumption by proxy for their husbands. However, the “cult of domesticity” that began to develop among Northeastern women in the mid-nineteenth century boosted the importance of women as consumers. Middle-class wives, no longer engaging in waged activities, took on a new role as cultural arbiters. They became responsible for social improvement through reform and benevolent societies. Although these new activities addressed public issues, the mechanism by which most women performed them did not include forays into the public sphere. Instead, women became more entrenched in their roles as conspicuous displayers. Their unpaid work was itself a form of conspicuous leisure, by which a woman demonstrated her husband’s wealth. The feminization of certain social values, such as temperance and education, did not increase the personal independence of women, but rather increased the extent to which they acted as demonstrators of their and their husband’s class. For these women, visible participation in the hobbies and interests surrounding feminine public service and the veneration of domestic life were a primary role.<sup>196</sup>

Among the uppermost classes in Boston and Charleston in the 1850s, the element of “taste,” developed by longstanding leisure, was the key to effective conspicuous display. Only the wealthy could afford to spend months traveling in Europe or a full morning preparing one’s appearance for luncheon. Yet, even more importantly, only the socially initiated would know the details necessary to visit the right places when traveling, or to dress according to a certain code of propriety.

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<sup>196</sup> Ryan.

Enjoyment of the performing arts is one example of the class-based contrasts in the way Americans consumed, and the differing status that accrued with each style. In the mid-nineteenth century, several cultural pursuits that now appeal only to elite audiences were mainstream. Lawrence Levine describes the accessibility of Shakespeare and opera in the nineteenth century, noting that people of all social backgrounds attended performances and were highly familiar with the work. However, class distinctions did exist.<sup>197</sup>

During the early nineteenth century, opera drew audiences of all social and economic classes. In New Orleans in the 1830s, opera was popularly understood to be a form of “public amusement” rather than being solely the cultural property of the affluent.”<sup>198</sup> As the century progressed, however, cultural appreciation of opera diverged between those who could understand the original language of the piece and those who could not. Opera in English translation became a component of popular culture. Opera performed in the original European language, particularly Italian, became to Americans a symbol for the exotic and the fashionable. The price of enjoying opera also varied greatly. A private box might cost thousands of dollars, in contrast to the few dollars that individual seats cost. Those patrons who chose the expense and the exclusivity of private boxes gained more in their social experience of the evening than in their musical enjoyment of the performance.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>198</sup> *The New Orleans Bee*, 1836, quoted in Levine, p. 88.

<sup>199</sup> Levine, pp. 85-103.

At the heart of the use of conspicuous display as a means of status assertion is the question of subtle distinction. A sign of high social status is useful only if there is an audience that can understand its meaning. Displays of wealth alone are relatively straightforward methods of creating a self-image and are understandable by almost any audience. Among American elites of the 1850s, however, more complex methods of class identification operated.

In the transformation of opera into a highbrow form of entertainment, principles of both the raw display of wealth and the more refined display of taste coexisted. The more ostentatious of the two behaviors, conspicuous consumption, was apparent to all observers. The cost of a private box was public knowledge. If it was available for purchase or lease by anyone with the wherewithal, then the display was purely one of money. If a private box was more difficult to obtain, for example, if an exclusive social group took charge of disbursing the seats, then the display became even more meaningful. Both wealth and connections would now be on display, for those who had the familiarity with the city's customs to understand them. Finally, the enjoyment of opera in Italian was, for some elite mid-nineteenth century Americans, a more effective social statement than anything that directly involved money. Opera in Italian was more desirable than opera in English, because it proclaimed a long study of a foreign language or a musical art form. That proficiency in an esoteric skill was a sign of conspicuous leisure.

In each of the above examples of social statements through the newly highbrow opera of the mid-nineteenth century, a different level of social

communication exists. With each increase in the encoded nature of the display, a different audience becomes the focal point of the action. As Veblen's model of conspicuous display includes social negotiations both within classes and between classes, different audiences are necessarily engaged, perhaps simultaneously.

This project examines the ways in which the elite of Boston and Charleston engaged different audiences in different ways to express their social status. In each city, contrasting tensions existed between the laboring class, the middle classes, and the uppermost stratum. Those relationships dictated whether elites relied more on outright displays of wealth or on more nuanced demonstrations of exclusivity and taste to achieve or maintain their high social status. Families who were more socially entrenched were less likely to worry actively about which appearances were appropriate, but all were conscious of their outward effect. Whether they used obvious or subtle methods to outwardly mark their social status, elite Bostonians and Charlestonians did link at some level their public and private displays with the maintenance of their upper class identity.

## **PART TWO: BOSTON AND CHARLESTON FAMILIES**

### **Chapter Four: Conspicuous Display among Children and Young Adults**

One of Veblen's theories of status-related display is that a household's dependents were the primary actors in displays of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. Women, children, and servants proclaimed their own social status through display while at the same time demonstrating the status of the male head of the household. As young people had a significant role in the fashioning of their family's social status, their parents trained them carefully in the necessary patterns of behavior. Through their knowledge of social forms and through their display of their family's wealth and "good taste," children and young adults were responsible for vicariously demonstrating the social status of the head of their household.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, upper class Americans placed an increasing importance on "separate spheres" for men and women. According to that set of cultural ideals, men belonged in the public sphere, participating in economic and political activities, while women belonged in the private sphere, ruling the household. As economic production moved from the home to public settings, women were no longer associated with production, but were instead the keepers of culture and family. The ideal domestic scene became one of calm, yet elevated ideals, in which the female head of the household personally set the tone. Within this "cult of true womanhood," nineteenth century women were



responsible for taking care of the cultural and social development of their family.<sup>200</sup> The gendered division of attention to family involvement in cultural activities and social forms supports Veblen's notion that women were by the end of the century the main actors in a family's conspicuous display. As he notes, women of both the middle and upper classes of that period demonstrated more social status if they refrained from paid work and any manual labor.<sup>201</sup>

The gender roles that prevailed in the United States in the 1850s strongly influenced the ways in which young members of the elite participated in forms of conspicuous display. Children, like women, were increasingly gaining social status for abstaining from work. By mid-century, however, only the upper class was able to achieve that goal for their children, making their conspicuous displays of leisure highly visible to other classes. Elite children demonstrated their social status, and that of their family, through ornate dress and decoration according to particular forms. At the same time, they also displayed status through patterns of leisure behavior, through formal education and knowledge of refined manners.

Formal education of children was a key opportunity for the public display of a family's wealth and refinement. For boys, an emphasis on schooling was common to both the North and the South. Girls, however, experienced varying opportunities for formal education in the two regions. The different emphasis that elites of the two regions placed on patriarchy and the ideals of "separate spheres"

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<sup>200</sup> Ryan; Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: the Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Michael Gordon, *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

<sup>201</sup> Veblen, p. 230.

gave girls of all classes in the North and the South different possibilities for their education.

In both regions, the advanced education of girls and young women presented a cultural problem due to the cultural expectation that formal schooling was designed to prepare one for paid employment. For upper class young women, entrance into the male sphere of influence was not a possibility. Instead, they looked ahead to a role in the “cult of womanhood” that included improving the family and home, but not earning a wage through work outside the home.

Educational opportunities for girls in both regions demonstrated a tension between intellectual improvement and preparation for society. Southern girls’ schools, however, were more likely than Northern schools to gloss over academics in favor of conversational skills and deportment. Yet, in both Charleston and Boston, much of the social status of the elite was linked to the personal appearance and behavior of its women. For girls and young women, this often meant conformation to an ideal of a single sphere of influence. Elite women, in gaining a less rigorous academic education than their male counterparts, prepared for a different sphere of influence. At the same time, that conception of gender roles, and the way it impacted female education, was a form of conspicuous display. Through their educational unfitness for paid work, elite women exhibited conspicuous leisure, expressing the high status of their family.

The ways in which elite children in both regions operated as conspicuous displayers of social status were linked to the changing role of children in American society since the colonial period. In the seventeenth century, parents

viewed their children as small, undeveloped adults. Furniture makers designed narrow cradles to keep infants stretched tall, like adults, rather than allowing them to lie in a fetal position. Children wore scaled down versions of adult clothes and used stiff manners in public. The eighteenth century brought much less formal methods of childrearing to America. Enlightenment thought encouraged a reliance on Nature as a means of hardening children into adults. By the mid-nineteenth century, ideas about childhood were changing again. Childhood and children became romanticized icons of innocence and unspoiled morals. As a result of their newness and their freedom from worldly corruption, children were believed to be spiritually superior to adults. Clothing for children was usually not strongly gender specific. Unlike the scaled down fashions of the previous eras, however, children's dress was very different from that of adults.<sup>202</sup>

Children in different economic situations differed primarily in the group of people with whom they regularly came in contact. That set of experiences dictated the children's potential audience for conspicuous display, as well as defining the boundaries of the children's daily activities. Children who worked among adults for wages, whether in industry or agriculture, had little opportunity for age-specific differentiation in clothes. Instead, the dress and manners of working children approximated those of adults, for reasons of socialization and practicality. In contrast, children who had the economic freedom to refrain from paid work were subject to the increasing age differentiation in clothing and activities in the nineteenth century. Elite children, because their daily experience

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<sup>202</sup> Karin Lee Fishbeck Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992).

was so different from that of their parents, became important actors in the family's status display.

In both Boston and Charleston, even the smallest children and infants were likely to display status through dress or expensive accessories. Many elite parents chose to dress their children lavishly and to give them ostentatious material goods, despite the prevailing cultural ideals of unburdened and innocent childhood. The arrival of a new baby was an occasion for lavish gifts to the child and the new parents. When Caroline Cary Curtis of Boston bore her first child, Charles Curtis, Jr., in 1854, she received several luxury baby items from family and friends. His Curtis grandparents sent baby Charles "a very handsome silver mug" at his birth.<sup>203</sup> The following Christmas, the Curtis family received several expensive items for their son, including a "silver spoon and fork...for Baby."<sup>204</sup>

The clothes of children, like those of adults, varied in refinement and decoration according to the event for which they would be worn. A christening ceremony was a milestone that introduced the baby to society as a member of the family. For such an occasion, an infant's dress was as fine as was affordable. The christening gown itself was a new tradition in the nineteenth century, accentuating with its length and stateliness the infant's grace and innocence. Despite being slightly more elaborate than everyday wear, however, christening gowns were usually similar to a baby's ordinary dress.<sup>205</sup> The event, however,

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<sup>203</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis Diary, October, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid, December 23, 1854.

<sup>205</sup> Calvert, p. 97.

gave members of elite society an opportunity to present their own perceptions of their social status to others through the appearance of their baby.

In 1858, Bostonian Anna Sears Amory and her mother, Miriam Sears, corresponded about the christening of a young cousin. Amory was pleased to hear that the ceremony had gone well, noting "...the baby must have been superb in her Paris dress and Diamond bracelets."<sup>206</sup> This infant girl's christening outfit had more in common with a woman's ball attire than the loose white garments that babies wore for their everyday clothing. For the Sears cousins, lavish display characterized the family's appearance in public, even for an occasion designed around an infant.

The ordinary costume of elite babies and young children combined elements of the expensive dress that parents, especially mothers, were used to wearing themselves, and the simple garments that were considered appropriate for young children of all classes. Even the simplest garments for babies could show ostentation in the form of an extensive wardrobe of white, which implied that the family had the staff necessary to keep those items freshly laundered. Adding formal, adult elements to a child's costume too early was no longer the fashion in the nineteenth century, as it spoiled the appearance of youthful innocence.<sup>207</sup> Yet at the same time, it was hard for some adults to resist the temptation to dress their children in the finest clothes that they could afford.

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<sup>206</sup> Letter from Anna Sears Amory to Mrs. David Sears, July 3, 1858, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>207</sup> Calvert, p. 97.

In her 1864 novel, *Gerald Gray's Wife*, Charlestonian Susan Petigru King tells a story of a young and blissful couple who welcome their first children, twins, into the world with pride. The children, even when they are very small, are swathed in “flounces and frills” of Valenciennes lace.<sup>208</sup> Their dress is consistently fine, rather than being reserved for a special occasion, such as a christening.

In 1851, Bostonian Anna Sears Amory worried that her infant son's clothes were not as fine as they ought to be. She wrote to her mother, Miriam Mason Sears, in Paris, asking that she bring clothes for the baby when she returned to the United States. Although the two women had had considerable prior correspondence about their own clothes, Sears Amory did not mention them in conjunction with those for her baby. Instead, she worried that although the baby was “beautiful,” her friend Emily thought that she did not dress him “*smart enough*” [sic]. Sears Amory asked her mother to “purchase him a suit for the Winter, that [Emily] may not be shocked at the meanness of his apparel.”<sup>209</sup> Only a few weeks later, Amory wrote again to her mother about the baby, noting that she is “just getting him a Cloak embroidered, not that I think such things befitting his age, but only to please Emily...we are the best of friends, but we [Sears] are too plain by half.”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Susan Petigru King, *Gerald Gray's Wife* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 271. While Petigru King's earlier novel, *Lily*, presents elements of her own youth and courtship days, this work tells the story of a marriage gone badly wrong, as did her own. Both works draw heavily on Petigru King's own experiences and surroundings.

<sup>209</sup> Letter from Anna Sears Amory to Mrs. David Sears, April 20, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>210</sup> Letter from Anna Sears Amory to Mrs. David Sears, May 4, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Annie Rotch also dressed her children in expensive finery. While traveling in London and Paris in 1851, only five years after her marriage, she bought her two children considerable clothing, much of which was expensive and ornate. The children, Edith (four years old) and Arthur (one year old), received items of clothing that included hats, aprons, “bronze shoes,” side combs, and silk jackets. In 1851, Rotch bought a bonnet for her four-year-old daughter Edith, at a cost of 15 shillings as well as a hat for her son Arthur, for 12 shillings. At this time, a high-quality hat for Rotch herself might cost twice as much, as was the case for the pink silk bonnet that she purchased early in 1852 for 30 shillings.<sup>211</sup> The expense and the variety of the children’s clothes, particularly those of the infant Arthur, suggest a simultaneous yet not contradictory adherence to ideals of finery appropriate to the family’s high social and economic status as well as ideals of particular garb appropriate to children, such as bronze shoes and aprons.

Even if children wore clothes that were simpler than those of adults, they still followed the prevailing fashion of changing costume several times a day, as different events unfolded. Louisa Cheves McCord Smythe recalls a summer in Naragansett in 1857 when she and her younger sister would wear “only” three ensembles a day, complete with hats. Although they were on vacation, they still “dressed for dinner.” The limit of only three outfits per day, however, “was a healthy plan, and saved our clothes very much.”<sup>212</sup> The McCord girls, even in informal surroundings that allowed them to relax their standards somewhat,

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<sup>211</sup> Annie B. Rotch Diary, December 1851-March 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>212</sup> Louisa Cheves McCord Smythe, “Recollections of Louisa McCord Smythe,” p. 23, at the South Carolina Historical Society.

followed the fashion of dressing carefully and with an eye to their appearance to others.

One way in which the clothing of children conformed closely to gender conventions of the 1850s was in the wearing of any sort of trousers. During the last century, young boys had customarily long worn either trousers or a frock. By the 1830s, however, the combination of the two into a knee-length sac and pantaloons appeared as an import from London and Paris. Parents quickly accepted the fashion for boys, but resisted it for girls. Girls had never before worn any divided trousers, and the idea of their doing so was shocking to some American consumers. The popular objection to girls wearing pantaloons, even under long skirts, was that they would no longer be modest, and would grow up to be without culture and refinement. By the 1850s, the social furor on the topic had largely subsided and pantaloons were becoming widely acceptable for both girls and women.<sup>213</sup>

The extent to which elite consumers in Boston and Charleston accepted the innovation of pantaloons for girls as a change in gendered fashions reveals their commitment to patriarchy and their interest in innovative display. The Cary family of Boston was quick to take up the new European fashion for pantaloons. An 1842 silhouette by August Edouart shows Caroline Cary, aged 15, with her two younger siblings, Richard and Sarah (Sally). Sally Cary, aged 12, wears a calf-length full skirt with pantaloons clearly visible beneath. Caroline Cary, however, wears a floor-length skirt, with no pantaloons apparent. Although the

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<sup>213</sup> Calvert, pp. 99-100.



silhouette was made during a time when this new style of clothing for girls was controversial, the Cary girls had already adopted the fashion. Their willingness to take up this androgynous style of dress suggests that they were eager enough to embrace new fashions that they did not allow their prejudices about gender roles for women to extend entirely into the realm of girlhood.

As children grew older, they began to attend organized events at the homes of family and friends. Although they were not responsible for the same standards of formal behavior as adults were, they did experience pressure to fit into public gatherings without giving offense. Elite children were conscious of the need to behave and dress differently when in “company.”

One common way in which parties of mixed ages met was for outdoor picnics. Among Northerners, where weather was not hospitable year-round, such gatherings were frequent in the summer. In August of 1850, Anna Cabot Lowell II of Boston described in her journal an afternoon’s picnic at the home of an acquaintance. She noted that although the scene was attractive, the entire company felt constrained in their actions, preventing the guests from genuinely enjoying themselves.

The place looked beautifully and it was a most picturesque scene—the children danced on the smooth shaven lawn—a band of music played...It was a beautiful picture—but as for real enjoyment or even merriment, there was little. The children were afraid to frolic, for fear of spoiling their company dresses and company manners—the young ladies looked *ennyués* and heated, and the old ones quite out of place. The young mothers looked the happiest, proud to show off their pretty children.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Anna Lowell Cabot II Journal, Aug 29, 1850, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Although the picnic was set outdoors, there was little relaxation from a mode of social performance. Even the children were so conscious of their appearance to others that they could not behave naturally. Although these children belonged to elite families, and were as such held to a relatively high standard of behavior at home, it was clearly increased when among adults from the same social status. Adults, as well, seemed concerned with their appearance and that of their children to the exclusion of enjoying the event.

When among a broader range of company, children may have given less attention to their appearance and the resulting expression of family status. Traveling abroad was a common pastime for elite families of both Boston and Charleston. Although American travelers often met friends from home while away, they also met with the necessity of presenting themselves to a new audience, even if they did not meet formally. The responsibility of that presentation fell on children as well as adults. The wrong behavior was not only unattractive, but it weakened the family's position in elite society.

When Anna Sears Amory toured in Europe in 1855, her well-traveled Boston relatives gave her advice on where to go and how to behave. Her younger brother, Bob Amory, included a note to Ellen's children, instructing them: "Ellen, sit up straight, and Harriet don't cross your feet, its considered under bred."<sup>215</sup> With his lighthearted comment, he teases the two girls, but he also reveals longstanding family instruction on matters of comportment. The penalty that he suggests to them, if they do not follow the instructions, is not that they will be

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<sup>215</sup> Letter from Bob Amory to Anna Sears Amory, August 29, 1855, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

sore or lose their balance, or become stuck in their bad posture. Rather, he reminds them that they will appear “under bred.” Even in a rote reminder from a friendly uncle, the phrase suggests a fear of damaging the family’s social status through one’s own errant behavior.

