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The Tavern in Colonial America

Abstract

The tavern in Colonial America, or the “ordinary” as it was referred to in Puritan Massachusetts, was a staple in the social, political, and travel lives of colonial citizens from very early in this country’s existence. Samuel Cole in Boston opened the first tavern on March 4, 1634. It was not long before the demand and necessity for taverns in New England, and throughout the colonies, was overwhelming. In 1656 the General Court of Massachusetts held towns accountable with fines if they did not sustain an ordinary.

Keywords

tavern, ordinary, Colonial America

THE TAVERN IN COLONIAL AMERICA

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The tavern in Colonial America, or the “ordinary” as it was referred to in Puritan Massachusetts, was a staple in the social, political, and travel lives of colonial citizens from very early in this country’s existence. Samuel Cole in Boston opened the first tavern on March 4, 1634.¹ It was not long before the demand and necessity for taverns in New England, and throughout the colonies, was overwhelming. In 1656 the General Court of Massachusetts held towns accountable with fines if they did not sustain an ordinary.²

The tavern served a multitude of purposes in colonial towns and countrysides. They were means of direction for travelers, as well as settings where they could eat, drink, be entertained, and spend the night. As historian Carl Bridenbaugh states, “The tavern was conceived as a public institution which should provide all needed services, and which should be carefully regulated by law to prevent all usual sorts of abuses.”³ Obviously the term “abuses” refers to the use of alcohol and the behaviors caused by its over-consumption. The tavern was the means by which the town assemblies controlled the distribution of alcohol. Along with alcoholic beverages, colonists could play games, enjoy entertainment, participate in discussion, and receive the latest news and debate of the time.

Along with being popular locations of social congress, taverns were significant for their function in town culture and society. Taverns were utilized as meeting places for assemblies and courts, destinations for refreshment and entertainment, and, most importantly, democratic venues of debate and discussion. The purpose of this investigation is to identify the democratic nature of tavern culture and the formation of differing opinions concerning the influence taverns had on political opposition and the general socialization of a colonial town.

A handful of historians have embraced the issue concerning the role of taverns in colonial society with varied success. Alice M. Earle views the tavern as a traditional institution “whose effect was to pull fledgling communities together.”⁴ While this is a relatively concise explanation of tavern importance, it does little to explain the influence of tavern culture in society. David W. Conroy presents a different argument suggesting that taverns “became a public stage upon which colonists resisted, initiated, and addressed changes

1 Alice M. Earle, *Stage Coach and Tavern Days* (New York: MacMillan, 1900), 180.

2 *Ibid.*, 2.

3 Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life 1625-1742* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938) 114.

4 Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch Revolution: Taverngoing and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 11.

in their society . . . gradually redefin[ing] their relationships with figures of authority.”⁵ Because of a lack of evidence concerning the extent of tavern use, Conroy resorted to analyzing specific attempts made by ministers and legislators to regulate tavern culture. Although this is a clever scheme for gaining a perspective regarding the influence of tavern culture, it is a biased perspective originating exclusively from the social elite: the group who felt most threatened by taverns.

Through his contemporary use of methods surrounding the concepts of modern social history, Peter Thompson analyzes the influence of tavern culture in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia by considering the perspectives of tavern-goers through his use of tavern guest-books and personal histories. Thompson suggests that tavern-going was more of a popular activity through which a range of desires were expressed, rather than Conroy’s claim that tavern culture was essentially oppositional toward authoritative provincial leaders.⁶ Thompson is successful at attaining a view of tavern culture from the opposite perspective of the elitists, who felt most threatened by this popular culture.

