

Spoons, Salts & Saucers: 300 Years of Table Settings

by Karin Goldstein,
Curator of Collections, Pilgrim Society

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Do you get your salad fork mixed up with your dessert fork? Maybe you'd rather have lived in the 17th century, when people didn't use forks. Or perhaps you'd have preferred the 18th century, when people had only one fork, but had to eat cold food, as all of the dishes were served at once.

We invite you to explore how dining customs have changed over time, and learn something about dishes, spoons (and yes, forks) along the way.



The 17th century

Many people think that the Pilgrims lived "primitive" lives in the "wilderness." Although they faced many hardships, the Pilgrims maintained the dining customs of England and Holland, where they had lived.

Images from the 17th century show tables covered with white linen cloths. Often there is a colorful table carpet, sometimes covered with a cloth to protect it. Diners used napkins draped over their shoulders to wipe their hands, as they had only spoons, knives and fingers as utensils. Documents show us that the Pilgrims had table linens from the start. Mary Ring, who died in 1631, had 24 napkins, and Will Wright had 2 table carpets when he died in 1633.

Dishes were made of wood, pewter and Delft. Lobed dishes, imported from the Netherlands at the end of the century, were used as fruit bowls for the dessert course, and as finger bowls for washing the hands.

Small plates occupied the edge of the table. Diners usually carried their knives and spoons with them. Food was served on large pewter platters known as chargers, set in the center of the table.

Stews called potages were also popular, and were eaten from small, handled bowls known as porringers



A salt container was set in the center of the table. Those who sat "below the salt" were of lesser status than those who sat "above" it.



The 18th century

In the 18th century Plymouth residents had access to cookbooks published in England. These books showed diagrams of how the meal was to be arranged on the table.

The main meal had at least two courses, with all of the dishes arranged symmetrically in the center of the table. The first course featured meat, fish and other seafood, while the second course combined meat and vegetables with a tart or pudding.

Diners helped themselves and their neighbors to the dishes nearest them. Diaries from the period tell of shy diners who were afraid to ask their neighbors for help and ate nothing but peas for the entire meal!

Dishes of pewter, wood and Delft continued to be popular for the first half of the century, when English factories began to make matched sets of ceramic dishes. Tea drinking also became popular in the 1700s and some wealthy families imported teaware from China. Forks appear in Plymouth documents for the first time in the 1720s. Matched sets of forks and knives became common.

The 19th century

Table settings in the first half of the 19th century were similar to those of the end of the 18th century, while the dishes changed slightly. More mass-produced glass and silverplate became available for purchase, while pewter declined in popularity.

The custom of bringing all the entrees to the table at once persisted into the 1800s. Around the middle of the century, service *a la russe*, introduced by the Russian ambassador in Paris, became popular. No longer was the center of the table occupied by platters and serving bowls. The center of the table was now free for condiments and a floral centerpiece. All of the cutlery and glasses for the meal could now fit around the edge of the table.

Manufacturers' catalogs and ladies' magazines show us just how many different types of cutlery, glasses and serving dishes were available. The late 19th century was an era of great social change as immigrants arrived and cities grew. Possessing the "right" tableware, and knowing the rules for its proper use, reflected a person's status in a rapidly changing society.

PRESENTATION OF THE ALLERTON / CUSHMAN CUP

On Friday, April 4, 1998, the daughters of Mercy Ramsey Carl -- Madeline Mercy Carl Beall, Catherine Elizabeth Carl Dalferes, and Charlotte Christine Carl-Mitchell, gathered from Delaware, Mississippi and Texas. The three sisters presented a family heirloom, the Allerton-Cushman Bowl, to Pilgrim Hall Museum.

Each of the sisters spoke thoughtfully and eloquently about the meaning of the bowl to the family and of their reasons for giving the bowl to Pilgrim Hall Museum.

"It was after much thought and considerable emotion," related Madeline Mercy Carl Beall, "that I cast my vote in the family circle to release the ownership of the bowl from family hands. It is my prayer that it will be a symbol of the importance of family traditions and because of its history a source of inspiration, hope and courage to future generations as it has been to the twelve generations who came before us."

Catherine Elizabeth Carl Dalferes paid tribute to a long line of female ancestors, from Mary Allerton to her mother "all of whom, to a small or large degree, made me what I am today -- a survivor -- a believer in 'If Mary Allerton could make it, I can!' sort of philosophy, one who believes that I am entitled to my opinion, and one who believes that life is mostly good. So, in a sense, this ceremony is not only an act of donation but also a homecoming, both for the bowl and for us."

The family historian, sister Charlotte Christine Carl-Mitchell, brought the presentation to a graceful finale. "So, one journey ends as another begins. Hundreds of people now will be able to share this bowl that has such a rich history. May it continue to open eyes onto the past so that Americans will never forget the contributions made by the band of believers called the Pilgrims."

The Pilgrim Society thanks the "Carl sisters," for their generosity in sharing their thoughts about their family history and for sharing their priceless and precious family heirloom with the wider world.

The Allerton-Cushman Cup presentation was the centerpiece of the opening of Pilgrim Hall's Main Hall temporary exhibit : *Spoons, Salts and Saucers*. Made possible by the generous support of sponsor Compass Bank, the exhibit runs through October 26.