

# OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND

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## Notes on Furnishing The Seventeenth-Century House

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**I**N many museums and historic houses today we think of period rooms as display settings for the decorative arts. Yet both customs and manners which have an effect on fashions in taste have changed radically in three hundred years, and it is likely that the rooms in our earliest colonial houses may have looked much different than we imagine. Many objects then in common use are not available today, and much of what has been preserved for the public to see, being of "museum quality," does not accurately reflect the general picture. For these reasons it is interesting to speculate upon the differences we might find if we could step back into these same rooms as they appeared in the home of a New England Puritan of average means in the period from 1630 to 1720.

Inventories give the most information about how these houses were furnished, especially those which list the contents room by room. The fully developed seventeenth-century plan was that of two

rooms, one invariably a little larger than the other, built around a central chimney, with or without the addition of a back lean-to. The inventories commonly refer to these two principal ground-floor rooms as "parlor" or "best room" and "hall" (sometimes "kitchen" or "keeping room"). The rooms above them are called parlor and hall chambers, and the main room in the lean-to when it exists is the "kitchen."

Neither the words parlor nor hall meant then what they do today. The term hall, brought over by the first colonists, harked back to the "great Hall" of late Medieval England, that area in which much of the daily life of the manor was centered, and loosely speaking the ancestor of our modern living room. The seventeenth-century parlor, however, has no exact parallel in the twentieth-century home. Nor was it the formal room of the Victorian era, to be entered only when there was company or on some special holiday. Actually it had multiple uses, all

somehow related to its character as the "best" room. Samuel Sewall, for example, mentions entertaining a large company at dinner in the "best Room" in 1720.<sup>1</sup> At the same time wills and inventories show that it was usually the room in which the parents slept, thus adding to its character a sense of intimacy. These differences, however, can only be measured in the inventories and in the fact that the hall fireplace generally had an oven. In all other purely architectural respects there is a striking similarity between the average hall and parlor in our seventeenth-century New England houses. It remained for the occupants to put a particular interpretation upon each space in terms of its use and furnishings.

In part this interpretation was born of necessity. No house before the age of stoves and furnaces could be kept uniformly warm without an uncommon amount of fuel. In one room, probably the hall, a fire would presumably have been kept burning constantly during the coldest days of the year, but elsewhere fires were made only when the room was needed for some special purpose or perhaps to take off the chill before retiring. Sewall's vastly illuminating diary makes it repeatedly clear that this was true even among the well-to-do. "Mr. Sewall the Minister comes hither p.m.," he writes on one occasion in February of 1719; "I have a fire made in his Mother's Chamber, and there we pray together. . . ."<sup>2</sup> For fully six months of the year the use of rooms and arrangement of furnishings in the colonial home had to take into consideration this confining factor.

The hall is the easiest of the seventeenth-century rooms to understand and

reconstruct in terms of furnishings, especially today when we are returning in some of our homes to the concept of an all-purpose living area. A glance at characteristic inventories makes this clear. In the hall or "Kitchin" of John Whittingham's house in Ipswich, Massachusetts, a 1648 inventory lists (with heavy emphasis upon utensils used in the preparation of food)

one Copper  
 one Brasse Pott  
 one Brasse Pan  
 fowre kettles  
 fowre Brasse Skillets & one Chafeing dish  
 117£ of Pewter at 12d. p.£  
 one Pewter flaggon & 2 candlesticks  
 3 Iron potts  
 2 Iron kettles  
 Brasse potts  
 4 Brasse candlesticks  
 one frying pan & one warming pan  
 two Musketts, 2 fflowling peeces  
 one table, one Dresser, 3 tubs & 2 formes  
 [benches]  
 2 payre of Cobirons, one fire pan & Tonges, one  
 dripping pan & spitt, 2 tramells  
 one pestle and Morter<sup>3</sup>

Often there was also a bed in the hall, usually of less value than the parents' best bed in the parlor, and quite commonly some tools and lightweight farm equipment. In the "Hall" of Daniel Ringe's house in Ipswich in 1662 were "Carpenters tooles, Other tooles & two bottles, Two Axes," much safer here than in an outbuilding, probably, and again at hand for work during those periods when it was too cold to be in the "shop."<sup>4</sup>

A glance at the contents of the parlors of these same houses shows at once that they were not used for any heavy duty housekeeping. In John Whittingham's "Parlor" were

<sup>1</sup> *Diary of Samuel Sewall, Coll. Mass. Hist. Soc.*, 5th ser., v-vii. Published by the Society (Boston: 1878-1882), III, 268.