When it came to formal education, girls experienced stricter social controls than did boys. Although members of the elite did not usually attend public schools, the contrast between the educational systems in Boston and Charleston are indicative of the difference social constructions of female education in the two cities. Northern and Southern culture took two different views of the purpose of educating girls. In both regions, the utility of higher education for young women was controversial, as popular thought associated the rigors and expenses of high school with practical preparation for employment. As women were unlikely to seek highly skilled employment, according to the new ideals of the middle class, they found it difficult to attain a serious education. Yet Bostonians were more willing to offer higher education to young women than were their Southern counterparts, largely due to the longstanding Puritan tradition of literacy in the city.

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, Boston made significant improvements to its free public school system. The strong Protestant tradition in the city, with its attention to individual Bible study, had created a highly literate population. By the 1830s, girls’ attendance at elementary public schools was as common as that of boys. Public high school for Bostonian girls, however, was a subject of contention. Most citizens viewed formal education as

financially practical only as it prepared young people for productive work. Since most women did not perform skilled work for wages, Bostonians decried the expenditure of city funds on female higher education as wasteful.<sup>216</sup>

In Charleston, free public education for women developed even more slowly. The city did not have the tradition of widespread literacy that Boston did, partly because most of the labor force was enslaved and prohibited by law from receiving any formal schooling. The existence of slavery in Charleston significantly retarded the formation of free public schools, even for whites, as the education of the poorest segment of society was not a social priority. The low social emphasis on education in general, compounded with the strong patriarchal ideals of the South, led to a poorly developed sense of the importance of female education. With respect to even seriously considering organized public education for girls, Charleston lagged behind Boston.<sup>217</sup>

Although upper class girls in both cities were unlikely to attend public school, the popular social perceptions of female education influenced approaches to private schooling. In Boston, where the notion of public education of girls for the sake of pure intellectual development was at least under consideration, elite girls were more likely to gain an education that was similar to that of their male contemporaries. In Charleston, where gender differences in education were more pronounced, the education of young women focused more on social graces than on the advanced study of academic subjects such as Latin or mathematics.

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<sup>216</sup>Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, pp. 66-68.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63-72.

Although the academic education of Elizabeth Mason Cabot of Boston was discontinuous and at times informal, she believed that “the cultivation of the mind” was as important for women as for men. Mason Cabot applauded the availability of public schools for girls, noting that general intellectual improvement was more important than “learning to sew and keep house.”<sup>218</sup> Mason Cabot received most of her education at home, or as part of a private group of her peers. As a girl, she spent several years as a regular pupil at the small school of Anna Jackson Cabot Lowell, a widowed member of the city’s elite. By her mid-teens she had a schedule of meeting with other students for lessons twice a week at the home of Mrs. Hodges. Elizabeth studied several languages, mathematics, history, geography, and biography. With close friends, she frequently organized literature study groups.<sup>219</sup> In 1855, when she was twenty-one, she attended a series of symposia organized by Lowell, who had gathered “fifty or more” of her old students for two hours of reading and discussion.<sup>220</sup> Throughout her teens and young adulthood, Mason Cabot’s desire to extend her education warred with the social norm that female education was unnecessary. At only fifteen, she considered leaving school to devote herself as a companion to her “melancholy” mother—she felt a particular responsibility as she was the only daughter in the house.<sup>221</sup>

In Charleston, educational opportunities for young women were so limited that parents who wished their daughters to have a serious academic grounding

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<sup>218</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, P.A.M. Taylor, ed., August 15, 1849.

<sup>219</sup> Taylor, pp. 15-16.

<sup>220</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, P.A.M. Taylor, ed., November 3, 1855.

<sup>221</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, December 16, 1849, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

sent them North. Although some schools existed in the city for daughters of the elite, they gave equal attention to academics and the refinement of social graces. Mrs. St. Julien Ravenel of Charleston describes in her memoirs the two “most fashionable” Charleston schools for girls in the 1850s. She notes that the Charleston girl who attended either Madame Talvande’s or Madame Dady’s school learned, in addition to her lessons, “a careful demeanor and an absolute submission to the will of her teacher.”<sup>222</sup> Many girls, however, attended boarding schools for short periods of their young adulthood, for “polishing off.” Mary Boykin Chesnut recalls the relaxed attitude that Charleston’s most famous teacher of the period, Madame Talvande, held regarding these students: “These grown, young ladies...took lessons from every Master—Music, dancing, and any thing whatsoever there was any body on the spot to teach. [Madame Talvande] did not expect this top dressing to amount to much, and she left them to an easy and pleasant life.”<sup>223</sup>

The traditional scholastic programs among the Charleston elite dictated a much more rigorous education for boys than for girls. Typical curricula included “Classical for boys, modern languages and accomplishments for girls.”<sup>224</sup> Those accomplishments included the demonstration of refined appearance and behavior. Boykin Chesnut notes that if the students were “handsome, well mannered, graceful, and a credit to her establishment, [Madame Talvande] adored them.”<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Mrs. St. Julien Ravenel, *Charleston: the Place and the People* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), p. 365.

<sup>223</sup> Mary Boykin Chesnut, “Two Years or the Way We Live Now,” reproduced in entirety in Elisabeth Showalter Muhlenfeld, “Mary Boykin Chesnut: The Writer and her Work” (Unpublished doctoral dissertation: The University of South Carolina, 1978), p. 526.

<sup>224</sup> Ravenel, pp. 123-124.

<sup>225</sup> Chesnut, “Two Years or the Way We Live Now,” p. 526.

Although the education at Madame Talvande's was not as academically difficult as at many boys' schools, it was an expensive investment in a young woman's future. One term might typically cost \$500, although extras such as music lessons and theater tickets might increase the cost to \$700. Enrollment was small, ranging from about twenty-five to fifty girls.<sup>226</sup>

Parents who desired that their daughters receive the rigorous education that was common for boys sent them to schools in Philadelphia and New York. James Petigru sent his eldest daughter, Caroline, to Madame Binsse's New York finishing school for only one year, bringing her back in 1834, when she was only fifteen. Petigru's commitment to his daughter's education, particularly her language skills, was such that he recognized the inadequacy of the local academies. However, despite his better judgment, he did not ensure that she remained at school. Caroline disliked the strict environment of Madame Binsse's and the busy atmosphere of New York itself. At the same time, her mother, Jane Amelia Petigru, pressed her husband to allow their daughter to return home to take over household duties. Finally, Petigru capitulated to the wishes of both women, though he wrote to his sister that "Fifteen is not an age to finish one's education and in taking [Caroline] from school I do wrong, and do it knowingly."<sup>227</sup>

James Petigru's younger daughter, Sue, had no more success with boarding school than her sister. She attended first Madame Talvande's school in

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<sup>226</sup> DeCredico, pp. 8-9.

<sup>227</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, p. 43; Letter from James L. Petigru to Jane Petigru North, August 4, 1835, James Petigru Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., quoted in *Family of Women*, p. 43.

Charleston, then Madame Guillon's boarding school in Philadelphia. She disliked both institutions intensely, resisting the "improving" society toward which her parents tried to propel her, and decrying the utility of the feminine program of French, music, and drawing.<sup>228</sup> In her 1885 book, *Lily: a Novel*, Sue Petigru King satirizes her own experience in her account of the stifling and ultimately useless studies of two Charlestonian girls at a Philadelphia boarding school. In the novel, one of the girls notes that the accomplishments that girls learn at such schools are abandoned as soon as they marry and are "a great waste of time and dollars."<sup>229</sup>

Adele Petigru Allston's daughters came to school-going age later, and benefited from the family's experience in such matters. For their girls, the Allstons sought a combination of academic rigor and attention to feminine deportment. In their early years, the Allston children learned together in a small schoolhouse on their property. Their teacher was an Englishwoman who previously had been governess to a noble family in her own country. When Della, the eldest girl, reached the age of thirteen, the Allstons sent her to boarding school.<sup>230</sup> Although Della first attended Mrs. Dupre's school in Charleston in 1851, her parents found the standard of work so poor that she soon returned home again.

In 1853, however, Acelie Togno came to Charleston from Philadelphia, opening a new school that was on a par with the now defunct Madame Talvande's. Elizabeth, the Allston's second daughter, describes the school as

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<sup>228</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, p. 44.

<sup>229</sup> King, p. 72.

<sup>230</sup> Pringle, pp. 124-125.



“select,” noting that it “took only a limited number.” When Elizabeth followed her sister into Madame Togno’s in 1854, at the age of nine, she thrived on the program of constant French and found herself stimulated by academic competition in arithmetic, history, and dictation. Most of the twenty boarders, however, were there for “finishing off.” The most beautiful girls always appeared in the first ranks when the school appeared in public to attend concerts or plays.<sup>231</sup> All of the girls attended mandatory parties, at which Madame Togno required sparkling conversation, in practice for the girls’ future careers as belles.<sup>232</sup>

Much of the ambiguity that existed in both regions regarding the education of girls results from the role of women, particularly among the elite, as symbols of vicarious leisure. Elite women planned to go from their childhood home directly into marriage, without ever working for a wage. For that reason, many among them believed that the training of women in intellectual pursuits was wasteful. Instead, the education that most young women received was tailored to their future roles as nurturers. This notion of “republican motherhood” is apparent in Mary Boykin Chesnut’s description of her nieces’ excellent education. Chesnut believed that the daughters of her sister Kitty were excellently prepared for life in their “refinement of ideas and manners...excellent French and German accent &c &c –above all *Goodness*—pureness of life and conduct.”<sup>233</sup> According to this

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid, pp. 127-129.

<sup>232</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>233</sup> Mary Boykin Chesnut, “We Called her Kitty,” reproduced in entirety in Elisabeth Showalter Muhlenfeld, “Mary Boykin Chesnut: The Writer and her Work” (Unpublished doctoral dissertation: The University of South Carolina, 1978), p. 820.

ideal, a woman was well educated if she had the ability to mix well socially and act as a positive influence on her family (both of birth and of marriage).<sup>234</sup>

Personal accomplishments of the drawing room variety were the goal even in educational pursuits abroad. When the Boston Lowells visited Rome in 1852, they stayed long enough to engage music teachers for their girls. For Nina Lowell, a misunderstanding rooted in class niceties complicated the hiring of a music teacher. At first, an Italian lady of important social connections but reduced circumstances was engaged, partly because Mrs. Lowell wished to “have a lady near [her] daughter.” The teacher, Constanza Bennetti, who protested that she did not usually give lessons, soon took offense when she heard a garbled rumor that another teacher was supplementing her work. In fact, the other teacher was instructing Mary Lowell. The Lowells soon replaced Bennetti. Although their original intent may have been for Nina to improve not only her music but her own gentility through the connection, the differences in power between the Lowells and Bennetti led to an unsustainable relationship.<sup>235</sup>

The important aspects of female education were more located in social or spiritual improvement than intellectual training. For girls from both Boston and Charleston, as shown by the experiences of Elizabeth Mason Cabot and Caroline Petigru, strong maternal pressures existed for the girls to leave advanced education for domestic activities. Both of these families could afford to employ (or buy, in the slave South) household helpers, indicating that the main motive of

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<sup>234</sup> Steven Stowe, “The Not-So-Cloistered Academy: Elite Women’s Education and Family Feeling in the Old South,” Walter J. Fraser, ed., *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985).

<sup>235</sup> Letters between Mrs. Lowell and Constanza Bennetti, January, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society

the two mothers was their own loneliness. Yet also, there is the implication that excessive education for girls was unseemly as well as unnecessary. Girls who received the intellectual training that boys did became better fit for paid work, decreasing their conspicuous leisure and the social status of their families.

As young members of the Boston and Charleston elite prepared to leave the world of childhood for adulthood, they faced a new series of social hurdles, in which display played an even more significant role. The social graces that they had learned at school and at home were now put into practice. In both Boston and Charleston, the social interactions of young people relied heavily on ritual. Tradition governed the appropriate entertainment, dress, manners, and degree of familiarity between boys and girls. Young women, as they entered adult society and opened the door for courtship and marriage, lived in a flurry of conspicuous consumption and carefully mannered behavior.

Among the skills that girls had to master before they reached adulthood was comportment at formal parties and balls. Dancing class was a rite of passage for elites in both Boston and Charleston. Even while traveling abroad, Bostonian mothers organized dancing instruction for their daughters, no matter how young. While in Paris in 1852, Annie B. Rotch sent her five-year-old daughter Edith to dancing class, at a cost of 15 shillings per month.<sup>236</sup>

In Boston, the “dancing master of the day”<sup>237</sup> for more than thirty years was Lorenzo Papanti. Papanti conducted classes and dancing assemblies from the

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<sup>236</sup> Annie B. Rotch Diary, March, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>237</sup> Curtis, p. 71.

late 1830s until his death in 1872, when his son carried on the work.<sup>238</sup> As late as 1885, when William Dean Howells wrote *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Papanti's dancing classes were a byword for the most desirable of Boston society. In Howells' novel, the two *nouveau riche* Lapham girls are just out of the orbit of elite Bostonians. They "had learned to dance at Papanti's; but they had not belonged to the private classes. They did not even know of them, and a great gulf divided them from those who did."<sup>239</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis did attend private lessons with Papanti, whom she recalls as dignified and possessing of a respect from the community unusual to a dancing master.<sup>240</sup>

Elizabeth Mason Cabot took dancing class from Papanti in the 1840s and 1850s. When she was only ten, in 1844, she began to go to the classes of older girls mostly as a spectator, although she would participate in a few dances. In 1856, when she was twenty-two, she attended what appears to have been her final season of dancing classes. She describes the last class of the season as a party, at which she was highly conscious of her lack of marriage prospects and her peers' opinion of her.

In the evening Mother went with me to the dancing class, the 13<sup>th</sup> and last. The room was very crowded, many strangers, everyone in their best dresses too, and looking very well. I wore my new pink; carried a bouquet sent by Mr. Aa. Hubbard...It was very brilliant, and I had a sufficiently good time; but though I feel very sorry to think that this is about the end of society for me as a young lady, and sigh that it should be past, I feel no desire to continue. When I say the end, I mean that in America, and Boston, a girl who has been in society three winters, has nearly climbed

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<sup>238</sup> Taylor, pp. 316-317.

<sup>239</sup> William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Ticknor and Company, 1885), pp. 26-27.

<sup>240</sup> Curtis, p. 71.

the hill, and must begin to give way to new aspirants, absurd as it sounds.<sup>241</sup>

The final transition from childhood to adulthood was more marked in both regions for women than for men. Elite women usually displayed their long-practised social skills at a party given particularly in honor of their “coming out.” Although young men also engaged in rituals to mark their adulthood, as in the case of a European Grand Tour, those displays were more tangentially directed. The social debut of a young woman occurred in her town, often at her parents’ home, and required the attendance of all of her friends and family. The social season in which she participated for the first time as an adult, following her debut, may be analogous to the male Grand Tour.

When Elizabeth Grimball of Charleston marked her entry into adult society in 1850, the occasion merited a full month of her mother’s undivided attention. Elizabeth and her mother, Meta Grimball, moved from the plantation into town for all of February, so that Elizabeth might “be introduced into Company [sic].”<sup>242</sup> The two women went out almost every night. At home at Pinebury, John Grimball proudly noted in his journal that Elizabeth was invited to “all the parties—Public and Private.” The Grimballs attended the St. Cecilia Ball and the Jockey Club Ball, but turned down many of the less desirable private invitations.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, February 28, 1856, at the Massachusetts Historical Society

<sup>242</sup> John Berkeley Grimball Journal, January 30, 1850, at the South Carolina Historical Society.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, March 19, 1850.

Over the next decade, Elizabeth and her brothers attended several parties in honor of the “coming out” of their female contemporaries. In 1861, Meta Grimball described such a gathering for the daughter of a friend. It was

a very handsome entertainment, which Mr Lewis gave to introduce his daughter, the boys were all invited, and Berkley & William went. They arrived at Ashapoo in time for Lunch & afterwards went out with horses, riding or driving, & rowing on the river. Had a very handsome dinner, sat down 30; and in the evening music from Town, and a band with some outside additions, & danced until five o'clock they then went to their rooms, and after resting 3 hours had breakfast, hot cakes, omelet , sausages, spare ribs, which B. said were not spare at all...Mr Lewis must have been making arrangements for a long time, and succeeded.”<sup>244</sup>

Once young women had made their social debut, they interacted slightly more freely with men. Calls at home required strict attention to social forms by all participants. Bostonians were perhaps more subtle than Charlestonians in determining what was correct behavior. In Boston, some members of the elite dismissed certain behavior as not desirable. Confrontation, however, was rare. Not long before Caroline Cary’s marriage in 1850, she and her elder sister entertained a gentleman caller far longer than their father wished. The two young women were at home, when the attractive and older Mr. Simon Barstow flattered them with a visit. He remained until after ten o’clock, far too long in the opinion of Thomas Cary. Mr. Cary was not in the room with the young people; rather, he was “on the watch” in the back parlor. His later, wry rebuke to the two girls, “It seems to me Mr. Barstow had a vast deal to say,” embarrassed them, but was his only mention of the impropriety.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Meta Morris Grimball Diary, January 12, 1861, at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>245</sup> Curtis, p. 76.

In Charleston, however, specific rules were more common. Elite Charlestonian girls never entertained male visitors without having a chaperone in the room. Elizabeth Allston Pringle notes that her mother found this duty annoying, and contrived to oversee the lessons of the younger children in the same room to save time.<sup>246</sup> In addition, Charlestonian girls who entertained beaux at home knew that when the slave curfew rang, at nine in winter and ten in summer, the young men must promptly depart.<sup>247</sup>

The more subtle way in which elite Bostonians signaled correct social behavior may have been a result of the relative impermeability of their class. Since Boston's upper echelon was characterized by intermarriage and longstanding membership in the community, knowledge about social behavior was passed informally. In Charleston, where more mobility into the upper class was possible through increased wealth and landholding, the forms of elite behavior were more obvious, and thus available to all. Rules about behavior were more explicit and were more likely to appear as formalized lessons in the education of young women.

In Charleston, the stress placed on the conspicuous leisure of girls and young women, as evidenced by the less academic education available to them in Charleston, was common to both the upper class and the middle class. That commonality of values among both classes suggests some permeability for individuals. Bostonian elites, in contrast, had a greater commitment to the education of girls than did the city's middle class. For members of the middle

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<sup>246</sup> Pringle, p. 145.

