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Race and the Genteel Consumer: Class and African-American Consumption, 1850-1930

ABSTRACT

Between the Civil War and the 1920s, a consumer culture emerged which attempted to evade class tension by focusing on contrived racial differences. The vast majority of American-born whites and European immigrants alike embraced the illusion of a classless consumer culture in which opportunity was available to white citizens alone. African Americans were caricatured as being racially unsuited to those citizen privileges in consumption and labor space. Archaeological assemblages from Annapolis, Maryland demonstrate, however, that African-American consumers actively sought the opportunities consumer culture promised and articulated an anti-racist class struggle in consumer space.

Introduction

In the wake of the Civil War, Americans faced a society profoundly transformed by European immigration, mass marketing, working-class formation, and the eradication of slavery (Susman 1984; Agnew 1990; Kasson 1990:34). Historically, the moment potentially could have realized the erosion of racism as African Americans were transformed into free laborers with the privileges of citizenship (Du Bois 1935; Foner 1988:xxv). Instead, the post-Civil War period witnessed a dramatic expansion of anti-black racism which pitted racial groups against each other and condemned the plausibility of an interracial sociopolitical order.

Racism certainly did not first spring into Western life in the middle of the 19th century (Morgan 1977). Racial identities varied significantly over time, between classes, and across regions, but by the mid-19th century race was a central feature of American class identity and material consumption (Roediger 1991). In the urban Northeast, race structured social identity through complex differentiations between groups such as Irish, Anglos, African Americans, and native-born rural newcomers to the cities. In the South, on the other hand, popular discourse tended to distill racial differences into a stark black/white divide. Regardless of region, though, race lay at the heart of American social structure.

For mannered, well-born, and affluent genteel whites, the Civil War’s wake posed a deeply troubling rabble of European immigrants, native-born white working classes, and newly freed African Americans. Genteel white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were ambivalent about the rise of “uncouth” newly moneyed whites, apprehensive of European immigrants, and distressed by the possibilities of African-American freedom. In 1875, newspaperman Edward King was one of many voices who sent shudders into genteel white society when he concluded that the Civil War and Emancipation had a “genuine leveling influence” on Southern social structure. King recognized that there were but two classes in the South under the old [antebellum] system, the high up and the low down . . . . The negro did not count; he was a commodity . . . . Now-a-days a middle class is gradually springing into existence . . . and some of the more intelligent and respectable negroes are taking rank in this class (King 1875:773-774).

For his WASP readers, King prophesied the most distressing prospects of post-war America. He acknowledged the emergence of an African-American “middle class,” a moniker which in King’s usage had as much to do with genteel performance as material standing. This African-American “middle class” was a somewhat distressing possibility, but it was not particularly unsettling because of the dearth of affluent post-war African Americans (Foner 1988:398). King’s more troubling implication was that social and material “leveling” could produce a mobile, interracial class structure which inevitably would reach outside the South and unsettle WASP

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domination throughout the resurrected nation (King 1875:776).

For aspiring white and European working-class laborers, African America’s ascension to freedom was equally troubling, albeit for quite different reasons. After the Civil War, formerly enslaved laborers ostensibly could aspire to and even assume a footing alongside “free” American white laborers. For many white working-class laborers, this was not the makings of interracial class empowerment; it was instead a profound reduction in status, because “free” labor dominated by whites meant nothing without the polarized guise of unfree black labor. The notion of unfree black labor was a critical structuring mechanism which aspired to make race, labor, and class inseparable phenomena.

The authors and audiences of popular discourses as disparate as etiquette books, blackface minstrelsy, and advertising constructed a white ideal by fashioning a store of racial caricatures which monolithically defined and universally degraded African Americans (Roediger 1991; Lott 1995). This tacit white backdrop simultaneously restricted African-American freedoms and petitioned the non-black masses to envision racial difference, particularly distance from an idealized whiteness, as the fundamental structuring element of American society. Popular assumptions about African Americans provided a clear contrast to “white” behavior, material consumption, and social rights: for white Americans (and immigrants like the Irish who aspired to white privilege), black racial caricatures were the inverse of the white racial ideal they strove to reproduce (Ignatiev 1995).

W. E. B. Du Bois (1935:727) argued that this public demeaning of African Americans “compensated” white workers because it provided social status in the absence of material affluence. Du Bois contended that racial caricatures provided the white working class “a public and psychological wage.” Despite the material subordination they shared with many African Americans, most white and European laborers assumed they were of higher social status than African Americans and enjoyed exclusive privileges by virtue of being white (Roediger 1991:12-13).

Class rarely figured in popular discourses after the Civil War. Instead, those discourses fixated on race and recast pervasive class turmoil as the inevitable product of various non-white racial groups, especially blacks. In the face of a rapidly emerging consumer culture, genteel WASPs faced a thorny dilemma of simultaneously rationalizing elite control of labor, legitimizing unequal resource distribution, and reproducing the labor of subordinated groups, which included European immigrants, working-class whites, and African Americans. Racists attempted to defuse class consciousness by forging a contrived white racial consensus which was far more significant than class interests. This maneuver fabricated an ostensibly classless mass consumer culture which promised racially exclusive privileges to all white citizens. The glaring material disparities among those citizens were inelegantly rationalized as evidence of the uncommon merit of individuals in pursuit of an ideal which was presumably attainable by all white people (Cohen 1993:136).

