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Living on the Edge: Consumption and Class at the Keith Site

Maria O'Donovan and LouAnn Wurst

Ceramics from the Keith Site, a farmstead in upstate New York, are principally expensive, early nineteenth century table and tea ware vessels. Documentary evidence places the site occupation at mid-century which is confirmed by TPQ dates. Moreover, the site's residents were lower class farmers and other artifact classes show little investment in consumption. These discrepancies become clear when we consider the high diversity of ceramic vessels, which we would expect if site residents purchased older, cheaper vessels in "odd lots." Consumer choice models rest on ideologically loaded assumptions of free will and unlimited choice in the market place. The lower class residents of the Keith Site had very restricted choice in their material culture. Thus, their ceramics do not simply mirror their class standing or express their identity, but rather tell the tale of their struggles within the milieu of rural class relations, struggles in which production and female labor were crucial.

Les céramiques du site de Keith, une ferme du nord de l'état de New York, sont principalement des pièces de vaissellerie de table et d'articles pour le service à thé dispendieux datant du XIXe siècle. Des éléments de preuve documentaire nous permettent d'affirmer que ce site a été occupé au milieu du XIXe siècle. Cette date est confirmée par les dates terminus post quem. De plus, les résidents du site étaient des fermiers de la classe inférieure et les artefacts de types autres que ceux mentionnés précédemment démontrent qu'on investissait peu dans les objets de consommation. Ces différences se clarifient lorsque nous considérons la grande diversité des pièces de céramiques. C'est ce à quoi nous pourrions nous attendre si les résidents achetaient des pièces de vaisselle plus vieilles et moins chères dans des lots de vaisselle dépareillée. Les modèles de décisions des consommateurs reposent sur des hypothèses chargées d'idéologies voulant que les consommateurs choisissent des objets de plein gré et que le marché présente des choix illimités. Les résidents de la classe inférieure du site de Keith avaient des choix limités en ce qui concerne la culture matérielle. Ainsi, leurs céramiques ne reflètent simplement pas leur position sociale et n'expriment pas non plus leur identité. Elles racontent plutôt l'histoire des combats menés par ces gens à travers les relations entre les classes rurales et dans lesquels la production et le travail des femmes étaient cruciaux.

Introduction

On the surface, the Keith Site, located in the Town of Coventry, Chenango County, New York, seems to represent a typical 19th-century farmstead (FIG. 1). The consumption patterns of the site residents, however, represented by a large and diverse assemblage of relatively expensive table and tea wares, initially appear anomalous with their known class standing as poor, lower class farmers. This apparent contradiction between material behavior and class standing provides an entry point to examine the actual class dynamics and situation of poor farm families, as well as the ideology of choice that underlies consumer models. In general, the artifact assemblage from the Keith Site provides a compelling example of the failure of consumer choice models to adequately capture and explain the dynamics of human behavior and class relations.

Over the last decade, historical archaeologists have become enthralled with issues of consumption and behavior (Spencer-Wood

1987; Klein 1991; LeeDecker 1991; Henry 1991; Gibb 1996). Consumer choice, what people purchased as evidenced by archaeological collections, has been used as a relatively simple indicator of the class, status, or rank of the site's occupants. In most studies, the class position of site occupants is typically established based on historical documentation and archaeological excavation is merely a means to test, or confirm, this historical information. Because they are ubiquitous on historic sites, ceramics are seen as providing direct evidence of consumer choice issues.

Miller's (1980, 1991) pioneering research on CC Index values, which makes it possible to assess the relative cost of ceramic assemblages, has provided archaeologists with an easy measure of consumer choice. Similar research has focused on faunal assemblages and the relative cost of meat cuts (Schultz and Gust 1983), while others have emphasized that the purchase of matching sets of ceramic vessels, particularly tea items, are symptomatic of greater display and elaboration of dining