Both of their claims represent two opposite views concerning the influence of tavern culture: one suggests oppositional intent, while the other advocates a melting pot of ideology and entertainment. Thompson’s analysis seems to contain more merit, however Conroy’s work certainly deserves consideration. In the following survey of the colonial tavern culture, in order to decipher its influence in society, I suggest that the concept of tavern going was political and oppositional to authority indirectly by ways of an un-influential minority, thus the primary influence of tavern culture remaining inherently social in nature. To accurately understand the influence of taverns, one must first realize the function of the tavern itself, followed by the significance of the most controversial activities of tavern culture, namely drinking, gambling, and entertainment.

THE COLONIAL TAVERN

The tavern itself was rather simply designed and coordinated. The earliest taverns were mostly independent structures, yet they could also be located within or attached to residential houses.⁷ The interiors of taverns were designed with different rooms, the largest room being the taproom with furnishings such as chairs, desks, the bar, and a fireplace. Certain upper-class taverns had parlors that were attached to the taproom. The taverns located in towns usually had special rooms designated for meetings of groups or, the more likely case, assemblies and court proceedings.⁸ No doubt partially caused by their frequent occupation of taverns, assemblies throughout the colonies assigned functions for taverns including required provisions of lodging, food, and drink. Often

5 David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 6-7.

6 Thompson, 12, 14.

7 Nancy L. Struna, *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure and Labor in Early Anglo-America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996) 144.

8 Earle, 43, 44.

laws regulated the prices that a tavern keeper charged for these services.⁹

Virtually anyone in the colony could keep a tavern, however they were required to possess a license. Aside from the license, colonists were encouraged to keep a tavern for the benefit of the community. Inducements such as land grants, pastures for cattle, or exemption from school and church taxes were offered to citizens to keep a tavern.¹⁰ Many tavern keepers held other trades along with the tavern. It was not uncommon to see women tavern keepers, however they were usually widows or single women.¹¹

Taverns were establishments that fostered activity from morning until night. A typical day, for example, may have consisted of laborers, seamen and artisans gathering at a tavern in the morning to begin their day. Most taverns provided a formal breakfast at nine o'clock. After noon the first card or ninepins (a primitive form of bowling) games would begin, followed by a two o'clock "dinner" and drinks. Supper was usually served at seven o'clock followed by more drinks and a mixture of shooting contests, card play, a rendezvous in the backroom, a round of dancing, a fight between the inebriated, and possibly a political philosophical discussion.¹²

Taverns were establishments where many natural facets of daily life occurred. Merchants and mariners utilized the atmosphere of the tavern to bargain over cargoes. Churchgoers would warm themselves after two or three hours in an unheated meeting-house with a warm beverage or a meal.¹³ Taverns at this time were also fundamental venues in government operation. Tavern rooms would serve as meeting places for Superior and Lower court sessions, as well as public meetings.¹⁴ In addition the tavern was the place where business was conducted between farmers, artisans, and town merchants. They served as centers for people to receive their mail, catch up on news, and debate politics.¹⁵

This exchange of gossip and information also occurred in Philadelphia taverns, however, because of Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia had competing weekly newspapers as well as an efficient postal service. Because of this residents and strangers did not have to rely as heavily on tavern-talk for news, yet such talk still fascinated them.¹⁶

Colonial taverns were one of the most important assets to a traveler. As Kym Rice describes, "A person did not have to be traveling a great distance to be in need of a tavern. A trip ten miles beyond Boston required spending the night."¹⁷ In New Am-

9 Struna, 145.

10 Earle, 2.

11 Struna, 146.

12 Ibid, 148.

13 Bridenbaugh, 107.

14 Susanna Barrows and Robin Room, eds., *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 31.

15 Struna, 145.

16 Thompson, 2.

17 Kym Rice, "Early American Taverns for the Enlightenment of Friends and Strangers," *Early American Literature* 14 (1983): 46.

sterdam Director-General Kieft, in order to accommodate English visitors traveling from New England to Virginia from whom he suffered “great annoyances,” was forced to open a tavern of his own in 1642.¹⁸ Along with being establishments for travelers to acquire refreshment and housing for the night, taverns also served as landmarks to guide travelers on their journeys.

