

Wills and inventories: A process guide

BY DAVID WALBERT

These questions are geared to the colonial South, but could be adapted to records from other times and places.

EXAMINING THE INVENTORY

1. How large a house or farm/plantation was this? How many rooms or outbuildings did it have?
2. If there were multiple rooms, what does it appear that each room was used for? (For private or public purposes?) What does the organization of the rooms tell us about the way the family lived?
3. Are there items that are no longer in use today? How would they have been used? Why were they necessary or desirable then?
4. Where would the individual have obtained these items? Are some clearly homemade? If so, who would have made them? If they were purchased, where or how would they have been purchased?
5. If the individual owned slaves, how are they listed and valued?
6. Are there items listed that you are surprised to see? Are you surprised that the individual owned them, or that they were listed in the inventory?
7. Are there items *not* listed that you would expect to see? Why do you think they might be missing?
8. Are the values of any items surprisingly high or low? Why do you think that might be?
9. Compare the items to the items in your own house. (If the inventory is large, choose a single room.) How do they compare in terms of quantity, where and how they were made, and what they were used for? What items did eighteenth-century Americans need that we no longer need, and what do we “need” now that colonial Americans didn’t have?

UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL AND HIS/HER WORLD

These questions require some speculation and/or comparison with other inventories or other primary or secondary sources.

10. What was this person's status? (Rich, poor, or middling?)
11. What was his/her role in society? What did he/she do for a living?
12. What might a typical day in his/her life have been like?
13. What do the items listed tell us about the individual's interests, tastes, and personality?
14. If this is a will, look at which items were left to which family members. What can we surmise from this about gender roles? If the individual was the head of the household, what do you think the various members of the family were expected to do after his death? Is the distribution of goods surprising in any way?
15. What can we learn from the way particular items are listed and/or valued? Which appear to have been particularly valuable to the owner or were treated carelessly by the owner or appraiser? What does this tell us about the owner or appraiser?
16. If you know anything else about the deceased, does any of this (possessions, wealth, distribution, valuation, etc.) strike you as odd or contradictory? How might you reconcile what you know about the person?
17. What, if anything, can we surmise about this person's *values* — what was important to him/her and to how he/she looked at the world?

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