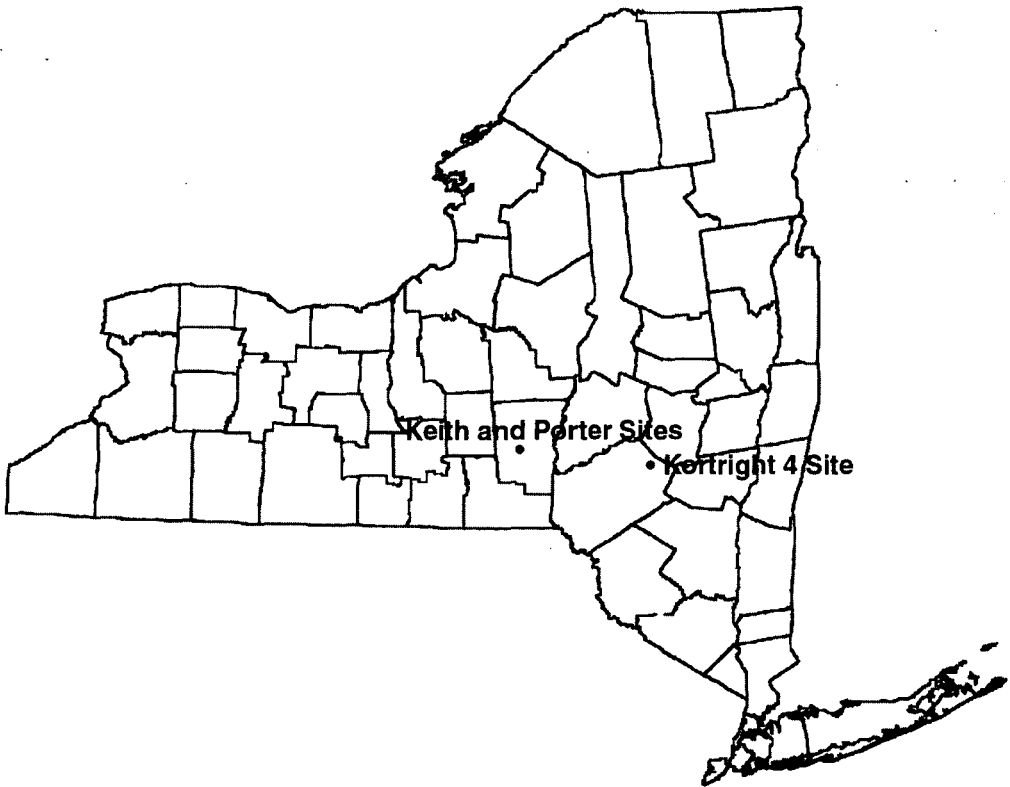


Figure 1. Location of archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

among the urban middle and upper classes during the 19th century (Fitts 1999). Arguments relating to refinement and genteel behavior in dining have not been effectively demonstrated in rural contexts. Transformations in urban areas have been linked to the rise of the middle class and the subsequent separation of work from the home. Farm families may never have experienced this separation and it is unlikely that transformations in dining and consumer behavior would manifest themselves in similar ways in rural contexts (Friedlander 1991; Klein 1991).

Consumer choice models have gained popularity because they are so easy to apply to the archaeological record, becoming an accepted canon in the cultural resource management arena. Yet, these models also tend to ossify the complexity of class relations and consumption patterns into relatively simplistic measures that merely reflect class standing and status. Consumer choice models actually leave us little choice in the range of interpretations for real world cases and force these consumption

patterns into reified assumptions of choice in behavior.

The limitations of consumer choice models and the ideology that they embody become particularly salient when we consider lower class contexts. Mapping consumer choice models and expectations onto the poor farm family at the Keith Site obscures the reality of their class struggles and the material manifestations of their strategies. The ceramic assemblage of the Keith Site is not a passive reflection of consumer behavior; rather, it tells a real story of how the residents of the Keith Site engaged rural social relations.

Class in the Countryside

Scholarship of the rural northeast has been influenced by a pervasive "Agrarian Myth" of a classless, undifferentiated rural population of middling farmers where the entire population lived in similar material circumstances (Wurst 1999). Stratified agricultural society

has been acknowledged in the American south where race as well as economic standing strictly divided the classes (Orser—1999) and to a lesser degree in the Midwest where middle and lower class farmers lived side-by-side but with a clearly differentiated social standing (Houdeck and Heller 1986; Gates 1973; Winters 1978; Cogswell 1975). In the Northeast, the stratification of rural society has not been widely recognized and thus the Agrarian Myth lingers on in images of rural social relations.

