

1996

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Recommended Citation

Blaszczyk, Regina Lee (1996) "Review Essay: Private Lives and Armory Practice: Artifacts and Armsmaking Reconsidered," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 25 25, Article 8.

<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol25/iss1/8> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol25/iss1/8>

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Review Essay

Private Lives and Armory Practice: Artifacts and Armsmaking Reconsidered

Regina Lee Blaszczyk

COLT: THE MAKING OF AN AMERICAN LEGEND by William N. Hosley, Jr., 1996. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. 254 pp., illustrations, and notes, \$49.95 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper).

CULTURE CHANGE AND THE NEW TECHNOLOGY: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EARLY AMERICAN INDUSTRIAL ERA by Paul A. Shackel, 1996. *Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology*, series edited by Charles E. Orser, Jr. Plenum Press, NY. 217 pp., illustrations, appendix, bibliography, and notes, \$37.50.

For decades, the study of America's 19th-century armories was primarily the purview of economic and technological historians who focused on gunmaking's seminal role in the evolution of the so-called American system of manufactures. Seeking to understand the origins of quantity-production methods central to the nation's rise as an industrial power, these scholars produced a plethora of articles and books that considered how, if at all, manufacturers of small arms, along with producers of consumer durables such as wooden clocks and sewing machines, adopted single-purpose machine tools to increase output and a rational system of jigs, fixtures, and gauges to insure the interchangeability of parts (e.g., Rosenberg 1972; Mayr and Post 1981). Among these historians, Merritt Roe Smith (1977) and David A. Hounshell (1984) provided in-depth analyses of shop-floor practices respectively at the United States armory at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and at Samuel Colt's armory in Hart-

ford, Connecticut. As the agents of technical innovation, managers and master mechanics loomed large in these prize-winning monographs about technological change on the shop floor.

Recently, the material world of arms production has captured the attention of non-academic scholars who have approached older debates with new sets of questions. In this vein, William N. Hosley, Jr., Curator of American Decorative Arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, and Paul A. Shackel, historical archaeologist at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, have built on the rich literature on the American system of manufacturers to unravel the cultural and social dimensions of arms production in the private and public sectors. Designed to accompany an exhibition and a series of public programs at the Atheneum, Hosley's biography of Samuel and Elizabeth Colt is a masterful synthesis of recent academic scholarship on technology, gender, architecture, and philanthropy and an engaging story of a great Yankee gunmaking fortune. Based on a National Park Service initiative to reinterpret historic sites "from the bottom up," Shackel's monograph, in contrast, draws heavily on the new social history to delineate aspects of community life and domestic relations among Harpers Ferry's 19th-century inhabitants. Together, these books move beyond the gun factory into the community to delineate dramatically different worlds—those of rich and poor—wrought of 19th century arms production.

A member of the Atheneum's curatorial staff for almost two decades, Hosley had played a major role in the exhibition, "The Great River" (Hosley and Ward 1985), and was working on another blockbuster, "The Japan Idea" (Hosley 1990), when he started the

Colt project in 1986. The outgrowth of an administrative mandate to display some of the museum's dusty firearms, the gun show blossomed into a large interpretive exhibit under Hosley's guidance. Digging into the Colt store-rooms, Hosley discovered a rich repository of documents and artifacts, including fine and decorative arts, that illuminated the glittery world of Hartford's 19th-century manufacturing class. In his catalogue, Hosley effectively blends this textual and visual evidence to examine the construction of several legends surrounding Colt, including the role of firearms in taming the Wild West. While Samuel Colt (1814–1862) is a big figure in Hosley's analysis, *Colt* is more than a biography of a great industrialist. Indeed, one of the book's outstanding features is Hosley's nuanced portrait of Elizabeth Caldwell Colt (1826–1905), who outlived her husband and children by up to four decades and who devoted those years to the articulation and promotion of the Colt legend. Spanning most of the 19th century, Hosley's dual biography proceeds chronologically, tracing the experiences of Samuel as a bachelor, the couple during their brief marriage (1856–1862), and Elizabeth during her long widowhood.

The greatest strength of *Colt* is Hosley's able analysis of the family's lavish lifestyle in the context of American industrialization. Nowhere were the cultural dreams of the 19th-century nouveaux riches more fully expressed than in their sporadic, often impulsive accumulation of possessions, from Italianate villas filled with paintings by old masters to fast boats docked at prestigious yachting clubs. But, as any visitor rushed through Newport's mansions can testify, hagiography often dominates museum interpretations of Gilded Age business elites (Preservation Society of Newport County 1996). Not so for the Atheneum, with Hosley in charge. From his perspective, Samuel Colt saw Armsmear as a "home that validated the law of progress and symbolized his place at the top of its relentless hierarchy" (p. 138). While they belonged to the leisure class, the Colts nonetheless understood that arms manufacturing was the basis of their wealth and power. In a poignant passage on the armory's destruction by fire, Hosley depicts Elizabeth collecting relics, including

melting gun components, for her curio cabinet; a less astute scholar might have missed the symbolism of this sentimental gesture. Hosley's talent for spotting meaningful artifactual details and using them to illuminate the big picture makes *Colt* an enjoyable book to read and a significant contribution to the literature in American material culture.