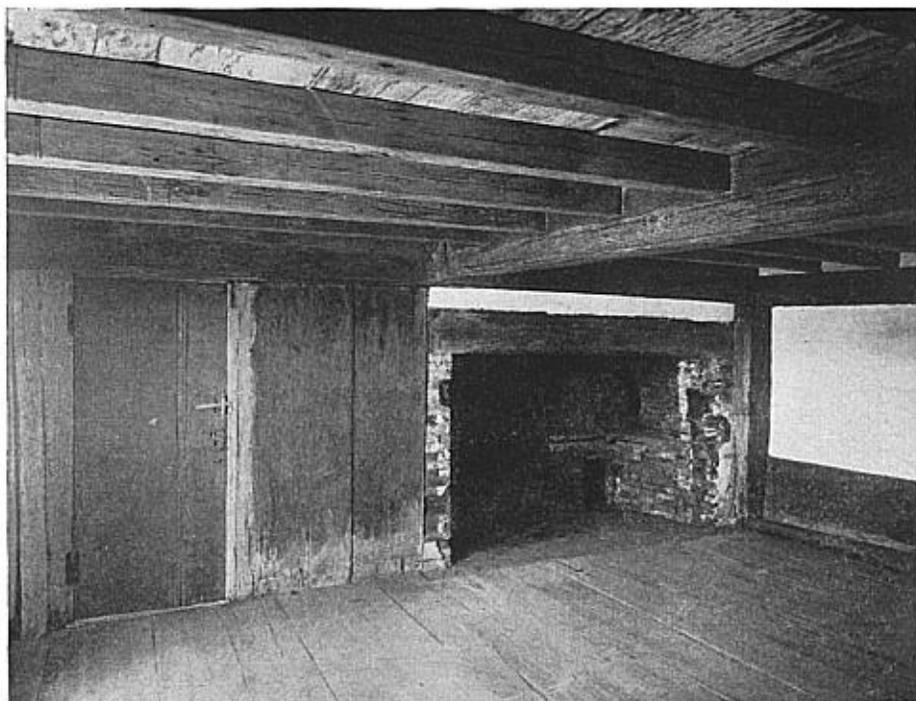
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>3</sup> *The Probate Records of Essex County, Massachusetts* (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1916-1917), I, 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

one Joyne Table with five Chaires & one ould Carpet  
 one fetherbed, one flockbed, two boulsters, one pillow, one p blankets, one Rugge [for the bed], Curtaines & valients and bedstead  
 one cupbord and Cloth

There was not in the seventeenth century any one fixed area for dining. Family meals were apparently taken in the hall or kitchen with the head of the family seated in a chair and the children seated



HALL OR KITCHEN WITH ORIGINAL FIREPLACE, JACKSON HOUSE, PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE, c.1664.

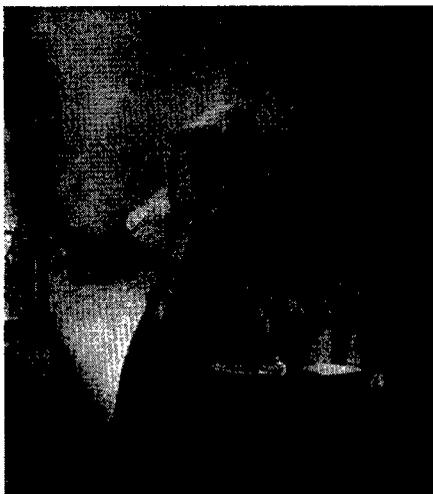
two paire Cobirons  
 two window Curtaines and Curtaine rods  
 one case of Bottles  
 Bookes  
 Eleven Cushions  
 one Still

In Daniel Ringe's "Parlor" there were among similar items a total of four chests including "One chest with Apparell," and three "Boxes," but neither these nor comparable inventories mention candlesticks in the parlor. Seemingly these were kept in the hall from which they were carried into other rooms as needed.