<sup>247</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, p. 59.

class, the conspicuous leisure of women and girls was an important class signifier. Members of the elite, however, expressed their social class in other, subtler ways. For upper-class Bostonians, the vicarious display of girls and women through an undeveloped education or intellectual ability was not an identifier of high status.

Conspicuous consumption of goods by children, however, was similar in the two cities. Whenever possible, adults found opportunities to adorn their children with expensive items, including dress and jewelry. In addition, they indicated their wealth even through the simplest of clothes, by their fabric, or by the number of costumes owned and cared for. For the events of childhood and young adulthood, the financial outlay of the rich of both cities was extensive. Young members of the elite had access to expensive entertainments, including riding and travel. These symbols of wealth were perhaps most useful in distinguishing the uppermost class from the lower classes. Social outsiders could easily assess at a broad level the rarity or expense of material goods.

A more complex form of conspicuous display existed among adolescents and adults in the form of highly nuanced behaviors and manners. As children grew older, they were socially responsible for more refined behavior, culminating in the prescribed rites of courtship and marriage. The labyrinthine rules governing personal comportment were perhaps more important in telegraphing status to peers than to members of other classes. Such methods of conspicuous display were difficult for social outsiders to decode and even more difficult for them to master themselves. For that reason, forms of conspicuous leisure were



the greatest social barrier between the elite and other classes, yet at the same time were most often consciously employed in interactions with peers.

## **Chapter Five: The Public and the Private: Social Life and Conspicuous Display**

For many nineteenth century American elites, socialization in public venues was undesirable. A public establishment offered the risk to elite patrons of mixing awkwardly with social inferiors. On some occasions, such as evenings at the theater and opera, members of the upper class might be in the same location as members of other classes, but their different status was clearly visible through private (and expensive) boxes. Such barriers gave elites the opportunity to display their wealth and status to society at large while at the same time allowing them to refrain from actually interacting with members of other groups. Many social occasions were more exclusive, taking place at private homes or through select invitation or club membership. Those that were more public almost invariably had a mechanism by which elites separated themselves from members of other classes, whether through physical barriers or strict codes of behavior.<sup>248</sup>

Through the social interactions of elites in the 1850s, both formal or informal, ran the theme of conspicuous display. When elites met together, whether at home or in the few public places that they used for mixed entertainment, the display of material wealth in the architecture, furnishings, and style of the setting took center stage. The hosts and guests, as well, engaged in conspicuous consumption in their appearance, taking care over the quality and fashion of their clothes. In addition to the displays of material prosperity and taste, social interactions were heavily laden with the conspicuous display of

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<sup>248</sup> Kasson.

leisure, in the form of mastery of a complex set of rules of behavior. Foremost among these was a requirement of personal restraint in all settings. As the division between appropriate public behavior and appropriate private behavior increased in the early nineteenth century, elite Americans began to regard strict emotional discipline among the most important identifiers of members of their own class. For people of the upper class, good manners were a hallmark of their status that was worn at all times.<sup>249</sup>

Very few locations outside the private homes of the elite were acceptable for evening entertainments that included ladies. Those that were suitable were characterized by a regimented set of distinctions between elites and others. Social status was attached to attending the opera only if one purchased a private box. In 1850, Benjamin Rotch of Boston wrote to his sister Kitty of the excitement that the new opera season had generated, and the rising prices of the private boxes in response to demand. He clearly links that demand to an emulative fashion for having a box, suggesting that without that badge of status, the opera was hardly desirable. He writes that the bids for parquet boxes increased as “a few fashionables excited a few *less* fashionables, and they that *would be* fashionable...”<sup>250</sup> For these bidders, fashion was linked to a specific and purchasable act of display. Rotch, however, implies that even if those less fashionable people should get a box, he would still be able to distinguish their social status.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid, pp. 147-148.

<sup>250</sup> Letter from Benjamin Rotch to Kitty Rotch, May 28, 1850, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Another way in which elites separated themselves from members of other classes was to make membership or subscription to particular events by invitation only. Those formal social events in Boston and Charleston that did not take place at a private house were held in large private meeting halls, where entrance was strictly according to invitation and organization was by committee. In both cities, membership in the few best committees was almost impossible for social newcomers to obtain.

In Boston, the largest balls took place at Papanti's dancing hall, which organizers engaged for the evening. Caroline Cary Curtis writes that most dancing parties were "given in private houses," although "the assemblies, given by subscription, were always at Papanti's hall, and without elaborate decorations."<sup>251</sup> For one New Year's Eve dance at Papanti's, Theodore Lyman brought decorations from his home. Lyman, one of the managers of the event, had just imported a large clock for his Brookline house. He had the clock hung in front of the orchestra to exactly mark midnight for the revelers.<sup>252</sup> In addition to having improved the décor and timekeeping of the ball, Lyman gained the opportunity to display his newly imported showpiece to his friends.

In Charleston, the highlights of the social season were the events held by the most fashionable clubs of the city: the Saint Cecilia Society and the Jockey Club. When Elizabeth Grimball made her social debut, her engagements were a mix of those at private homes and those at clubs. Her father, John Grimball,

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<sup>251</sup> Curtis, pp. 70-71

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, p. 72.

recorded that she had been “invited to all the parties—Public and Private.”<sup>253</sup> His reference to Public parties included the St. Cecilia and the Jockey [sic] Balls, both of which Elizabeth and her mother Meta attended. In 1850, Elizabeth Allston Pringle attended all three of the St. Cecilia Society balls, which took place at intervals of ten days. She describes those as the “most exclusive and elegant balls of all.” She notes that the Jockey Club ball was “the largest and grandest,” but was “not so exclusive, because it included all the racing people.”<sup>254</sup>

On occasions when members of the upper class found themselves in public in company that included people of less social backgrounds, it was appropriate to refrain from mixing too closely with the outsiders. Yet at the same time, an expression of social withdrawal was not properly conspicuous or showy. Particularly among Bostonians, self-effacement was the mark of the most elite social group when dealing with the rest of the world. To make too much of one’s distance from other social strata was to express insecurity. When Elizabeth Mason Cabot visited the Lymans in Newport in 1854, she visited a public dancing hall with a small group of friends, both male and female. Also present was another group of Bostonians, with whom Cabot found herself thrown together, despite the fact that she would not have counted them in her circle at home. She describes in her diary the contrived attitude toward dancing in public that the other Bostonians held. Although she shared their views about the undesirability of making herself a spectacle, she found the other group’s behavior ostentatious and distasteful. Cabot Mason suggests that the group was too willing to make

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<sup>253</sup> JB Grimball Diary, March 19, 1850, at the College of Charleston.

<sup>254</sup> Pringle, pp. 145-146.

itself available for public comment, despite their affectation of social exclusiveness. First, they danced, “making themselves for a short time very conspicuous,” then they went up to the gallery, declaring it “too public to join the ball!” Although Cabot pokes fun at the other group’s pretended delicacy, she herself genuinely found it inappropriate to join in dancing with strangers. She remarks that the company was “small, and not very select, and I did not dance at all.”<sup>255</sup>

Restrictions on women’s dancing in the 1850s went beyond the question of appropriate company. For elite young women, in both Boston and Charleston, only certain styles of dancing were acceptable. In both cities, parents forbade their young daughters to engage in dances in which couples might hold each other close. A few belles as early as the 1830s were allowed to waltz, as long as they did not “permit the cavalier to approach nearer than a certain distance.”<sup>256</sup> In an 1838 letter to Sarah J. Russell, Hannah Jackson remarked that at Papanti assemblies in Boston, the Sears, Parker, and Appleton women waltzed, but the Dwights, Gardners, and Jackson did not.<sup>257</sup>

By the 1850s, most well-bred girls still did not dance with male partners. Like other courting behaviors, the ban on particular dances was stronger and more codified in Charleston than in Boston. When Della Allston of Charleston “came out” in 1855, her mother did not allow her to dance the waltz, polka, or the mazurka, as only “the fast set” danced them. Elizabeth Allston Pringle

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<sup>255</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, August 25, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>256</sup> Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, p. 15.

<sup>257</sup> Letter from Hannah Jackson to Sarah J. Russell, December 22, 1838, quoted in *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, p. 173.

remembers that a ring of spectators would gather around the few girls who “were so bold” as to dance those dances.<sup>258</sup> In Boston, however, Caroline Cary Curtis danced the waltz freely at small, home-gatherings. Although Cary admits that the waltz was still danced less than the quadrille, it was an acceptable dance for ladies in private settings. Young men of her acquaintance, when they traveled to Europe, brought back the newest waltz music from Paris for the band.<sup>259</sup>

Less restricted by social convention, men were more likely to dance the partnered dances that were considered “fast” for women. However, men as well as women ran the risk of appearing too much engaged with fashion and not enough with respectable seriousness. Elizabeth Cabot Mason notes that “the most fashionable [men] are those who dance the polka...[yet they]...are not the most desirable by any means.”<sup>260</sup>

When traveling, elite Bostonians were likely to join the company of larger groups than they might at home, usually in a situation where the host were of a sufficiently attractive social status to make the occasion worthwhile. Both the Lowell family and the Rotch family visited grand balls at the Tuileries in Paris during the 1850s. John Gardner, the first cousin of Francis Cabot Lowell, wrote to his brother in 1857 that he and his wife would soon visit the Tuileries. He writes “if we can be presented, we shall expect an invitation to a ball.” He does not mention his own reasons for wanting to attend, but suggests that the women in his family were the motive force, as they had “heard such amounts of the

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<sup>258</sup> Pringle, p. 144.

<sup>259</sup> Curtis, p. 72.

<sup>260</sup> Taylor, p. 92

Diamonds and other magnificences it has been decided that our names should be put down for the next presentation.”<sup>261</sup>

Benjamin Rotch was less enthusiastic about the entertainments of the Tuileries after having attended. He wrote to his brother William from Paris in 1852, recounting a recent evening. “There was a grand ball at the Tuileries—the first ball given by L. Napoleon *there*, and as we went with the Diplomatic Corps we had peculiar advantages. There were, it is said, 5000 persons present, and certainly I never saw such a crowd and hope never again to be disposed to such a one again.”<sup>262</sup> Despite the advantages of having been in the privileged company of the Diplomatic Corps, Rotch shrank from the busy event, with its indiscriminate socializing.

Despite the existence of a few occasional events in large public halls, most organized social gatherings of the elite occurred at the homes of individuals. Private houses became in a sense public, as they were the sites of most interactions between elites. The home, both as an emotional space, and as a physical location, became “a place of preparation and social performance.”<sup>263</sup> As the home became crucial to the successful entertainment of social peers, it increased in its importance as a ground for conspicuous display. The practicalities of hosting social events influenced the organization and decoration of the houses of the elite. As Caroline Cary Curtis notes, the “size of the houses

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<sup>261</sup> Letter from John Gardner to F.C. Lowell, from Paris, Feb 20, 1857, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>262</sup> Letter from Benjamin Rotch to William Rotch, from Paris, Feb 5, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>263</sup> Kasson, p. 165.



[were] in proportion to the length of one's visiting list."<sup>264</sup> Most members of elite society in Boston and Charleston had large houses to facilitate their entertainments.

In Boston, the prestigious houses on Beacon Hill made up for their narrowness with depth. The childhood home of Elizabeth Mason Cabot was less than thirty feet wide, but was eighty feet deep. The rooms on the main floor were all in line, so that the parlor, center hall, and dining room could be connected with all the doors pulled open. Such a space was large enough for a ball in 1852 and a concert with seventy guests in 1858.<sup>265</sup>

Charleston's fashionable district was not as well delineated as that of Boston, where Beacon Hill and its environs were the center of tightly knit family enclaves. One of the most coveted residential locations in Charleston was the southernmost tip of the peninsula, where the East and South Batteries met the seat. There, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century merchants built imposing houses from which they could view the harbor and their ships. At the southern tip of the city lay the gardens of White Point, which members of the city's upper class had built in the 1830s.<sup>266</sup> In antebellum Charleston, the homes of the elite were distributed throughout the southeastern area of the city. After the Civil War, however, Charleston's elite became more residentially compacted in the face of

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<sup>264</sup> Curtis, p. 71.

<sup>265</sup> Taylor, p. 9.

<sup>266</sup> Fraser, Jr., p. 229.

Northern military occupation, so that members of the upper class deemed only addresses south of Meeting Street suitable.<sup>267</sup>

The townhouses and plantation houses of Charlestonians offered different styles and quantities of space. In Charleston itself, as in Boston, space limitations constrained most houses in width but not in depth. Houses were of the “San Domingo model,” consisting of three or four stories that were tall and narrow, “as though turning a shoulder to the world.” Full-length verandas and wide balcony doors allowed breezes to circulate. The arrangement of rooms was similar to the English style, in which the public reception rooms were on the second floor and the bedrooms on the third.<sup>268</sup>

In the South Carolina country, however, houses could be built as large as the owner wished and could afford. Plantation houses, due to their relative remoteness, were often large to accommodate long-term visitors. The winter country house of James Chesnut, built by his father in 1820, was an imposing brick and stone mansion. The house, “Mulberry,” was four stories high, with a broad veranda and a dramatic entrance of laurel trees and tall steps.<sup>269</sup> As important as a structure itself was the house’s situation on its land. Chicora Wood, the plantation house of Robert Allston, sat on a high point overlooking the Pee Dee River, with the front piazza commanding a wide view of the river’s bend.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Where is this story about two women, one of whom lives S and the other N of Meeting Street?xx

<sup>268</sup> Harriette Kershaw Leiding, *Historic Houses of South Carolina* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1921), pp 3-4.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 176-177.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, p. 125.

In both cities, European influence was evident, but it was perhaps stronger in Boston. Caroline Cary Curtis describes the house of the Deacon family in her city. Mr. Deacon had no apparent fortune when he arrived in Boston from the Mid-Atlantic region. He married Sarah Ann Parker, however, whose family then supported the couple. Curtis notes that the Deacon house on Washington Street was “a swell Paris house” and was “maintain[ed] after the French model.” The decoration was lavish, including satin walls and Fragonard panels. Although the Parker family financed the enterprise, Curtis notes that “...whoever paid, the planning and the carrying out of the plans showed a great deal of taste, and it was said that it was all done by Mr. Deacon.”<sup>271</sup> Despite being a newcomer to Boston elite society, and apparently to elite society anywhere, Deacon was adept at organizing a display that was not only expensive, but was notable for its good taste. However, he could not have attained his social or economic position without his marriage into the Parker clan.

Through contemporary accounts of the social atmosphere of houses runs the question of whether the appointments were in good taste. Some of the more staid observers remark on the appropriateness of the style, clearly considering the question of taste. In Boston, Elizabeth Mason Cabot described the new house of the Frank Loring as “very handsome, and particularly home like and elegant.”<sup>272</sup> With her qualified praise, she indicates that the homes of other acquaintances were not “home like,” perhaps indicating that those sites were too much oriented toward display. When John Berkeley Grimball of Charleston attended a supper

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<sup>271</sup> Curtis, pp. 22-24.

<sup>272</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, May 30, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

party following the wedding of his nephew, he left with the feeling that the evening had perhaps been overdone. Grimball writes in his diary:

“The entertainment was magnificent—Supper in two rooms—One richly and tastefully decorated for the Ladies and Young men—and the other of a more substantial but very recherché kind for the older men.<sup>273</sup>

His light censure of the evening is subtle, but his word choice is interesting. Grimball finds the supper and decorations prepared for the men’s salon to be affected or pretentious, making a fine distinction between what was tasteful and what was not.. Other observers, oriented more toward lavish display themselves, were more appreciative of grandeur. The Sears were one elite Boston family that was notable for its conspicuous consumption. When Anna Sears Amory described the Peabody house in 1851, she focused on the “splendid house, the new gothic room paneled with oak, and brilliant with Painted glass.”<sup>274</sup>

Observers were unlikely to record, even in their private papers, their speculation about the expense of their friends’ home décor. However, they often described in detail particular settings that they admired, perhaps intending to refer to their notes later for their own purchases. Far fewer mentions are made of locations that were in poor taste. One explanation might be that elites simply did not visit houses where they would encounter appearances of which they might vehemently disapprove.

For most members of the upper echelon in both Boston and Charleston, appropriate appearance for the home meant conservatism and reference to English

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<sup>273</sup> John Berkeley Grimball Diary, February 26, 1856, at the College of Charleston.

<sup>274</sup> Letter from Anna Sears Amory to Mrs. David Sears, April 6, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society

style. Some items of home furnishing were so important that even young families with tight financial resources purchased them immediately. The piano was a longstanding fixture in elite homes, and was by the mid-nineteenth century a sign of high status for members of the middle class as well.<sup>275</sup> When Caroline Cary was preparing for her marriage and planning the furnishings of her new house, she could not do without a piano, even though its purchase made her “doleful” as she realized that it made her “accounts run up most amazingly.”<sup>276</sup> Although the Cary’s new home was modest, and the couple retained only two servants, she found the expensive instrument necessary to her new life.

The Robert Allstons of Charleston, who spent money lavishly in the 1850s, bought a new piano *mechanique* from Paris in 1855. The upright piano was made of rosewood, and was like an ordinary piano, with the addition of a mechanized system of wired blocks that could be set up to play music as one turned a handle. Elizabeth Allston Pringle describes it as “the greatest possible joy...[to hear] all the most beautiful operas and classical music that we never would have heard or known anything about.” She notes that the piano cost \$1,000, in addition to the cost of shipping it from Paris.<sup>277</sup> The Allston’s mechanized piano is interesting in its combination of the new and the old. The purchase conformed to the tradition of the drawing room piano, but it also was technologically innovative. That element of newness may not have appealed to elite Bostonians, for whom social tradition was a guiding principle of life. Yet the

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<sup>275</sup> Bushman.

<sup>276</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis Diary, April 12, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>277</sup> Pringle, p. 140-143.

Allstons were proud to display their new piano, the likes of which nobody they knew in America owned. The piano mechanic served as a means of competitive display on many levels. First, it was an expensive and rare consumable item that none of their peers yet owned. In addition, it allowed the Allstons to enjoy specialized music to which they would not otherwise have had access, and through that refined pastime, to display their conspicuous leisure.

As long as they furnished and maintained their houses in such a way as to make them semi-public extensions of their personal display, members of elite society entertained enthusiastically. Formal balls were planned and executed so that the entire house was hospitably open to guests. Other events, such as dinner parties, teas, and “at homes,” were, despite their smaller size, almost equally structured. At all levels of formality, members of the elite conducted social events as extensions of their public self. Even if the event did not have as its main purpose the presentation of personal wealth and style to others, such an exposure of private life was bound to happen. With the increasing importance that nineteenth century Americans placed on the public persona, socialization became a form of controlled communication about oneself to others.