While rural northern society is typically seen as classless, there is a sense that it was a stratified society, aptly conveyed by the notion of the agricultural ladder. Farm labor is typically conceived as operating within a metaphorical "ladder," whereby a son would begin his career in farming by working on either his father's or a neighbor's farm. As he gained experience, wisdom, and capital, he would rent his own farm, becoming the tenant of another. With more years experience and capital, he would purchase his own farm, rising to the top of the ladder by becoming an independent producer like his father (Hamilton 1937; Lee 1947; Winters 1978; Atack 1989). Thus, many scholars recognize inequality in rural contexts, but this stratification is naturalized as temporary and based on individual attributes or failings rather than being inherent in the structure of the social relations (Atack and Bateman 1987; Atack 1988, 1989; Winters 1978; Osterud 1991; Jensen 1986). The question is not whether poor people existed in rural contexts, but whether we recognize the disparity as structural class differences (see Kulikoff 1992, 2000).

In an analysis of farm labor in upstate New York, Wurst (1993) has shown that the agricultural ladder was more myth than reality. In the small rural community of Upper Lisle, agricultural classes were defined to include the "wealthy" farmers, the "middling" farmers, and a large group of so-called farmers who owned little or no land. The families of these "farmers without farms" could only have survived by selling their labor for wages to other farmers in the area and through the labor of their wives. In Upper Lisle, many of the poorer laborers showed no evidence of progressing up the ladder over a period of sev-

eral decades. Many other individuals in this category probably left the area, making them invisible in our history. Thus, in rural New York, there was in fact a permanent, though small, class of agricultural wage laborers and poor farmers, some of whom may have also spent periods working for more prosperous farmers. The occupants of the Keith Site fall into the category of laborers and poor farmers. The Pittsley family fell at the lower rungs of the agricultural ladder, living very close to the economic and social edge during their brief occupation of the property.

The Keith Site and its Occupants

As is typically the case when dealing with archaeological sites relating to the lower classes, the documentary record for the Keith Site is more than a little confusing and hampered by incomplete mortgage and deed trails. The paucity of available documentation underscores the peripheral status of the occupants of the Keith farmstead, a fact clearly evident through their limited appearances in the agricultural schedules. This status kept them out of the documentary record, thus making them members of the "invisible" society that comprised the backbone of economic reality in the countryside.

The dwelling at the Keith Site was erected sometime after 1855. Census records indicate no family listing for this property in 1850 and no structure is shown on an 1855 map of the area (Fagan 1855). The house is first shown on the 1863 map listed as occupied by "C. Pittsley." Although they were not yet living at the Keith Site, the 1855 census enumerates Charles Pittsley, his wife Asenath, and five children ranging in age from 6 to 18. This document indicates that the Pittsley's had been resident in Coventry for only 2 months. None of these individuals had any occupations listed, probably a reflection of their recent arrival.

In 1860 Charles Pittsley acquired the Keith Site property from John Landers. The mortgage stipulated the payment of \$575 plus interest for the 13 acre parcel at the end of four years. This deed mentions that the parcel was originally part of a larger lot that may have been subdivided for Pittsley's use. The 1860 Federal census lists Charles Pittsley with real

estate valued at \$600, reflecting the acquisition of this property. Although Charles Pittsley owned land at this time, he is not listed in the agriculture schedules and his occupation is recorded as a farm laborer. His three eldest sons also worked for wages as farm laborers or apprentice carpenters.

The indications that Pittsley was a "farmer without a farm" are consistent with the 1865 agricultural schedule. Charles Pittsley is listed with a 13 acre farm valued at \$900 dollars. The average value of the 247 farms enumerated for the Town of Coventry is \$3,145. Thus, the Pittsleys' farm, stock, and production values are among the lowest in the Town of Coventry. This 13 acre farm would barely support a family of eight individuals (grown by the addition of another child) that engaged solely in agricultural production. Externally derived wages would have been necessary to augment the farm income.