This work examines the complex union of racial discourse, labor structure, and class in African-American material consumption. Archaeological data from African-American homes in Annapolis, Maryland, illuminate how race shaped and reflected labor relations, community consumption patterns, and class structure in the mid-Atlantic. In an effort to defuse racism, a rich cross-section of elite, upwardly mobile, and marginalized African Americans aggressively pursued civil privileges, developed consumption tactics which minimized community racism, and subverted racist caricatures. Archaeological material culture reflects that African Americans simultaneously aspired to the genteel privileges of consumer space and tactically undermined its anti-black racism through consumption. Archaeological and documentary data demonstrate the complex relationship between racism and African-American material consumption and the repercus-
sions of race on class structure between the mid-19th century and the New Deal.

Class Structure and Consumption Relations

Class analyses typically focus on the determining weight of production and economic realms and ignore or minimize consumption (Williams 1977:75-82). In most such formulations, class conflict fundamentally looms as friction between groups with differential relations to the means of production. Even theorists who see consumption as part of a production system tend to reduce consumption to a logical end-product of production. Ultimately, though, this tends to fetishize consumption as instrumental shopping behavior, focusing on purchase itself and evading how goods assume social meanings (Miller 1995:53).

It would be naive to discard the recognition that class tension reflects differential positioning in labor structure. Nevertheless, it makes sense to assertively probe how consumption itself was a mechanism which structured class. Posing class as differential relations to consumption challenges the assumption that the most fundamental social relations are fashioned by a group’s position within the labor structure (Miller 1987:48).

Since consumer culture began to emerge in the late-19th century, a fundamental dimension of class structure and conflict has been between consumers differentiated by various social and state mechanisms, not simply (or even primarily) by their unequal control of labor and production. Americans’ widespread social and material investment in consumption risked minimizing the profound sway of production, but most consumers saw the struggle waged in consumer space as one which inevitably involved the material opportunities provided (or denied) by labor structure. Americans clearly began to believe that their social and material ambitions could be realized by commodity consumption which required privileges in both workplaces and public consumer space.

For African America, citizen privilege lay in securing consumer rights as much as labor and production rights. In their association of citizenship and consumption, African America was not alone: in late-19th century America, material goods provided idealized opportunities, worlds of novel symbolic objects with which myriad individuals imagined new experiences and fresh identities (Susman 1984; Campbell 1995). It would be rash to reduce class analysis simply to this idiosyncratic and highly individualized consumer desire, because a focus on consumption symbolism alone would produce a highly fragmented vision of class and social structure. Nevertheless, any analysis of African-American class must consider the positioning of African Americans within a racist mode of production as well as position within—and resistance against—an equally racist consumer space. In that culture of resistance is a critical dimension of African-American class struggle: material goods and attendant genteel social behaviors reflect African America’s class struggle within and against dominant racist labor relations, communities, state interests, and other consumers.

Community and National Marketing

Consumer goods displayed late-19th century Americans’ investment in national affluence, showcased their gentility, and provided the symbolic means to entertain myriad individual desires and aspirations. Among the flood of new consumers were many African Americans who were eager to demonstrate their American identity, celebrate their freedom from servitude, and test the possibilities of an ostensibly equitable consumer marketplace. In Annapolis, African Americans developed a relatively consistent body of consumer tactics. For instance, Annapolitan archaeological materials indicate an African-American focus on brand consumption during the late-19th century. The largest African-American bottle assemblage in Annapolis came from the Maynard-Burgess House (Mullins and Warner 1993). The free African-American household of John and Maria Spencer Maynard built a house at 163 Duke of Gloucester Street between 1850
and 1858. The home was occupied by three generations of Maynards between the 1850s and 1914, when relative Willis Burgess purchased it (Mullins 1996a:164). Burgesses lived in the home until the 1980s, and archaeological collections span the whole range of the home's occupation. Among those deposits was a subsurface cellar accessed through an external bulkhead entrance at the rear of the house. The four-foot deep, earthen-walled cellar was filled with domestic debris which had a terminus post quem of 1889. Among a rich assemblage of household refuse, the cellar contained 87 glass vessels (79 bottles and 8 table vessels) (Mullins 1996b:4-5). Every one of the 26 embossed vessels in the deposit was from a nationally advertised brand (Mullins and Warner 1993:1:103-105). Several brands were used recurrently, and no bottles had the embossments of local pharmacists or bottlers. The mean production date for the bottle assemblage was 1882.52; this date is relatively close to the assemblage’s 1889 terminus post quem, indicating that most of the vessels were produced, sold, and discarded relatively quickly.

The same pattern of national brand predominance was identified at two other African-American sites in Annapolis. Gott’s Court was an alley community located on the interior of a city block. The Court was a 24 apartment frame complex which was home exclusively to African-American renters from 1907 until its demolition in 1952. Only one locally bottled beverage in an assemblage of 54 glass vessels (42 bottles and 12 table vessels) was recovered from Gott’s Court. The Gott’s Court assemblage can be dated tentatively to early in the Court’s occupation, but because it came from sheet refuse the dating is somewhat more provisional than that of the other African-American assemblages, which were all sealed features.

