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James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten

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Unearthing the Past: The Enduring Legacy of James Deetz's "In Small Things Forgotten"

In the vast landscape of historical scholarship, it is often the grand narratives—the rise and fall of empires, the battles of famous generals, the lives of presidents and kings—that command the loudest attention. Yet behind the pageantry of official records lies a quieter, more intimate story: the story of everyday life as lived by ordinary people. No work has done more to bring this hidden history to light than James Deetz's groundbreaking book, **In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life**. First published in 1977, this compact volume transformed the way historians, archaeologists, and the general public understand the colonial American past. By focusing on the material culture that surrounded early Americans—ceramic dishes, fence posts, building orientations, and even the placement of a single nail—Deetz demonstrated that the most profound insights about a society are often found in the smallest, most overlooked details.

This article explores the enduring influence of **James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten**, unpacking its key themes, methodological innovations, and lasting legacy in historical archaeology and beyond. Whether you are a student of history, an archaeology enthusiast, or simply someone curious about how the past is pieced together, Deetz's work offers a compelling reminder that the objects we leave behind speak volumes—if only we learn to listen.

Who Was James Deetz?

James Deetz (1930–2000) was a pioneering American historical archaeologist and anthropologist. Educated at Harvard University, he later taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and Brown University, where he directed the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology. Deetz was not content to let archaeology remain a discipline of elite monuments and grand architecture. Instead, he turned his attention to the more humble remnants of colonial life: the broken clay pipes, the worn-out spoons, the patterns of fence placement in early New England settlements. His approach was profoundly humanistic, blending anthropology, history, and archaeology into a seamless narrative.

Deetz's most famous book, **In Small Things Forgotten**, grew directly out of his fieldwork at sites such as Plimoth Plantation, the historic 1620 settlement of the Pilgrims, and Flowerdew Hundred, a 17th-century plantation in Virginia. Rather than simply cataloging artifacts, Deetz used them to reconstruct the mentalités—the shared habits of thought and perception—of people who left few written records. This made his work revolutionary for its time and continues to inspire new generations of scholars.

Core Themes of "In Small Things Forgotten"

The Power of Material Culture

At the heart of **In Small Things Forgotten** is the conviction that the physical objects people create, use, and

discard are not just passive residue but active expressions of culture. Deetz argues that everyday artifacts—whether a ceramic jug, a house foundation, or a coffin shape—reflect deeply embedded cultural patterns, beliefs, and changes. By reading these objects with the same care a historian reads a manuscript, the archaeologist can recover aspects of life that texts ignore: the rhythm of daily chores, the evolution of family structure, the spread of new ideas about privacy and individualism.

For example, Deetz demonstrates how the shift from communal to individual dining in colonial America can be traced through changes in ceramic sets. Early 17th-century households owned a few multipurpose vessels used for eating, drinking, and storage. By the late 18th century, matched sets of plates, cups, and saucers appear, indicating a new emphasis on personal place settings and formal meals. This small change in pottery, Deetz argues, is a material footprint of a larger cultural transformation—the rise of the individual as a distinct social unit.

Georgianization and the American Mind

A cornerstone concept in **James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten** is "Georgianization." Deetz observed that around the mid-18th century, the material culture of the American colonies underwent a profound shift, aligning with the British Georgian aesthetic and its underlying worldview. This manifested in everything from symmetrical house facades to paired grave markers, from orderly fence lines to matching dinnerware. Deetz argues that this change was not merely decorative; it reflected a deeper move toward order, symmetry, hierarchy, and individualism—values that would eventually underpin the American Revolution.

Deetz traces Georgianization through the seemingly trivial arrangement of houses in New England villages. Early colonial homes were often irregularly placed, oriented toward the sun or the road without a consistent plan. After 1750, houses were increasingly set in neat rows, facing a central street, with symmetrical facades and formal front doors. This shift in spatial organization mirrored a shift in social organization: from a communal, church-centered society to a more commercial, individualistic one. By paying attention to these "small things," Deetz reveals the material roots of modern American identity.