Even though the Pittsley's farm and production values were low, the agricultural schedule indicates that the family engaged in a wide diversity of activities, including the production of apples and apple cider, butter, pork, mutton, poultry and eggs. One interesting aspect of the enumeration is the record of the production of 10 yards of flannel, an activity in which few of their neighbors engaged. The fact that the Pittsleys were involved in this activity indicates the important role that Asenath Pittsley undoubtedly played in attempting to insure the economic survival of her family (Sachs 1983; Babbitt 1995; Osterud 1991). The production of poultry, butter, and eggs also reflect the importance of Mrs. Pittsley's labor to the household.

The 1865 New York State census shows the Pittsleys living in a frame dwelling valued at \$200 dollars. In 1865 the Town of Coventry contained 322 frame dwellings with an average value of \$532 (Hough 1867). Thus the Pittsleys' home was less than half of the average value, again, indicative of a lower class standing.

On November 20, 1865, five months after the agricultural schedule information was collected, Charles Pittsley mortgaged his 13 acre tract back to John Landers for \$865. On that same date, an assignment was recorded in the County Clerk's Office in which Charles

Pittsley transferred this mortgage to J. M. Phillips. This would suggest that although Charles Pittsley had paid off the mortgage on the property within the specified time frame, they no longer desired to live there and the land was sold back to the previous owner. The Pittsley's remained in the Coventry area, even though they vacated the Keith Site. Subsequent deeds indicate that the land may have been reincorporated into the original, larger property.

Records from ensuing years are missing and the title chain picks up again in 1870 when John Stoddard sold a 65 acre parcel, which seems to include the Keith Site to Hannah Barstow. Hannah Barstow and her husband Elam owned the parcel for 16 years although it is not clear whether they actually occupied the Pittsley house or lived in another one located elsewhere on the larger farm. The 1869-70 Coventry Business Directory lists Elam Barstow as a farmer with 73 acres, which may also indicate that they acquired the Pittsley land to augment their already existing acreage. This same document includes Charles Pittsley as a farmer with 10 acres, suggesting that he had relocated to a different parcel in the area.

The Barstows sold their farm to Mary E. Barrett in 1886 after they had already moved to Iowa. With this transaction the Keith property passed through a series of non-resident owners, and its acreage was eventually incorporated into a larger farm. Given the information available, it is not clear if the Keith Site was occupied only by the Pittsley family, or whether the Barstows may have lived there as well. The house was abandoned at least by 1880 and fell into ruin.

From the documentary evidence it seems clear that the Pittsleys were the primary occupants of the Keith Site and that they existed well below the normal standard of living for the community. The Pittsleys were apparently the first residents, moving to the property in 1860 and probably erected the structure at that time. The census and agricultural schedules indicate that they were a poor family that barely eked out a living from their small farm. The male members spent periods working for other, more prosperous, farmers and the

female members actively contributed to the family's economic survival. The Pittsley's relinquished the property in 1865 although they continued to live in Coventry.

Analysis of Cultural Remains

The Keith Site excavations were conducted in advance of road reconstruction by the New York State Department of Transportation (Versaggi and Weiskotten 1996). Field investigations at the Keith Site consisted of the excavation of 42 m² during the entire Section 106 process. These units primarily sampled extensive sheet midden deposits in yard areas. The field stone house foundation was also traced and mapped in full and a well was identified by surface indications. Ground penetrating radar failed to identify any other subsurface features.

Most of the material deposits were recovered from sheet midden contexts and no distinct occupation horizons could be identified. K-means clustering algorithms were used to determine whether there were any distinctions among these contexts but derived no natural clustering solutions. Since no variability was shown in spatial or temporal (discussed below) patterning, the material culture from the Keith Site was analyzed as a single assemblage.

The ceramic vessel assemblage shows the most obvious discrepancy with expected patterns of lower class consumption. Ceramics represent 39% of the total assemblage recovered from this site. When standardized by the span of occupation the ceramic assemblage from the Keith Site, consisting of 191 unique vessels, is large in comparison to other lower class domestic assemblages investigated in upstate New York, when the information is standardized by the span of occupation (Rafferty 2000; Wurst 1993). By any standard, 191 ceramic vessels is a large sample for a site occupied for a maximum of 20 years.