In her diary, Elizabeth Mason Cabot describes a formal ball that her family gave in 1852. Her mother had intended for many years to have a dance, but had put off giving it until the Masons moved to their house at 63 Mount Vernon Street. Although the family had moved into the new house in 1848, they were not ready to host such a formal event until 1852. Mason Cabot writes

...now that we have at last furnished [the house], we decided to give [a ball]. The house looked very well. The flower room was filled with

plants and looked beautifully. We had dancing in the dining room and center room where the floor is made for dancing—in the dining room a cloth was put over the carpet...The supper was down in the library where everything was moved away and a table laid the whole length of the room. The ornament in the center was a gold basket, with exquisite artificial flowers, and two bunches of real flowers at the ends. My chamber with everything moved out and other things moved in was the dressing room for the gentlemen. Mother's room was for the ladies, and the best chamber a card room.<sup>278</sup>

The requirements of hosting a successful ball at home were onerous enough that Miriam Mason did not feel ready for it until she had been in her new house for over three years. Although the house had been constructed with such events in mind, with a floor designed for dancing, much preparation was needed to make the house suitable for the evening. The transformation of the hostesses' bedrooms into dressing rooms was a recent idea in the nineteenth century. In her behavior manual of 1859, etiquette advisor Eliza Leslie suggests that a hostess should show callers immediately to a vacant room, where the visitors might check their appearance before joining the larger group.<sup>279</sup> Such strenuous attention to personal appearance coincided with the increasing importance that Americans place on their public persona.<sup>280</sup> Mason Cabot does not mention the number of guests in her diary, but there were enough visitors to fill a dining table “the whole length” of the library. Among the guests was Ellen D’Hauteville [née Sears], who Mason Cabot describes as the “only really beautiful woman in the room.”<sup>281</sup> Despite the national notoriety that D’Hauteville gained from her separation from

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<sup>278</sup> Taylor, p. 92.

<sup>279</sup> Leslie.

<sup>280</sup> Kasson, p. 166.

<sup>281</sup> Taylor, p. 94.

her Swiss husband, Gonsalve D'Hauteville, her old, exclusive Boston circle of friends still included her.

Visitors, even close friends and family, were apt to note in detail the style of a house and the meticulousness of its upkeep. Also of interest were the style of the decorations, the menu, and the appropriateness of the invitations and exclusivity of the event. Observers mentioned expensive accoutrements only in passing, focusing on the “taste” of the items instead of their richness.

When John Berkeley Grimball dined at the Charleston home of Mr. Blacklock in 1852, he included in his usually brief diary the menu and the style of the entertainment, which lasted from four to seven in the evening. The all-male party numbered eight, including the host. Grimball remarks that his host was “a gentleman of taste in such matters.” Blacklock began the meal with Champagne in several “silver Wine Coolers,” then served four meat courses, then ice cream, fruits, and liquors. Grimball recalls that the old Sherry was the best he had ever tasted. The “plate was in great profusion—and the china—white with a very deep border of green richly gilt.”<sup>282</sup> Blacklock’s lavish party was not apparently intended to commemorate any special occasion, but it was stylish and luxurious enough that Grimball made much over it in his diary. His careful notes about the menu and settings may have been intended to remind him of Blacklock’s good taste when Grimball himself next staged a dinner party.

When Elizabeth Mason Cabot dined at Emily Parker’s house in honor of Lizzie Mifflin in February, 1856, she returned home with similarly favorable

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<sup>282</sup> John Berkeley Grimball Diary, October 29, 1852, at the College of Charleston.



impressions of the hospitality she had received. Foremost in her memories of the dinner were observations about the table setting and material goods belonging to her hosts. Mason Cabot writes “The dinner was very handsome...a bouquet at each lady’s plate...the service of china and glass was very magnificent. The house is also a remarkably nice one, and beautifully furnished, especially the chambers.”<sup>283</sup>

Formal dining was an intricate affair in which both conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure played crucial parts. As Grimball and Mason Cabot’s accounts suggest, a dinner with social peers was an opportunity to show off one’s china, silver, and elaborate menu choices. More than that, it was a time when the entire house was on display—as Mason Cabot notes, the “chambers” were available to the guests, perhaps as dressing rooms, as they were at her family’s own 1852 ball. In return, the dinner guests were responsible for displaying their own conspicuous leisure in their knowledge of the correct forms. Grimball admired the fact that, at Blacklock’s dinner, “the cloth remained [on the table] during the entire entertainment.”<sup>284</sup>

Smaller, less formal social events did not require as much preparation as an evening of dinner and dancing with a large group, but a casual attitude toward home appearances could be deceiving. Even those who kept relatively simple houses, or staged small social gatherings, were mindful of a set of rules about the presentation of their material wealth. Caroline Cary Curtis writes of the sewing circles in which she participated as a young married woman. One of the charms,

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<sup>283</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, February 18, 1856, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>284</sup> JB Grimball Diary, October 29, 1852, at the College of Charleston.

she recalls, was that there was “no need for dress or preparation for eating and drinking.” However, another matron, newly transplanted to Winchester, was so eager to host the sewing circle and meet her neighbors that she did not even wait until her carpets were delivered to begin her hospitality. Her peers, although they enjoyed the outing, exclaimed amongst themselves at the informality. One woman noted that she “wouldn’t have dared to have the circle without a parlor carpet.”<sup>285</sup>

Personal appearance at social events was more important and complex for women than for men. Women’s clothes were so complicated and changeable that to wear the wrong thing in public led to self-consciousness, particularly for the young. Not long after her twentieth birthday, Elizabeth Mason Cabot attended a graduation at Cambridge with a group of male and female friends. She did not plan to attend until the very morning of the event, when her friends pressed her into it. She notes,

[my] comfort, I will confess, was somewhat diminished by my costume, which was a simple silk, a straw bonnet, a black and not new cloak, a pair of thick boots, an umbrella, and a pair of dark and dingy gloves, seized by mistake in my haste of departure, while the rest of the world were in gala array, --white muslin, crape and flowers and yellow kid [gloves].

At first, Elizabeth felt that her friends were poorly dressed for the damp weather, but as the sun came out, she wished she could “fly home, and seize the nice silk, white lace bonnet and crape shawl, that were laid on my table, and above all, to search for fresh gloves.”<sup>286</sup> At the Cambridge Class Day, Elizabeth presented herself both to men and women of her peer group, as well as a variety

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<sup>285</sup> Curtis, p. 109.

<sup>286</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, June 23, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

of others. The group of friends traveled on a public streetcar to the event—which Elizabeth notes was acceptable due to the presence of young men as escorts—where they would have been visible to the public at large. Her embarrassment at being dressed too informally and even untidily was perhaps rooted in the fear that, without the correct costume, she did not truly appear to be a member of her close-knit caste.

While the Allston sisters were at boarding school at Madame Togno's in Charleston, their mother asked Madame to choose their spring and summer clothes, sending a special check for the purchases. The results did not produce the look to which the girls were accustomed; rather, Madame Togno selected outfits in styles similar to her own. Elizabeth Allston Pringle describes her straw hat as “just like an old lady's bonnet in the sixties.” The girls were mortified that their new clothes were so different from those of their peers, but good manners required that they wear the clothes without letting Madame know how they disliked them.<sup>287</sup>

For the most formal events, a lady took particular care over her costume, making sure that it showed all the hallmarks of expense and good taste. When Della Allston came out, all of her ball dresses came from Paris.<sup>288</sup> In 1850, the year that Elizabeth Grimball was “introduced to Company,” her mother paid special attention to her wardrobe. Among the family accounts for the year appear more purchases for Elizabeth than for any other single individual. Elizabeth and Meta purchased many of the same items—they each had a “silk summer dress,” at

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<sup>287</sup> Pringle, pp. 133-135.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

the price of \$6.50, untrimmed—but Elizabeth had more trimmings, and more incidentals, such as hats, scarves, and parasols.<sup>289</sup> Although it is likely that Meta already owned many of these items that Elizabeth was purchasing for the first time, the accounts suggest that Elizabeth’s appearance was of foremost importance to the family. In comparison, the other children in the family had very few new items of clothing.

Some Bostonian women were as likely to wear ornate and expensive clothing as were Charlestonians. Anna Sears Amory obtained as many of her clothes as possible from Europe. While her mother traveled through Europe during the 1850s, Sears Amory made many requests for clothing items to be sent back to her. When her mother’s Parisian purchases reached her in Boston in 1851, Sears Amory devoted two weeks to the outfitting of herself and her daughters and sister. She wrote to her mother, “I am looking forward to an *harassing* fortnight of dressmakers and sewing, having I believe some dozens of gowns for the young ladies, besides mantles, habits, &c.”<sup>290</sup> In most cases, imported goods were preferable, but in a few, their Boston counterparts were cheaper and better. In response to a request for French lace from her daughter, Miriam Sears wrote from Paris, “...the Valenciennes lace that I inquired for yesterday...I found much less fine and good, for 5 francs a yard than the same quality we sometimes get at Plymptons for 30 cents.”<sup>291</sup> Despite the social cachet

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<sup>289</sup> J.B. Grimbald Memorandum Book, “Expenses for 1850,” at the College of Charleston.

<sup>290</sup> Letter from Anna Sears Amory to Miriam Sears, March 31, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>291</sup> Letter from Miriam Sears to Anna Sears Amory, April 10, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

attached to bringing one's clothes from Europe, Mrs. Sears was not interested in buying items that could be had cheaper at home.

In a similar effort at sensible thrift, Elizabeth Mason Cabot's mother did not buy a new dress for the family's 1852 ball. Mason Cabot herself had a new tarlatan dress with a silk waist and satin bows. Her mother's dress, however, was "...one she has worn before, a light green watered silk, and application lace mantle, and artificial flowers in her hair."<sup>292</sup> Although the occasion was important enough that the family waited four years after moving into the house, so as to have everything in order for the ball, Mrs. Mason did not find it necessary to have a new dress made for herself, as she did for her daughter. Mrs. Mason was a retiring and often ill woman, but she clearly made considerable effort to make sure the ball was a success. A grand, new dress for her was not necessary to the effect of the event.

For elite young women in antebellum America, marriage was a turning point in their relationship to society. After several years of worrying almost incessantly about their appearance and behavior, they began a new period in their lives, in which their role in their own home and family was both freer and more prescribed. Married women experienced less acute attention to their actions, as they had the social safety of a husband's protection from sexual scandal. However, the increasingly important ideals of "separate spheres" delineated the role of the wife in the home and in society. Elite married women, in both the North and the South, were responsible for the organization of all things related to

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<sup>292</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, February 22, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

the home. Prior to beginning married life, however, women in both Boston and Charleston completed one of the most significant rites of conspicuous display in their lives. In both cities, the staging of wedding festivities presented problems of public versus private, as families negotiated the boundaries of the audience for their status display.

In Boston, elite weddings were modest affairs, with a church ceremony, then a reception held at home with little fuss. When Elizabeth Mason Cabot attended the 1856 wedding of her girlhood friend, Susie Welles, she described a small and select gathering. First, the group assembled at Trinity Church for quiet marriage rites. Then Mason Cabot returned home, changed her clothes, and was at the Welles' house before eight for a small reception of only "family and intimate friends." At nine, the guests left, and the newly married couple left town for their wedding trip.<sup>293</sup>

Caroline Cary, another Bostonian, married Charles Curtis at King's Chapel, with a modest reception afterward at her new home in Winchester. She writes that several female friends visited her during the day of her wedding. After dinner [lunch], she dressed and drove to the church. Immediately after the ceremony, she drove to her new home, reaching it "in time to change [her] dress and unpack the silver before tea."<sup>294</sup> Although Cary's parents' house was showier than the little out-of-the-way home of the new couple, she chose to greet her friends in the place that would be hers henceforth.

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<sup>293</sup> Mason Cabot Diary, January 14, 1856, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>294</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis Diary, April 22, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The notion of a church wedding, and its necessarily public quality, did not appeal to Elizabeth Mason Cabot, a reserved person. She describes the 1849 wedding of her cousin, Annie Parker, as “the most disagreeable performance possible. The church is generally filled with people drawn merely from curiosity, and in whom you have no interest. It must be very trying to the immediate friends.”<sup>295</sup> Mason Cabot’s fastidious avoidance of public scrutiny was a hallmark of her close-knit social milieu.

For elite Charlestonians, the fashion had long been to have weddings at home, partly as an accommodation to the geographically far-flung planter population. Mary Boykin Chesnut recalls that church weddings were in the 1830s and 1840s “almost unknown.” Instead, weddings were held at large country houses and accompanied by “a course of uninterrupted dinner parties and balls.” Boykin Chesnut describes her own wedding, which occurred in 1840 at Mount Pleasant, the Boykin plantation house where she had been born. Although she terms the wedding “private,” there were fifty guests staying at the house, and the entertainment was lavish. The breakfast table, at which the married couple shared a meal for the first time, stretched sixty feet in length, from the front door to the back. The wedding took place in the evening, followed by the breakfast, a formal dinner on the following night, then a succession of parties given by friends.<sup>296</sup>

By 1856, the time of another elite Charleston wedding, the fashion of a wedding service at home remained unchanged. The ceremony of John Berkeley

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<sup>295</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, January 21, 1849, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>296</sup> Chesnut, “Two Years or the Way We Live Now,” pp.598-599. Chesnut is coy about whose wedding she is describing here. See Muhlenfeld, *Mary Boykin Chesnut: a Biography*, p. 42 for confirmation that it is Boykin Chesnut’s own.

Grimball's nephew Gouverneur M. Wilkins to Adela Lowndes was a luxurious event, which combined the ceremony of matrimony with entertaining at home. The wedding took place at the Lowndes family home on Legare Street, but was performed by the pastor of St. Philip's Church. Approximately sixty people were present for the wedding and the supper that followed. The entertainment, which Berkeley describes as "magnificent," lasted until two in the morning.<sup>297</sup>

The wedding of Robert Allston's eldest daughter was almost as extravagant, despite the fact that it took place during the Civil War, at a time when the Allstons' fortune was foundering more than most. On the morning of June 24, 1863, Adèle Allston and Arnoldus Van der Horst were married in the ballroom at Chicora Wood by the assistant rector of Saint Michael's Church. Della wore Brussels net over silk, with a "real lace veil."<sup>298</sup> Despite the difficulty of getting fine fabrics and ornaments during the war, the bride was determined that her wedding would be as lavish as that of her cousin Carey North in 1853, before the war had come. Despite her efforts to make it grand, Della Allston's wedding was less striking in at least one respect: only a few members of her extended family were present.<sup>299</sup> In contrast, Carey North's wedding had included the "entire family connection...making a display of numbers."<sup>300</sup>

Elite weddings in both cities reflected social status through religious affiliation. The location and extent of the public ceremony was not only a function of the level of conspicuous consumption involved, but of ethnic and

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<sup>297</sup> John Berkeley Grimball Diary, February 26, 1856, at the College of Charleston.

<sup>298</sup> Pringle, pp. 187-188.

<sup>299</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, p. 184.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96.



religious community patterns. In both cities, the Episcopalian Church attracted more of the wealthy elite than any other church. In Boston, the majority of the elite population were Protestants of English descent. The most prestigious places to worship in the city were St. Paul's and Trinity Church (where Susie Welles, the friend of Elizabeth Mason Cabot, was married). Together, the two Episcopal churches attracted a third of the city's rich and prestigious. The other religious affiliation that was important to Boston's richest population was Unitarianism. Many of the newly rich merchants of the city were Unitarian: of the city's richest Church members, half belonged to that faith. Those Unitarians who were both rich and socially established, however, were likely to be members at the Unitarian King's Chapel, whose theology was similar to that of the Anglican Church.<sup>301</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis was married at King's Chapel, her family's church.

In Charleston, the most important religious affiliation among the elite was with the Episcopalian Church. Where Boston's social elite and financial elite were split between the Episcopal and Unitarian faiths, Charlestonians of both categories united in the Episcopalian Church. The two most prestigious churches in the city were St. Philip's and St. Michael's. At the Lowndes and Allston weddings, officials from these churches performed the ceremony, although the event did not take place on church property.

Although the level of conspicuous display attached to weddings in Boston and Charleston differed at the event itself, elites in both cities were eager to purchase expensive gifts for the new couple. Some presents were decorations for

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<sup>301</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, p. 133.

the new home of the newlyweds, while others, given by close family and friends, were personal ornaments for the bride.

In Boston, silver for the home was perhaps the most common gift. Of the 1849 wedding of her friend Annie Parker, Elizabeth Cabot Mason wrote,

...her presents have been splendid. She has a great many friends, besides a large number of relations, and all of them have sent her some gift, most of them very handsome ones. Silver seems to be the common present, of which I should think she had fifteen or twenty pieces, besides many other things.<sup>302</sup>

As Caroline Cary prepared for her 1852 wedding to Charles Curtis, she noted the wedding presents the couple received. The newlyweds received many items to furnish their new home, including “a very pretty silver tea caddy” from “Aunt Margaret,” a “silver sugar bowl from Aunt Harriet and a cream pitcher from Aunt Anne,” a “very handsome clock with a kind note from Anna,” and “a present from Johnnie of a beautiful French teaset—a perfect beauty.”<sup>303</sup> Cary’s favorite present was from her husband. On New Years Day, 1851, he sent her a “very beautiful desk.”<sup>304</sup>

Although many gifts were for a new couple’s home, items of personal adornment for the bride were also appropriate, when they came from intimate friends or family. Cary Curtis received a gold watch from her new father-in-law. Her new mother-in-law sent her a gold thimble. Several of her female friends made her gifts of hand-worked clothing, such as a “handsome collar and wholesleeves.”<sup>305</sup> When Elizabeth Mason Cabot’s friend Amelie married into the

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<sup>302</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, January 21, 1849, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>303</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis Diary, February 3-21, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>304</sup> Caroline Cary Curtis Diary, January 1, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

Sigourney family in 1854, her new mother-in-law presented her not only with a “very handsome set of silver,” but with a Paris dress.<sup>306</sup>

When Della Allston married, her father-in-law presented her with a set of heirloom jewelry a week before the wedding. He wrote to her that he hoped she would always find him “a kind and affectionate parent.”<sup>307</sup> For him, the language of affection for this new member of his family included the giving of expensive gifts. To its new owner, the jewelry would signify both membership among the wealthy, through its brilliance, and membership in the longstanding planter family of the Van der Horsts, through its family associations.

