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Introduction

The history of consumption is a potentially vast field, global in scope and arguably extending back to the earliest human civilizations. The reference list alone for such a history might exceed the length of this chapter. Thus, the present discussion is restricted to the consumption history of the United States, the world’s foremost consumerist nation, from its first English settlements in the early seventeenth century until the present. The focus is upon the experiences of Europeans and to a lesser extent Africans who came to North America, rather than on the consumption history of indigenous people. This still constitutes a very broad and complex subject area, but one that is more manageable in terms of time span, people, places and cultures covered.

The reporting of past events – including the individuals, groups and societies involved and their various discourses about consumption – can be arranged chronologically, topically, geographically or in some combination of the three (Witkowski and Jones, 2006). Finding an appropriate periodization scheme for writing a history of American consumption is challenging. Ideally, significant external events and relevant consumption turning points should be used (Hollander et al., 2005). For example, the American home front economy during World War II, with its full employment, high wages, rationing and price controls, was a much different environment for consumers than the subsequent years of post-war prosperity and burgeoning mass consumption. So, the end of the war in 1945 would mark a logical division. However, other milestone dates in American political history, such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 or the end of the Civil War in 1865, have much less relevance for consumption. Thus, for reasons of convenience and readability rather than being historically event-driven, the periodization scheme used in this brief chapter will just consist of four broadly defined, and somewhat arbitrary eras. It will begin with the colonial and early federal (national) years, and then proceeds through the nineteenth century, the twentieth century to 1945, and, lastly, the post-war period to the present.

This history is informed by analytical concepts from consumer culture theory (CCT), a now major subdiscipline of consumer research. CCT emphasizes the hedonic, aesthetic and
ritualistic dimensions of consumption, consumer identity projects and marketplace cultures. The field acknowledges the contribution of research on consumption history (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). The present narrative follows three cultural threads that wind through American consumption history: (1) the assigning of meaning to possessions and consumption, (2) the gendering of consumption thought and behaviour, and (3) the delivery of anti-consumption rhetoric and consumer resistance and regulation. Possessions have multiple meaning. Through consumption the meaning in objects participates in cultural reproduction (Slater, 1997). Gendered aspects of American consumption history include the allocation of household purchasing roles and influence, the cult of domesticity, and criticism of female materialism, among other topics and practices. Anti-consumption rhetoric includes religiously motivated and philosophical critiques of consumerism and, in practice, takes the form of environmentally virtuous behaviour, politically motivated boycotts of goods, and government policies of control and austerity. These cultural threads will be surveyed in each of the four broad eras. The present chapter format dictates that this history will be a mere overview of the topic. Gaps in the narrative appear during time periods where little historical research has been conducted.

The terms ‘consumer history’ and ‘consumption history’ are deployed more or less interchangeably. Consumers here are considered people (i.e. end-users), not companies, and their consumption entails acquisition, use and disposal activities. In modern economies, acquisition largely results from shopping and buyer behaviour in a commercial marketplace. However, people can also consume goods and services from sources outside the market including nature (e.g. hunting, fishing, gathering), unpaid work (e.g. domestic activities, self-production), and public provisioning (e.g. food stamps, subsidized water and sanitation services). Consumption history is more than what consumers do; it is also about what people think, feel and say about consumption. Such intellectual history will also be addressed herein.

This account of American consumption history and some of its cultural themes is largely based on secondary works including books, chapters and journal articles in American social history, as well as historical research published in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour. It also has been informed by a small literature on consumption historiography. Historiography refers to the principles, theories and methodologies of historical writing, although it also has a second meaning as a body of literature. Contributions to consumption historiography include Fullerton (1987), Pollay (1987), Lavin and Archdeacon (1989), Smith and Lux (1993), Witkowski (1994), Elliott and Davies (2006), and Witkowski and Jones (2006). In 2011, the Journal of Historical Research in Marketing featured a special issue on ‘historical methods and historical research in marketing’ and several of its articles are very relevant to researching and writing consumer culture history (Davies, 2011; Fullerton, 2011; Pollay, 2011).

**Colonial and early federal consumption**

The Europeans who settled North America in the seventeenth century undoubtedly depended less on the market for goods and services than do Americans four centuries later. Still, even the earliest settlers were never totally separated from global trade and the consumption opportunities it provided. The amount of labour and skill required for complete self-sufficiency was enormous. For many goods, households performed just a step or two in the production process and then relied on craftsmen and women for the remainder. Take the production of cloth. Probate inventories indicate that only 49 per cent of households surveyed in Massachusetts in 1774 owned spinning wheels, and this percentage
may have been inflated by the patriotic spinning fad brought on by the non-importation movement (Shammas, 1982a, 1982b). Fewer than 6 per cent owned the other equipment necessary for cloth production. Southern plantations, because of their large scale and pool of slave labour, were more self-sufficient than northern farms. Nevertheless, households everywhere in the colonies needed to obtain some things from other parties through barter, credit arrangements and specie in various forms.