The preponderance of the ceramic vessel assemblage is comprised of table and tea wares, which account for approximately 68% of the sample (TAB. 1). Since the artifacts recovered from the Keith Site originated primarily from unsealed sheet midden deposits consisting of small fragments, form informa-

Table 1. Functional type of ceramic vessels

Type	Count	%
Food Preparation/ storage	48.0	25.1
Table/teaware	129.0	67.5
Toilet	3.0	1.6
Unidentified	11.0	5.8
Total	191.0	100.0

Note: The table and tea ware categories consist of vessels an individual diner would use to consume their meal. These have been combined, since information on 19th-century table settings indicate that cups and saucers would be at the place setting for every meal. Tea wares, including cups and saucers, may represent everyday consumption as well as status display in social contexts.

tion is generally absent, making it impossible to compute CC Index values. The general value of the assemblage can, however, be assessed based on gross decoration categories. Within the table and tea ware category, more than a third of the vessels had transfer print decoration, the most expensive decoration available for white earthenware vessels (TAB. 2). Less expensive wares, such as shell edge, sponge and hand painted decoration, comprise 53% of the sample. The frequency of colors within decoration types also sheds some light on the general nature of the vessel assemblage. The white earthenware vessels include seven distinct colors, or 21 separate color and decoration combinations. Many of these combinations are represented by more than one vessel. In short, color variety is fairly high suggesting that ceramics were not acquired in matched sets. The Keith assemblage does appear to have a lower relative cost value for table and tea wares compared to other elite and middle class sites of the same time period (see O'Donovan and Weiskotten 1999 for com-

Table 2. Decoration types for table and tea wares.

Decoration	Count	%
Transfer	45.0	35.0
Painted	28.0	22.0
Edged	40.0	31.0
Molded	1.0	0.8
Undecorated	15.0	12.0
Total	129.0	100.0

parative information). Even so, the number of vessels, the preponderance of table and tea wares, typically indicative of status display and social behavior, and the relative cost of these vessels is not what we would have expected for "hard scrabble" farmers.

The glass vessel assemblage from the Keith Site presents an interesting contrast to the ceramic assemblage. The total of 41 glass vessels pales in comparison to the numerous and more elaborate ceramic vessels. Throughout the early to mid 19th century, glass vessels tended to be expensive and were heavily recycled. The small number of glass vessels at the Keith Site is more consistent with class information on the Keith Site residents and indicates that they were not in the habit of purchasing packaged consumer goods. Of the 37 glass vessels that could be assigned to a functional type, 31 were unidentified bottles, 3 were canning jars, 3 vessels represented the tableware or teaware category which included 2 tumblers. The scarcity of canning jars may be related to the occupation period of the site. Home canning was an unproven technology when it was first introduced in the second half of the 19th century and the poor farmers of the Keith Site may have found it difficult to afford the new technology. The presence of canning jars, however, along with the production of flannel, indicates an emphasis on a diversity of domestic production strategies. The two drinking glasses in the assemblage suggest little consideration of elaborate dining, a fact that is not evident from the ceramic assemblage.

Temporal Assessment

Temporal patterning at the Keith Site is a key element to interpreting this apparent contradiction between poor farmers with a large collection of relatively expensive ceramics. The muddiness of vertical patterning of the sheet midden deposits that comprise the site inhibited the definition of discreet occupational episodes. At a superficial level, mean dates for the site seem to indicate the presence of an early 19th-century component for which there is no historical documentation. Assemblage mean dates for all the units across the site concentrate in the early 1840s or even

earlier. We have no firm documentary evidence for any residents at the site prior to 1860 when the Pittsleys took up residence at the property. The units containing early 19th-century dates do not exhibit any consistency in terms of vertical or horizontal location, making it difficult to substantiate any earlier occupation.