In Salem, Massachusetts tavern licenses were granted with the proviso that “there be sett up in some inoffensive sign obvious [means] for direction to strangers.”¹⁹ Aside from a tavern’s sign being easy for a foreign traveler to identify, the symbols and icons depicted on these signs were necessary because of a low literacy rate. As literacy grew in the colonies, signs became virtually obsolete, however many taverns elected to keep their sign for tradition, nostalgia, or humor.²⁰

Depicted on these signs, along with symbols, were often distinct tavern names of which the origins are rather intriguing. The varying, apparently meaningless names on tavern signs are actually modifications and alterations that transpired over time to familiar English sayings or concepts. For instance the tavern “The Bag o’ Nails” was originally “The Bacchanalians.” The familiar “Cat and Wheel” was the “Catherine Wheel,” and even earlier “St. Catherine’s Wheel,” an allusion to the saint and her martyrdom. The tavern “The Goat and Compass” stood for the motto “God encompasseth us.” Similarly “The Pig and Carrot” was the “Pique et Carreau” (the spade and diamond in playing cards). These quirky evolutions not only reflect the effects of the translation of dialects, but also the successive mistakes of ignorant sign painters.²¹

In relation to travel, taverns also served a significant role in colonial development. William Penn desired an efficient settlement of Philadelphia and believed a thriving seaport would provide this. He believed taverns would speed development by serving the needs of workmen and travelers and convincing settlers that Philadelphia was hospitable.²² Paralleling the development of towns, the rural expansion of farms led to an increase in the need for rural taverns. The increase of traffic and population in Philadelphia in the 18th Century called for an increase in taverns. By 1731 there were nearly 100 legal taverns in Philadelphia, and that total increased to 120 by 1750.²³ Taverns functioned in a somewhat different respect in the southern colonies. Since the population was more spread out, each plantation was, in effect, a separate tavern. It was only in larger southern

18 Bridenbaugh, 107.

19 Earle, 20.

20 Ibid, 138.

21 Ibid, 141.

22 Thompson, 9.

23 Struna, 145.

cities that taverns thrived in the way they did in the north.²⁴

ALCOHOL

In the 18th Century drinking was the most popular and controversial of all tavern recreations. One of the primary functions of taverns was to carry on English drinking culture in America. Because of the stricter religious limitations, specifically in New England, the practices of drinking, and to greater extent drunkenness, tended to be more restricted. However, seeking refreshment by way of alcoholic beverages remained as one of the primary desires of tavern-goers.

The types of drinks found in taverns varied anywhere from beers and ciders to wines and mixed concoctions. The most universal staple in all colonial taverns was rum. A liquor unique to the colonies, rum originated from the gypsy word “powerful,” and the effects of it concurred. Two of the most popular drinks in colonial taverns were flip and punch. Flip, a distinctly American beverage, was made in pitchers and consisted of two-thirds strong beer (sweetened with sugar, molasses, or dried pumpkin) and rum. Into this mixture was dropped a red-hot iron loggerhead that made it foam and gave the drink its unique burnt, bitter taste. Punch was another popular drink in Colonial America that had its origins in India. The basic recipe for the drink was the combination of tea, rum, arrack, sugar, lemons, and water in a large bowl. Taverns often had several of their own distinct versions of punch that were classified by various other fruit juices, liquors, and spices as well as the quantities of each used.²⁵

Many of the problems that arose in taverns concerning alcohol surrounded drunkenness, and in response to this, authorities implemented many restrictions. However, because inebriated patrons were a minority in the tavern-going population, these restrictions were rarely enforced. Another common problem that arose in taverns concerning alcohol was the illegal sale of tainted beer and liquor. Often tavern keepers would be caught selling beer that contained pollutants and sediments to make profits on otherwise useless beverages. Restrictions were placed on these actions, however, the question remains as to how serious of a crime tavern-goers actually perceived this to be. In Philadelphia in 1722 laws established heavy penalties for the sale of adulterated and polluted beer, yet they were never followed.²⁶

It is evident that the issues of drunkenness concerning alcohol were more of a problem in certain areas. In 1681 the General Court took direct control over licensing and reduced public houses in Boston from 45 to 24 in explicit response to alcohol problems. Despite these restrictions, there was an indispensable necessity for taverns in society to

²⁴ Earle, 32.