Locally produced items accounted for the majority of market purchases, but 27.5 per cent of expenditures in the 1760s were for items produced in other British colonies, especially the Caribbean, or in England (Shammas, 1982a). Foodstuffs, primarily wine, rum, salt, tea and molasses, as well as woollen, linen and cotton cloth and garments, were the most important categories of imported merchandise. Colonial consumers also purchased imported household items, including looking glasses, brass candlesticks, glassware and ceramics, and personal items such as silver and brass buttons and buckles. Firearms have been a noteworthy consumer good throughout American history. In the colonial period, most guns were brought from England or assembled locally from parts made abroad. An analysis of several sets of probate records from different colonies recorded between 1638 and 1790 showed that 50–73 per cent of male estates, and 6–38 per cent of female estates included firearms (Lindgren and Heather, 2002). One of the authors’ databases (from 1774) had more estates containing guns (54 per cent) than Bibles (25 per cent).

Retail institutions emerged gradually and by the 1760s consisted of itinerant peddlers, rural general stores, more specialized city shops, and auction sales of new and estate goods. In the coastal cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Charleston, merchants advertised the arrival of new shipments and, when augmented through word of mouth, this market information was undoubtedly widely known among the relatively small urban populations. Surviving letters and diaries show that married couples engaged in comparison shopping (Bridenbaugh, 1950), and that upper-class males, like George Washington, ordered items from their London agents on behalf of their families (Detweiler, 1982). The relative influence of men versus women in consumer decision processes is difficult to determine. Some wives bartered independently with neighbouring females and storekeepers, trading the eggs, butter and spun linen they produced, and cooking, washing and midwife services they offered (Ulrich, 1990). Being legally part of their husbands’ household, however, women’s influence ultimately rested on their persuasive abilities. At all social levels, husbands usually established credit accounts with local shopkeepers (Ulrich, 1982). Men took shopping trips by themselves or with their wives; infrequently did women venture out on their own. Women made only 8 per cent of all purchases at the Simpson-Baird store in Prince George’s County, Maryland, in 1769 (Kulikoff, 1986) and an analysis of the John W. Hunt Daybook, Lexington, Kentucky, July–September 1796, indicates that just 15 per cent of all visits were made by women (Perkins, 1991). Although some wives had their own store accounts, as did some single, widowed and divorced women, and while in some families wives did nearly all the shopping, such households were a minority. In the eighteenth century, America’s purchasing agent was a man.

With an abundance of land for the taking and ample natural resources to exploit, colonial living standards were among the highest in the world outside of Great Britain. True, most people of the times lived in cramped, poorly heated and insufficiently lighted quarters without indoor plumbing, but by the 1700s a typical middle-class family owned earthenware, bed and table linen, knives, forks, and a Bible. A family with income above the median might possess a few fancy clothes, a watch, china plates, fine furniture,
some silver items, and other small amenities. The wealthy might possess fine clothes and furniture, exquisite china and silverware, nonreligious books, a man’s wig, artwork, a carriage, and a large volume of luxury goods (Perkins, 1988, 228).

Slaves, indentured servants and poor whites had very few possessions aside from the tattered clothing on their backs, a few eating utensils, and perhaps a bed, table and a couple of chairs.

(Witkowski, 1989)

The meaning of possessions changed in the middle of the eighteenth century. As colonial society became richer and more established, an urge for gentility emerged. Colonists began building larger and more stylish homes and gardens, purchasing better quality furniture, using higher quality eating utensils, improving their manners by reading courtesy books, and, in general, becoming more refined (Breen, 2004; Bushman, 1992). Imports of luxury goods from the mother country increased and some colonists began to amass large debts with British middlemen (Henretta, 1973). The upper classes were among the first to adopt these newer values and behaviours; but, as documented in surviving probate records (Carr and Walsh, 1980), even people of more middling circumstances began to acquire small luxuries such as silver spoons.

Slowly rising consumerism did not go unchallenged. Colonial Americans voiced anti-consumption rhetoric and organized significant consumer resistance. Drawing from a Western Judaeo-Christian tradition sceptical of excess in acquisition, Puritans and Quakers favoured productive work for the benefit of society and frowned upon consuming more than necessity required (Shi, 1985). But whereas the Quaker critique was utilitarian and not an attack on consumption per se, Puritans were driven by a spiritual principle asserting that the love of consuming was an evil (Dröge et al., 1993; Schudson, 1991). To forestall impious materialism, the Massachusetts and Pennsylvania colonies enacted sumptuary laws in the seventeenth century (Hollander, 1984), and New England ministers preached jeremiads against worldliness well into the eighteenth century. Between 1732 and 1757 in his Poor Richard’s Almanack, the very secular Benjamin Franklin preached frugality as a moral virtue with sayings like ‘Beware of little expenses; a small leak will sink a great ship’ (Witkowski, 2010, 239).

American consumption practices and the concomitant meanings of possessions became highly politicized in the decade before the Revolutionary War. Three times in the 1760s and 1770s, colonists organized mass boycotts of British goods in order to put economic pressure on English manufacturers who would then force Parliament to rescind objectionable taxes. Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and many other patriots urged their fellows to forego imported ‘superfluitities’ and, instead, to be thrifty and to produce their own goods. Such views were aired at town meetings and widely disseminated via letters reprinted in colonial newspapers. Colonial consumers responded by substituting homespun apparel for imported ribbons, laces, velvets and silks and by swearing off foreign liquors and imported teas (Witkowski, 1989). This ‘nonimportation movement’ was successful in that many onerous taxes, such as the Stamp Act of 1765 and most of the Townshend Duties of 1767, were repealed, but it took six years of fighting to finally settle the political dispute with Great Britain. In effect, an anti-consumption movement abetted the American Revolution (Breen, 1988, 2004; Witkowski, 1989).