Terminus post quem (TPQ) dates were instrumental in clarifying these discrepancies. While clear TPQ dates for the site were not sufficient for detailed stratigraphic interpretation, their concentration in the 1850s and 1860s indicates an occupation consistent with historic documentation. The TPQ dates are also more in line with the 1860–1865 Pittsley occupation. The relatively low frequency of ironstone (4 vessels or only 2% of the ceramic assemblage), which became common after 1850, would support our suspicions that the Barstows may never have occupied the Pittsley house. While not conclusive, this evidence suggests that the site material belongs mainly to the Pittsley occupation.

The disparities between the TPQ dates, mean dates, and historical documentation indicate that something is biasing one of our sources. We suspect that this bias can be found in the high frequency of early 19th-century ceramic vessels. The ceramic assemblage exhibits significant variability in decoration, material, and color and resembles what might be contained in an odd lot available at auction or the equivalent of a 19th-century jumble sale. Odd lots would probably have contained earlier, outmoded ceramics discarded or cast away by their original owners. These ceramic discards would skew assemblage mean dates, making the dates appear older than they might actually be.

The Keith Site in Comparative Context

Placing the Keith Site in a comparative framework adds texture and depth to our understanding of the intersection of class and consumption in this context. The two sites considered in this comparison include the middle class Porter farmstead (Rafferty 1998a) and the elite household that occupied the Kortright 4 Site (Rafferty 1998b). The Porter Site dates to approximately the same time

Table 3. Ceramic ware for table and tea wares.

Ware	Keith	Kortright 4	Porter
Whiteware	67.0%	28.0%	48.0%
Pearlware	28.0%	58.0%	9.0%
Ironstone	2.0%	0.4%	34.0%
Redware	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%
Common			
Creamware	0.0%	0.0%	3.0%
Porcelain	0.0%	5.0%	3.0%
Semi-Porcelain	0.0%	0.0%	2.0%
Creamware	4.0%	7.0%	0.0%
Other	0.0%	1.0%	0.0%

period as the Keith Site and is located within the same regional market network. All of the cultural material from these sites derives from sheet midden contexts. Thus, most general factors including regional and archaeological context that may influence our interpretation of consumption patterns are controlled for with the exception of class. The Kortright 4 Site dates to the early 19th-century and represents an elite assemblage associated with the family of a rural entrepreneur and local government official.

A comparison of the percentages of ceramic wares (TAB. 3) highlights some interesting differences among these sites. Except for the fact that both assemblages are dominated by whitewares, the Keith Site ceramics share few similarities with the middle class Porter Site, even though they are located in the same region and date to the same time period. The percentages of pearlware and creamware in the Keith Site assemblage are significantly higher than we would expect for a mid 19th-century context, and the numbers fall midway between the Porter Site and Kortright 4. The fact that the Keith Site shares high percentages of these wares is curious since the Kortright 4 assemblage derives from an elite household dating to the first decades of the 19th-century. The unexpected percentages of pearlware and creamware from the Keith Site probably relate to the lower class status of the site residents. With less disposable income, lower class households may have purchased older, used ceramics due to their cheaper prices. In this context, the relative lack of ironstone at the Keith Site is interesting. Ironstone becomes prevalent after 1850, as evidenced by the Porter Site where it represents a significant

portion of the ceramic assemblage. Even though the Pittsleys occupied the Keith Site after 1860 when ironstone had increased in popularity, it is clear that they did not purchase these newly available ceramic goods.

Based on the frequency of decoration types, the Keith Site assemblage is clearly more similar to the elite Kortright 4 Site, dating several decades earlier, than the coterminous Porter Site (TAB. 4). The Keith and Kortright 4 assemblages have similar percentages of transfer printed, painted, and edged vessels, while the main disparity is that the Keith Site has a larger number of undecorated vessels. The difference in the temporal affiliation of these assemblages holds the key to interpreting the remarkable convergence in these patterns. This would indicate that the superficial similarities in the ceramic assemblages may well reflect very different class-based consumption patterns separated by approximately a generation.

The differences in the consumption patterns can be glimpsed by examining the number of color categories present in these assemblages. Standardizing this information into a ratio based on the number of color categories present, divided by the number of color-decorated vessels, reveals that the lower class Keith assemblages had a high ratio of 0.09, while both the middle and upper class Kortright 4 and Porter Sites had the same ratio of 0.04. This conforms to an expectation of higher color variety among lower class assemblages, which were probably purchased piecemeal, and lower variety among the upper class contexts where matched sets and less variety might be the norm.