²⁵ Earle, 100-101, 108-109, 114.

²⁶ Bridenbaugh, 432.

accommodate gatherings, meetings, and to house travelers. As David Conroy admits, "Even the most rabid critics of intemperance admitted the necessity of public houses for the provision of alcohol so necessary for the conduct of social relations as well as the refreshment of travelers."²⁷

GAMES AND GAMBLING

Gaming in taverns was another exceedingly controversial issue associated with these establishments. Taverns were sites of all varieties of social contests in general whether it be sporting, dancing, social justice (the courts), or debates.²⁸ The problems, however, surfaced when gambling became associated with these activities. Thus, the restrictions that ensued concerning tavern games were not because of the games themselves, rather the gambling that surrounded them.

The types of games played at taverns were relatively similar regardless of location. Card playing was one of the most prominent tavern and domestic amusements. Patrons would participate in card games in tavern public rooms, during private gatherings, and during other events.²⁹ Other indoor games included dancing, fistfights, and shooting at random indoor targets. Taverns also usually had grounds outside where patrons would play cricket or quoits. Ninepins, an early form of bowling, was usually played in a side alley or lane. One of the most popular sporting events in colonial taverns with outdoor space was cockfighting. The origins of this peculiar phenomenon are unknown, however the sport spread throughout the colonies by the turn of the century. Despite the extensive gambling that was associated with the sport, it was never regulated.³⁰

The problems that formed with tavern sporting concerned mainly the element of risk. Because gambling in taverns was often illegal, those patrons were embracing a risk in participating. Issues regarding liquor, games, matches, and socializing were all popular forms of tavern entertainment that were a threat to the tavern keeper because of the possibility of fines or imprisonment.³¹ Interestingly problems surrounding tavern violence, as defined by today's standards, were relatively infrequent. Most "violent" acts were usually considered acts of strength, power, stamina, or speed.³² Despite the fact that these behaviors did occur, strangely they were never outlawed. For example in the December 19, 1749 edition of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, an article reads:

Two seamen belonging to a brig . . . agreed to walk out, and take a trial

27 Conroy, 19.

28 Struna, 154.

29 Rice, 52, 54.

30 Struna, 148-150.

31 Struna, 148.

32 *Ibid*, 153.

of skill at boxing; which having exercised a while, they were parted, and came in and drank friends, where the person who boasted of his strength, died in a few minutes after.³³

Despite the violent nature of this encounter, the article does not suggest any forthcoming disciplinary action concerning the event.

The controversy surrounding taverns, more specifically the dispute concerning games and gambling, concentrates on the idea that taverns were places where ordinary people could participate in extraordinary activities.³⁴ This disturbed certain genteel members of the community because of the threat they believed this culture had on their status and style. More specifically the elite society considered gambling a wasteful economic activity that promoted the lackadaisical treatment of finances. While this may have been a legitimate concern at the time, it is another issue that seriously affected only a minority of the population who were heavy gamblers.

