

Material Culture: Exploring Wills and Inventories

Except for the first page, which serves as an introduction, this chapter is all primary sources, and primary sources of a special type: wills and probate inventories. Wills and probate inventories are the records of what people owned when they died. We don't have a lot of written evidence from the eighteenth century about how people lived, but we do have wills and probate inventories — and they tell us a surprising amount about how people lived and worked, how they organized their households, and how they thought about their families. By exploring these documents, you'll be the historian and detective, drawing your own conclusions about life in the eighteenth century from scraps of evidence.

A worksheet for analyzing will and inventories is also available.

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People in colonial America left detailed records of what they owned — including individual tools and articles of clothing — that tell us a lot about how they lived.

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