The Courthouse site was a neighborhood which was home to African Americans of all socioeconomic stations from the 1830s into the 1960s. The block contained an alley community known as Bellis Court, which was built in 1897 and razed in 1939 (Aiello and Seidel 1995:1:48). Unlike the 24-household Gott’s Court, Bellis Court had only 6 units, but both complexes were dominated by service laborers (e.g., domestics, porters, laundresses, waiters, etc.). Other addresses in the Courthouse block were home to local African-American elite, several groceries and small businesses, and Annapolis’ African-Methodist-Episcopal congregation. Of these contexts within the Courthouse block, Bellis Court contained the best-preserved bottle assemblage. A privy containing 66 glass vessels (56 bottles and 10 table vessels) with a mean production date of 1905.68 included only 2 locally bottled goods (Mullins 1996a:184-185).

Consistent national brand consumption among materially stable home owners at Maynard-Burgess and marginalized tenants at Gott’s Court and Bellis Court suggests that the pattern is not class related. If bottle consumption followed some class pattern among African-American Annapolitans, it would be reasonable to expect differences between the Maynard-Burgess assemblage and that of renters at the two alley communities. Instead, all of these sites were overwhelmingly dominated by nationally produced brands, whose distribution mushroomed in the 1870s (Schlereth 1991:162). Brand consumption patterns from non-African American sites is irrelevant to an understanding of African-American brand preference; besides assuming a dubious “norm” for brand consumption patterns, the desire for a pattern comparison implies that African-American consumption can only be understood when that implicitly white consumer norm is itself defined.

The favor for brands certainly was not fueled by economizing: whether bottled, bagged, wrapped in paper, or canned, brands were significantly more expensive than loose goods (Edwards 1969 [1932]:58). Instead, brand consumption was a tactic which circumvented local marketers’ racism and reflected African Americans’ aspiration to the consumer privileges trumpeted in brand advertising (Lears 1994). Legions of African Americans served white households as domestics, cooks, and service laborers, so they ac-
cumulated "a wealth of knowledge regarding brands and qualities and varieties" (Edwards 1969 [1932]:168). In a 1932 study of African-American consumption in the urban South, Paul Edwards (1969 [1932]:52-53) found that the vast majority of African-American consumers favored brand goods. Edwards' study indicated that the difference in brand consumption between African-American laborers and professionals was negligible, a class consistency which is also suggested by Annapolitan archaeology. Edwards argued convincingly that the consistent favor for brands was an effort to circumvent racist marketers. In the South (if not elsewhere), African Americans were constantly cheated by community merchants who bottled their own products, sold dry goods from barrels, and marketed goods loose. Nationally produced goods, in contrast, assured the same quality in every container, and because they were sealed outside the local market neighborhood retailers had no opportunity to adulterate the ingredients. Canned foods offered the same advantage and the Maynard-Burgess cellar contained nearly 800 corroded metal fragments which could be conclusively identified as cans.

Lizabeth Cohen's (1990, 1993) research on Chicago between the World Wars reveals that European immigrants, unlike African Americans, tended to continue buying loose goods from community merchants. In Chicago, though, these merchants were usually from the same ethnic group as consumers, creating a consumer venue which reproduced many distinctive cultural conventions (Cohen 1993:137-138). In contrast, she found that African Americans tended to heavily favor brand goods and chain stores, which offered lower prices and large stocks of nationally produced goods (Cohen 1990:152). Shopping at African-American stores was not a particularly viable option in Annapolis or Chicago, because cash-strapped African-American entrepreneurs tended to run sparsely stocked, expensive, and short-lived ventures (Cohen 1990:151-154). An African-American Annapolitan remembered that during the 1930s "we did have a few black people who had stores, but they were smaller . . . they were mostly, well, a few canned goods like beans and sugar and, maybe, a small amount of meat, pork chops, maybe bologna and cheese, a few eggs and stuff like that. Their volume was very small" (Maryland State Archives 1990).

The lower costs of the chains certainly was attractive, but for African-American consumers it was also critical that chains lay outside the control of local marketers. The racism of community merchants was a tangible lived experience, and many African Americans placed comparatively more hope in a national market which displayed less clearly defined racism. For African-American Annapolitans, though, the paucity of pre-Depression chain stores minimized the chain patronage favored by African Americans in Chicago. In 1930, Annapolis' 220 retail stores included 192 single store independents, 20 stores in a regional chain, and just 8 units of a national chain (U. S. Department of Commerce 1930:1). This predominance of independently owned corner stores was typical of most Maryland markets at the outset of the Depression (U. S. Department of Commerce 1937:85). Not strategically organized or limited to one class, brand consumption negotiated the persistent racism of these Annapolis corner marketers and reflects African Americans' rapid attachment to a nationally based consumer culture (Mullins 1996a:308-316).