American women participated actively in the non-importation movement and thus became associated with virtuous consumption. Indeed, by the 1790s, in the early federal (i.e. national) period, a ‘republican-mother’ ideal gained traction. Proponents believed that
female virtue could be harnessed to build the new, democratic nation (Evans, 1989; Norton, 1980). On the other hand, some commentators held more critical views about women and consumption. A letter from 1787, published in a Philadelphia magazine called *American Museum*, described how female influence could override a farmer’s better judgement:

> When his second daughter prepared her trousseau, his wife insisted that the girl be furnished with store-bought goods – a calico gown, stoneware tea cups, pewter spoons, and so forth. Although the farmer protested that homespun was good enough, he gave his wife the money. Upon the marriage of the next daughter, his wife again demanded money and this time she bought silk and china. From that point on, no money could be saved because all of the profits went for market luxuries.

*Cited in Shammas, 1982a, 248*

Intended as both social and gender criticism, this letter suggests that some women placed a higher priority on household luxuries than did their menfolk, and were notably earlier adopters of the more prestigious, store-bought items. They were, in other words, developing a propensity to consume characteristic of modern consumerist culture (Slater, 1997; Witkowski, 1999). Chastising women for frivolous spending continued to be a standard part of the critical repertoire until the late twentieth century (Stearns, 2001).

### Consumption in the nineteenth century

From 1800 until the Civil War (1861–5), the US economy grew in most years and material conditions gradually improved for many but far from all Americans. The nation continued to be predominantly rural and the majority of its people had only limited purchasing opportunities. Consumer goods were usually made and consumed locally, although as physical distribution systems evolved (e.g. canals, railroads), these largely generic products travelled longer distances to market (Porter and Livesay, 1971). Newly arrived immigrants and pioneers moving west usually had relatively few possessions, and African Americans, most of whom were enslaved, had even fewer goods. But some men amassed great fortunes and urban centres, above all New York City, became sites for the most fashionable consumption (Milbank, 2000; Peck, 2000). Although distribution was still spotty and advertising remained primitive, a few bold retailers, like New York’s A.T. Stewart, experimented with more opulent and larger scale merchandising formats in the 1840s that would soon evolve into full-fledged department stores (Benson, 1986; Ressweguic, 1964).

After the Civil War, urbanization, industrialization and technological and managerial innovations (see e.g. Chandler, 1977; Porter and Livesay, 1971) greatly transformed the country within just a few decades. Some areas of the defeated South languished and grinding poverty faced freed African Americans and many arrivals from Europe. In much of the US, however, living standards rose as incomes grew and the world of goods expanded through product innovation, mass production and new forms of distribution such as department and chain stores and direct mail (Boorstin, 1973; Leach, 1984). Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck catalogues brought an enormous assortment of goods to rural Americans who did not have easy access to city department and specialty stores, but who could accept packages, especially after the advent, in the 1890s, of free rural postal delivery. Advertising of the time embodied a happy optimism and flamboyance (Laird, 1998; Lears, 1994) and promotional schemes became increasingly aggressive. In the 1870s, chain stores like the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company began giving away premiums such as ceramics, glassware, cutlery
and kitchen gadgets (Blaszczyk, 2000). Thus, the marketing infrastructure and worldview necessary for a modern consumer culture became increasingly manifest by the end of the century.

Possessions continued to be associated with gentility and other positive values. Books and reading, for example, became ‘invariably associated with that most powerful of nineteenth-century ideas, improvement’ (Bushman, 1992, 285). Possessions also acquired further meanings. In his computer-assisted analysis of diaries, letters and other documents from the 1847–69 Mormon migration, Belk (1992) identified five types of meanings – sacred, material, personal, familial and communal – that the pioneers instilled in their possessions. Among the sacred meanings was the purifying act of sacrifice where small luxuries would be left behind to facilitate the move. Material meanings were expressed when migrants retained possessions for survival and sometimes picked up items other migrants had left behind. Many objects, such as guns and woodworking tools for men and sewing machines for women, embodied the personal meanings of competence, transformation and domesticity. Familial meanings were articulated through the preservation and transportation of heirlooms and wedding dresses. Communal meanings were expressed in caring for others through sharing possessions. Other nineteenth-century Americans undoubtedly bestowed similar and probably many additional meanings onto their consumer goods.

Middle-class women were becoming increasingly active as their households’ purchasing agents and mavens of domesticity (Witkowski, 1999, 2004). As discussed above, men dominated family purchasing decisions in the colonial and early federal period, but in the nineteenth century trends began to favour female agency. Some middle-class single women could support themselves teaching, while their working-class counterparts could find jobs in New England textile mills or as servants. By 1850, 15–30 per cent of urban American households supported at least one live-in domestic (O’Leary, 1996). Married women generated income by taking in boarders or laundry (Bose, 1987). Further, as the nineteenth century progressed, more and more American women (primarily native-born whites) became literate, an important skill for reading ads and otherwise negotiating the marketplace (Cott, 1977). Thus, by the 1850–70 period a definite shift towards greater female agency in shopping, buying and consumption had begun.