on joint stools or "forms." Formal dining was at times in the par'or and at other times in the chambers. "Dine in my wives Chamber at the great Oval Table . . .," writes Sewall in 1708, "Eleven in all."<sup>5</sup> The inventories of the simpler houses make it clear from the furnishings described that these cold upper rooms were used primarily by the children (perhaps in dormitory fashion for more than one bed in a room is often mentioned) and for the storage of miscellaneous house-

<sup>5</sup> *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, II, 243.

hold equipment and the food stuffs which played such a vital part in the economy of the new settlements. Some of these houses, in fact, like the Fairbanks House in Dedham, Massachusetts, had an "unfinished" chamber for which a fireplace was never designed nor intended. "In the chamber"



GIRL WITH PITCHER, PAINTING BY JAN VERMEER, DUTCH (1632-1675), SHOWING TABLE CARPET AND EARLY WALL MAP.

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

of John Stevens' house in Andover, Massachusetts, a 1662 inventory lists

**Bedding**

wheate, twenty Bushells, Indian corne, ten

Bushells

A bridle & sadle & pannell

two fitches of Bacon

Baggs

Flax & yarne

Old tubbs & other lumber [household refuse]<sup>6</sup>

Yet in many of the substantial houses of the period one finds the chamber more elaborately appointed. "In the parlor

<sup>6</sup> *The Probate Records of Essex County, I, 377.*

Chamber" of the Samuel Jacobs House in Ipswich in 1672 there were

curtins, valents,

a Ruge and two blankits

fether bed, two bolsters

grat bedsted, trundlbed with cord and mat

one bedcase and a Ruge

two Coverlits

fower chayers with Cloth and fringes

fower stooles with Cloth and fringes

table and Carpit and a grat Chayer

Andeirons, Looking glas

glases and a case of Knives

glases and cheny dishes

windo Curtins

a truncke and a warming pane

one payer holon shetes

five shetes

a Large table cloth dieper, a payer of shetes

two table clothes

a duzen dieper napkins

two table clothes

two table clothes

cubburd clothes

seven pilowbers, sevene towels

two duz. of napkins

a chest and thre napkins<sup>7</sup>

In many cases, moreover, the most refined architectural detail in the whole house was lavished upon the upper rooms. One could argue that chambers such as those in the Society's "Scotch"-Boardman House in Saugus with their delicate shadow moulding and fireplace trim, in contrast to the cavernous fireplaces with exposed lintels downstairs, suggestive even in the parlor of household chores, offered a more refined setting for polite entertainment or formal events. "Mr. James Sherman Married Richard Fifield and Mary Thirston . . . in our Bed-Chamber, about 9. at night,"<sup>8</sup> writes Sewall in 1688, and in 1706 he records, "My wife and I execute a Lease to Mr. Seth Dwight, for 21. years, of the House he dwells in. . . . T was transacted in our Bed-Chamber."<sup>9</sup>

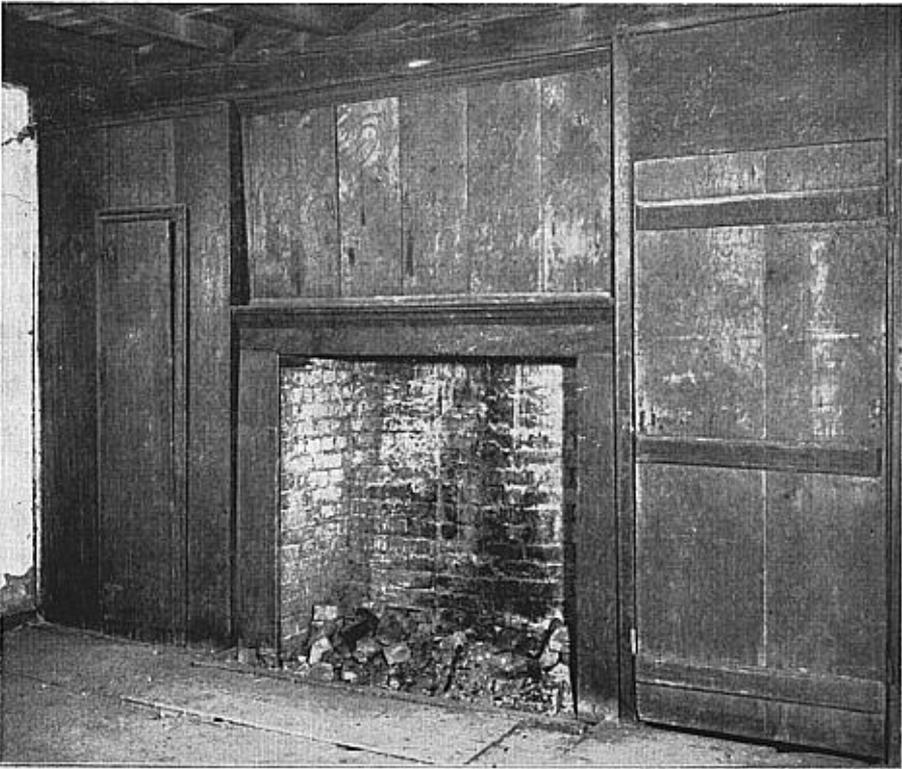
<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 281.