Class and Materialism in African-American Annapolis

Bottle consumption similarities among African-American Annapolitans do not suggest marked class differences, but the appearance of class homogenization is misleading. Wealth and material display often were less crucial to African-American elite status than they were among white elite (Gatewood 1990:206-207). Willard Gatewood (1990:343-345) demonstrates that African-American elite throughout the country were distinguished by long-term family prestige, often descended from free African Americans; education; material wealth, albeit usually modest by white standards; and light skin complexion,
which reflected the mixed ethnic ancestry of many African-American elite (Foner 1988:397-398). In Annapolis, African-American status was most clearly vested in social circles whose espoused values—education, self-control, rational morality, material denial—mirrored white genteel ideology.

Rather than embrace pretentious material display, African-American elite focused on genteel social performance, education, and status of established families. Elite and upwardly mobile African Americans often viewed working-class African Americans with ambivalence, but "respectable" African Americans labored to school the African-American masses in genteel social behavior and often were vocal advocates for African-American civil rights. This desire to "uplift" all African Americans was not wholly altruistic: racism cast African Americans as one monolithic lot, so African-American elite were distressed that their genteel identity was undermined by the social behavior of "coarse" African Americans (Gatewood 1990:343). In Maryland, for example, resistance to segregated rail car laws was spearheaded by the Baltimore and Annapolis elite, including William Bishop of the region's prestigious Bishop family (Afro American Ledger, 22 February 1902:4). The resistance to "Jim Crow" car laws, though, was not without self-interest: many elite African Americans were convinced that separate car laws were a white scheme to force "respectable" African Americans to consort with "uncouth" African Americans (Gatewood 1990:309).

Many upper-class African Americans positioned themselves as voices for African America in visible public positions, such as entrepreneurs, journalists, and ministers. Annapolis had a circle of such figures who spoke to whites as well as African Americans on a variety of social and material issues. Among the most prominent African-American voices in Annapolis was that of Wiley Bates. Born enslaved in 1859, Bates shucked oysters, huckstered, and waited tables in order to rent a modest Annapolis grocery which he opened in 1879. By 1897, Washington's African-American newspaper *The Bee* concluded that Bates' Annapolis grocery "takes rank among the leading grocery houses of the city" (*The Bee* 9 January 1897b:1). Like many other African Americans, Bates was a testament to the power of Booker T. Washington's quest to instill genteel "middle class" aspiration among self-made African Americans. Bates mirrored Washington's call for African-American material solidarity, labor discipline, and cultural and educational refinement. Much like Washington, Bates decried racism, but he embraced the bourgeois notion of a laissez faire free market. Indeed, Bates was among the African Americans who viewed racism simply as an obstacle to participation in an otherwise equitable labor and economic system (Mullins 1996a:328-332).

In Annapolis, African-American elite were dominated by modest entrepreneurs like Bates who were active in fraternal organizations and the church. They championed social refinement and were eager to display their good graces. In 1897, for instance, (*The Bee* 1 January 1897a:8) reported that "Wm. H. Bates, our popular grocery-man, gave a reception to Universal Lodge No 14, A. F. & A. M. . . . Four courses were served in excellent style, consisting of everything eatable. No wines or liquors were served." It was evident to any genteel reader that Bates' Mason's Lodge reception embraced dominant social canons, serving a diverse meal in a series of "stylish" courses and spurning alcohol. These good graces extended to cultural refinement as well. In 1900, for example, Bates was among a group of African-American entrepreneurs and professionals who formed the "Bamuke Literary and Musical Association, (colored)" to "develop a taste for classical literature. To attain success the organization will invite acknowledged exponents and prominent educators of both races to deliver lectures, addresses, &c." (*Anne Arundel Examiner*, 11 October 1900:5). The link between African-American social status and education was evident in the group's membership: the association included graduates of Howard, Wilberforce, Lincoln, Oberlin, and Morgan.
Annapolitan elite were energetic champions of African-American economic organization, ranging from small business to modest cooperative ventures. That economic organization was centered in fraternal organizations, a pattern typical throughout African America (Frazier 1924:293). In Annapolis these fraternals included an African-American Elks Lodge which was organized in 1910 by J. Albert Adams, a City Council member who also ran a funeral parlor and a liquor store (Brown 1994:110; Mullins 1996a:560). The most prestigious African-American fraternal group was the Masons, who established an Annapolis lodge in 1864 and included Wiley Bates among their number (Brown 1994:112). The Masons, though, were among the most exclusive and class-conscious of all African-American fraternals: throughout the country, their number included a disproportionate volume of well-educated, moneyed, and light-complexioned African Americans (Gatewood 1990:212).

This Annapolitan circle of African-American elite primarily distinguished themselves by genteel behavior, rather than conspicuous materialism. Genteel African America's puritanical focus on behavior, lineage, and education was comparable to an anti-materialist bent in WASP discourse, which routinely divorced status from material affluence as a means to curb social ascent (Horowitz 1985). Despite their professed anti-materialism, though, Annapolis' African-American elite did have some material distinctions, and a handful of African-American Annapolitans achieved the material trappings of an idealized genteel household. In 1860, for instance, William Bishop owned 11 properties in Annapolis as well as a house in Albany, New York worth a total of more than $12,000 (Calderhead 1977:18). Born enslaved in 1802 of a European-born white father and African-American mother, Bishop was the wealthiest African American in Annapolis and Anne Arundel County in 1860, and he ranked among Annapolis' 12 richest families (Calderhead 1977:18). The Bishops' African-American neighbors on Duke of Gloucester Street included William H. Butler, a businessman who owned 33 homes and 4 vacant lots worth over $24,000 by the mid-1870s (Ives 1979:147). In 1873 Butler became the first African-American elected official in Maryland when he won a seat on the Annapolis City Council, and in 1876 he was the largest private landowner in Annapolis (Maryland Pendulum 1987:10).