The conspicuous consumption that weddings in both regions generated focused largely on the bride and the female members of the family. Little mention is made of gifts to the groom, even from the bride. As Veblen suggests, women were more important vehicles for social display than men. Most luxury items that surrounded the wedding ceremony were designed for use by women, either as personal finery, or in the female-centered universe of the home.

From their childhoods, members of the elite were steeped in the rules of conspicuous display and the material goods that proclaimed them members of their class. For women, more than men, major events in childhood and adulthood were centered on conspicuous display. Social events such as balls or dinners were intricate constructions in which women played the more important role in displaying both wealth and taste. Personal milestones, such as “coming out” and

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<sup>306</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, May 31, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>307</sup> Letter from Elias Vanderholt to Adèle Allston, June 15, 1863, quoted in Pease and Pease, *A Family of Women*, p. 183.

being married, were opportunities for women to demonstrate the status of their families through goods and behavior. During the mid-nineteenth century, the divide between male and female social spheres deepened, increasing the extent to which women were, as Veblen states, vicarious status-bearers. At the same time the division between public and private culture became blurred, so that individuals perceived their personal behavior as ever more visible.

As the self became more public, more subjected to constant scrutiny, so did the home and private family events. Weddings in both Boston and Charleston, for example, were more than family or community markings of life transitions. Instead, they were opportunities for conspicuous display, to ones peers or to a wider audience. The homogeneity of religious affiliation among each city's elite relaxed, to some degree, the extent to which a church wedding might represent a mixing with other classes and the general public. However, the public nature of such a gathering was for some too great an extension of the private world into the public view. Mason Cabot's view of a church wedding as a "performance" for curious onlookers foreshadows the public extravaganzas that elite weddings would become in the Gilded Age. Elites of both cities seem to have preferred to keep this aspect of private life truly private, with their conspicuous display directed to their peers. In Charleston, more so than Boston, that translated into lavish wedding receptions, with the goal of matching or outdoing previous affairs in grandeur.

Through conspicuous consumption and the complex social rules that denoted conspicuous leisure, the private and public lives of elites were

increasingly available for observation by others. In most cases, members of the upper class directed that display toward their peers through closed social events and, especially in Boston, tightly knit extended families. Yet at the same time, the sense that personal actions were private was vanishing. In many ways, the class membership of elites was based on a sense of performance, in which self was a construct of what one's elite community deemed important.

## Chapter Six: Conspicuous Display and Gender

In his theories of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure, Thorstein Veblen argues for a gendered balance of power among members of elite society. He states that as nineteenth century women held less social and economic power than their male relatives, their patterns of conspicuous display were different. Veblen describes the life of the American woman of the era as “vicarious” in all respects, so that her “civil, economic, and social bearing” were merely reflective of the influence of the men in her life.<sup>308</sup> According to his theory, women’s participation in conspicuous display was an affirmation of their larger role as a reflector of male status. Veblen suggests that, among the richest members of society, the only participation that women would have in the economic sphere would be their conspicuous display of their husbands’ wealth and their own resulting leisure.<sup>309</sup> Although analysis of elites in Charleston and Boston confirms Veblen’s notion of gendered vicarious display, women were not entirely without agency in the realm of conspicuous display as a means of social communication.

In nineteenth century Boston and Charleston, most elite women relied on their male relatives for financial support and social status. That gendered culture of dependence was rooted in longstanding legal forms of coverture in Colonial America and in England. According to laws of coverture, which persisted in some forms through the 1850s in the United States, married women were unable

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<sup>308</sup> Veblen, p. 229.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid, p. 126.

to own property or enter into contracts in their own right. They were, legally and economically, extensions of their husbands. Although this system barred married women from enjoying the same freedoms as their husbands, it did allow for significant blurring of separate spheres. Through coverture, women gained the right to appear in court to represent the legal interests of their husbands, marking an unusual sanction of prominence in public life for members of their sex.<sup>310</sup>

The extent to which married women were legally able to hold property varied in mid-nineteenth century America. In South Carolina, married women found greater protection of their property rights than their Massachusetts counterparts. South Carolina courts had from the colonial era strictly overseen any transfers of married women's property. A woman could surrender her dower to her husband only if a court found that she did so voluntarily. The state's judicial decisions favored the intent of gifts and settlements to women, even if the legal documentation was sparse. By the 1830s, post-nuptial contracts became relatively common, often sheltering a woman's property from her husband's creditors.<sup>311</sup> Massachusetts, however, gave governmental enforcement of written marriage contracts only after 1845.<sup>312</sup> In cases of property held by an intestate deceased relative, Massachusetts law treated male and female relatives equally, but inherited goods were likely to pass from a wife's ownership to her husband's. South Carolina law for intestates favored men over women,<sup>313</sup> balancing the effect

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<sup>310</sup> Margot Finn, "Women, Consumption, and Coverture in England, c. 1760-1860," *The Historical Journal*, 39, 3 (1996), pp. 703-722.

<sup>311</sup> Pease and Pease, *Ladies, Women, and Wenches*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>313</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, p. 124.

of the state's greater protection of property that explicitly belonged to married women.

As the property rights of many married women remained insecure in the mid-nineteenth century, their finances were likely to be tied to those of their husbands or male relatives. Under a patriarchal national culture, women in both the North and the South experienced legal, cultural, and economic restrictions on their actions. In the South, the character of the slave society, in which male planters represented almost absolute legal authority over their households and property, increased the extent to which white women were dependent on husbands and male relatives for their status. Additionally, the culture of control that surrounded the institution of economic slavery generated what may have appeared to some to be almost unlimited power for elite white males.<sup>314</sup>

Although most elite women, as Veblen states, derived their status from others, their role as primary conspicuous displayers may have allowed them some personal empowerment. With such control over not only their own conspicuous display, but that of their families, elite women of Boston and Charleston in the 1850s might have found room to mediate and alter those expressions of social status and group membership. Rather than acting merely as reflective surfaces of existing modes of communication, women gained the opportunity to develop a new cultural currency of encoded display. In doing so, women achieved more control of their social milieu than Veblen suggests. At the same time, however,

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<sup>314</sup> Bruce.



those measures of control over male family members were minute compared to the monolith of patriarchy that defined 1850s America.

The extent to which women in nineteenth century Boston and Charleston were able to find avenues of personal power through conspicuous display varied. Bostonian women were more likely in general to assert personal power than were their Charlestonian counterparts, who lived in a society with overarching patriarchal values. For elite women of each city, material display was more confining than displays of refined behavior. The display of objects was more immediately noticeable to others, allowing for less variation according to personal choice. In addition, more of the intricacies of conspicuous consumption were apparent to members of lower classes. Variations in style and color of dress were more readily notable to a poor and uninitiated observer than niceties of phrase or syntax. Manners and other forms of conspicuous leisure, particularly in Boston where those patterns of behavior were less overtly circumscribed than in Charleston, allowed women more freedom to deviate from social expectations. In Charleston, where patriarchy was strong, many of the behavior patterns that elite women followed were based on the repression of public hints of sexuality. In that arena, Charlestonian women found little room for compromise.

Conspicuous consumption of material goods in nineteenth century America was, as Veblen argues, highly gendered. Although elite men were likely to buy expensive clothes accessories, such as gloves, to indicate their gentlemanly station, such a low level of display was generally sufficient. Women were the members of the family who demonstrated wealth and status through ornate

jewelry and through attention to ever-changing fashions. Veblen's guiding principle of elite dress is that it must display "wasteful expenditure." To that end, women of the 1850s were more involved in conspicuous display than men, as feminine attire required more expensive fabrics and trimmings, and far more yardage.

The gendered division between the elaborateness of men's and women's clothes appeared in the nineteenth century, just as Americans had become more invested in maintaining "separate spheres" of influence for the sexes. In the eighteenth century, appropriate dress for gentlemen included showy fabrics and extreme attention to detail. Ornate fashions for men were the mark of courtliness, both in America and Europe. By the nineteenth century, however, men's dress tended more toward an image of an inexpressive businessman, whose public persona did not require ornamentation in dress. Daytime and evening wear were both almost wholly black. Men's outfits became increasingly similar, reaching the almost total uniformity of the modern suit in the mid-nineteenth century. Conformity and unobtrusiveness had become bywords for the appearance of American men of all classes.<sup>315</sup>

Men who appeared in bright colors were taken either as foreign, or as ridiculous figures of poor taste. When Elizabeth Mason Cabot attended a Newport dancing hall with friends in 1854, she found much of the company to be of a lower class than she. Among the inappropriate male partners was a man "with pantaloons much too short, yellow waistcoat and blue coat and brass

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<sup>315</sup> Kasson, pp. 118-121.

buttons.” His appearance was “an excellent model of a respectable butcher, in his ‘Sunday go to meeting attire.’”<sup>316</sup> This was likely not the impression the man had hoped to make with his colorful evening clothes.

Like men, upper class women began in the nineteenth century to follow increasingly strict rules of conformity in dress in public. Fashions dictated that dark colors be worn on the street, so that ladies might best avoid attracting attention from strangers. However, the social motivations behind styles of dress for women differed in a few significant ways from that of men. Most importantly, women encountered greater penalties for making spectacles of themselves in public.

Brightly colored or gaudy attire on the street was the province of prostitutes and, by mid-century, young, urban, working women. Caroline Cary Curtis of Boston recalls the “bright yellow” wedding bonnet of a young woman whom Mrs. Thomas Cary had charitably aided. The young woman had been “tempted away from home” into a singing career before she met the intervention of Mrs. Cary and her friends. After their aid, and in much better circumstances, the singer visited the Cary house in Boston to give thanks. Caroline Cary Curtis teased her mother about “being envious of the fine clothes” in such bright colors that the former singer wore. Although the pretty singer was a sympathetic figure to the family, Cary Curtis’s ironic jest with her mother indicates that neither woman would have worn a bright yellow day bonnet herself.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, August 25, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>317</sup> Curtis, p. 83.

Plain dress for ladies in public gatherings was primarily motivated by a fear of being forced to interact with undesirables. A lady presenting the incorrect appearance in public might appear to passers-by as a member of a different class, leading to harassment. If she received attention on the street, a lady properly ignored the strangers, even going so far as to pretend not to understand English. By appearing not to understand words that she must clearly have heard, a lady protected her composure. Her dignity was of paramount importance to her public appearance.<sup>318</sup>

The trend toward drab dress for women in public did not extend to their appearance in private or among peers.<sup>319</sup> On the contrary, to appear in dark colors at a formal evening function was inappropriate and declass  for those not in mourning. In reference to a subscription ball at the Boston Theatre in 1859, Elizabeth Cabot Mason noted that “...among the five or six thousand people I do not think there were more than half a dozen women who were in dark & uncouth dresses, almost all were respectable looking and very neatly dressed in light colors.” Although the gathering Mason Cabot describes was open to the public, and was, as she puts it, a social “mixture,” the five dollar admission price for each party did prevent the lowest economic classes from attending.<sup>320</sup>

Women’s appearance in public required not only general inconspicuousness, but adherence to a particular set of rules concerning propriety. Constant attention to neatness and refinement in dress was the hallmark of the

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<sup>318</sup> Kasson, p. 130.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, p. 121.

<sup>320</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, March 5, 1859, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

lady in public. Failure to meet those standards left women open to criticism of their social status, even from their peers. When Elizabeth Mason Cabot visited Newport with the Lyman family in 1854, she was too uncomfortable to participate in the spectacle of public bathing. Her companions, Mrs. Lyman and her daughter Florence, took a daily swim in the ocean, but Mason Cabot repeatedly declined. She notes in her diary that although she wanted to join in the fun, she was acutely aware of the presence of the young men who visited the beach purely as spectators.<sup>321</sup> In such an uncomfortable atmosphere of conspicuousness to strangers, she criticized the personal grooming of the bathers. She notes that several women were “without stockings, collars, or muslin sleeves, a degree of negligence that was not becoming.” The transgressors, also members of the elite, were in other situations more refined. Mason Cabot notes that these “sweet young ladies in dainty dresses, [usually] too languishing and delicate to live, do not hesitate to appear as ugly, undressed, cross, and coarse women [while bathing].”<sup>322</sup>

At locations more formal than the seaside, some women found that their personal preference in dress was unimportant compared to advice that fine clothes were particularly fitted for women of high social status. Although she complained that making an elaborate toilette bored her, Mary Boykin Chesnut made it her habit to buy such fine clothes that she would be without reproach. Her wardrobe was largely composed of imported goods from Paris, which she bought either in Charleston, or from her family’s longstanding dressmaker in

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<sup>321</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, August 22, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>322</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, August 22, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Philadelphia.<sup>323</sup> In 1859, Chesnut received from her Philadelphia dressmaker two lace capes at the cost of \$110 and \$120. The dressmaker noted that they were “just what a Senator’s wife ought to have—provided she thinks she can afford it.”<sup>324</sup> From the dressmaker’s perspective, the clothes were not only fine and stylish, but they were especially well-suited to the new role that Chesnut had acquired with her husband’s election to the U.S. Senate.

James Chesnut, too, had long favored imported clothes whenever possible, perhaps at his wife’s suggestion. During the 1850s, when in Charleston, he bought his own clothes at Edgerton and Richards, a Broad Street shop, “Importers of French and English Cloths, Cassimers and Vestings.” The clothes he bought there were for formal occasions and ran his accounts into hundreds of dollars, which he could not always pay. Edgerton and Richards held over his 1853 accounts until 1854, with interest of \$6.93.<sup>325</sup> Fine clothes, whether for men or women, were linked, at least for the Chesnuts, to European imports of goods and style.

Although women’s clothing was more diverse overall than that of men, their public and private styles of dress were significantly different. As a result, women faced greater social restriction of their movement and time by standards of dress. The wider array of appropriate clothes for women led to more elaborate sets of rules regarding their use. Many costumes for women were appropriate for

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<sup>323</sup> Muhlenfeld, p. 65.

<sup>324</sup> Letter from Mary M. Wharton to Mary Boykin Chesnut, January 7, 1859, quoted in Muhlenfeld, p. 66.

<sup>325</sup> James Chesnut Receipts for 1853, 1854, 1855, at the South Carolina Historical Society.

only a brief period during the day, so that different attire might be worn for morning, then visiting, then luncheon, walking, and dinner.

Fashions in female attire restricted women physically, as well. Long skirts, hoops, crinolines, and tight stays prevented women from moving as freely as men. The heavy clothing that women wore for both daytime and evening was not only confining but in many cases dangerous. Elizabeth Mason Cabot records the fatal burning of her acquaintance, Sarah Barnard, in 1858. Barnard was waiting in her parlor at home for a friend to collect her for an afternoon outing. While her grandmother was out of the room, Barnard's voluminous, steel hooped skirts caught fire, blazing up so quickly that they could not be put out, causing her to burn to death.<sup>326</sup>

Even clothes that were worn during active pursuits were significantly more cumbersome for women than for men. When Mary Boykin Chesnut attended school in Charleston, she found that the costumes in which the girls danced were both bulky and, to her eyes, unattractive. At their dancing master's weekly ball, the girls wore narrow calf-length skirts, which did allow their legs to move more freely than usual. At the same time, however, their sleeves were heavily padded with eiderdown, so that they appeared "winged."<sup>327</sup>

Another way in which women's clothes restricted personal freedom was in their need for meticulous care. The clothes of elite women included expensive fabrics and trimmings, which were useful for display only as long as they

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<sup>326</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, March 13, 1858. Taylor notes that Frances Elizabeth Appleton burned to death in similar circumstances in 1861. Taylor, p. 333.

<sup>327</sup> Chesnut, "Two Years or the Way We Live Now," p. 551.

remained spotless. One way in which ornate clothing represented conspicuous display was through its obvious need for expensive maintenance. Thus, clothes had to be cared for and kept neat. While in London in 1851, Annie Lawrence Rotch sent out her gloves to be cleaned. Her care for her gloves is from one perspective indicative of the pressure women experienced to be always crisp and spotless in their dress. From another, however, it suggests a surprising thriftiness. Lawrence Rotch was willing to spend two shillings and eight pence to clean fifteen pairs of gloves in July of 1851, when a new pair would have cost her only one shilling<sup>328</sup>. Later in the same year, however, she spent fifteen shillings on one bonnet for her four-year-old daughter and twelve shillings for her one-year-old son Arthur.<sup>329</sup>

When Elizabeth Mason Cabot attended a daytime picnic with friends in 1854, she wore an elaborate and new costume of lace, embroidery and kid gloves. The other ladies present wore silk gauzes and satin wraps. In the rustic setting, however, the ladies' fine clothes were almost a burden. Mason Cabot notes that the group looked "most picturesque in their white and thin and many colored garments." Yet her enjoyment of the scene receded at "seeing the delicate stuffs torn and caught by the hundreds of blackberry vines that...made it almost impracticable to move many steps."<sup>330</sup> The men in the party wore more serviceable clothes, so that Mason Cabot concluded "the only place for a damsel

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<sup>328</sup> In June 1852, Rotch purchased a single pair of gloves for one shilling. Annie B. Rotch Diary, June 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>329</sup> Annie B. Rotch Diary, July 28, 1851 and December 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>330</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.



in pink barege was on a shawl beneath a tree, leaving the ground free to the gentlemen.”<sup>331</sup> Mason Cabot suggests that her clothes, in which she took so much pleasure at this outing, were the direct cause of her decision to engage in little strenuous activity. Her expensive costume, and the care it required, simply did not allow her to act as freely as the men in the party.

While women found little room for deviation from the expected forms of conspicuous consumption in their appearance, men were more likely to get away with personal eccentricities. Particularly among well-established male members of the upper class, variation from rules of display was possible. One Bostonian man who eschewed some of the standard forms of conspicuous consumption was Charles Amory, the brother-in-law of Anna Sears Amory. In an 1852 letter, Harriet Sears humorously pointed out to her sister Ellen Sears Amory the lapses that existed in Charles Amory’s appearance and behavior. Harriet notes, although Martha Amory has “such an interest in her worldly possessions, she must regret to see [her husband] Charles entering his superb house without gloves, & carrying his own little carpet bag down to the...depot.”<sup>332</sup> In that household, Martha was apparently responsible for most of the conspicuous consumption. She performed that function well enough that her husband, Charles, had the freedom to be eccentric in his own display without any loss of status. Although a man in a more socially precarious situation might have found it necessary to wear gloves and

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<sup>331</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, 1854, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>332</sup> Letter from Harriet Sears to Anna Sears Amory, December 23, 1852, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

have servants carry bags in order to convey his identity as a gentleman, Charles Sears did not.