<sup>8</sup> *Diary of Samuel Sewall, I, 222.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 175.

Without pictures we know very little about the exact arrangement of furnishings in the seventeenth-century New England room. It is impossible, however, to think of the hall with its spinning wheels, tools, tables, stools, and cooking utensils in constant use serving the needs of a large family arranged as fastidiously as they often are in many period rooms and museum houses. The hall in the seventeenth century must have presented an

bright oriental designs, were placed *on* the table rather than on the floor as the following characteristic entry testifies in 1676: "a long Table, two Fourms, & a Carpet to ye table."<sup>10</sup> Similarly the cupboard was often covered with a cushion or cupboard cloth or both, "on old sid cubert, Cushion & cloat" being itemized in one inventory in 1667.<sup>11</sup> European prints of the period indicate that the cloths came well down over the front, falling



CHAMBER WITH ORIGINAL FIREPLACE AND TRIM, PEASLEE HOUSE, HAVERHILL, MASSACHUSETTS, c.1700.

undisciplined appearance much of the time! The parlor and the "best" chambers, on the other hand, were apparently furnished with some concern for the niceties of life. Carpets, generally of

halfway to the floor. The cushion was perhaps a protection for the fine ceramics

<sup>10</sup> *The Probate Records of Essex County*, III, 147-148.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 89.

or glassware that must have stood there at times. But this surface could have held a variety of objects. Sewall in 1696 mentions a book "on the Cupboard's head."<sup>12</sup>



CHAIR TABLE WITH DRAWER, OAK AND PINE, NEW ENGLAND, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Cushions are also mentioned in connection with chairs: "3 turkie work cushions" (1679), and "5 Cussings, Culler red" (1653), for example.<sup>13</sup> And the beds, especially the best bed in the parlor,

<sup>12</sup> *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, I, 419.

<sup>13</sup> *The Probate Records of Essex County*, III, 304; I, 156.

were colorfully decked out with such items as "3 yellow Curtaines & vallens" (1662); "1 Greene Rugg" (1678), and a "Tapestry Couerlet" (1672).<sup>14</sup> One inventory in 1656, however, mentions "a bare's skin" with the furniture of the bed, an excellent reminder that seventeenth-century New England houses were still a part of the frontier.<sup>15</sup>

Window curtains are hardly ever to be found despite the fact that they are listed in some of the inventories quoted here. One suspects that they may not have been considered a necessity in even the best rooms. Maps are mentioned at times, but pictures rarely. What few there were appear in the homes of the somewhat more well-to-do, and were confined to a very occasional portrait and a sprinkling of prints. There were "Seven Framed pictures" in the "best roome" of William Hollingworth's house in Salem in 1677, and Thomas Wells of Ipswich in his will in 1662 left his son "the new pictures, viz. of the Kinge and Queene & of the five sences," probably among those items listed in the inventory of his estate in 1666 as "maps & papar pictures."<sup>16</sup>

Inventories show that rooms were often overfurnished according to our standards. "One table, six stools & a cheare" (1654) seems perfectly normal. "One duzzen of leather Chaires, 6 Joyned stooles," and "2 Chaires," all in one Salem chamber, however, may have been necessary for such parties as Sewall described, but seem curiously plentiful to us today.<sup>17</sup> European prints seem to indicate that these many chairs were often simply lined up against the wall.