Less affluent African Americans like the Maynards aspired to genteel standing and accumulated more modest, albeit distinctive material assemblages. The Maynards' tax and property values and social associations suggest the household was materially stable, and they were at least familiar with prominent African Americans in the city. Born free in 1810, John Maynard waited tables, probably at Annapolis' renowned City Hotel, and he and wife Maria purchased the $400 Duke of Gloucester Street lot in 1847 (Mullins 1996a:159). The Maynard's pre-Emancipation neighborhood included several prominent free African Americans, such as William Bishop and Main Street merchant Henry Price (Hurst 1981:244). An 1849 book of 344 Annapolis tax valuations provides suggestive evidence for the standing of Maynard and 19 other free African-American Annapolitans at mid-century. Maynard was assessed an amount of $525, a value higher than 103 of the white taxpayers and 10 of the 19 African Americans (Sullivan 1849). It is unclear how these 19 African-American households compared to the city's 533 free blacks, 642 enslaved blacks, or 1,826 whites recorded in the following year's census (Ives 1979:133). These 19 free African-Americans, however, like the whites recorded in the 1849 tax book, likely were among the city's most affluent residents at mid-century.

In February 1876, James C. Bishop and William H. Butler inventoried the material possessions of their neighbor John Maynard, who died in July 1875. James C. Bishop was a sugar manufacturer who lived on Church Circle, as the elder William Bishop had, so James likely was one of William's older sons (Gatewood 1990:74). Bishop and Butler's inventory of the Maynards' household reveals a distinctly genteel living space.
(Maryland State Archives 1876:553-554). The home’s “front room” contained a sideboard, mahogany chairs, a sofa, a carpet, six “pictures” (i.e., chromolithographs), cane chairs, side tables, curtains, and mass-produced bric-a-brac and “china”; over half of the probate’s value was invested in the goods in this single room. As in any showpiece Victorian social space, the concentrated assemblage of material goods stressed a social and material investment in American consumer affluence. Household manuals argued that such genteel living environments and material assemblages were essential to impart cultural refinement, morality, and intellectual development (Mullins 1996a:84-97).

Relatively inexpensive chromolithographs like those in the Maynards’ house were typical of the many consumer goods laden with moral and social symbolism. An 1873 household guide advised consumers that “the subjects of the pictures must be such as we can truly sympathize with, something to awaken our admiration, reverence, or love” (Ellett 1873:21). Many African Americans like the Maynards followed such genteel decorative dictates. In 1901, for instance, William Taylor Thom (1901a:91) reported that in the homes of Sandy Spring, Maryland’s African Americans “many of the rooms are carpeted and adorned with prints and pictures on the wall.” Marginalized African Americans also included illustrations as a central element of household aesthetics. In 1880 a Harper’s Weekly correspondent touring Georgia noted that it was common to find African-Americans’ cabin “walls covered with newspapers. Harper’s Weekly was a great favorite for this purpose . . . it served the double purpose of wall-paper and pictures” (Harper’s Weekly 1880:733). In 1913 Robert Park (1969 [1913]:160) even suggested that only one other item of household material culture was more important to African Americans than pictures: “after he [i.e., an African American] gets a bathroom he will probably want to have some pictures.” The designs and sources of prints differed between African-American consumers, and the symbolism of such decorative goods likely differed between households, but the consumption of prints clearly appeared to be a widespread phenomenon across classes.

Fish and Genteel Identity

Neglected by the inventory yet symptomatic of the household’s genteel aspirations are archaeological fish remains. The earliest sealed archaeological deposit at Maynard-Burgess dates from 1874 to 1877, when a rear addition was built onto the back of the house, sealing a dense assemblage of faunal discards scattered around the home’s original back door. This rear assemblage indicates that from the 1850s until the mid-1870s the household was consuming a diverse range of fish from Annapolis area waters. In contrast, later deposits from both the 1889 cellar and a 1905 barrel privy contain considerably lower quantities of fish. The gradual decline of fish consumption in this household suggests a distancing from racist caricatures and the mid-Atlantic fish market, both of which had a direct influence on regional class structure and consumption.

Most antebellum Southern rivers, streams, and ocean fronts were communal fishing spaces, and in the Annapolis area African Americans and whites fished in the Chesapeake Bay and its network of tributaries surrounding the city (McDaniel 1982:145). Yet as mass consumption expanded after the Civil War fishing began to be viewed as a rustic or African-American consumer pattern. Racist ideologues disparaged fishing by associating it with caricatured black traits. In 1860, for instance, D. R. Hundley (1973 [1860]:342-343) observed that the “genuine” African American “dotes on fishing. . . Angling requires little exertion, and your genuine Cuffee most cordially hates exertion.” Fishing was essential to the subsistence of many Southerners, but Hundley’s caricature of African Americans dismissively denigrated it through racist hyperbole.