This trend has been documented by Belk (1992, 357) who found that, although men created more of the surviving documents than women, ‘the greatest number of deep possession attachments and meanings are found among women … This has been interpreted here in terms of women’s desires for attachment and continuity and men’s views of the journey as a challenge and a separation.’ An engraving in *Gleason’s Pictorial* (December 1854), titled ‘Interior View of John P. Jewett & Co.’s New and Spacious Bookstore’, shows well-dressed, presumably educated women out shopping for books (Burke, 2001, fig. 48). Still more visual evidence has been found in several oil paintings depicting vigorous female characters in domestic genre scenes. These images of women showing initiative as consumers were consistent with their gaining access to public places, forming associations and collectively demanding their political rights (Witkowski, 2004). In the latter part of the nineteenth century, retailers increasingly defined shopping as a feminine activity and transformed crockery emporiums, tea stores and five-and-tens into appropriate public spaces for women and girls. Department stores, in particular, were deliberately feminized for the enjoyment of women shoppers (Benson, 1986) and by the 1890s relatively few men frequented them. The tangible products they sold were also becoming increasingly gendered. F.W. Woolworth, for example, urged its suppliers to create goods with ‘lady lure’ (Blaszczyk, 2000).
Several forms of anti-consumption rhetoric challenged expanding consumerism in the nineteenth century. On the religious front of the 1820s and 1830s, revivalist Lyman Beecher advocated a conservative, moralistic, even Puritan ‘Christian simplicity’. Reverend Beecher worried about materialism undermining the established social order (Shi, 1985), whereas other ministers simply repeated the old accusation that ‘the parade of luxury’ undermined the ‘more durable riches than those this world can offer’ (Stearns, 2001, 52). Harris (1981) contends that during the mid-century period, criticism of consumerism began shifting from a moralistic disapproval of the upper classes buying luxuries to a concern about working-class consumers unable to restrain themselves from purchasing the increasingly alluring array of goods presented in stores.

Different voices stressed a frugal domesticity. In his essays, books, and architecture, Andrew Jackson Downing (1842, 1850) advocated utilitarian cottages and farmhouses for the people and unostentatious, moderate homes for country gentlemen. Magazines, such as Godey’s Lady’s Book (founded in 1837), instructed middle-class women on how to tastefully furnish and manage their houses (Shi, 1985). Lydia Marie Child’s popular manual for homemakers, The American Frugal Housewife, first published in 1828, and with 12 editions by 1833, was ‘dedicated to those who are not ashamed of economy’ (Child, 1833). Along with her advice for frugally performing the various domestic arts, Mrs Child railed against consumerism, especially ‘the rage for traveling, and for public amusements’ (p. 99). Catharine Beecher, the daughter of preacher Lyman Beecher, echoed these sentiments in her books, A Treatise on Domestic Economy (1841) and The Domestic Receipt Book (1846).

In their lectures and writings, philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau endorsed a more spontaneous, liberating and romantic ‘transcendental simplicity’ (Shi, 1985). Emerson, who himself lived comfortably and genteelly, saw frugality as a means to a higher end: ‘Economy is a high, humane office, a sacrament, when its aim is grand; when it is the prudence of simple tastes, when it is practiced for freedom, or love, or devotion’ (cited in Shi, 1985, 133). Thoreau’s sojourn at Walden Pond in 1845–7 taught him to value self-sufficiency in raising food, making clothes and building shelter and furniture. High thinking was preferable to high living: ‘Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meager life than the poor’ (Thoreau, 1971, 14). The audience for this supposedly uplifting philosophy may have been limited. Thoreau was not an especially frequent or popular public lecturer and it took him eight years to sell the 2,000 copies of Walden printed in 1854.

Authors Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner published a social satire in 1873 that gave the post-Civil War decades their lasting sobriquet: the Gilded Age. Although the buyer behaviour of the middle and lower classes continued to come under scrutiny (Horowitz, 1985), leading intellectuals, such as William Dean Howells, editor of the Atlantic Monthly, E.L. Godkin, editor of The Nation, Charles Eliot Norton, editor of the North American Review, and the philosopher William James, declared much more disgust with the crass materialism of the newly rich (Cashman, 1993; Shi, 1985). At the end of the century, Thorstein Veblen became American plutocracy’s greatest critic. In his Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen (1899) wrote a scholarly, but highly influential frugality sermon combining wry social criticism with new insights from economics and cultural anthropology. He contended that consumption became grossly conspicuous in order to create invidious distinctions and to mark status. Women were transformed historically from domestic labourers to household consumers and those men who could afford the show paraded their finely attired females in public as gaudy signs of their commercial or professional success. The more visible idleness these wives and
daughters enjoyed, the greater their symbolic value. Images of well-dressed women at leisure appeared in a number of works by American painters around the turn of the century. This social pose irritated Veblen who had a high regard for productive work. In *The Decoration of Houses*, Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr. (1897) argued for a simple aesthetic with less cluttered domestic spaces. As her later novels would testify, Wharton (who came from old money) was a keen observer of the social ambitions of parvenus.