Although elite men in both Boston and Charleston experienced fewer strictures on their dress and behavior than women, they, too, faced a need for the constant proof of their personal gentility. For elite men, whose status rested heavily on abstinence from manual labor, physical dirtiness or roughness was unthinkable, even if peers might dismiss a lack of gloves as a mere peccadillo. In *Lily: A Novel*, Susan Petigru King satirizes the endless care toward self-presentation that characterized the society of her youth. Yet, in her admiring description of the gentleman novelist William Thackeray, whom she had met personally, she demonstrates her own commitment to those ideals. Her only mention of his physical person is her reference to his hands, which she notes another belle had called “so nice and English, with their clean nails.”<sup>333</sup> The description evokes a comparison of Thackeray to the male characters of her novel, whose own dandiness approached that ideal. With her open admiration for the very cleanliness and freshness of the hands of a true gentleman, Petigru reveals her culture’s reverence for the ideal of the English gentleman whose avoidance of manual labor was complete.

Men and women found very different avenues of leisure open to them in 1850s America. Young women of elite families enjoyed far less personal freedom and variety in their daily occupations than did young men. Most days were spent at home or at the homes of friends. Outings, which included drives,

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<sup>333</sup> King, p. 114.

concerts, and evening parties or balls, were conducted strictly according to rules of propriety.

Although the leisure activities available to women were similarly restricted in the North and the South, Bostonians were more likely than Charlestonians to chafe against their limitations. In 1854, Elizabeth Mason Cabot compared the daily lives of young women like her and young men at Cambridge. She notes that men lack appreciation for the “perfect freedom” they find at college and fail to enjoy their “choice of friends, pleasures of intercourse, opportunities of study, the pleasure of a regular employment, the time for all kinds of reading, and the pleasures of skating, walking, etc., with whom, when and where you liked.” Mason Cabot suggests that “girls would do better” at appreciating these years of freedom. The acuteness of her desire to do what she liked is striking. Each pleasure that she mentions is one in which she has been particularly thwarted—notably in her own studies. Mason Cabot’s experience of a stifled social life was no different than that of her female friends.

The restrictions that existed on young women’s leisure activities not only prevented them from going where they pleased, but also strongly discouraged public rudeness of any kind. Elite young women, in keeping with their social role as the demonstrators of conspicuous leisure through refined manners and subtle niceties, did not speak their minds when cross. In particular, they did not make themselves unpleasant to men of their own class. To do so would be to belie the years of free time that they had spent in developing their social skills.

At a public function, society required that a young woman be unfailingly polite and even cordial to young men, whether or not they made themselves agreeable. In 1857, Elizabeth Cabot Mason struggled with maintaining a façade of pleasantries with Joseph Gardner, whose suit she had rejected almost a year earlier. Gardner had proposed marriage by letter, completely surprising Mason Cabot, who had not perceived any such prospective relationship between them. She responded in kind, sending a polite refusal by letter.<sup>334</sup> Almost a year later, however, in February of 1857, Gardner still expressed interest in her, watching her constantly at social events. At a dancing class at Papanti's, Gardner pestered Mason Cabot with no apparent sympathy for her feelings. She writes, "He sent me tonight a bouquet which I should have been glad to leave at home, but Mother thought it would be rude...When the German cotillion began...he came to sit by me, and I was as still as I could be. But of what avail, I must say yes and no, must grimly smile occasionally, and must make a remark after staring ten minutes at space, instead of sending him off." In the end, another young man rescued Elizabeth by sitting down near her. She turned her back on the unhappy Mr. Gardner until it was time for her to leave the class.<sup>335</sup>

Women found less forgiveness than men when they ranged outside the set of social behaviors that were considered acceptable for them. Many of the strictures that existed with regard to the activities of women were designed to preserve their appearance of chasteness and sexual innocence. Disregarding those

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<sup>334</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, March 29, 1856, at the Massachusetts Historical Society

<sup>335</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, February 26, 1857, at the Massachusetts Historical Society

rules was dangerous for a woman who wished to preserve her membership in the elite.

The strict rules that governed the social behavior of young women in both the North and the South were largely rooted in the repression of explicit sexuality. Elite women experienced significant pressure from family and friends to adhere to particular patterns of courtship. These patterns of behavior were socially functional in two ways. First, they served as signposts of social status for the elite, indicating the group membership of those who knew the rules. Second, social restrictions on the expression of sexuality by young women were a form of maintenance of the patriarchal social system. Moreover, the set of patriarchal mores was intertwined with the set of class-protective behaviors that made up conspicuous display. Deviance from appropriate behavior threatened, for women, disgrace in the dual arenas of gender roles and class membership.

For unmarried women of the 1850s in both Boston and Charleston, most socially acceptable behavior had in common the theme of limited interaction with members of the opposite sex. The restrictions among the elite of both cities on physical closeness while dancing, or on un-chaperoned socialization were the most easily apparent barrier to excessive familiarity between young men and young women.

The stigma attached to the polka and the waltz for elite young women stemmed from the physical proximity that was necessary between the dancers. Dancing in pairs was off limits for unmarried women in both Boston and

Charleston, because it suggested sexuality. Young men, however, were free to engage in such dances without the fear that polite society might censure them.

The appearance of more explicit sexuality among elite women was so socially inappropriate as to be shocking. Even amongst close female friends, women rarely referred to pregnancy directly. Instead, they mentioned future times when they anticipated being “sick” or when they might want family to visit to help them.<sup>336</sup> Women who were far along in pregnancy did not appear in public as freely as before. Their appearance and behavior during those few appearances, however, were the key to whether their condition was socially acceptable. When Louise Porcher (the sister of James Louis Petigru) attended a ball in 1850, she was shocked to see the young Mrs. Blacklock dancing as freely as if she were not eight months pregnant. Porcher’s censure came not from the fact that Blacklock was present, but rather that she did not conduct herself accordingly. Instead, she did not properly conceal her heavy figure and danced as if she were a young girl.<sup>337</sup>

Yet more complicated rules were the responsibility of young and marriageable women. In their interactions with men, women bore the larger brunt of displaying correct behavior, both due to a more complex code of actions, and due to the greater consequences that might arise from flouting the rules. When Della Allston, of Charleston, wrote to decline an invitation to ride with a young man, her mother found fault with her syntax. Della’s first person note had been

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<sup>336</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, p. 24.

<sup>337</sup> Letter from Louise Porcher to Adèle Allston, March/April, 1850, quoted in Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, p. 61. The Blacklocks were close friends of the Grimballs—the two families entertained one another at home frequently.

too familiar, her mother argued: instead, her note should have read, “Miss Alston regrets that she will not be able to ride...”<sup>338</sup> The excessive familiarity that Della unknowingly conveyed was dangerous, as it could lead to rumors of engagement or an inappropriate affair. After being “talked about” by society, a young, unmarried girl’s prospects were dim.<sup>339</sup>

The protection of older women chaperones in riotous, unfamiliar company, was necessary to a young woman’s reputation. When the Gardner family visited Washington from Boston in 1851, they met a busy social whirl that was outside their normal purview. The entertainments included private social events at home as well as more inclusive Hotel Balls. Mrs. Gardner wrote to her sister, Mary Lowell, that she refrained from joining much of the fun, so that she “live[d] more in the style of Victoria than any one else [she could] think of.” She lightheartedly describes the events as “dissipation,” noting that “this place would not do very well for most young ladies without a mamma.”<sup>340</sup>

The supervision and guidance that Mrs. Gardner describes may have been less rigid than the chaperonage that was common for young Charlestonian elite women. Although she writes that the lavish social activity is too much for her, she does note that some young women of her acquaintance appropriately take a place within it. The presence of a “mamma,” or at least a family friend, as in the case of her young friends, was, however, a requirement. Some events, however, were too much to contemplate. Mrs. Gardner writes of declining an invitation for

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<sup>338</sup> Pringle, p. 144.

<sup>339</sup> King.

<sup>340</sup> Letter from C.E. Gardner to Mrs. Francis C. Lowell, Washington, Feb 13, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

her daughter Julia to a “Fancy Ball, “ noting that she did not wish Julia to hear that she had been invited at all.<sup>341</sup>

Although women were, as Veblen suggests, the bearers of more responsibility for status maintenance through manners and daily actions, men were not entirely free from such assessments. The social behavior of a man was one indicator by which elites assessed his status. If his manners were not sufficiently refined, his desirability to elite women suffered. In 1855, four years before her engagement to Walter Cabot, Elizabeth Mason Cabot briefly considered the suits of a New Yorker named Mr. Van Schaick. Their connection was prolonged enough that some of her friends speculated that an engagement might be forthcoming. Mason Cabot’s affection for Van Schaick, however, was tempered by his poor understanding of the manners of Bostonian elites. As the pair mixed with Mason Cabot’s social circle, she grew increasingly uncomfortable with him. She notes, “I wish he could be changed a little, chiefly in comparative externals, manners, habits and actions, etc...now I always after seeing him, especially when others are present, feel regret that his faults should be so striking and apparent, hiding from acquaintances, at least, what lies beneath.<sup>342</sup> Soon after, Mason Cabot ended the connection.

Although women may have been more responsible for display through material goods and through evidence of personal leisure than men, members of both sexes relied at some level on conspicuous display for the preservation of their social status. For women, the relationship of status to conspicuous display

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Elizabeth Mason Cabot Diary, September 9, 1855, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.



was fairly direct. For men, however, personal display was less important in the demonstration of social status than the display of women in the household, whose evidence of wealth and leisure were conveyed vicariously.

The relative importance of personal display in both Boston and Charleston between men and women was strongly tied to patriarchal ideals, in which women experienced less freedom of choice than men. Elite women in both Boston and Charleston kept closely to a specific set of rules regarding their dress and behavior. As Veblen's theories suggest, those patterns of display were more complex for women than for men. Moreover, the social penalties for disregarding them were greater. If a man, like Charles Amory, chose to disregard convention and forgo gloves in public, or carry his own bags, his peers chuckled over his eccentricities. If a woman flouted the accepted standard of her class, however, she risked being taken for a member of another class entirely. The wrong style of dress or excessively relaxed manners might suggest that she was available to the advances of strangers on the street. Even among other elite women, the wrong behavior, such as dancing when obviously pregnant, did not elicit tolerant amusement but rather shock and disgust.

The harsh social penalties that women found when they departed from the correct rules of social display reinforced their secondary status in a patriarchal society. Although the South was in many ways more patriarchal than the North, particularly in light of the parallels that existed between the relationships between men and women, and between masters and slaves, the gendering of conspicuous consumption was remarkably similar in the two regions. Female Bostonians were

just as likely as Charlestonians to regret their inability to travel the streets by themselves, or to wear loose and unconfining clothing.

Although patterns of gendered conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure in nineteenth century Boston and Charleston gave elite women a form of personal agency, that empowerment operated entirely within a repressive culture of male dominance. Women, as the main actors in the maintenance of their family's social status through display, had the ability to choose the details of that presentation to the world. Yet, those choices were overwhelmingly narrow and the repercussions of a misstep were grave. In some families, such as the Robert Allstons, women gradually gained almost complete control of the household budget, after proving to their husbands that they could manage it prudently.<sup>343</sup> Yet even with the financial empowerment to make whatever choices she desired regarding the front that she and her family presented to the world, the elite woman of the 1850s was almost entirely bereft of real power to dress as she wanted, act as she wanted, or associate with whom she wanted, while at the same time maintaining her class identity.

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<sup>343</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*.

## Chapter Seven: Consumption, Class, Slavery, and Charity

In Boston and Charleston in the 1850s, material wealth and the display of fashionable taste were important tools by which the elite demonstrated their social status. That demonstration was in many cases directed largely to peers, as in the case of extravagant dinner parties, complex requirements of dress, and refined personal manners. At the same time, however, the display was visible to members of other classes, including laborers whom the elite employed. The conspicuous display in which the upper echelon of both the North and the South engaged was at least in part designed to emphasize the difference between classes and to keep order through that symbolism of goods.

The impact of conspicuous display on the relationships between classes varied in the two regions. Eugene Genovese suggests that Southern planters used conspicuous consumption as a means to underscore their social authority. By displaying their wealth, elite whites approximated the appearance of European gentry. In so doing, they attempted to convey a natural fitness for social dominance. Such a use of outward display to maintain the existing social order may not have been entirely conscious or deliberate, but it was effective.<sup>344</sup> Genovese argues that the use of conspicuous display among Southern planters supported a particular social system that approximated the pre-modern European set of relationships between landowners and serfs. Yet the notion that conspicuous display might be used to suggest validation of high social rank is

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<sup>344</sup> Genovese, *Political Economy*.

applicable to antebellum Boston, as well. Members of the elite of both cities fashioned their images in a way that would grant them increased power among the lower classes, while at the same time making that division appear natural. The difference between the two cities was that Charlestonians had a unique set of rules for their conspicuous display among slaves. Bostonians, without the constant tensions of violence and pseudo-familial relationships that characterized slavery, used fewer and simpler methods to define class relationships through display.

In the antebellum South, the economic institution of slavery engendered a complex social system, in which masters and slaves continually expressed and adjusted their power relationships. At the center of planter culture was the importance of control. Elites faced the necessity of controlling their slave population to maintain their way of life. At the same time, they internalized those notions of control, so that their own lives became bound by tradition and a set of strict rules regarding personal behavior.<sup>345</sup>

The culture of human control that dominated the South in the 1850s had several effects on the conspicuous display of Charleston planters. Among the most prominent was the influence that potential inter-racial violence had on the physical landscape of the city and country. By the 1850s, white South Carolina planters had long been a racial minority in the state. The influx of 39,000 slaves into the state in the first decade of the nineteenth century, along with the natural increase of the slave population already resident in the state, had led to a severe racial imbalance. With that demographic imbalance came the ever-present

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<sup>345</sup> Bruce.

possibility of a slave uprising. Racial tension was a concern for all whites, but for planter families, who lived in rural areas with hundreds of enslaved laborers, the threat of a reversal of power was terrifying.

Although the law upheld the absolute power of slave owners, in reality, planters were ever mindful of the danger of going too far and creating a situation of revolt. On many plantations, owners were willing to recognize their slaves' holding of personal property, in a considered attempt to keep the peace.<sup>346</sup> After the American Revolution, low country rice planters altered their agricultural system, turning to tidal rather than inland cultivation. That shift may have reflected planters' recognition of the precarious balance of power between masters and slaves. With the move to tidal rice cultivation, planters required less labor from their slaves, reducing the strain on the power of the institution of slavery.<sup>347</sup> By the Stono Rebellion of 1739, when South Carolinian slaves worked together in an abortive burst of violence to gain liberation, the possibility of organized slave revolt had been increasingly real. Through deliberate attempts such as the Stono uprising, the slaves of South Carolina reached toward freedom, while at the same time, inspiring the white minority to a "concerted counterattack" through physical and cultural methods.<sup>348</sup>

A major slave conspiracy finally came to the surface in Charleston in 1822, causing planters to increase their grip on their slaves and on measures that

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<sup>346</sup> Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 148-149.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281.

<sup>348</sup> Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), pp. 308-326.

were intended to ensure the safety of planter families. Denmark Vesey, a freedman who had purchased his own freedom with lottery winnings, led approximately nine thousand slaves in plans to seize the city guardhouse, powder magazines, and military arsenals. Although Vesey was found out before the revolt occurred, the repercussions to race relations were significant. Many of the slaves that elite Charlestonians trusted most had been involved. Two slaves who were loyal to their white owners reported the plot, leading to the hanging of thirty-five conspirators and the deportation of the rest.<sup>349</sup> Only a decade later, in 1831, Nat Turner led a bloody rebellion in Virginia. One result of such challenges to Southern slavery was newly stringent controls over the activities of slaves and freedmen.

One way in which Charlestonians reacted to the exposed slave conspiracy was by increasing their attempts to protect their physical safety. The houses of the elite began to reflect society's increasing concern with personal violence. One of the most famous Charleston mansions, the Miles Brewton House at 27 King Street, shows evidence of the racial tension that reached new heights after the Vesey conspiracy. The Georgian-style house dates from 1765, when Brewton, a merchant, hired a London architect to build his new home. By the early nineteenth century, the house had passed into the Pringle family.<sup>350</sup> After the 1822 uprising, the Pringles added severe iron spikes to the existing fence around the property.<sup>351</sup> These spikes, or *chevaux-de-frise*, now dominate the appearance

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<sup>349</sup> Edward A. Pearson, ed., *Designs Against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>350</sup> Leiding, pp. 4-7.

<sup>351</sup> Leland, p. 12.

of the house, emphasizing the divisions that exist in the city's culture. In the event that a widespread uprising overtook the Charleston, the owners of the city's mansions could hope to isolate themselves from panic in the streets. Ironically, such attempts to provide planters with security from the threat of racial violence were likely doomed to failure as a result of the total integration of slaves into slave owning households.

In contrast, the residences of the Bostonian upper class showed little outward sign of a threat of violence. The houses on Beacon Hill, where most of the Boston elite were concentrated during the first half of the nineteenth century, consisted largely of stocky yet imposing mansions with only low decorative iron railings separating them from the street. The buildings reflected the character of their owners in several ways: they were solid, brick houses, built for generations to live in, in which privacy was the central ideal. Only a narrow façade communicated with the street, although a house might be far deeper than it was wide. The insular nature of Boston elite society affected its demographic distribution, so that most of the richest families of the city lived on only six streets.<sup>352</sup> With that residential segregation, members of the elite clearly demonstrated their desire for class differentiation. However, the urgent need for enforcement of that barrier that existed among slaveholders in Charleston, was absent in Boston.

Planters continually sought for ways to emphasize their power over their slaves. One way in which they did so was by demonstrating their ownership and

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<sup>352</sup> Pessen, pp. 196-198.

control of their slaves' personal goods. Slave owners distributed clothes and home furnishings according to their own schedule. On many plantations, the planter family passed out clothing and shoes as Christmas gifts, eliciting an appearance of gratitude from their slaves. The items that slaves received included yards of fabric to be made into clothes, thread and needles to do the work, and in some cases the necessary wool to produce homespun fabric.<sup>353</sup> Even the meanest cabins of slaves were, as most planters made clear, part of the slaveholder's property. Planters discouraged slaves from regarding their crowded homes as their own, instead emphasizing the communal nature of the space by organizing the maintenance and cleaning of slave quarters as plantation-wide projects.<sup>354</sup>

Much of the control that Southern planters exerted over their slaves through means of material goods was related to women and children of both races. The gendering of that aspect of the master-slave relationship links Veblen's notion of gendered conspicuous consumption with the larger, hierarchical stresses of patriarchy. In Veblen's theory of conspicuous display, women and children play larger roles than men because they act socially as appendages of their male relatives. As such, they demonstrate status vicariously for men.<sup>355</sup> From that perspective, it is not surprising that, among planter families, the use of conspicuous display of the home and personal attire to demonstrate their dominance over slaves was largely the province of women and

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<sup>353</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese mentions that many plantations were entirely self-sufficient in regard to slave clothes, growing the wool and indigo dye needed to prepare homespun goods. The planter families in this study, however, provided their slaves with store-bought fabrics for at least some of their clothes and blankets. Fox-Genovese, pp. 181-183.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

<sup>355</sup> Veblen, p. 229



children. More interesting is the way that those displays demonstrate the intersection between patriarchy and slavery. If conspicuous display exists as a means of class differentiation in response to a perceived threat, then the relationship of planter women and slaves is important to understanding that display. Perhaps planter women, aware of the similarity of their social powerlessness to that of slaves, found satisfaction in their central role as maintainers of that class differentiation.