Archaeology does not indicate that legions of African Americans congregated by water’s edge in Annapolis. Annapolitan evidence instead sug-
recovered through wet screening. A Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) count was produced using all bones identified to species, producing a count of 44 individual fish from the rear assemblage. Eighteen different fish species were included in the assemblage, with white perch, striped bass, catfish and croaker most common (Table 1). With the exception of sea bass, all of the fish in the assemblage could be caught from the Annapolis shoreline or in modest boats. Warner concludes that species diversity and the relatively modest local fish market after the Civil War argue that the vast majority of the household’s fish was caught by local hucksters and household members, rather than commercial fisheries. Of the four most common fish in the rear assemblage, only perch was commonly marketed by commercial fishers after the Civil War (Bayliff 1971:296). In contrast, the 1889 tpq cellar had an MNI of 14 fish (total MNI of 39) and NISP of 68 (7.11% of assemblage NISP), a considerably lower percentage of

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<tr>
<th>Fish</th>
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Note. Only elements identified to species level were included in MNI count. Wet screen artifacts are not included in NISP or MNI. (From Warner 1998.)

fish than from the rear assemblage, and it contained only 10 different species (Table 2) (Warner 1998). The 1905 tpq barrel privy was comparable to the cellar, containing an NISP of 79 fish (7.61% of privy NISP), an MNI of 14 (34.14% privy MNI), and 11 different species (Tables 3, 4).

Trowel and wet screen excavation recovered 1,780 fish scales in the rear assemblage. Most were recovered around the back door, hence it seems clear that fish were being cleaned and the scales discarded in the yard directly around the kitchen door. In contrast, the 1889 cellar assemblage included few scales (1 from trowel excavation and 80 in wet screen). The privy likewise contained only 15 fish scales, all recovered from wet screen samples. The scarcity of scales in the 1889 deposit may reflect formation differences between the rear addition and the cellar and privy deposits, but it likely also reveals that the household purchased cleaned fish from hucksters after the mid-1870s. Many African Americans who caught fish for their household exchanged their surplus around Annapolis, selling to African Americans and whites. A white Annapolitan who grew up at the turn of the century, Evangeline Kaiser White remembered that African-American hucksters sold fresh fish at her Annapolis home each morning. After her mother “bargain[ed] for the fish she wished,” they “would be scaled and cleaned right from the cart in a bucket hanging underneath” (White and White 1957:58). Fish which were cleaned through this technique clearly would decrease the amount of scales recovered archaeologically.


### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fish</th>
<th>NISP</th>
<th>MNI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>striped bass</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white perch</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>croaker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yellow perch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black sea bass</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weakfish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blueback herring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genus herring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>menhaden</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bluegill</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brown bullhead</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>white catfish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genus catfish</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unidentified fish</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Only elements identified to species level were included in MNI count. Wet screen artifacts are not included in NISP or MNI. (From Warner 1998.)

### Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deposit</th>
<th>NISP (% of deposit NISP)</th>
<th>MNI (% of deposit MNI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>circa 1870-1874</td>
<td>907 (17.45%)</td>
<td>44 (47.31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tpq cellar</td>
<td>68 (7.11%)</td>
<td>14 (38.46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905 tpq privy</td>
<td>79 (7.61%)</td>
<td>14 (34.14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. NISP and MNI counts do not include wet screen artifacts. (From Warner 1998.)
residents were tenants of relatively modest means, so if consumption were economically determined the Bellis Court families would seem most likely to consume inexpensive goods and minimize their consumption expenses. Any assumption that marginalization would be reflected in fishing was also undermined by the Gott’s Court assemblage, where only 18 fish bones were recovered from an assemblage of 678 bones (Warner 1992:Appendix 3).

African-American Annapolitans apparently decreased their fish consumption at the very moment the regional fishing industry flooded regional markets with Chesapeake Bay seafood. After 1870, new net and oyster dredging technologies fueled the expansion of the Chesapeake seafood industry (Bayliff 1971:297). Vast quantities of shad, white perch, herring, and pike were hawked in Annapolis markets, and the overwhelming glut of herring induced many local fish dealers to pickle and can herrings for sale to markets in the western United States. By 1873 Annapolis' Maryland Republican State Capital Advertiser (27 September 1873:3) already was proclaiming “the progress of the oyster business for the past few years in our city. At the present time, no less than eleven oyster packing establishments are in successful operation.” Chesapeake oyster canneries, fishing fleets, and myriad market positions were dominated by a mobile seasonal labor force of African Americans, and some African Americans employed in fisheries even took their pay in fish, reselling some and using the remainder to feed their families (Frissell and Bever 1899:33). The fishing industry contracted somewhat in the early twentieth century, because over-harvesting dampened seafood prices and triggered the Bay’s ecological decline after the early 1880s (Thom 1901b:1122; Bayliff 1971:294). Nevertheless, Annapolis markets had abundant supplies of inexpensive fish in the late-19th and early 20th centuries.

