

Thirteen Sent, Ten Received: Account Books, Valentines, and Social Capital



The dissonance was palpable. I sat in the reading room of the American Antiquarian Society, looking up at a large portrait of Stephen Salisbury III (1835-1905). The portrait captures Salisbury in his middle years; the mood is somber and Salisbury projects a gravitas appropriate for a member of the nineteenth-century elite of Worcester, Massachusetts, and for one of the chief benefactors of the institution in which his portrait hangs. I was reading through Salisbury's account books and had started with one he began in 1849, when he was thirteen years old. It was hard to reconcile the stern middle-aged man in the portrait with the boy whose childish scrawl recorded purchasing candy, seed for his pet canary, marbles, a shuttlecock, and valentines. The valentines would provide a key insight into Salisbury's values, but I did not realize that when I first saw them listed in the account books.

I was at the American Antiquarian Society in the fall of 2009 on a long-term fellowship, doing research for my current project, an examination of how consumer activities and family relationships shaped one another in the nineteenth century. I am interested in how family members negotiated appropriate levels of consumer spending and in the meanings they attached to their consumer activities. Did increased opportunities to purchase goods challenge traditional household decision-making patterns? Did all family members share similar ideas regarding proper levels of consumer spending? How did family members determine which goods were appropriate to purchase and what prices were acceptable to pay? In what ways was consumer spending a cooperative venture within families? In what ways did it cause conflict between family members? To answer these questions I have turned to collections of family papers which contain account books, diaries, and correspondence created by multiple family members. The voluminous Salisbury family papers at the Antiquarian Society fit the bill precisely.



Fig. 1. Stephen Salisbury III, Frederic P. Vinton from his earlier portrait (50

x 40 inches), 1908. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The Salisburys were one of nineteenth-century Worcester's leading families. Stephen Salisbury I (1747-1829) had moved to Worcester from Boston in the 1760s to establish a branch of his family's mercantile business. Stephen II (1798-1884) built on his father's success as a merchant by investing in the manufacturing and transportation industries that developed in eastern and central Massachusetts in the early and mid-nineteenth century. Stephen Salisbury III was born into privilege, enjoying an education at the best schools as well as extensive social and kinship ties in Worcester and Boston. Like many nineteenth-century elites, Stephens II and III were extremely concerned with preserving the legacy of their family's contributions to Worcester, and both were active members of the American Antiquarian Society. When Stephen III died in 1905 without heirs, he willed a substantial part of the family fortune to the Antiquarian Society. The Society also inherited the Salisbury family papers, which contain account books and letters kept by the three Stephen Salisburys and their wives, as well as the diaries of Stephen III from his teenage years through adulthood.

Young Salisbury's early account books provide many clues to the questions that drive my project. Stephen Salisbury II taught Stephen III to keep accounts of the money he received from his father and of how he spent that money. On occasion, the adult Salisbury's hand is visible in the books, correcting a mistake or helping young Stephen calculate his total expenses for a given period. Clearly the father intended to use his son's consumer activities as a vehicle to teach him accepted nineteenth-century book-keeping practices, knowledge that would be essential in any field of business. However, he also wanted to teach his son how to spend money and how to determine what goods were and were not appropriate to purchase. The goods Stephen recorded in his early account books reveal the values his purchases helped inculcate. The teenager purchased tickets to concerts, museums, and a "World's Fair Panorama," indicating his participation in the cultured, "educational" entertainments popular among well-to-do New Englanders. The account books also make clear that his father expected Stephen to be responsible for maintaining his appearance: the young man routinely recorded what he paid for hair cuts, as well as cologne, hair oil, soap, creams, and lip salve. Salisbury's purchases clearly evoke the image of a young man concerned with meeting the expectations of Worcester's privileged class.

And then there were the valentines. In January and February of 1849 and 1850 Salisbury recorded purchasing valentines on several occasions. He did not record the precise number of valentines he purchased, but he only spent small sums, between ten and twelve cents, at any one time. In purchasing valentines to exchange with his female acquaintances, Stephen III was participating in an increasingly popular American ritual. In the early nineteenth century, young

by recording "Have written 13 valentines." His attention then turned from sending valentines to receiving them. Salisbury's diary entries for the next three days read like a stock market ticker tape accounting for every increase in the number of valentines he received:

February 14 "Its Valentines Day have already received one Valentine but the Girls will probably not put theirs in till tomorrow Have written 13 already 1 more"

February 15 "Have recd 4 Valentines more"

February 16 "Have received a Valentine this morning which makes 7 already Have recd 2 more One more Have now got 10"



Fig. 3. An example of a valentine, front and interior written verse, 1851, taken from the Valentine Manuscript Collection, 1825-1863. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

This last entry, in particular, resembles a shop keeper's day book, with Stephen returning to the diary on at least three separate occasions to record a transaction, in this case, the receipt of an item which he valued. Each valentine he received was important because it revealed that another person had valued him enough to purchase (or perhaps make) a valentine and then pay the postage required to send it to him. Salisbury had not finished accounting for his valentines, for on the blank pages at the back of the diary he entered a "Memorandum" in which he recorded the names of the young ladies to whom he had sent valentines and the names of those from whom he received valentines. He ended by writing, "I have received 10 Valentines. Very Well." Salisbury obviously was pleased with how well he had done in the "receipts" category, even if he was three valentines in the red.

Numbers mattered to Stephen Salisbury III. Learning to keep accounts had taught

the emotional to the practical. However, this value was difficult to express. The language of numbers and accounting helped Stephen Salisbury III express the pleasure and sense of value he received from valentines. Just as numbers in account books and diaries helped Salisbury express value, so too did his portrait hanging on the wall of the American Antiquarian Society. After all, Salisbury's portrait presents a man of wealth, status, and benevolence; it is a measure of Salisbury's economic and social value. Perhaps I was wrong to sense any dissonance between the middle-aged man in the portrait and the boy who purchased candy and toys. They both understood the value of social capital, whether expressed through portraits or valentines.

Further reading

For further reading on consumerism in early America, see John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (New York, 1993); Cary Carson, Ronald Hoffman, Peter J. Albert, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, Va., 1994), Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore, 2008); and Elizabeth A. Perkins, "The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky," *Journal of American History* 78 (1991): 486-510. Elizabeth White Nelson, *Market Sentiments: Middle Class Market Culture in 19th-Century America* (Washington, D.C., 2004) analyzes the relationship between the growth of sentimental culture and the market economy. For histories of Valentine's Day celebrations and cards, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, 1995) and Barry Shank, *A Token of My Affection: Greeting Cards and American Business Culture* (New York, 2004).

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