Southern planter families experienced a long term, daily proximity with their household slaves that often far exceeded their society with other whites.<sup>356</sup> The relationships that slave owners developed with their African-American slaves were both intimate and complex. Among many planter women who experienced a subjugated role under patriarchy, daily interactions with slaves generated perpetual feelings of tension and contradiction. While only a few plantation mistresses reacted politically to the similarities between their lives and the lives of their slaves by supporting abolition, many were aware of parallels. As Mary Boykin Chesnut noted in her diary, "There is no slave, after all, like a wife."<sup>357</sup> That identification that some planter women felt with slaves, though contradictory and perhaps subconscious, may have been one cause of the gendered use of material goods to maintain dominance over slaves.

Throughout the South, slave women who worked closely with planter families often had in common with their mistresses the belief that fine clothing

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<sup>356</sup> Joan Cashin, *A Family Affair: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>357</sup> Chesnut, Mary Boykin, *A Diary From Dixie* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 49.

was a badge of high status. For slave women, the highest status came with the expensive clothes that were the cast-off property of planter women. Elizabeth Fox Genovese finds that many plantation women justified their brief use of fashionable clothes, which might last only for a season, by sharing the discarded clothes with household slaves. Those slaves took pride in their mistresses' fashionable appearance, while at the same time hoping that some of the finery would eventually be theirs. For this reason, household slaves were better versed in fashion and often had better clothes than poor white women.<sup>358</sup> Even among slave women who did not receive cast off clothes from the planter family, fine clothes were an important way of marking social status. Slaves who wore homespun and rough fabric during the week were likely to own a better garment for Sunday churchgoing. A calico dress, for example, was a common way in which slave owners rewarded female slaves for good work.<sup>359</sup>

The practice of slaves "claiming" the material possessions of the family that owned them was widespread on the Cheves McCord plantation, suggesting that a functional transfer of social power accompanied the transaction. Louisa McCord Smythe describes a Sunday treat for all of the plantation children, in which they all played together. The slave children came up to the McCord house, singing and dancing, to receive biscuits and sugar from the planter children. She notes

Part of the performance was always to "choose," as they called it, that is to say, to go over us and our belongings and claim us or them, as their special property. This was a great compliment and we were always much

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<sup>358</sup> Fox-Genovese, pp. 216-219.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

pleased, though a little embarrassed, by the claiming of our dresses or shoes or anything else down to our toes and fingers.<sup>360</sup>

McCord Smythe does not explain how the game concluded, but it is likely that the claiming of goods that she describes was temporary only. Nevertheless, the slave children and the planter children created a moment of negotiation in which personal power could be transferred. Young slaves, whose own clothes consisted of denims, rough osnaburgs, and muslins, could for a brief time “own” the McCords’ fine fabrics, and more importantly, the entitlement that those goods conveyed. They could even temporarily “own” the body parts of the planter children. Just as the McCord family owned the physical selves of their slaves, so could the slaves temporarily play at owning the bodies of their masters.

The relationship between adult slaves and planter children was one of negotiation, with regard both to action and material display. White children were often under the daily care of enslaved adults, to whom they owed strict discipline. At the same time, however, those children held a significant power over their family’s slaves. The racial division that existed in the antebellum South was absolute. A slave was always aware of the danger inherent in overstepping boundaries of apparent ease between house workers and their owners. A white child could, with little ado, cause the destruction of a slave adult.<sup>361</sup>

Planter children wielded a power over enslaved members of their household through material goods, much as plantation mistresses did. Slaves gave considerable attention and often envy to the goods that planter children

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<sup>360</sup> Louisa McCord Smythe, “Recollections,” at the South Carolina Historical Society, p. 12.

<sup>361</sup> Stampp, pp. 329-330.

owned. Louisa McCord Smythe remembers that her nurse, Maum Di, admired greatly the clothes of her charges. As Maum Di was a diminutive person, she was able to fit into the tops of the cast-off dresses of the small McCord girls, first mending and cleaning the clothes, “with great pleasure to herself and [the girls].”<sup>362</sup> Her motivations for adopting the dress of the white children may have been based partly on the quality of the goods. Yet, she was a prominent member of the household, and as such had considerable clothing of her own. Maum Di always wore three aprons, which she would shed in turn through the day, as each layer became dirty. The last apron was white, and was visible only when she went “before people.”<sup>363</sup> She was concerned about her appearance, wanting to present herself as clean and well-dressed when she met “people.” More than that, she may have wanted to claim her close association with the family, in wearing the mended clothes of the McCord girls. Her status increased as she adopted the conspicuous consumption of the McCord family as her own.

Another example of the transfer of material goods from planter families to their slaves was the casting off of old plantation furniture to slave households. Louisa McCord Smythe mentions several pieces of furniture that were passed down to household slaves. One, a “fine Sheraton sofa,” had returned to her possession by the 1890s. Smythe’s mother, Louisa Cheves McCord, had given the sofa to Marianne, a mulatto house slave to whom she felt close. Marianne later sold the piece, and after it had had at least one other owner, McCord Smythe

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<sup>362</sup> Smythe, p. 2.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

successfully recovered it.<sup>364</sup> Another piece of family furniture that passed into slave or ex-slave ownership was a bookcase that McCord Smythe gave to a former house servant. Although Smythe describes the bookcase as “handsome,” she also notes that it was “Late Empire, a poor piece,” suggesting that she did not miss it.<sup>365</sup>

Some South Carolina slaves identified so closely with the planter families that owned them that they adopted their political views as well as their cast-off material goods. Even if those political beliefs strongly supported the institution of slavery in the face of abolitionism, some slaves elected to embrace them as a means of consolidating their identity with a planter family. Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote to her husband James in 1850 that one of the old Mulberry slaves was “triumphantly” proud of Chesnut’s political success. The servant, “Dick,” was conscious of the pride that Chesnut’s late grandfather would have had in him, “a *true true* gentleman.”<sup>366</sup> That adoption of the public successes of the family by an old household slave suggests both a genuine fondness and a pride in claiming a part of that group identity.

On Southern plantations, the provision of goods for slaves was a combined form of charity, family duty, and conspicuous display that served to underline the invidious comparisons between the powerful and the powerless. Plantation mistresses were the primary managers of the health, education, and clothing of all

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

<sup>366</sup> Letter from Mary Boykin Chesnut to James Chesnut, May 28, 1850, quoted in Allie Patricia Wall, “The Letters of Mary Boykin Chesnut,” Unpublished M.A. Thesis: University of South Carolina, pp. 5-6.

slaves on the property. The framing of the distribution of that aid as ceremony emphasized the charitable nature of those “gifts.” Louisa McCord Smythe describes the ways in which her family gave goods to the Lang Syne slaves. She states “the long line of women and children with baskets and buckets would come over from the quarter” for the weekly “lowance.” At the more ceremonious occasion of the giving of the clothes allowance, all of the slaves, including the men, would come to the house, dressed in their best. Louisa Cheves McCord would stand in front of the “barred store room” and measure out the portion of cloth, buttons, needles, and thread to each individual. McCord Smythe recalls, “it was a sort of Fair day for [the slaves.]”<sup>367</sup>

During the Civil War, as the institution of slavery became increasingly unstable, the understandings about the controlled sharing of material goods that masters and slaves had developed collapsed. Adele Allston recalls making a dangerous drive with her mother during the war years to each of her family’s South Carolina low country plantations, where the two white women faced down angry slaves on the properties. Without the protection of slavery, planters were no longer the unquestioned owners of all of the material goods on the plantation. At each plantation, Adele Petigru Allston had to argue with slaves to gain control of the keys to the storeroom. Once she had gained the keys, the traditional symbols of the power of the plantation mistress, she no longer perceived the crowd as a threat to her.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Smythe, pp. 15-16.

<sup>368</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*. Pp. 199-201.

In Boston, labor relations differed fundamentally from the slave South, yet complex perceptions of race still influenced social thought. Although Massachusetts had been in 1641 the first state to legalize slavery, it had also been among the first states to outlaw the institution. The egalitarian ideals of the American Revolution reached political fervor earlier in Massachusetts than in other colonies, leading many activists to speak out against slavery as unjust. As early as 1755, citizens called for an end to the importation of slaves. By 1767, Boston's representative to the General Court advocated the total abolition of slavery.<sup>369</sup> By the end of the century, abolition became a widespread fact in Boston as a result of numerous individual lawsuits, rather than an explicit legal bill.<sup>370</sup> By the 1850s, Boston was a center for abolitionist activity directed toward Southern states. The city was the home of prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison as well as several of the most influential antislavery associations, including The New England Emigrant Aid Company.<sup>371</sup> Despite the lack of racial slavery in nineteenth century Boston, however, class divisions were rigid.

Laborers were, some historians have suggested, almost as socially immobile in the North as African-American slaves were in the South. By the early nineteenth century, the laboring class of the city was becoming clearly identified with the population of recent Irish Catholic immigrants. In 1830, the Irish comprised almost ten percent of the city's population, while African-

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<sup>369</sup> Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 100.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>371</sup> Richard Abbott, *Cotton and Capital: Boston Businessmen and Antislavery Reform, 1854-1868*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).

Americans made up only about two percent. Both groups lived in de facto segregated neighborhoods, either in the North End, or on Broad Street.<sup>372</sup> Many of the Irish in Boston were recent immigrants, who lived in crowded poverty and had little opportunity to improve their lot. By mid-century, the Irish population was the target of public violence and nativist rhetoric. Popular opinion in the city claimed that the Irish were unruly and unwilling to assimilate into American culture.<sup>373</sup> Immigrants and Roman Catholics found it difficult to make their way even into the economically unrewarding system of domestic service, where they often had to lie about their origin or religion in the face of rampant nativism.<sup>374</sup>

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Irish in Northeastern America became equated in popular culture with a racially defined working class. The epithets that many native-born white Americans used to describe Irish immigrants were strikingly similar to those that appeared in descriptions of African-American slaves. The Irish faced ridicule for apparent physical and temperamental differences that, according to some, defined them as a race apart from white native-born Americans. As David Roediger finds in his analysis of the racialization of the Irish in antebellum America, common descriptions of the Irish included “low-browed,” “bestial,” and “prehensile.”<sup>375</sup> Such words differentiated the Irish from the native born in much the same way as popular Southern descriptions of African-Americans. When Sally Baxter wrote about the

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<sup>372</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>374</sup> Faye E. Dudden, *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. 68.

<sup>375</sup> Roediger, p. 133.



“animal faces and idiot gestures” of the slaves at the Cheves plantation of Lang Syne, she created a clear distinction between herself and what she perceived to be an entirely separate category of people—one whose claim to humanity was so tenuous that they kept it only on the sufferance of those who held more power.<sup>376</sup>

A racially based affirmation of social and economic class division was perhaps as strong in Boston as it was in Charleston, although it did not translate as directly in the North to legal and economic bondage. By the 1840s, when Irish immigration into America increased in response to famine in Ireland, Boston’s Irish were so focused on their own struggle to assert themselves in America that they were solidly proslavery. Their own experience of racial marginalization in the New World had led them to grasp what they could of the benefits of their situation in contrast with that of Southern slaves.<sup>377</sup>

Although it was unusual for Bostonians to have African-American servants, partly because the population of African-Americans in the city was relatively small, it was not unheard of for Charlestonians to have Irish house servants. Robert Allston employed an “Irish nurse who was head of the nursery” for his daughters.<sup>378</sup> His unusual choice for the job, which entailed the supervision of many slave women, suggests a cosmopolitanism attitude. Just as the Allstons had to have a piano from Paris, and send their daughters to a French-speaking boarding school, they were approximating the ways of the Northeast in

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<sup>376</sup> Letter from Sally Baxter to her “Dear Papa,” April 15, 1855, Cheves Family Papers, at the South Carolina Historical Society.

<sup>377</sup> Roediger, p. 136.

<sup>378</sup> Pringle, p. 108.

having an Irish house servant, whose social status was a step above African-American slaves.

Despite the similarities between the North and South with regard to the rigid definition of a laboring class, the relationship of elites to household servants was far less complex in Boston than in Charleston. By the 1850s, the Irish represented a majority of household laborers in the Northeast. As Christine Stansell shows, seventy-five percent of female household servants in New York in 1850 were Irish-Americans.<sup>379</sup> For native-born Americans, domestic jobs held a stigma of servitude that suggested Southern slavery. The very word, “servant,” which had been unacceptable as a descriptor of native-born white Americans, reappeared in the Northeastern lexicon as a term for Irish-American workers.<sup>380</sup>

In Boston, although many of the same barriers existed between household workers and members of the elite as in the South, the most extreme elements of the relationship were not present. If forced labor was not the legalized foundation of the Northern economy, neither were there the elements of paternal, reciprocal feeling in which Southern planters at least sporadically believed. Members of the elite household did not experience the extended proximity with their servants that characterized plantation life, and did not in most cases develop the long-term relationships resulted in the South. Some employers enjoyed a close relationship with their servants, but others found them to be a source of friction. Most importantly, house servants appeared far less often in any capacity in the personal

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<sup>379</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

<sup>380</sup> Roediger, p. 146.

papers of Bostonians than Charlestonians. Rare were notations that linked household employees with the giving, sharing, or display of material goods. The lives of employer and worker simply were more separate in the urban, free-labor setting of Boston.

Bostonian Caroline Cary Curtis made several mentions of her servants in her diary when she first began housekeeping as a newlywed and found herself unprepared to deal with her employees. At first, when the couple's finances were slim, she had only two servants: one man who worked outside, and one woman, who ran the kitchen. The man-of-all-work was Irish, but chose to downplay that heritage, asking that he be called Coine, instead of his real name, Flaherty, because his father had been in the British army.<sup>381</sup> Although Coine was patient with the inexperience of his new mistress, the cook, Hannah, was not. Curtis writes that "it was just about a month when Hannah dismissed me from her service: certainly I never should have had the courage to dismiss her."<sup>382</sup> The frequent turnover of household servants in the Curtis household was not uncommon among elite Bostonians. Servants who could get better positions elsewhere, or who wanted to move to another part of the United States, simply did so.<sup>383</sup> Thus, the long-term relationships that existed in the slave South were not often evident in Bostonian households.

The personal rapport between employer and servant in Boston households was far less circumscribed than in the South, where the forced nature of slavery

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<sup>381</sup> Curtis, p. 99.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid, pp. 99-100.

<sup>383</sup> Dudden.

trumped all other elements of the relationship. Caroline Cary Curtis believed that she was too lenient with her servants, allowing them to take advantage of her. Although the young mistress once admonished her cook, Hannah for staying out too late at night, she later regretted the incident, and bought the cook a ruffled muslin apron as an apology. Cary Curtis wrote in her journal that “[She] took my measure on [that] occasion.”<sup>384</sup> Without a strong sense of discipline in the relationship, Cary Curtis had little hope of success with the cook, and was glad when she left.

A contrasting view of the elite Bostonian relationship to servants appears in Francis Cabot Lowell’s papers. Lowell wrote in 1855 to his cousin, John Gardner, about their agreement to offer financial support to the family of a servant who had died. Lowell reminded Gardner that he had promised to share the expense of bringing up the children of the servant, Joseph Hills, who was “equally in the service of both of us.” Since that time, Gardner has lost interest in the expensive venture, and Lowell, being “not as rich as [he] was at the time of Joseph’s death,” seeks his help. Although the nature of Hill’s service must have been important, Lowell seems to be unusual in his continued loyalty to the man’s bereft family.<sup>385</sup>

Most elite Bostonians had little understanding of the hardships that their servants experienced. Charity was to many of them a vague concept that applied to the poor, not necessarily to those individual members of the working class that

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<sup>384</sup> Curtis, p. 100.

<sup>385</sup> Letter from Francis Cabot Lowell to John Gardner, July 15, 1855, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

appeared in their lives on a regular basis. The social chasm between the two groups is evident in the lighthearted dismissal that Anna Sears Amory gave of the Irish working class of the city during a spring flood in Boston. Amory and her family spent an evening's merriment at home while the weather raged outside. In a letter describing the event, however, she noted flippantly that "all the poor Irish who live in cellars here floated out of their miserable habitations."<sup>386</sup> Amory recorded the misfortune of the Irish without indicating that she felt a sense of responsibility for their welfare or any personal attachment to anybody affected. Her detachment from their lives is very different from the involvement that likely would have occurred in a Southern context. Yet Sears Amory was one of the most committed elite women of her generation in organized charitable causes. When she died in 1894, her obituary in the *Boston Transcript* described her many contributions to "charitable and helpful works," including establishing a day nursery in New York, and a house dedicated to summer vacations for poor children in Quincy, Massachusetts.<sup>387</sup> Anna Sears Amory's devotion to charitable works conforms to the Boston model that Pease and Pease suggest, in which good works were a means of improving the city and its productivity, rather than an individual means of helping others. That more civic-oriented method of dispensing aid did not, however, necessarily indicate a greater altruism on the part of the giver. With her involvement in organized causes, Sears Amory may have

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<sup>386</sup> Letter from Anna Sears Amory to Mrs. David Sears, April 20, 1851, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>387</sup> "Mrs. William Amory, April 21, 1894," Obituary, *Boston Transcript*, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

eliminated most personal interaction with the needy, but in doing so, she increased her interaction with peers who might appreciate her works.