The gradual decline in Annapolitan fish consumption may reflect the stigmatization of African-American hucksters and the caricature of fishing as a black and “rustic” consumer pattern (Mullins 1996a:440-445). Critique of hucksters clearly was fueled by racial apprehension in the Northeast as well, where hucksters were almost all newly arrived Europeans (Heinze 1990:196). African-American hucksters usually were reduced to standard racial stereotypes. Touring Washington, D. C.’s market in 1910, Katherine Busbey observed that a “semi-rural element” of African Americans would regularly “appear outside the big market in the city’s heart on market-days, offering the products of their tiny garden patch” (Busbey 1910:217). She rhapsodized that in the winter, when African American marketers could be found outside the market “squatting about their little charcoal fires in the midst of their wares, the flickering light playing over their shining black faces and glistening the whites of their up-turned eyes, they make, to me, one of the most picturesque details of Washington life.” Busbey’s travelogue applauded Washington’s storefront consumer spaces and department stores, but she facilely reduced African-American marketers to humorous racial ornamentation and disparaged open-air marketers and their consumers.

Despite such stigmatization, African-American hucksters continued to sell goods in Annapolis streets into the 1940s, and public markets and retailers always had a sufficient supply of fish. Consequently, African America’s effort to be seen as genteel consumers certainly is not the sole explanation for the decline in African-American fish consumption. In post-Emancipation cities like Annapolis—which had a sizable, socially aspiring African-American community since the early 19th century—many African Americans may have willingly shifted to genteel foods and market venues, eager to play out the possibilities of their new consumer citizenship. African-Americans’ modest fish consumption in Annapolis may also reflect that genteel consumer ambitions were more seriously pursued in urban settings, a suggestion which casts fish consumption as an urban rather than class pattern. In the rural mid-Atlantic, fish consumption continued to be central to many rural African Americans’ diets well into the 20th century. Budget studies
conducted of turn of the century African Americans identified substantial consumption of household-caught fish among rural Virginians (Frissell and Bevier 1899). Hints of class difference in Virginian's fish consumption tended to become evident when rural and urban assemblages were compared. In Hampton, Virginia, for instance, a household headed by Hampton Institute graduates consumed considerably less fish than African Americans in rural outlying areas. Noting this difference, the investigators characterized the Hampton family’s diet as “that of an ordinary well-to-do white family” (Frissell and Bevier 1899:31). As with most consumer change, African-American Annapolitans’ shifts in fish consumption likely indicate a complex amalgam of material aspirations, resistance to racist caricature, and genuine economic differences between households.

Race and Service Labor Structure

Despite African Americans’ efforts to erode racism in consumer space through tactics such as brand consumption, African-American laborers remained embedded in a racist labor structure which inevitably limited any class struggle which focused itself on consumer space alone. Katherine Busbey’s caricature of Washington’s African-American street marketers was typical of a flood of late 19th-century literature which linked black racial traits with service labor (Mullins 1996a:435-451). Popular discourses routinely stereotyped African Americans as being racially suited only to manual and subservient labor serving whites. In the mid-Atlantic these caricatures fortified a service labor structure which had African Americans at its foundation. Despite their genteel consumer aspirations, African Americans eventually were compelled to examine the link between racism, African-American labor opportunity, and consumer privilege.

Buttons provide a suggestive insight into the construction of a racially based service labor system in the post-Reconstruction mid-Atlantic. Women were at the heart of an African-American service labor force in positions as laundresses, domestics, seamstresses, and cooks catering to white employers. The labor of African-American laundresses is clearly reflected in the archaeological presence of buttons. At the Maynard-Burgess House, 290 buttons were recovered. Like many African-American women, Maria Maynard and sister-in-law Martha Maynard appeared in the 1860 census as laundresses. The large quantity of buttons at the Maynard-Burgess House is not atypical of post-Civil War African-Americans sites in Annapolis. Phase II excavations at the Courthouse Site neighborhood recovered 104 buttons (Warner and Mullins 1993). In 1910, 19 African-American women living on the Courthouse block were recorded in the census as laundresses. In their excavations of neighboring alley and street front communities in Washington, D.C., Charles Cheek and Amy Friedlander (1990:55) found more than twice as many buttons in African-American alley communities than neighboring white street front neighborhoods, reflecting the different labor roles forged for African-American and white women. Although they reflect quite different aspects of class, both buttons and brand goods were implicated in African-American class struggle.

Glass and stoneware preserving vessels (i.e., Mason jars and crocks) suggest the impact racially based service labor had on African-American foodways. Preservation of fruits and vegetables was commonplace in many Maryland homes well into the 20th century, yet Annapolitan archaeological evidence reveals very little home food preservation (McDaniel 1982:144-145). In the wake of the Civil War, virtually all of the cooks in Annapolitan home and hotel kitchens were African Americans. One Annapolitan noted that by the 1920s “even those whites in moderate financial circumstances, could and did afford ‘two black hands in the kitchen’” (Keith 1977:153). In such positions African Americans transformed regional cuisine and preserved foods for their white employers, but the demands of domestic labor apparently impacted African-American foodways. For instance, none
Class, Race, and Mass Consumer Culture