Case Studies: Bringing the Theory to Life

The Parting Ways Cemetery

One of the most famous examples in In Small Things Forgotten is the analysis of the Parting Ways cemetery in Plymouth, Massachusetts, a burial ground used by African American families in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Traditional historians had little to say about these individuals; written records were sparse. But Deetz and his colleagues excavated the graves and discovered that coffin shapes, burial orientations, and grave goods showed a blend of African and European traditions. Some coffins were nailed shut with a distinctive pattern that echoed West African cosmologies; others contained objects like clay pipes and glass beads that suggested a syncretic belief system. This material evidence rewrote the story of African American cultural survival in New England, proving that enslaved and free Black communities maintained distinct cultural practices even under the shadow of oppression.

The "ABC" Pattern in Artifacts

Deetz also developed a famous mnemonic: the "ABC" of artifacts—Alter, Behave, and Contain. He argued that most objects in colonial households could be categorized by their primary function: altering raw materials (like an axe), shaping behavior (like a chair or a book), or containing substances (like a jug or a casket). This simple framework helped archaeologists think systematically about how artifacts related to human action and belief. In small things forgotten, the ABC pattern reveals that colonial life was organized around practical needs but also around symbolic meanings. A butter churn, for instance, does more than make butter; it enacts a set of gendered roles and culinary values.

Methodological Innovations and Influence

In Small Things Forgotten was not just about content; it was about method. He championed a multidisciplinary approach that combined careful excavation with anthropological theory and a deep reading of historical documents. This approach, now known as historical archaeology, was in its infancy when Deetz began his career. His book helped legitimize the field within academia and made it accessible to the public. Today, historical archaeology is a robust discipline, and many of its foundational principles—attention to everyday life, use of material culture as primary evidence, integration of history and anthropology—can be traced directly back to Deetz's influence.

Moreover, Deetz's accessible writing style made **In Small Things Forgotten** a staple in undergraduate courses and a favorite among non-specialist readers. He avoided jargon and instead told compelling stories about the people of colonial America: the Pilgrims at Plimoth, the planters at Flowerdew Hundred, the enslaved families at Parting Ways. This storytelling approach, grounded in rigorous scholarship, demonstrated that archaeology could be both scientifically sound and deeply human.

Criticisms and Ongoing Debates

No influential work is without its critics. Some scholars have argued that Deetz's concept of "Georgianization" is too sweeping, oversimplifying the diversity of colonial experiences. Not all regions or ethnic groups adopted the Georgian mindset at the same pace or to the same degree. Native American and African American communities, for instance, often resisted or reinterpreted these changes. Others have pointed out that Deetz's focus on English colonial sites neglects the material cultures of the Spanish, French, and Dutch colonies, which had their own distinctive trajectories.

Nevertheless, even critics acknowledge that **James Deetz In Small Things Forgotten** opened up new avenues of inquiry. The book's core insight—that everyday objects are rich with cultural meaning—has been refined and expanded, not discarded. Subsequent research has examined how gender, class, and race intersect with material culture, building on the foundation Deetz laid. His work remains a starting point for any serious examination of how things shape and reflect human lives.

Relevance for Today's Readers

Why does a book about 17th- and 18th-century artifacts still resonate more than four decades after its publication? The answer lies in its message about the power of the ordinary. In an age of mass consumption and disposable goods, **In Small Things Forgotten** encourages us to look at the objects around us with new eyes. The smartphone in your pocket, the layout of your kitchen, the way your neighborhood is organized—all are small things that encode cultural values, histories, and social relations. Deetz's methodology provides a toolkit for decoding these contemporary landscapes, making his book not just a history lesson but a guide to understanding the present.

For history lovers, the book offers a refreshing antidote to the dry, document-heavy narratives that dominate so much of the field. It shows how a broken piece of pottery or a rusty horseshoe can tell a story every bit as compelling as a letter from a Founding Father. For archaeology students, it remains a model of how to think critically about material evidence. And for anyone who has ever wondered what life was really like in early America, **In Small Things Forgotten** provides a vivid, tangible connection to the past.

Conclusion

James Deetz's **In Small Things Forgotten** is far more than an academic monograph; it is a testament to the idea that the most important histories are often hidden in plain sight. By shifting focus from the great and the grand to the small and the seemingly insignificant, Deetz gave voice to countless individuals who left behind no written words but left behind a world of objects. His work reminds us that every artifact, every arrangement of space, every worn handle and chipped plate is a living memory—if only we learn to read them. For anyone seeking a deeper, richer understanding of the American past, this slender volume remains an indispensable

guide. Whether you are a professional historian, a passionate amateur, or a curious reader, Deetz invites you to look down, examine the small things, and discover the forgotten stories that shaped a nation.

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