Thorstein Veblen notes that as American society became increasingly characterized by invidious comparisons, it developed a culture of charitable involvement in which conspicuous display was a more important motive than disinterested altruism. He notes that most charitable efforts, including small clubs and more formal endowments were based on their members' desires for "enhanced repute or...pecuniary gain."<sup>388</sup> Veblen suggests that visible acts of charity served to authenticate the financial reputation of the giver, while at the same time emphasizing the contrast between those who had money and those who did not. Nineteenth century American culture, however, masked the invidious motives of charity through religious characterization, in which giving appeared as a Christian value tied to no personal motivations. Thus, the generosity of helping others validated the donor financially, socially, and even morally.<sup>389</sup>

Charity and civic works were important to the members of the elite in both Boston and Charleston, although through different mechanisms and perhaps for different reasons. Most members of the elite in each city were involved in local improvement at some level. However, the way in which those in power dispensed charity differed in the two cities. Pease and Pease find exclusivity to be the major difference between community involvement in the two cities. In Charleston, civic groups were an inclusive way in which members of the elite expressed their sense of duty toward the entire community. People with different skills and

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<sup>388</sup> Veblen, p. 221.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid, pp. 221-222.

backgrounds bonded together to accomplish a variety of charitable purposes. Because civic groups were open to a diverse membership, involvement in them was one way in which new landowners might enter the social elite. In Boston, however, civic groups were highly specialized, including as their members only those who could contribute to a set goal, such as music or care for the sick. Charity was for Bostonians simply another kind of productive work, in which the focus on completion was more important than attempting to form social networks where none previously existed.<sup>390</sup>

Bostonians David and Miriam Sears had longstanding ties to their city's Humane Society. They gave frequent dinners and entertainments for the group, which included many members of Boston's elite. The guest lists for the Rotch family dinners for the Humane Society for the 1850s included Charles Amory, Abbott Lawrence, Francis Parkman, Francis Crowninshield, Charles Curtis, Robert Winthrop, Louis Agassiz, and Charles Lyman. The group included only men, although some women were present at the social gatherings. In 1854, David Sears was President of the Society. In the same year, the list of officers included Charles Amory, whose lack of personal dapperness faintly amused his Sears in-laws, as Treasurer.<sup>391</sup> The extent to which the group's membership over the decade was almost synonymous with the elite of the city confirms Pease and Pease's suggestion that such groups affirmed existing social networks, rather than extending them.

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<sup>390</sup> Pease and Pease. *Web of Progress*, p. 152.

<sup>391</sup> Annie B. Rotch Diary, 1850-1858, at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

The Lawrence-Rotch family had a continued involvement in some of Boston's most prominent charitable organizations. Abbott Lawrence, Annie Lawrence Rotch's father, was (with his brother, Amos Lawrence) one of the founding members of the "Thomas Perkins Institution and the Massachusetts School for the Blind." During the second half of the nineteenth century, Amos Lawrence gave more than \$600,000—some of it anonymously—to Boston's organized charities.<sup>392</sup>

Boston and Charleston differed not only in the way that charitable groups were organized, but in the chosen recipients of that charity. In Charleston, the value placed on personal leisure as a sign of membership among gentle folk precluded the formation of judgments of the industriousness of the poor. Bostonians, in contrast, were unwilling to bestow charity on those who did not exhibit worthiness in the form of a Protestant work ethic.<sup>393</sup> Such an attitude is consistent with the notion that Boston was a free-labor capitalist society in which hard work could elevate a person's social and economic position. Bostonians preferred to believe that the city contained a population of independent people who could for the most part help themselves. Charlestonians had a different ideal of the relationships within their city's population, believing that members of all classes were interdependent. As Henry Pinckney of Charleston stated in 1835, "The whole social system [of the city] is but a chain of reciprocal dependence, the poor hanging upon the rich, and the rich upon the poor."<sup>394</sup> For members of elite

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<sup>392</sup> Pessen, pp. 253-254.

<sup>393</sup> Pease and Pease. *Web of Progress*, p. 152.

<sup>394</sup> Henry Laurens Pinckney, *Address Delivered before the Methodist Benevolent Society, July 1835* (Charleston: E.J. Van Brunt, 1835), p. 17.



Charleston, charity was a way of maintaining the balance of power between classes. The explicit way in which they framed their system of dependence, and the control that it offered them suggests that they directed that conspicuous display both to peers and to members of lower classes. That display is consistent with a pre-modern social and economic system of reciprocity, in which duty and control reinforce each other.

In Charleston, the dispensation of charity to the public was complicated by the relationship of planters to their slaves. Some slave owners felt a sense of responsibility to their slaves that was consistent merely with the care-taking of valuable property.<sup>395</sup> Others, however, believed that their class had a moral and deeply personal responsibility to care for their enslaved workers. According to the ideology of paternalism, slaves were like children, needing the care and guidance of their masters.<sup>396</sup> From that perspective, the money and time that planter families expended on their slaves comprised a form of charity to the less fortunate. The central role that white plantation mistresses occupied in the distribution of daily care to slaves was comparable to the involvement of women of both cities in the direct giving of alms to the needy. Yet at the same time, Charlestonians recognized that it was necessary to separate the two causes, to better delineate the racial differences between slaves and poor whites, thus maintaining the peace among both groups.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Fogel and Engerman.

<sup>396</sup> Stampp, p. 163.

<sup>397</sup> Barbara Bellows, *Benevolence Among Slaveholders : Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993).

The involvement of men and women of both Boston and Charleston in charitable works was consistent with the divided gender roles that existed in the ideology of “separate spheres.” Men were likely to be involved in activities that met outside the home and conformed to businesslike models. For men of both cities, that meant membership on various committee boards, and the organization of an annual budget for personal disbursement of one’s own funds. Civic groups controlled pools of public and private money for charitable disbursement and made decisions about city development and the provision for local needs, such as sanitation and firefighting. The underlying goal of all of these organizations was the advancement of Boston’s productivity and stability.<sup>398</sup>

Women were more likely to be involved directly in the distribution of money and goods to the poor. Although women’s charitable groups did not proliferate among America’s middle class until after the Civil War, the association of elite women with charitable causes had existed from the early nineteenth century.<sup>399</sup> Elite women gave food and clothes to their city’s poor during times of crisis. In addition, they cared for people who were associated with the family in some way, including neighbors and, in the South, slaves. Many feminine family roles were easily adapted to charitable work, including sewing and nursing the sick. The emphasis on women’s maintenance of religious values that developed along with “separate spheres” meant that women were more likely than men to be involved in religious ministrations directly to the needy, giving ecumenical aid while at the same time proselytizing their religious values to those

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<sup>398</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, p. 150.

<sup>399</sup> Ryan.

who accepted the practical elements of their charity. In Charleston, however, race was even more important than religion, causing organized societies to focus more on white solidarity than on religious or ethnic barriers.<sup>400</sup>

In antebellum Charleston, elite women were more likely to give charitable handouts to individuals in person than to belong to organized groups concerned with the systematic betterment of society. That face-to-face interaction with the recipients of charity conformed more closely to an aristocratic model of “noblesse oblige” than to the city-improvement-oriented model of elite Bostonians. To make those personal contributions, however, Charlestonian women had to have cash at the ready. Such accessibility of personal funds for planter women was not always possible in a culture that was both patriarchal and aimed toward self-sufficient production on the plantation.

The subject of personal disbursement of charity was the cause of serious disagreement between Robert Allston and his wife, Adele Petigru Allston. By the 1850s, Adele had been managing many of the financial affairs of the plantation for almost two decades. Allston, however, felt unable to trust his much younger wife with much money or control. In 1851, however, Adele Allston found herself without enough cash to make a contribution to a church charity for Thanksgiving. Her anger at being powerless to make her desired donation sparked an argument with her husband, after which he agreed to share more financial control with her.<sup>401</sup> For Adele Petigru Allston, charity had a strong enough place in her

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<sup>400</sup> Pease and Pease, *Web of Progress*, p. 143.

<sup>401</sup> Pease and Pease, *Family of Women*, pp. 113-114.

conception of a woman's role that the event was important enough to confront her husband about years of aggravation over his financial paternalism.

During the Civil War, while living at Spartanburg, Meta Morris Grimball was similarly mortified to find that not only had she no change to give two female beggars that came to her door, but she did not even have enough extra food for them. Grimball was so sorry at having "refus[ed] her all aid" that she made a point of giving one of the women twenty-five cents when she saw her again.<sup>402</sup> Although Grimball does not indicate the race of the women, they were almost certainly white. Her compassion and sense of obligation to them suggests that the dependent relationship between planters and African-American slaves did not preclude charitable care for poorer whites.

The ways in which Charlestonians and Bostonians used material goods to demonstrate their social and economic power were very different. Members of each city's elite showed a contrasting propensity to share their goods with others as charity. The different patterns of charitable works in each city were derived from contrasting idealizations of the relationship between the giver and the recipient. Those understandings of inter-class networks were central to the social and economic realities of the capitalistic North and the unique slave South.

In Charleston, planters were likely to share their clothes and furniture with their slaves, often doing so while an item was still in excellent condition. Because of the immutability of the master-slave relationship, planters did not feel a threat to their social status from their slaves. Certainly, the specter of a violent slave

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<sup>402</sup> Meta Morris Grimball Diary, November 28, 1862, at the University of North Carolina.

revolt was always present in South Carolina. Yet, as long as slavery remained intact, there was no risk that slaves might cross any status barriers simply by wearing the fine clothes of planters, or by having a massive piece of Chippendale furniture in their tiny house. On the contrary, such sharing of material goods was a way of cementing the relationship between owner and slave. From one perspective, slaves gained material wealth to enjoy. At the same time, however, they became ever more an extension of their masters, displaying that bond of ownership through the value on which they placed on the material goods of planters.

In Boston, the relationship that elites had with members of the laboring class did not involve the sharing of status through material goods. On the contrary, members of the upper class were reluctant to allow such a wavering of the barrier between each class. That adherence to a traditional outlook on the appropriateness of class-based dress is more consistent with European and American behavior in the nineteenth century. The sumptuary laws that had in previous centuries prevented Europeans of low rank from wearing certain items of luxurious dress, even if they could afford it, persisted in spirit in the eighteenth and nineteenth century American inflexible association of certain items with high social status.<sup>403</sup> For Bostonians, who did not have the rigid and legal class system that the slave South had, personal material goods were important markers of class

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<sup>403</sup> T.H. Breen, "The Meanings of Things," in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (Rutledge: London, 1993).

distinction that did not offer the same possibilities for reinterpretation through inter-class sharing of possessions.

## **Conclusion: The Nature of Conspicuous Display in Boston and Charleston**

The use and meaning of conspicuous display in antebellum Charleston and Boston suggest widespread differences between the social structures of the elite in the two cities. The extent to which each city's upper class relied on outward display to assert their individual social status differed, as did the means by which that display translated into desirable characteristics of personal identity. These patterns of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure conform in many ways to the broader social milieu in which each elite segment of society operated. At the same time, however, these patterns demonstrate both the commonality of outward construction of self among elite Americans of the 1850s, and the malleability of conspicuous display as a tool in that process.

The most important aspect of the affirmation of personal status in Boston and Charleston was the degree of social mobility that existed in each city. In a situation of high social mobility, greater possibilities existed for the re-fashioning of the public self in accordance with newly gained wealth or opportunities. On the surface, Boston was the more permeable society. There, the principles of capitalism and free labor allowed any person to increase his or her position, both economically and socially. Although this was true in the lower and middle classes, entry into the upper class was more difficult. By the 1850s, the merchant families that had come to power only a generation or two before had created a tightly knit social group in which bloodlines were the most important determinant

of high social status. Intermarriage was the most secure way in which a newcomer could join the ranks of the elite, yet that method provided a considerable barrier, as it required the consent of already powerful families.

As elite Bostonians experienced little social mobility, they were perhaps more secure about their own status. They were less likely than Charlestonians to use material display, or conspicuous consumption, to assert their wealth or “good taste.” Those forms of status display were most visible to the uninitiated—the members of the middle class who might have their eye on social advancement. Members of Boston’s elite were, however, keenly aware of status display through their behavior. Such learned forms of presentation through actions were an expression of conspicuous leisure. Many of those unspoken codes of personal comportment were understandable only by their peers, thus reinforcing the closed nature of the city’s elite, as well as its lofty detachment from those it considered to be outside its parameters.

In Charleston, social mobility was, paradoxically, both more restricted and more flexible. For enslaved African-Americans, no possibility for change in status existed. Slaves were unable to hold property, increase their wealth, or wield much control over their daily lives. In contrast, white Charlestonians were perhaps more free to reinvent themselves than their Northern counterparts. The road to power was, as Genovese states, “through the plantation.”<sup>404</sup> If a white citizen could become a land owner, plant a high-status cash crop like rice or cotton, and own large numbers of slaves, he stood a good chance of gaining entry

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<sup>404</sup> Genovese, *Political Economy*, p. 29.



into the elite. Although bloodlines were important in Charleston's upper class, elite kinship networks were not as densely interlaced as they were in Boston. In Charleston, intermarriage was perhaps easier than it was in Boston, because the social and economic credentials needed to form alliances with an elite family were more quantifiable. As a result, marriage was a more available tool for consolidating class status to Charlestonians of middle class backgrounds.

The greater permeability of Charleston's elite class generated insecurity for newcomers, who had to prove their worthiness for group membership, as well as longstanding members of the elite, who were ever wary of losing position. Charlestonians were more concerned than their Boston counterparts with displays of material wealth. They were more likely to relate that conspicuous consumption to their social status, and to judge others by that measure. Although elite Charlestonians did include forms of conspicuous leisure in their construction of their outward displays of status, those methods were less coded than in Boston. Charlestonian rules of genteel behavior were likely to be clear enough to be learned by newcomers, just as etiquette manuals explicitly stated what society required of those hoping to rise in status.

The extent to which each city embraced patriarchy affected the involvement of elites in conspicuous display. In both locations, women and children were the primary vehicles for status expression. As Veblen suggests, the degree to which women and children withdrew from productive work was a symbol of high status. Yet the gender roles of "separate spheres" were not unchallenged in either city. In Boston, the education and community involvement

of girls and women were greater than in much of the nation. Among elites, the importance of study and “culture” were more important than the notion that women gained status by being unfit for any paid work. In Charleston, elite women were less likely than Northerners to get a strong formal education and to forge bonds outside the home. Yet they did exert considerable control over that immobile segment of their society—slaves. Within the plantation household, women found a limited arena for personal power.

For elites of both cities, however, patriarchy remained strong in the 1850s. The daily activities and opportunities available to women underscore that confinement. Moreover, the place of women in the universe of conspicuous display makes clear their role as social appendages of their male relatives. High status for women was inextricably linked to the status of their fathers, husbands, or brothers. Through their consistently crucial role as the wearers of fine goods and the knowledge-bearers of esoteric customs, women were, as Veblen argues, vicarious reflections of male status.<sup>405</sup> What personal agency they found through their small controls of that display was confined to their role within patriarchy.

The relationship of the upper class to other classes influenced conspicuous display in both Charleston and Boston. While pressure from the emerging and upwardly mobile middle classes affected the social security of elites, the pressure from the lowest classes was of a different kind. In both cities, charity was an important component of the elite lifestyle, whether for religious, humanitarian, or ostentatious reasons.

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<sup>405</sup> Veblen, p. 229.

The existence of slavery in the South led to a complex system of charity. Charleston elites viewed their slaves through a lens of paternalism, believing at least to some extent that the masters and slaves of the plantation household made up a family, in which bonds of affection and responsibility reigned. That familial responsibility was a guiding tenet in the actions of planter toward slave, so that both charity and punishment were doled out to slaves at the planter's discretion. Because planters viewed their enslaved workers as an extension of their own families, they directed their own material display into a trickling down system of sharing. Slaves wore cast-off clothes and hoped to be seen in public with the luxury goods of their masters. Although Charlestonian planters also placed importance on charity to poor whites, they went about it in a similar way, doling out goods or cash according to personal requests and in face-to-face interactions. These personal relationships underscore the nature of charity as a form of conspicuous display, where the demonstration of wealth and the resulting obligation are integral components of giving.

In Boston, the rationalism of free capitalism and the social isolation of the upper class led to a different pattern of charity. Elite Bostonians believed that they had a responsibility to the lower classes, but not in an individual capacity. Instead, members of the upper class worked in community organizations to improve city amenities and to distribute aid through collective channels. Bostonians were less likely than their Southern counterparts to have personal relationships with needy employees, as the roster of household servants was far more likely to change. The lesser emphasis that Boston's elites placed on

personal acts of charity that incurred reciprocal obligation suggests again that they were less likely than Charlestonians to conspicuously display their wealth. The primary audience for such a display through charity was other members of a private committee or religious group; in the closed elite of Boston, those other members would be social peers.

This analysis confirms much of what Veblen suggests about conspicuous display in the United States in the 1890s. Veblen uses conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure as a means of assessing the social negotiations between classes and within them. These behaviors are useful as a window into the cultural history of antebellum America for several reasons. First, the democratic currents of thought that had grown up in the Jacksonian era led to higher levels of permeability between classes, as well as new ways in which individuals maneuvered through those distinctions. Second, a new culture of individuality was engendering a mania for self-presentation and internal identification through external means. By the mid-nineteenth century, social status was not at all a private matter. Instead, good manners and an attractive appearance were facets of one's character that must be always on display, even when alone in a room.<sup>406</sup> Finally, the cultural constructs of the antebellum Northeast and South were at their height in the decade before the looming sectional conflict escalated into war. The ways of cultural life that were peculiarly Northeastern or Southern were at their strongest in the 1850s.

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<sup>406</sup> Kasson, pp. 147-148.

Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous display are useful entry points into the operation of personal status in the two very different societies of Boston and Charleston. The distinctions that existed between regions, classes, age groups, and sexes all found expression in the different ways that individuals fashioned their public and private selves through material goods and behavior. Those differences show not only personal choices but cultural constraints and manifestations of broad social pressures at the personal or familial level.

The result of this application of Veblen's ideals of conspicuous display to a specific set of families in two contrasting cities of the North and the South is a set of answers about the diverging cultures of the two regions in this period. As Genovese argues, Southern planters carefully gave the impression that they were the rightful feudal lords of their plantations. Through a conscious fashioning of their appearance to each other, as well as lower classes, Southern planters indicated that they placed a high value on the European model of landed gentility. Yet the possibility of other whites ascending to such landed power created a circular system of class insecurity and ever-vigilant status affirmation. In the New England capitalist economy, however, wealthy merchants had managed to confirm their membership in the upper class in the years following the American Revolution. Genovese's thesis that material display was a means by which Southern planters cowed the disempowered suggests that Northerners were less likely to engage in material display. On the contrary, Bostonians were as interested in owning material wealth and luxury goods as Charleston. They were,

however, less likely to use that consumption as their primary means of communicating social status. Instead, they accomplished that goal through the more subtle mechanism of conspicuous leisure, though perhaps with no less intention of display to their peers.

In both cities, social standing was linked at all times to what one wore, or said, or did. Personal behavior or appearance was not everything—one might retain high social status through family connections despite a lapse in personal decorum—but it was the most visible way in which individuals shouldered a new responsibility for deliberately locating their own social status in a community. With the social permeability and opportunity of the nineteenth century had come a constant vigilance of taking care of appearances that would later filter through all American classes and come to pervade daily life.

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## Vita

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