**Consumption in the twentieth century to 1945**

Despite frequent, albeit relatively mild recessions during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the US economy generally trended upward. American consumers were presented an outpouring of increasingly affordable yet transformative new products, above all the automobile, but also newly electrified household appliances (refrigerators, vacuum cleaners), as well as telephones, radios, Victrola brand phonographs for RCA Victor records, and Kodak 'Brownie' cameras to name a few. The pace of change in US consumer culture seemed to accelerate in the 1920s as ‘modernization’ became equated with consumerism. ‘This is the age of real estate, consumer credits and cars: modern appliances, bought by modern methods, placed in a modern household’ (Slater, 1997, 13).

Then, the stock market crashed in October 1929 and soon the Great Depression of the 1930s posed a serious challenge to previously established mass consumption patterns and consumerist mindsets (Ewen, 1976; Marchand, 1985). With wages down and unemployment rates averaging 17.9 per cent between 1930 and 1940, many people were forced to greatly lower their material expectations and to scrimp wherever they could (Hill et al., 1997). The advertising industry discussed the threat posed by frugality in its trade publications, where writers complained about hoarders, a ‘buyer’s strike’ and ‘consumer constipation’. The gloomiest prophets worried about an impending collapse in the consumption ethic (Marchand, 1985). Cross (2000) believes that these fears of consumerism’s collapse were overblown. Yes, lack of income frustrated many buying plans, but people still clung to their old habits and dreams as long as they could. Movie-goers flocked to see the opulent movie musicals of Busby Berkeley and Fred Astaire, and many films of the era seemed fixated on the lifestyles of the very rich where tuxedos and top hats seemed to be everyday attire.

Although the 1930s saw increases in the percentage of US households with inside flush toilets and electric lighting and appliances, many families still lacked a modern consumer infrastructure. In 1940, 33 per cent of all Americans still cooked with wood or coal and another 33 per cent had no inside running water. Moreover, 67 per cent lacked central heating, 47 per cent did without indoor bathing equipment, and 48 per cent had no refrigerator (Green, 1992). In 1942, 58 per cent of all US families owned at least one automobile (55 per cent urban, 69 per cent farm), a percentage about the same as in 1930 (60 per cent) and more than double the 1920 figure of 26 per cent (Lebergott, 1993). The 1930s did see continual development of mass audiences for radio, the movies and slickly promoted professional sports whose stars were lionized by the mass media (Green, 1992).

By the 1920s, sophisticated magazine advertising campaigns were finding new meanings for products. In his *Advertising the American Dream*, Marchand (1985) provides an exceptionally thorough account of this meaning creation process. Ads in the late 1920s and early 1930s frequently told stories through stock social tableaux explained by copious amounts of body copy. Brands of toothpaste, shaving creams and razors starred in the ‘parable of the first impression’ where they facilitated the crucially important outward appearances of consumers. Other parables included ‘the democracy of goods’ where everyone could enjoy the pleasure,
convenience and benefits of consumption, ‘civilization redeemed’ where brands ensured healthy living, and ‘the captivated child’ where products played an instructive role in child guidance (Marchand, 1985). Presumably, this advertiser-driven meaning creation resonated with consumers.

Other product meanings emerged less from product advertising campaigns and more from consumption communities. For example, Witkowski (1988) discusses how the colonial revival movement reinterpreted early American (i.e. colonial and federal) artefacts, reproductions, and architecture. The roots of this movement go back to exhibits at Civil War charity fund-raisers, but enthusiasm for the colonial really hit its fullest stride during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Native-born WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) purchased and displayed period antiques for status presentation and ethnic identification. They praised and even appropriated early American life in order to assert their social standing and cultural hegemony and to set themselves apart psychologically (Stillinger, 1980). Early American décor also conveyed nostalgia for authenticity, became a form of tradition making, and suggested at least a partial rejection of modernity. Proponents of neocolonialism had a specific domestic vision: ‘Colonial meant cozy – a cozy home with a big kitchen, a broad chimneypiece, and ancestral relics strewn about in quaint profusion’ (Marling, 1988, 34).

In the 1920s and 1930s, photographs of colonial interiors depicting authentically costumed women socializing or doing household chores were extremely popular as wedding gifts (Witkowski, 1998). Finally, the taste for colonial revival objects and designs spoke of aesthetic conservatism among American consumers.

For middle-class households, spending and consumption were increasingly and perhaps even decidedly a female domain in the first part of the twentieth century (Witkowski, 2004). Women had won the right to vote in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution and they now could ‘vote’ with their family’s dollars as well (see Schwarzkopf, 2011). Major magazines targeted women with ads for fast-moving packaged goods including Palmolive and Ivory soaps, Listerine, and Fleischmann’s Yeast (Atwan et al., 1979; Marchand, 1985). New household technologies (indoor plumbing, gas, electric) and labour-saving devices (refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, wringer washers) aimed to reduce women’s household work, albeit with mixed success (Cowan, 1985). Tobacco companies pursued the female segment with new brands and appeals, the most notorious being the ‘Reach for a Lucky Instead of a Sweet’ campaign of the late 1920s (Beard and Klyueva, 2010; Witkowski, 1991). Greeting cards were especially popular among women. Originating commercially in the nineteenth century, after 1900 even more types of cards with more emphasis on printed sentiments became available. Between 1913 and 1928 industry sales surged from $10 million to $60 million annually (Schmidt, 1991).

