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Setting A Publick Table: Food and Food Service at a Colonial and Early American New Jersey Tavern

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Abstract: The Blue Ball, a tavern located in Shrewsbury, New Jersey served primarily a local clientele from 1754 through 1814. Excavations on the site of the still-standing structure have revealed a wealth of information regarding the preparation and service of food from the late Colonial through the Early American period. Using documentary and archaeological evidence, this paper will explore the menu and the table settings found at The Blue Ball. The Blue Ball, open to the public as The Allen House, a colonial tavern interpretation, is owned by the Monmouth County Historical Association.

For seven summers, since 1998, the Monmouth County Historical Association, based in Freehold, New Jersey, has been excavating the grounds of the ca. 1740 Allen House, located on the northwest corner of Route 35 and Sycamore Avenue, Shrewsbury, New Jersey. These excavations were conducted in the format of an archaeology summer camp, where participants aged 12 to 15 could learn hands on about archaeology and doing history.

The intersection where the Allen House is located is known locally as Shrewsbury's Historic Four Corners, and is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Other historic sites at the Four Corners include Christ Church, the Shrewsbury Friends Meeting House, the Presbyterian Church, and the Wardell Mansion, which until very recently was home to Shrewsbury Borough's township offices. All of these properties have long histories, several dating back as far as the late 1600s.

The Allen House property was first built on between 1670 and 1688 by Quaker Judah Allen, and in 1688, was the location of an Allen family wedding - which is how we know a house was on the property, and it was not simply vacant land. This original structure, however, is no longer standing and its location is unknown. In the early 1700s, the property passed into the hands of New York City merchant Richard

Stillwell, who built the main part of the still standing structure ca. 1740 as his second home. He did not live to enjoy his country property very long; dying in 1743, Richard left the property to his wife and children. Unable or unwilling to maintain or rent the property, Richard's heirs tried several times in the early 1750s to sell it. The 1752 advertisement in the New York Gazette described "A Good large Dwelling-House, two Story high, containing several Fire-Rooms well finish'd, with a good Stone Cellar under it, and a large Kitchen and Milk-House joining to it. The Lot belonging to said House, consists of near four Acres of choice Land, upon which there is a very good young bearing Orchard, two Gardens, a good Stone Well, a large new Storehouse, Chaise House, Stable, and several other Outbuildings."

In 1754, Josiah Halstead, a carpenter, and his first wife Zilpha, purchased the Stillwell property and began operating a tavern, which Halstead dubbed "The Blue Ball." Stories tell of successful taverns on stagecoach routes being called The Blue Ball; however, the corner of what was then Kings Highway (now Route 35) and the Burlington Path (now Sycamore Avenue) was not on stagecoach route. Stagecoaches running from Philadelphia to New York City ran through New Jersey further west; and much trade and travel with these larger cities from the Shrewsbury area was conducted by boat. Halstead may simply have been trying to evoke the feel of a larger, bustling successful tavern in largely agricultural Shrewsbury. While the tavern served primarily a local clientele, many in the community had close ties to New York and Philadelphia, and would have been familiar with the Blue Ball reference. Certainly, Halstead would have enjoyed a boom in business late in each October, when the Yearly Meeting of the Shrewsbury Quakers was held, drawing Friends from throughout this region of New Jersey.

Josiah had almost immediate success with his business. In 1755, the year after he opened the tavern, his excise taxes, calculated according to income, were the highest of the dozen or so tavern keepers in the

Shrewsbury area. Various organizations met at the Blue Ball, paying for the use of a private room as well as for food and drink. Among these were the Monmouth County Circuit Court, the Shrewsbury Library Company, and the Vestry from Christ Church, located just across the street B of which Halstead was a member. As well as being a member of the Church Vestry from 1747 (7 years before opening the tavern), Halstead served as Overseer of the Poor in Shrewsbury in 1758, and was a charter member of the Library Company when it was founded in 1763. During the rebuilding of Christ Church in 1769, Halstead not only supervised the work (harking back to his previous profession as a carpenter), but boarded the workers at the tavern.

What could guests at the Blue Ball expect by way of accommodation? In order to be licensed in New Jersey, taverns had to have at least two spare beds, stabling, and pasture. Privacy and quality, however, were not legislated -- the beds were often in the same room, and when a tavern had more guests than beds, they often slept on pallets or blankets on the floor. William Ellery felt it necessary to exclaim in his journal while traveling through New Jersey in 1779, "Our beds here and at Tomkins were clean and not infested with bugs!" Two days later near Morristown, he was not so fortunate; he writes, "I surveyed my bed according to custom before I ventured to enter it [search first before you enter is no bad rule] and lo! A bug of enormous size displayed his huge brown bloated corps." The French traveler Moreau de St. Mery was astonished in 1794 when he stopped at a Middlesex County establishment to find "beds with truly white sheets, which is the rarest of all things in every American tavern."