Consumer culture is often seen as a "mass culture": i.e., it replaced significant class distinctions with mass standards of living and social conventions shared by virtually all citizens (Agnew 1990). In the face of racial ideology—which restricted privileges and opportunities in consumer space—this clearly is, at best, an overstatement, and a steady stream of labor disputes throughout America demonstrate that workers' class struggle never disappeared in favor of shopping. Historians including Warren Susman (1984), Ronald Edsforth (1987), and Lizabeth Cohen (1990) argue that labor militancy in the 1920s and 1930s actually should be seen as embedded in (if not emanating from) a clearly articulated class struggle for consumer rights in the preceding decades. By the early 20th century, an increasingly broad swath of Americans began to envision their fundamental citizen rights and aspirations in material consumption. Jean-Christophe Agnew (1990) argues that this definition of citizenship placed mass material standards at the heart of American identity and turned away from previous touchstones such as labor identities, nationalism, and religion.

Examining African-American consumption as evidence of a long-simmering class struggle centered on consumption rights unsettles the assumption that class is best studied in workplaces or labor relations. Envisioning African-American class struggle in post-Emancipation consumer space has paradoxically conservative and radical implications on archaeological interpretations of class in emergent consumer culture. On one hand, the gradual mass homogenization of consumer culture is suggested by African-American archaeological materials, since Annapolitan evidence argues that African Americans shared many consistent consumption patterns across classes. It seems clear that resistance to racism spurred similar consumption tactics among African Americans of different material standings. Material similarities did not create a monolithic African-American Annapolis, though, because affluent households inevitably fulfilled genteel material ideals more seamlessly than others. Most significantly, class structuring principles like family heritage, education, and skin complexion ensured that many African Americans did not assume a footing among the African-American aristocracy (Gatewood 1990:95). In this defense of social distinctions, African-American consumers refrained from a radical critique of consumer culture's class underpinnings. Few African Americans actually anticipated or even desired a classless consumer culture: they simply desired individual and group rights which were unhindered by systemic inequalities like racism. This conservative desire to equitably participate in consumer space was a fundamental element of African-American class struggle against racially exclusive civil privileges. It may seem somewhat disarming and even politically misguided to critique consumer culture using consumption itself; nevertheless, the notion that American political
rights are vested in material consumption clearly took hold of mass imagination after World War II, and that idea remains a central feature of contemporary consumer culture (Agnew 1990:14).

Yet, on the other hand, African-American consumption was not utterly conservative, because African America’s class struggle never ignored racism. Indeed, African-American consumers attempted to purge emergent consumer culture of anti-black racism. This was a radical critique because racism and white privilege lay at the heart of consumer culture. During the early 20th century, African-American thinkers became increasingly critical of the racist ideology embedded in consumer culture and American society. For instance, African-American labor organizer Asa Philip Randolph (1919:10) argued that capitalist inequality “does not apply to Negroes only. It is the common fate of the servant class, black and white. But they must not understand that their interests are common. Hence race prejudice is cultivated.” Randolph recognized that consumer culture’s racist restrictions were deeply implicated in dominant class interests. However he failed to understand that African Americans’ powerful desire for consumer goods was a political and class struggle against anti-black racism, not simply instrumental elite abuse of African American and white laborers alike. Ultimately Randolph and many subsequent observers failed to consider that African-American class structure may have been as clearly focused on racism’s restrictions on consumer privilege as on unequal relations to the means of production.

The eventual erosion of genteel African-American social conventions reflects African America’s shifting perception of class and consumption after World War I. In 1928, the 69-year old Wiley Bates penned an autobiography in which he struggled to reproduce conventions separating genteel and “uncouth” African Americans (Bates 1928). Bates clung to his status as a social and moral voice for African-American Annapolis, defending aspiration, stressing that material wealth did not inevitably impart character, and reducing racism to a superficial obstacle. By the 1920s, though, this evasion of racism and stringent call to discipline was an untenable position for most African Americans (Gatewood 1990:313-319). Dismayed by resurgent racism, vexed by over 50 years of material marginalization, and faced by discourses transparently trumpeting a classless mass culture, African Americans were hard-pressed to see racism as something utterly separate from consumer culture.

Even when it passed unspoken, racism structured class struggle in all American consumers’ experience. By articulating class difference as a “natural” by-product of race, late-19th century class loomed as a conglomeration of racial categories, behavioral conventions, and material wealth. That definition evaded the anti-black social marginalization and white privilege which was the backdrop against which consumer culture emerged. African Americans maneuvered between mass culture and class society, seeking the equity mass consumer culture promised and forging evidence that African America could reproduce dominant social and material symbolism. Like most Americans, African Americans were deeply attracted to the material self-determination and attendant citizen privileges promised by consumer culture, and increasingly more African Americans saw consumer culture as a space to articulate social aspirations and class struggle. Inevitably African-American consumers were compelled to confront racism in consumer space and probe its implication in broader social structure.

Racism was essential to consumer culture’s evasion of class structure and the increasing acceptability of race as a basis for dispensing social privilege. To truly understand class in emergent consumer culture, it is essential to acknowledge that labor, consumer space, and social and material privileges were—and in many ways still remain—fundamentally structured by race.

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