ENTERTAINMENT

While all of the activities embraced in tavern culture could be considered forms of entertainment, there were a select few that created conflict between the classes. Nonetheless, taverns became the most important venue in serving as homes for shows, exhibitions, and other forms of entertainment in town.³⁵

Dancing became a popular form of entertainment found in taverns. In 1631, however, laws were passed forbidding dancing in taverns as a consequence to some excessive wedding celebrations.³⁶ These limitations did not linger primarily because of the difficulty of enforcing such laws in an environment so ideal for this activity.³⁷ Courtship was another type of entertainment where the tavern had a function. As historian Bruce Daniels notes: "A tavern outside the city became known as a favorite place for courting sweethearts to go for dinner."³⁸ Authorities, however, closely monitored this activity. In the mid-1600's towns had night watches to find young men and women walking together after ten o'clock. The watchmen would question a suspect couple and would ensure that they both went their separate ways.³⁹ Formal activities were also held in taverns. The most upper class New York tavern, The Black Horse, was owned by Robert Todd and played host to concerts, dinners, receptions, and balls such as the one given in honor of the Prince of Wales' birthday on January 19, 1736.⁴⁰

33 "New York, December 4," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 19 December 1749.

34 Struna, 153.

35 Bridenbaugh, 426.

36 Earle, 5-6.

37 Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995) 117.

38 Daniels, 134.

39 Earle, 6.

40 *Ibid*, 39.

Jokes were also commonplace in the colonial tavern. Often there was a specific person who was the butt of many practical jokes. In one old tavern located on the road between New Haven and Litchfield, a burly African American was the butt of all tavern jokes and was a great source of amusement to travelers and local patrons. By means of these pranks, which often culminated in a rough fight, it is understandable how the genteel members of the town could view this behavior as primitive and foolish.⁴¹ Other bizarre forms of tavern entertainment were traveling freak shows and exhibitions of the newest technological inventions. Shows of deformed beasts and people, mechanical devices, “electric machines” experimenting with the concept of electricity, plays, music, and lotteries all amused tavern folk while being stringently monitored by authorities. Lotteries and shows were regulated so money and political figures could not be exploited.⁴²

THE INFLUENCE OF TAVERN CULTURE

To acquire an accurate understanding of the distinct influence of taverns in society, a perception of the cultural composition of tavern-goers must first be established. Historian Carl Bridenbaugh suggests that the tavern was “the one agency that influenced the social and economic life of every class, enabling representatives from all walks of life to rub shoulders in a friendly and growingly democratic fashion.”⁴³ This notion can be attributed to the specific environmental characteristics of a tavern. In country taverns, for example, manners were rude and no exclusiveness was kept; everyone sat at the same table and many strangers shared beds.⁴⁴ In the earliest Philadelphia taverns, Peter Thompson notes, many rooms were cramped: “[In] a city with an ethnically and culturally diverse population and a relatively fluid social hierarchy, taverns drew together customers from a wide variety of backgrounds in conditions of enforced intimacy.”⁴⁵ This culturally diverse makeup is illustrated in the conflicts that occasionally erupted. For instance this incident was noted in the April 10, 1740 issue of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*:

Nicholas Hantwerk, a Palatine, and Patrick McQuire an Irishman, being at a tavern and drinking freely, a Difference arose between them, and they had a small scuffle . . . but the Dutchman proving too hard for the other beat him cruelly about the Head and disabled him.⁴⁶

The opinion that taverns were culturally diverse does have its opposition. Nancy

41 Earle, 92.

42 Ibid, 198-203.

43 Bridenbaugh, 434.

44 Earle, 79.

45 Thompson, 3.

46 “Philadelphia,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette* 10 April 1740.

L. Struna argues that taverns were not social melting pots as traditionally believed. The fact that during sporting matches people would join together in the atmosphere, she argues, were equalities that were short lived. In the endnotes of Struna's book, *People of Prowess: Sport, Leisure and Labor in Early Anglo-America*, she mentions Conroy's claim and suggests that the seclusion of the elite and those who challenged authority "seems to be more reasonable."⁴⁷ Considering Thompson's research of the common patron's perspective and his discovery of the extent of cultural diversity in Philadelphia taverns, it becomes more difficult to make such an audacious generalization. It must be noted, however, that Philadelphia was noted as being a culturally diverse city, which may have differed from a more socially segregated New England.