Halstead had ten good business years at The Blue Ball, but fell on hard times as early as 1765, when he advertised the tavern for sale in the Pennsylvania Gazette. The advertisement reveals the many improvements Halstead made to the property: "A Compleat small Farm, lying the Center of the Town

of Shrewsbury, New-Jersey, containing 56 Acres of very good Land and Meadow, with a good Dwelling House, Gardens, and Orchards of excellent Fruit, Stables and other Out-houses, all in good Repair, and in compleat order for a Tavern, it being the Place where the most noted One in Shrewsbury, hath been kept for many Years." In addition to adding 52 acres to his holdings, and tending the orchard to maturity, Halstead also added an attic "half-story" to Stillwell's original two, making the Blue Ball a 2-1/2 story structure.

After a decade of success and increasing fortune, why was Halstead trying to liquidate his assets? His financial difficulties may have resulted from an inability to turn a cash profit due to the rigidly controlled tavern industry. As well, the 1760s were characterized by rampant inflation, as cash-strapped colonies printed paper money without holding the necessary hard currency in reserve. As a result, paper money was heavily devalued, and good coin was withdrawn from circulation. As it happens, much of the hard currency ended up funneled back to England as taxes and payments for imported goods, for which the government and British suppliers refused to accept colonial paper. Coupled with the tavern's largely local clientele who were also feeling the pinch, Halstead may have been in a cash-poor situation, unable to pay his excise taxes or purchase stores from his New York suppliers in an economic system based increasingly on barter.

In 1770, despite his best efforts, Halstead's name was added to Shrewsbury's list of town delinquents, and by February of 1772, he found himself, once the Overseer of the Poor, in debtor's prison. He remained in this catch-22 -- in prison for non payment of debts, and unable to work to earn money to pay them B through March of the following year, when Shrewsbury resident Stephen Tallman, Jr. assumed ownership of the property, probably in payment of Halstead's debts. From this point on, the

Blue Ball rapidly changed hands, but continued in operation as a tavern by the various owners and tenants until 1814, when it was purchased by Dr. Edmund Allen and his business partner Jacob Corlies. The former tavern then went through several incarnations -- a doctors office and pharmacy, a dry goods store, a tea room, antique shops, and a private residence -- before it was acquired as a gift by the Monmouth County Historical Association in 1968. Following several years of restoration, lasting into the 1970s, the Allen House was opened to the public, offering a glimpse of Tavern Life during the second half of the eighteenth century.

Excavations of the site have produced approximately 70,000 artifacts, chronicling many years of human influence, ranging from an Archaic-period Projectile Point to the remains of lunch left behind by one of the restoration workers in the 1970s. Most of the tavern-related artifacts come from the years post-Halstead, when the Blue Ball was run by a succession of owners and renters; however, there are a small handful of artifacts that can be attributed to the Halstead years. These include scratch blue stoneware that appear to be teawares (cups and saucers) circa 1740 - 1770, eighteenth century blue and white tin-glazed earthenware or delft with very soft pinkish and yellowish bodies, and white salt-glazed stoneware tableware -- plates and platters, circa 1740 - 1770. Also recovered were pieces of stemware, including a stem and a folded foot-rim and pieces of Chinese export porcelain tea bowls, saucers, and slop bowls. Were these tavern dishes, or Halstead's personal table setting? Or perhaps a bit of both -- perhaps these represent Halstead's personal "good dishes" he brought out to impress his suppliers, the judges of the Circuit Court, or members of the Church Vestry. There is really no way to tell, with the little evidence we recovered. Perhaps Halstead served his clientele on wooden or pewter dishes and served drink in horn or pewter cups... none of these tend to survive in the archaeological record. Wood and horn decay, and damaged pewter was melted down and re-cast. Or, perhaps we just never hit Halstead's midden.

Considerably more information was available from a kitchen midden located about 40 feet northwest of the main structure, near the smokehouse. Large amounts of artifacts were recovered from the midden, dating primarily from ca. 1780 through 1819, the years the tavern was run by a series of tenants and owners.

A faunal analysis of the food remains from this large feature was funded by the Archaeological Society of New Jersey, and conducted by Mary Metzger. In her analysis, Mary found that the tavern patrons during these years ate primarily domestic animals, including beef, pork, and mutton and/or goat. Some wild food sources were utilized, and locally procured -- shellfish, primarily clam with some oyster; marsh terrapin (a type of turtle), fish, and perhaps a rabbit whose bones were found in the midden with no evidence of butchering. Meat tended to be represented by large stew-type cuts, rather than single-serving steak-type cuts, which is consistent with tavern fare at the time. Tavern patrons, particularly in smaller, rural taverns, were unable to select from a large menu of meal options, like we are used to doing when we go out to dine. Instead, they were served from a very few choices, or got whatever was cooking. Stews were easy to make and keep warm throughout the day and could be easily "stretched" by adding more vegetables, water, or meat, as required.