Much of the remaining seventeenth-century furniture shows a clever adapta-

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 414; III, 253; II, 289.

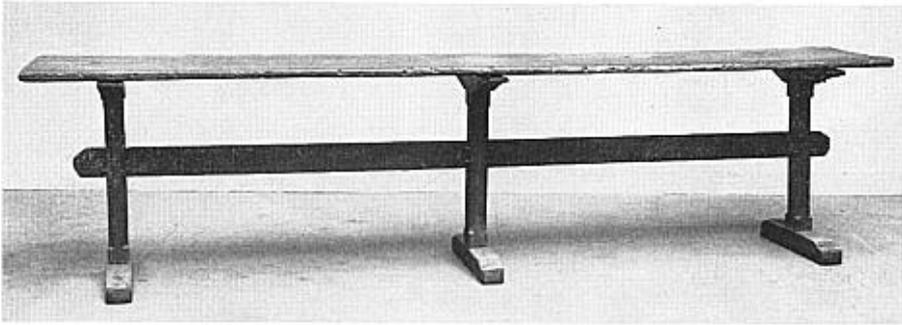
<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 242.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 192; II, 68, 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 180; II, 226.

tion to overlarge families and a minimum of space. A chair (with a little ingenuity) could double for a table with room for a drawer beneath the seat. The "table bord" as it is called in the inventories with

lead in diamonds & open upon hinges. The Doors open with wooden latches. The Chairs are the upright high arm chairs, & the common chairs are the short backed. The tables small & oval, the chest of drawers with knobs, & short swelled legs. The large fire places, & the



TRESTLE WITH "TABLE BORD," OAK AND PINE, c.1650, FROM EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS.

Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

its "tressell" could easily be constructed in two parts for easy storage in a corner when not in use, allowing greater floor space. And while many full-scale beds are mentioned, for example in 1680, "A winscot bedsted & Curtins and vallians & Iron Rodds,"<sup>18</sup> there were equally many "low" beds as the inventories described them, without superstructure for hanging the necessary bed curtains. What more simple solution than to hang them from the exposed joists overhead as one sees occasionally in early European prints? We have at least one documentary reference in New England which may describe this treatment of bed curtains, and helps at least to picture an early house which survived to the end of the eighteenth century with little or no change. Writing in 1796 the Reverend William Bentley of Salem tells us

This day was buried Mr John Symonds, a Batchelor, from his House near the ferry. With the loss of this man the appearance of the last & beginning of this Century is lost. . . . The windows of this house are of the small glass with

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, III, 369.

iron for the lamp. The blocks of wood in the corner. The Press for pewter plates with round holes over the door of it. . . . Old Dutch maps & map mondes highly coloured above a Century old. The Beds very low, & the curtains hung upon the walls.<sup>19</sup>

One sees reflected in most of the surviving documentary material the traditional Puritanical double concern with problems of subsistence in a somewhat unyielding environment and salvation of the soul. Neither of these, however, precluded all of the refinements which had been left behind in England. Inventories show an increasing preoccupation with these "refinements" as the century wears on. But the continuing juxtaposition of wheat with bedding, carpenters tools with pewter flagons, and cushions with a still gives a clue to the seventeenth-century attitude towards the home as a "machine for living" in a much more real sense, perhaps, than even our most progressive designers in the twentieth century have ever envisioned.

<sup>19</sup> *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1905-1914), II, 172. (Italics added.)

## SUPPLEMENT

*The following inventories with household furnishings quoted in full will help to give a complete picture of at least two typical seventeenth-century New England homes.*

Inventory of the estate of John Harrington of Dedham, Mass., taken July 28, 1676, and recorded in Suffolk Co. Probate Records, vol. 12, pp. 90-91.