Considering the background and composition of colonial taverns, the actual political influence versus the supposed influence can be deciphered. For this argument, actual political influence will be defined as any influence taverns had on society as a whole, while supposed influence will refer to the effects of a popular minority.

It would be unreasonable to suggest that taverns had no actual political influence in colonial society. There are instances when taverns had a significant role in affecting the authoritative figures in the community. For instance tavern patronage had importance concerning ministers. Conversation in taverns concerning a minister's style and content in his preaching could have consequences for his community position. In this way tavern-goers could, in effect, oppose the minister in a given town.⁴⁸ The argument could be made that tavern culture was contrary to the ideology of the church. Conversely, tavern function actually paralleled with church function. Licenses were often granted to tavern keepers provided the tavern was located near a church. The General Court of Massachusetts required all keepers within a mile of a church to clear their taverns during church hours, thus forcing people to attend church.⁴⁹

With the lack of political opposition to authority present in tavern culture, Conroy's argument must be questioned. It also must be reiterated that Conroy's claim that taverns represented oppositional forces in society rests on the views and legislation of the genteel. The reactions of people with this status were actually reactions to concentrated problems within tavern culture that had no significant political influence, such as extreme drunkenness. Conroy's argument has relevance concerning the lack of purpose and uneconomical themes the genteel believed taverns represented, however, this was only associated with a minority of drunkards and those customers who exploited taverns.

Conroy suggests that in the 1720s, "As conflict between the elected assembly

47 Struna, 152, 245.

48 Bridenbaugh, 38-39.

49 Earle, 13,15.

and the newly established royal government intensified, taverns became important instruments in the organization of popular antipathy to royal authority.⁵⁰ While this argument may have been applicable in a few select taverns, it is unreasonable to suggest that tavern culture in general was opposed to government. Likewise, rather than their concern being imbedded in fears of political upheaval, genteel critics were more apprehensive of tavern-goers because of the “rampant gambling, heavy drinking, and other ‘evil’ associated” with taverns. “They saw it as a threat to the style they had cultivated” because it “countered gentility and refinement.”⁵¹ In actuality these critics feared societal modification, not political anarchy.

Issues associated with drinking have also been correlated to the oppositional political influence of taverns. In the January 11, 1739 edition of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, an Act of Assembly was described, “As a Means for the suppressing that irreligious Practice of frequenting Ale-House, taverns, and other public Places, and drinking and tipping there, as the first Day of the Week, commonly called Sunday.”⁵² While there is no doubt that this was most likely a legitimate concern, it is difficult to believe that, in a society so highly influenced by religion, the population for whom this act was implemented to regulate could have been anything other than a minority.

Another issue that was present in colonial society that raises inquiry into the actual oppositional influence of taverns is the enforcement of legislation. Retaliatory laws and acts of assemblies addressed many “illegalities” of tavern culture, yet the neglecting of the strict enforcement of these laws suggests a smaller actual political influence. If society, as a whole, were so concerned with the oppositional power of tavern culture, they would have put forth more effort in enforcing regulation.

Taverns in Colonial America were undoubtedly a major force in societal culture. The roles they fulfilled as places of refreshment, hostels for travelers, means of direction, places of entertainment, and meeting places for the most influential people in a town were necessary for the well being of a community. The tavern’s role in society was influential and, at times, deviant. However, rarely was it oppositional to authority.

Tavern culture and its influence on society cannot be isolated by one diagnosis. Each tavern varied, as did the citizens who frequented them. While there were people who chose the extreme alternatives of excessive drinking, gambling, and protest, they were a minority. It is important to recognize the minority for their worth and the influences they maintained. However, in attempting to illustrate the influence of the colonial tavern on society, the most accurate classification would have to be a place of refreshment and entertainment for townspeople and travelers where ideas were discussed and news shared. Simply, it was an establishment for ordinary people.

50 Barrows, 31.

51 Struna, 161.

52 “Philadelphia,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette* 11 January 1739.