The thread of anti-consumption was picked up during World War I when popular writer Stuart Chase became convinced that reducing luxuries was ‘not only a personal necessity but a patriotic duty to eliminate waste and extravagance’ (cited in Horowitz, 1985, 112). Chase went on to write The Tragedy of Waste (1925) and, with F. J. Schlink, Your Money’s Worth (1927). These books promoted restrained and informed buying rather than renouncing or resisting consumption altogether. Chase and Schlink also founded the advocacy group, Consumer’s Research in 1929, which was the precursor organization to Consumer’s Union and its publication, Consumer’s Report. A slightly different form of anti-consumption advocacy, in the tradition of Benjamin Franklin, received new impetus with the founding of the National Thrift Movement in 1916. Crusading leaders wrote popular books and magazine articles, gave talks to civic and youth groups, and formed local Thrift Committees across the country. The movement published National Thrift News, sponsored a national thrift week, and organized
public service ad campaigns. The American Federation of Labor passed a resolution at its 1919 convention in support of the Thrift Movement (Wolfé, 1920). In January 1920, the entire contents of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* were devoted to ‘the new American thrift’.

Anti-consumption social policy took draconian turns in the 1920s and 1930s. The eighteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, for example, banned the sale of alcoholic beverages. Enforced by the Volstead Act, Prohibition (1920–33) represented a straight-laced, religious and frequently nativist breed of anti-consumption sentiment in American history. State ‘blue laws’ had been around since the seventeenth century. They prohibited not just the sale of alcohol on Sundays, but also the sale of less morally justified items, such as housewares. These laws privileged the political theology of conservative Protestants over that of Catholics and other religions. Other laws attempted to hobble the competitiveness of successful chain stores through legislation (Hollander and Omura, 1989). Chains stores, especially in the food and pharmacy fields, were a disruptive institutional force that benefited consumers in terms of lower prices and good assortments, but sometimes brought abuses and naturally created many enemies among hard-pressed small businesses. About half the states, mostly in the South and West, passed anti-chain tax legislation. Thanks to the lobbying of retail druggists, many states also instituted resale price controls – known at the time as ‘fair trade’ – that put floors under prices (Hollander and Omura, 1989; Palamountain, 1955).

By 1941, better business conditions, helped by a rapid increase in military spending, were once again creating a buoyant economy that finally put money in consumers’ pockets. The problem was how to spend it. After Pearl Harbor, the war effort necessitated a redirection of raw materials and production, which quickly led to shortages of a number of consumer goods (appliances, automobiles and tyres, gasoline, some foods) and services (housing, medical). In order to mobilize the home front, the US government launched publicity campaigns that advocated being thrifty with goods and services, conserving gasoline and tyres, recycling scrap metals and other materials, growing and storing food at home, obeying price and ration controls, and buying war bonds. The Office of War Information coordinated the efforts of several federal agencies and conveyed these messages through the press, posters, radio and motion pictures. Schools, libraries, companies and volunteer groups helped this effort by disseminating posters and other messages (Witkowski, 2003). Thus, frugality received official sanction during World War II.

**Consumption since 1945**

A deep reservoir of consumer demand drove the immediate post-war economy. New families and new ‘baby boom’ babies needed provisioning and businesses quickly retooled from war production to consumer goods. This demand was funded by personal savings from the war years, encouraged by generous credit terms, and given an additional promotional boost from the new medium of television. Business, labour and government leaders agreed that future prosperity depended upon unrelenting mass consumption and this consensus firmly established once and for all the great American propensity for buying and having things. In effect, purchasing was transformed into a civic responsibility – good consumers became good citizens (Cohen, 2003). Large numbers of Americans dropped the ethos of Great Depression retrenchment and World War II home front frugality and re-embraced what Cross (2000), Ewen (1976), Twitchell (1999), and many other observers have contended is the deepest and most durable ideology of twentieth-century America: consumerism.
The material well-being of American consumers was not something to be taken lightly, as post-war politicians generally recognized. In the 1960s during the Vietnam War, President Johnson did not ask the public to sacrifice financially because he believed the nation could simultaneously afford to fight communism in Southeast Asia and build a ‘Great Society’ at home. After the terrible events of 11 September 2001, the Bush administration actually asked people to continue spending as usual in order to help revive an already sluggish economy. In contrast, President Carter’s earnest, cardigan-clad appeals for plain living, energy conservation and lowered expectations did not help him much at the ballot box in 1980. Voters had had enough of oil shortages and stagflation and, instead, opted for Ronald Reagan’s politics of early-morning optimism. In the 1980s, and again after 2001, lower taxes, private spending, and record federal budget deficits would fuel economic growth until the bubble burst in 2008 with the onset of the ‘Great Recession’, whose consequences for consumption still remain profound at this writing.