The ceramic data indicate that the Keith Site assemblage is closest to the Kortright 4 Site, dating about 40 years earlier and associated with an elite rural family. The size of the

Table 4. Comparison of decoration categories for table and tea wares.

Decoration	Keith	Kortright 4	Porter
Transfer	35.0%	34.0%	49.0%
Painted	22.0%	18.0%	12.0%
Edged	31.0%	39.0%	16.0%
Molded	0.8%	1.0%	7.0%
Undecorated	12.0%	0.0%	12.0%
Other	0.0%	8.0%	3.0%

ceramic assemblage, its high frequency of table and tea wares, and the relative cost of these vessels is not compatible with common conceptions of the consumption patterns of poor farmers. The similarities between the Keith and Kortright 4 Sites in terms of decoration and ware types suggest that lower class households may have purchased older, used ceramics that were probably cheaper.

Class and Consumer Behavior

Given the contexts dealt with here, it should be clear that the family occupying the Keith Site had a very different material existence than the nearby Porter family. Referring equally to their consumer purchases as "choice" mystifies the real class inequalities that existed among them (Wurst and McGuire 1999). The Pittsley family did not inhabit a world with a cornucopia of choice and lifestyle alternatives, as consumer choice models would have us believe. They occupied a less than productive farm in upstate New York and worked for wages on neighboring farms. Did they long for a few meager crumbs of their better's existence or dream of progressing up that metaphorical ladder, and thus, behave as consumer choice models would suggest? These expectations are certainly not outside the realm of real experience, but they are also facile. If all we do is verify that lower class families may have "emulated their betters," or that middle class families bought more expensive ceramics, we have only confirmed our "common sense" notions about class and consumer behavior. A better starting point would entail asking "How did these 'hard scrabble' farmers live within the realities of rural social relations where their choice was constrained by the demands of their material existence?" We may never know all the answers to this question, but we owe it to this poor farm family to look beyond the ideology of individual choice and the market forces of supply and demand for our answers.

Consumer choice models, with their scenarios of choice and emulation, also do a disservice to the strengths of the archaeological record by privileging historical sources, forcing archaeological information into a mere confirmatory role. Instead of simply rein-

forcing information more easily obtained from the documentary record, archaeology has the potential to expand, refute, or add more depth to that information. It is often the contradictions or ambiguities existing between the documentary and archaeological records that have the most potential to add new insights into the everyday life of the past. The Keith Site is no exception since the archaeological assemblage offers a contradictory picture of the class standing of its consumers.

Historical records provide a pretty clear picture of the Pittsleys as relatively poor, with a small farm operation that was never very successful, with below average house, acreage, and farm values. Since the Pittsley men worked as wage laborers, it is likely that their farm was not sufficient to support the family, with or without all of their labor. Nor would we expect a 13 acre farm to be a fully sustaining economic enterprise. Even though Charles Pittsley was listed as a farmer, it is clear that he engaged in wage labor, probably for his wealthier neighbors, for most of his life. Asenath's labor, producing butter, eggs, and cloth, also formed an integral part of their productive strategy.

The ceramics recovered from the Keith Site do not conform to expectations based on the historical documentation. The ceramic assemblage of 191 vessels from the Keith Site seems large for limited sampling of a site occupied for about 20 years. The relative value for table and tea wares at the Keith Site is lower than other elite and middle class sites of the same time period; however, the large size of the assemblage and the investment in table and teawares in comparison to other artifact types still sets this site apart from what we would consider "typical" lower class consumption patterns.

There are several different ways that this contradictory evidence can be explained. According to the application of typical consumer choice models, we might conclude that the Pittsleys were investing more than they could afford in their ceramic assemblage, and thus emulating upper class consumer behavior and status display. This interpretation seems to be reinforced by the fact that most of the vessels are table or tea wares rather than food preparation or storage vessels, which would

indicate an emphasis on production. The disparity between ceramic and occupation dates casts doubt on this, however.