A historical archaeologist at the National Park Service and a faculty member at the University of Maryland-College Park, Shackel brings different concerns to his study of Harpers Ferry. Attributing his interest in the lives of ordinary Americans to roots in an immigrant working-class household, Shackel, laboring in the emerging field of documentary archaeology, engaged the analytical tools of social history in a series of excavations and site reports during the early 1990s. The research of Shackel and his co-workers on Harpers Ferry's domestic and commercial districts collectively sought to round out Smith's analysis of labor and the "new technology" on the shop floor with thick descriptions of daily life in the community. In short, Harpers Ferry's archaeologists were emulating the work of Lowell's archaeologists (e.g., Beaudry and Mrozowski 1987–1989), with the objective of expanding their site's interpretative scope beyond the dramatic moment of John Brown's raid. *Culture Change* is the fruit of that research.

Comprising an introduction and seven chapters, *Culture Change* may remind readers of an archaeological dig, for Shackel starts with big themes and hones in on smaller and smaller details. The volume begins with a useful vignette on the history of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, which summarizes the changing objectives of administrators since the site's founding by Congress in 1944. Tracing the park's transformation from a monument to the Civil War to a site devoted to 19th-century life, Shackel demonstrates how academic imperatives partially reshaped the Park Service's research agenda to include social history in the 1980s, a timely assessment given the culture wars and budget crunches of the 1990s. From this framework, Shackel shifts gears to overviews of two historical "questions that count" (p. 17), industrialization and consumerism, that informed his study of the town's domestic sites. In sequence, he dis-

cusses Harpers Ferry in the 19th century and the haphazard industrial landscape that evolved in tandem with the increased division of labor at the armory. Ultimately, he focuses in on the home. While Shackel posits useful observations about the permeability of the domestic sphere, suggesting that some laborers may have completed piecework in their homes, his most significant observations lie in his microcosmic analysis of consumption patterns among antebellum managers and workers.

Carefully sifting through the material remains at two house lots, Shackel examines the degree to which armory families participated in national market culture. But, more important, he analyzes his domestic findings in the context of changing production practices at the armory, seeking to understand if transformations on the shop floor—"the new technology"—influenced consumption habits in the home—"culture change." Shackel posits a big question about ideology and behavior: Did people working under the early task-oriented manufacturing system at the armory view the material world outside the work place in different ways than those laboring under the piecework system instituted in 1841? Shackel tackles this query with archaeological minutiae, including fragments of ceramics and bone, to hypothesize, albeit cautiously, a correlation between technological and cultural change. Comparing artifacts from two boss households dating from 1815–1822 and 1832–1852, Shackel shows how the family of Benjamin Moor, the later piecework-oriented master, more readily embraced the higher living standards made possible by industrialization than did the family of the first master armorer, Armistead Beckman. The Moors purchased a greater variety of tableware forms and ate fewer wild animals than the Beckmans, signalling their participation in complex formal dining rituals. Workers' families responded to market culture in another way. Despite growing access to consumer products, wage-laborers' households after 1841 opted to overlook fashionable ceramics, whether pressed by the exigencies of falling wages or electing to resist the new economic order. Perhaps engendered by a suspicion of things industrial by de-skilling technologies at

the work place, Harpers Ferry's workers of the 1840s and 1850s turned their backs on market culture. In Shackel's analysis, workers' worlds were indeed turned upside down.

Shackel's *Culture Change* and Hosley's *Colt* embody divergent trends in material culture scholarship. Focusing on the daily lives of ordinary Americans, Shackel's volume reinforces the findings of a generation of social historians, who posited the importance of understanding the experiences of "inarticulate" groups. From fragments of the past, Shackel extracts tangible evidence about bosses' and workers' responses to the emerging market culture and its concomitant cult of gentility. But when he argues that "many communities were deliberately planned by industrial capitalists who standardized the behavior of workers in the home as well as in the factory" (p. 106), Shackel stands on less solid ground. Whether industrial capitalists conspired to standardize laborers' domestic lives or whether they simply devised competitive strategies for insuring the survival of their firms—often developing products that improved living standards along the way—depends on one's ideological perspective.

In sharp contrast to Shackel, Hosley gives credence to industrial elites as positive agents in American culture, reminding us that historical change often depends on the clear thinking, entrepreneurial drive, and decisive actions of key individuals. In *Colt*, Hosley paints a miniature portrait of the many dimensions of wealth, showing the Colts as economic go-getters and as cultural leaders, particularly as philanthropists and art patrons. Hosley's assessment of Hartford's leading couple depends not only on his able engagement of multiple historiographical debates but also on his skillful blending of documentary and artifactual evidence. Indeed, Hosley's interpretation of the Colts' glittery world points to new directions in artifact analysis, for few authors so proficiently and eloquently decode the meaning of objects. Without negating a generation of social history, material culture scholars should take Hosley's work seriously, for, in *Colt*, he offers a new angle of vision for the 1990s.

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