	£	s	d
In Silver £15. 18s: 1d: bookes £1	16	18	1

## IN THE PARLOR

A Bed a boulster 2: pillows a pr. of blanckets, A paire of sheets, a bedstead & bed cord £8: 10s	8	10	
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A Cupboard £1: beeswax, 2: 6d: four glasse bottles 3s. Two Stone Juggs & three gally potts: 2s. a warming pan 5s. A Table 16s. one Jointe Stool 1.6d	2	10	
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## UPON THE PARLOR CHAMBER

A Bedstead £1: 3s. a paire of Curtains £1: 10s: Seven Sheets £3: 10s lynen yarn £3: Cotton yarne £1: 12s: yarne at weaving £2. 5s. gloves 2s. a Chest 10s: lynen Cloth 15s. a Table Cloth. 6d	14	15	6
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fifteen new napkins £1: 10s: Six other napkins 6s: another table cloth 6s: Two pillowcoats 6s. A coverlet, £1. 15s. a rug 1. 15s. another rug 15s. a Basket 3s: Rope 5s	7	01	
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## IN THE FIRE ROOME

A Cupboard 12s: a table & forme 8s: Six chaires & three Cushions 1s one houre glasse, with Some Small things in the Cubbert 2s. a: Smoothing Iron & 2 heaters 5s: a peelee & firepan 2s a paire of andirons 12s. 2 tramels 5s	2	16	
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A paire of Tonges, 2s. a Spitt 1. 6d. three brasse kettles £2: 10s. two skillits 7s. 2 Iron potts & hooks £1: nine pewter dishes & a bason £1. 14s: three pewter: potts: two Cups a vinigar a Suckling bottle and Some old porringers 14s	6	08	6
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A paire of Scales 5s. weights 1s: Trenchers 2s: Spoons 1. 6d. nine small wooden dishes, 2s: three bowles & foure trayes 6s a dripping pan 5s a linning pan 1s: 5 Cheesefatts 15s: a mashing Tub, 5s. 2 keelers 6s. Two Small milke keelers 2s: three pales 3s. an old Churne 2s a meal Tub 5s a Cheese presse 4s: a pigion nett 8s an old barrel 1s	3	06	6
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## IN A LITTLE BED ROOME

four paire of Sheets £3: three paire of Sheets & a Single sheete £2: 10s:  
A course table cloth & a wallett [?] 7s: A bed & a bed blancket & a paire

of Sheets, A bowlster, & a bedstead and pillow, £7. A Trundle bed as it  
 Stands £1: Sheeps woole. 6s. Cotton woole: 4s. Chests 9s a Small rem-  
 nant of lymen Cloth 6s

15 02

UPON THE: CHAMBER OVER THE FIRE ROOME

A Bed Two Bolsters a Coverlid, and a paire of Sheets £6: Another bed  
 and bolster. Coverlid, three blanckets, & a pair of Sheets: £4: 10s: Six  
 bushels of Indian meale 10 [?] ]s. a keeler & two Sives 2s: Seven old tubbs  
 3. 6d. A Small parcel of hoase yarne 1. 6d. a tub & Some Salt in it 2s

11: 17:

for: a: parcel of Sheeps woole 2s: Cheeses. 16s. 8 Sacks £1: 12s. a buck  
 skin 3s

2 13

IN THE CELLAR

One powdring tub & a barrel 7s. beefe, 7s: porke £3: butter 12s the butter  
 tub 2s. Suit 5s greese & candles, 3s: earthen vessels 1: 6d three beere ves-  
 sels: 5s. two wooden bottles 2: 6d

5 04

UPON THE: GARRET

Twelve bushels of mault £2: 8s: Sixteene bushels of Rye £3. 4s. Nine  
 bushels of pease 1. 11. 6d: One bushel of wheat & a bag 6d hemp &  
 flax £3

10 10

Indian Corne £12: Two woollen wheels: Two lymen wheels: Two paire  
 Cards: & two reels, £1: Soape & Sope tub 2s in lumber, 4s

13 05

Inventory of the estate of John Bowles of Roxbury, Mass., taken Apr. 22, 1691, and  
 recorded in Suffolk Co. Probate Records, vol. 13, p. 583.

IN THE PARLOUR.