Curiously, the presence of terrapin in the faunal assemblage may help suggest a date for the midden. Terrapin cookery evolved as a substitute for green turtle, which had been hunted to scarcity. In the early 1800s, an advertisement in Poulson's American Daily Advertiser proclaimed Elizabeth Rubicam of the Washington Hotel, Philadelphia America's premier terrapin cook. New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia (and presumably a tavern keeper in Shrewsbury) took their cue from her, and terrapin became a catering

standby. Over harvesting, drainage of salt marshes, and pollution eventually led to the demise of the terrapin.

While Halstead described his property in 1765 as "a complete small farm", faunal analysis indicates that, with the possible exception of the pig, preliminary butchering of the domestic animals was done off-site. This is seen through the lack of the less desirable parts like head and lower leg bones, and that the butchering cuts were made with a saw, and not a cleaver. This indicates that the tavern keeper was purchasing their meat at least partially butchered, rather than raising and butchering it themselves. The presence of cranial bones from pigs suggests butchering on site, or, more likely, that the tavern-keeper purchased the head for processing into headcheese, sausage, etc.

Artifacts were heavily biased towards the preparation and storage of food, consistent with expectations of a kitchen midden. These included stoneware crocks, redware bowls and other dishes. Artifacts related to food service were also recovered from the midden, including creamware and green edge-ware platters. Tablewares recovered included early polychrome mugs, Chinese Export porcelain, a gift cup ("a gift for Joh...") suggesting the presence of a child at the site, and the bone scale from the handle of a piece of cutlery. Most of the tablewares recovered from the midden, however, are simply decorated -- either plain molded creamwares or edgewares, suggesting the tavern owner was setting a decent, yet modest, table.

The Hudibras Tavern in Princeton set a slightly nicer table for its guests. Artifacts recovered from excavations at the site look similar to those from the Allen House, but there are clues that this was a wealthier establishment -- for example, more, and nicer, teapots were found at the Princeton location, as

well as a double fish mold - evidence of fancier fare. The Hudibras, which was operating contemporaneously with the Blue Ball, was considerably larger than Shrewsbury's best tavern, boasting 12 rooms, feather beds, two kitchens, and room enough for 40 guests and 30 horses. Economics of scale alone would dictate that the Hudibras could afford to set a nicer table; but other factors certainly played a part. Princeton was almost exactly mid-way on a very busy stage route between Philadelphia and New York, and was also home to the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University. Several taverns were operating in the town of 75 to 80 houses, including the Sign of the College, the Washington Inn, and the Thirteen Stars. All of these were competing for a clientele a little more "cosmopolitan" than the largely local and rural clientele of the Blue Ball.

As on other tavern sites, quantities of wine bottles and a couple of case bottles were recovered at the Allen House. Documentary evidence shows that the most popular liquor of the time, whether in Princeton or Shrewsbury, was Rum. It was drunk straight in small amounts referred to as gills or drams in the tavern daybooks, or found as a main ingredient in several other tavern drinks such as toddy, sling, grog, and punch. A letter from Halstead to his New York supplier reveals his need for a steady supply of hogsheads of rum. While rum was the most popular, other beverages such as Madeira wine, cider, and beer were also enjoyed. One of Halstead's competitors, Levy Hart, who ran a tavern a few miles from the Blue Ball, in Colt's Neck, had 23 bottles of porter, 40 bottles and a quarter cask of wine, and three square bottles of brandy on hand when his estate was inventoried in 1775. Sales of tobacco and cigars, as well as gallon quantities of alcohol to be taken home for consumption also appear in contemporary tavern daybooks from Monmouth County.

Taverns in early New Jersey were not just a luxury; in fact, the law required their presence in every New Jersey town, or the municipality would be fined. Also regulated were the prices charged for food and lodging ... but the specifics of what each tavern offered for that money varied widely -- sleeping accommodations varied from bug-ridden beds to crisp clean sheets. Meals ranged from simple bread and cheese at the most basic taverns, to hearty stews at the Blue Ball in Shrewsbury, to poached fish at Hudibras. Archaeological evidence recovered from the Blue Ball site, as well as contemporary accounts, suggest that the tavern keepers set a decent, yet modest table -- something most certainly appreciated by travelers and locals alike in the 18th and early 19th centuries, just as we do today.