Any discussion of relatively recent consumption history risks making premature assessments about the past, but it seems that two trends within American consumer culture during the post-war era are particularly noteworthy. The first trend has been the growth of consumer individualism. More and more Americans have chosen to live alone, drive their own cars, watch their own TVs, tablets and smart phones, and eat their meals at the times most convenient for their hectic schedules (Cross, 2000; Putnam, 2001). In his influential book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2001) lamented the loss of social connections and capital caused by consumer individualism. The ideology behind such individualism has been quite influential in shaping social policy. Americans have long favoured putting primacy on what they are told is their consumer sovereignty (Schwarzkopf, 2011), rather than on community needs and collective consumption (Galbraith, 1958). However, the rise of consumer individualism may be slowing and possibly reversing in the new millennium. Young people seem to have less interest in owning their own automobiles (The Economist, 2012) and new services, whereby people can rent cars by the hour or day, may encourage a countertrend. Belk (2010) contends that consumer researchers have neglected the study of alternative sharing phenomena, a bias potentially making individual-centred consumption in the US appear more prevalent than it really has been.

The second trend dates to about 1980 when disparities in income and in wealth in the United States began growing more pronounced. The 1980s launched an era of accelerating globalization and ascendant neoliberal politics, with both forces apparently fuelling the rise in inequality. This was in stark contrast to the decreasing levels of inequality that started during the Great Depression and New Deal of the 1930s and stayed moderate through both Democrat and Republican administrations until the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Greater inequality in income and wealth has exaggerated differences among classes of consumers where a small minority patronizes luxury boutiques and a much larger group shops at Walmart and Dollar General stores. Consumer spending drives about 70 per cent of the US economy and the relatively slow recovery from the Great Recession since 2009 has been attributed to weak demand among the bottom 95 per cent. Incomes are too low and, unlike previously, can no longer be propped up by working longer hours, finding jobs for spouses or taking on more household debt (see e.g. Cynamon et al., 2014).

As McCracken (1988) theorized, the symbolic meanings of possessions in the post-war period continued to evolve in tandem with larger shifts in the culturally constituted world. In the 1950s and 1960s Americans quickly became smitten by suburbia and by mass-market luxuries, a consumption style, attitude and aesthetic (e.g. mid-century modern, ‘googie’ and space age architecture, interior décor and product design) that Hine (1986) has dubbed...
'Populuxe'. In the famous 1959 ‘kitchen debate’ in Moscow between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice President Richard M. Nixon, ‘Nixon seemed to be making a stand for American values right in the setting that was most meaningful to Americans, in the heart of the suburban house – the modern push-button kitchen’ (Hine, 1986, 130). The cultural resonance of modernity and futurism as product meanings waned after the Kennedy assassination and with the ramping up of civil rights demonstrations and, ominously, the war in Vietnam.

In the 1970s, consumer goods took on political identities that reflected right vs left cleavages opened in the 1960s. Firearms, an ever-popular American consumer durable, became politicized in 1977 at the annual National Rifle Association convention in Cincinnati, when gun rights activists ousted the incumbent leadership, who had stressed the interests of hunters and target shooters, and installed new executives strongly opposed to gun control laws and willing to fight for pro-gun rights. In 1980, for the first time ever, the NRA endorsed a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan. By the 1990s an anti-government, absolutist fringe favouring the abolition of all gun controls had emerged in the militia movement (Burbick, 2006; Winkler, 2011). Interestingly, gun rights advocates have portrayed their politics as a consumer civil rights issue and have equated gun purchasing with freedom from government.

Political meanings have also been assigned to different types of motor vehicles. At the start of the new millennium, sport utility vehicles, and especially General Motors’ Hummer brand, became political lightning rods (Neil, 2008; Witkowski, 2010). Forces from the left disapproved of their sheer excess – their size makes them visually prominent and a nuisance to other drivers – and deplored their poor fuel economy and environmental consequences. Forces on the right scoffed at the claims of the critics and, in turn, hurled insults at hybrids and subsidized electric cars as being gimmicks of the Obama administration. By 2012, however, with the introduction of more new electric models, and after Motor Trend awarded the Chevrolet Volt its ‘Car of the Year’, right-wing pundits appeared to be backing off. Nevertheless, Democrats are more prone to purchase small, fuel-efficient vehicles, whereas Republicans favour gas-guzzling SUVs and pick-up trucks (Strategic Vision, 2012).

Technology further accelerated the attribution of political meaning in 2014 when a company called Spend Consciously introduced an app fittingly named ‘BuyPartisan’. This software enabled consumers to determine whether the source of any given product leaned Democrat or Republican. While shopping users could scan a barcode with their smart phone camera, or search by individual company name or specific product, and the programme would report the ideological leanings of the company as measured by the political donations of boards of directors, chief executive offices, employees, and political action committees (The Economist, 2014; Nicks, 2014).