One factor that we can rule out in explaining the contradictions in the Keith Site assemblage is access to markets. Central New York State had been firmly embedded in a national market since the early 1800s. This connection was solidified by the completion of the Chenango Canal in 1837 and the Erie Railroad in 1854. By the time the Keith Site was occupied, access to markets would not have been a significant issue. In any event, limited market access would equal limited access to ceramic and other consumer goods; that is hardly the case given the nature of the Keith Site assemblage.

The most compelling interpretation of the data patterns evident from the Keith Site assemblage, however, arises from questioning the assumption of choice. Everything we know about the Keith Site residents indicates that their economic resources limited their ability to invest in mass-produced consumer goods. The fact that the ceramic assemblage stands out suggests that something very different is going on, something related to how these goods were acquired. This pattern can easily be explained by recognizing that the occupants may have acquired "second-hand" goods.

Comparison of the Keith Site ceramic assemblage to other sites lends support to the idea that the residents had purchased older ceramics. The percentages of ceramic ware type and decoration at the early 19th-century Kortright 4 Site and the Keith Site were very similar. Both the Kortright 4 and Keith assemblages contained very low amounts of ironstone in relation to the Porter Site but higher amounts of pearlware. The rural elite residents who occupied the Kortright 4 Site were certainly able to purchase expensive, new, and fashionable ceramics. The similar percentages of decoration types at the lower class Keith Site suggest a parallel purchasing pattern that does not make sense for the period of occupation unless we consider that the Keith Site residents were purchasing older, out-of-date, used ceramics. It is unlikely that the older ceramics in the assemblage were heirloom pieces due to their high frequencies and the fact that these

would have been elite, expensive ceramics in the preceding generation. Lower class families such as the Pittsleys, who arrived poor and did not "progress," would not be expected to have significant numbers of expensive, heirloom pieces.

Additional support for this conclusion is found in the ceramic assemblage from a 19th-century town poor farm in Rhode Island (Garman and Russo 1999). The ceramics found at the poor farm were probably donated by elite patrons who were discarding older, unfashionable dishes. The ceramic assemblage contained much higher frequencies of transfer-printed and hand-painted pearlwares that skewed mean level dates at this site. In fact, dates based on the ceramic assemblage actually indicated that the site was occupied long before the documentary evidence indicates that the building was even constructed (Garman and Russo 1999). The Keith Site shows a similar, atypical, high percentage of pearlwares for its occupation span, suggesting that these poor farm families purchased discarded ceramics.

Purchasing used or discarded ceramics would presumably be much cheaper than new vessels. While we can never be sure where they purchased these goods, household auctions, either for reasons of foreclosure, settling estates, or because a family was migrating, were common activities in rural areas. Box lots of odd ceramics could probably have been acquired relatively cheaply, especially if they did not represent the newest fashion in dish ware. Brighton (1998) has argued that the immigrant families in the Five Points tenement in New York City were able to acquire cheap ceramics by several means, including public and "street" auctions. Some ceramics may also have been purchased from peddlers who were also sources of used goods. Old but serviceable dishes, tools, and other items that were unwanted by a middle-class farmer's household could be easily traded to the peddler, who in turn traded them to someone that needed such items.

The obvious conclusion is that the residents of the Keith Site did not set out to select the particular patterns, decorations, or colors represented in their ceramic assemblage. Rather their "choice" was constrained by the

dictates of their material existence. The example of the Keith Site assemblage makes it clear that consumption is not simply a reflection of class or status, nor simply an objective measure obtained by an index value (Wurst 1999). Rather, class is a set of social relations played out in the mundane aspects of everyday life. In this context, it is also intriguing to posit that the high disposal rate—the fact that so many dishes were broken in such a short period of time—may be related to this lack of choice. Their old, second-hand ceramics would have been an obvious daily reminder of their lower class existence, and that their limited consumer choices varied dramatically from those that so many other Americans took for granted. If the “success” of some was determined by the goods they had, for others, wealth was measured negatively by the goods they needed but did not have (Dawley 1976: 149). We may commiserate with the less than careful handling, and thus higher breakage rate, of these symbols of inequality.

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