£ s d

13 Leather chairs 52s. 6 Turkey work chaires 48s. 6 Turkey work  
 Cushions 30s. 4 Stools wth: needle work covers 24s.

7 14

A Table and a Turkey work Carpet

5

A Chest of Drawrs, Looking Glass, A Glass case, a Firepan, tongs and  
 Andirons

3 5

PARLOUR CHAMBER

a Down bed and bolster, 2 pillows and pillowbeers, a good green  
 woosted rugg, 2 blanketts, apr. of Sheets, greenserge Silk fringed Cur-  
 tains & Vallains with the bedstead & cord, and green curtains to the  
 Windows

16

A Table, 6 flagg bottom'd chaires and an old trunk

13

A Dressing box

2 10

## IN THE HALL

A great Table 20s. a Small Table 4s. A Standing Cupboard and Cupboard Cloth 20s. 8 joint Stooles 12s. 2 old plain great chairs 6s. a looking Glass 5s	3	7	
A pr. of small andirons wth: Firepan tongs & warming pan		16	
2 Fowling pieces 40s. & a musquet 15s. apr: of Garden shears 2/6d	2	17	6

## IN THE GARRETTIS

A Featherbed, bolster and a small matter of old covering given to Mr Bowles his Son by old Mr. Eliott	-	-	
2 very mean flock beds and flock bolster	1	15	
an old cast Feather bed, the Ticking very bad, 3 Feather bolsters, 5 Feather pillows with a Small matter of old covering	3		
an old Skreen, 2 Small Remnants of homespun Cloth, and a wicker Cradle	1		
A Trundlebedstead & cord 5s. a pitsaw & 2 old backswords 15	1		
A halfe headed bedstead with a Feather bed, bolster & covering thereunto	4		
About 60 bushlls: of Indian Corn at 2s p bushll:	6		
12 bushlls. malt 36s. 15 bushlls. oats 15s. 2 bushlls. Rye and 5 bushells of barley 2 1s	3	12	

## IN YE HALL CHAMBER.

A Feather bed, bolster and 2 pillows and pillowbeers 2 blankets, a Coverlid, rugg, painted Calico Curtains and vallaines with the bedstead, matt and cord	8		
A small Table and Carpet, 5s apr. of Andirons firepan, tongs and tobacco tongs 15s	1		
a Library	35		

## IN YE KITCHEN CHAMBER.

a bedstead with Curtains, 2 Featherbeds, 2 blankets apr. of Sheets, a Feather bolster, rugg and coverlid	9		
12 pr. of Sheets (pretty well worne)	9		
4 pr. pillowbeers 20s: 3 doz napkins (well worne) 30s.	2	10	
6 Table cloths (one of which Diapar) 40s. 6 Towells 12s.	2	12	
a Remnt. of Serge 20s. 14 yds: cotton & linnen Clo: 18d yd: 2 1s.	2	1	
2 chests, 1 box, a small trunk, a childs chair, and two other old Chaires	1		

An old Cupboard with the Cloth 10s. a Saddle, Pillion and 2 pillion Cloths 30s.	2	
An old Saddle and a bridle		10
28 Pewter platters small and great £4 4s. 21 plates and 2 Basins £1 13s.	5	17

IN THE KITCHEN.

2 Flaggons, 5 porringers, a small bason, 2 Saltcellars 2 Cups, a Cullender, 2 qt. pots & 3 Chamber pots	1	9
2 kettles (well worn) & the brass of another past use	2	
6 Brass Skillets and 1 bellmettle Skillet	1	
2 Skimmers & a ladle 4/6d. 2 mortars & 1 pestle 9s		13 6
6 Candlesticks and 2 chafing dishes	1	
3 brass Pottage pots and a small Iron pot	1	10
A pewter Limbeck & a brass pot belonging to it	2	
A Jack, 3 Spitts, a dripping pan and bellows	1	6
A Firepan, Andirons, 2 pr. of Trammels, Gridiorn and Lanthorne		18

IN THE CELLAR

one Butt and 8 barrlls: of Cyder	4	
Salt meat in the House	1	10
* * * *		
old tubbs and other Lumber about the House		12
15 Silver Spoones £6: 2 Silver Tankards and a small cup £13. a Silver bowl & an Inkhorn of Silver £5	24	
5 gold Rings and a Silver Ring	3	10
Money in the House	33	2 6
All his Wearing Apparrell	20	