With the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s, the accepted gendering of household consumption roles became problematic. The dominant cultural ideal – repeated endlessly in consumer magazines and portrayed memorably in situation comedies such as Leave It to Beaver (1957–63) – envisioned women as competent yet unpaid, stay-at-home ‘consumption managers’ dependent upon a male breadwinner’s income (Galbraith, 1973). Betty Friedan’s highly influential book, The Feminine Mystique (1963), challenged this orthodoxy and helped spark a new wave of feminism. Friedan described how many women felt relegated to just being housewives, living their lives through their children, and having this role definition imposed by others. The feminist movement fought to establish new norms legitimating careers and outside work for women and new thinking about a wide range of power relationships between men and women. One expression (and commercial cooptation) of
this cultural shift was the highly successful advertising campaign for Charlie brand perfume launched by Revlon in February 1973. Charlie ads featured model Shelley Hack as a liberated woman, striding confidently through New York wearing a chic Ralph Lauren pantsuit (Bird et al., 2011). Like the working women who comprised the target audience, Charlie had the wherewithal to buy her own fragrances and did not have to wait for a man’s gift. More broadly, the incomes of newly working women could enhance their economic power within the household unit, a trend that may have accelerated in the 1970s when more and more women entered the labour force to help their families maintain living standards threatened by stagnating male incomes (US Census Bureau, 2015).

The marketing literature published studies of family purchasing roles since the 1950s. Using data collected by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center, Sharp and Mott (1956) and Wolgast (1958) focused upon decision-making patterns for different purchase categories according to whether they were more husband dominant, wife dominant, or shared equally. Husbands had greater say about buying automobiles, but wives had more influence about food spending, money and bills, and household furnishings. Decisions in other categories, such as choices of vacations and housing, were more likely to be shared. The emerging field of consumer research incorporated this interest in household decision-making and its gendered balance of power. In the very first issue of the Journal of Consumer Research, Ferber and Lee (1974) investigated the relative influence of husbands and wives on family purchasing behaviour. The authors conceptualized the role of the ‘family financial officer (FFO)’, the person or persons who, like Galbraith’s ‘consumption manager’, paid bills, kept track of expenditures and decided on how to spend discretionary funds. In their very middle American sample drawn from the small cities of Decatur and Peoria, Illinois, they found that the FFO role was filled by wives about a third of time, by both spouses jointly about a third of time, and by husbands about one quarter of the time. These patterns have remained relatively stable for half of century with, perhaps, long-term trends in consumption balance of power favouring women (see e.g. Pew Research, 2008).

Anti-consumption thought and practice can be found throughout much of the post-war period (Witkowski, 2010). Writers of the 1950s identified and criticized the excesses of post-war consumer culture. In The Affluent Society, for example, John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) complained about the manipulation of demand by business, and the over-emphasis on private consumption to the detriment of the quality of public services. In The Waste Makers, a popular muckraking journalist, Vance Packard (1960), took on seductive packaging, planned obsolescence and the throwaway psychology of the masses. Some ‘beat’ poets and artists in the 1950s kept their distance from consumer culture (Shi, 1985) and a decade or so later, hippies and other highly committed adopters of the late 1960s counterculture practised alternatives to consumerism via experiments in communal living and through studied rejection of their parents’ suburban values (Reich, 1970; Roszak, 1969). The first Earth Day, celebrated 21 March 1970, marked the emergence of an environmental movement in the US that reasserted the need for a conservation ethos in order to protect the planet from pollution and other afflictions (Fritsch, 1974). During the 1970s, evidence of a ‘voluntary simplicity movement’ emerged (Leonard-Barton, 1981) and soon numerous newspaper and magazine articles, book-length anti-consumption guides, and a modest selection of scholarly analyses instructed readers about the meaning and practice of varying degrees of voluntary simplicity (see e.g. Dominguez and Robin, 1992; Elgin, 1993; Etzioni, 1998; Schor, 1998; St James, 1996). Somewhat ironically, the movement has been faulted for its focus on personal lifestyle choices (i.e. consumer individualism) and lack of collective action to reform larger political processes (Maniates, 2002).
Conclusion

This chapter has provided a mere thumbnail sketch of the history of consumption in the United States. It does not do justice to the potential richness of the topic, but does offer a theoretically informed introduction. The narrative has followed three phenomena studied in the field of consumer culture theory – the meaning of possessions, the gender of consumption and opposition to consumption – through different time periods and has showed examples of continuity, and instances of change. The meanings of possessions have been constantly in flux over time, while the history of the gender of consumption appears more purposeful: largely male in the colonial era, it became increasingly feminized in the second half of the nineteenth century through the early twentieth centuries. Although some of the specifics have changed, anti-consumption thought has shown broad continuities in motives (religious, philosophical, political) and in its behavioural expressions (boycotts, voluntary simplicity).

These threads are important, but constitute just a small part of a larger fabric of American consumption history. Since the seventeenth century, Americans have made repeated efforts to ‘protect’ consumers from themselves by regulating alcohol, drugs, gambling, prostitution and other perceived vices (Hollander, 1984). In the twentieth century, the consumer movement has protected, through education, litigation and regulation, the rights of buyers from infringements by companies and governments (Herrmann and Mayer, 1997). Critiques of advertising, branding and other so-called evils perpetrated on American buyers by the marketing mixes of corporations have been a cottage industry for quite some time (see e.g. Klein, 1999; Packard, 1957). Other strands include the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s where gaining equal access for African Americans to stores, restaurants, housing and other sites of consumption was a major issue. Different American subcultures – racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation and age-based – have had their own consumption histories. These and many additional themes in the history of US consumption should also be explored.

References


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A history of consumption in the United States


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