

What is a Dutch Oven? How was it used? What can one cook in it? Why did it appear in the inventories of so many colonial households? Why was it so frequently included in the wagons of pioneer families? What has replaced it in the modern kitchen? In an effort to provide an agenda alternative to that of male-dominated history, a growing number of historians of women are pursuing such lines of inquiry. Laurel Ulrich and Mary Beth Norton have studied the household implements and resources available to colonial housewives in order to delineate their daily chores. Susan Strasser's pioneering research on the history of household technology traces the changes in domestic utensils and appliances and their impact on the nature of housework and housewives' self-perceptions over the last two centuries.¹ Julie Roy Jeffrey and Glenda Riley have brought new perspectives to the frontier experience by specifying the conditions of the domestic milieu--household possessions, housing styles, and kitchen facilities--in which pioneer men and women raised their families.² Through analyses of the composition of butterchurns and canning equipment, Joan Jensen has disclosed how rural women adapted to the age of commercial agriculture and urbanization by placing their household products on the marketplace.³ Despite the diverse subject matter and different emphases of these scholars, they all consider material culture indispensable to their research and use artifacts as primary data for understanding the values and attitudes of past generations.

Traditionally, academic historians have been reluctant or resistant to use mundane objects such as Dutch Ovens and butterchurns in their research and

teaching. A general assumption among historians, dating from the formative years of the profession, has been that only literary documents can provide valid evidence for the changes and continuities in history. Trained to work with verbal evidence, professional historians are often unaware of how to "read" objects and believe there is no way to verify their observations and interpretations of nonverbal evidence. As the art historian Jules Prown has explained:

Historical scholars generally prefer to work with verbal data. The twentieth century scholar using documents, literature, diaries, letters, philosophical writings, or other forms of verbal expression as source material has a sense of communicating directly with the past as he experiences the same mode of verbal expression with which he is familiar in his own daily existence. While it may be that the medium has become today's message, for historians the messages from the past are in words and rarely in other media.⁴

An even more fundamental objection to the use of physical evidence stems from the historians' view of what history is. Traditional history is male-oriented: the main substance of the discipline is what took place in the public sector. Major political and military events, dramatic shifts in cultural and intellectual trends, and the thoughts and deeds of public personalities merit the attention of historians. On the other hand, minutia about household routines or the study of household objects have been regarded as insignificant and unworthy of serious historical scholarship. To be certain, many professional historians would think it mere trivia to learn that the Dutch Oven was an essential cooking vessel for colonial and frontier housewives in which entire meals were prepared. So contemptuous are traditional historians of physical and material things that they dismiss the vast literature on artifacts as antiquarian. Thus, for decades, members of the historical profession disparaged "pots and pans" history as a game for amateurs and connoisseurs and largely ignored artifactual evidence.⁵ The handful of historians who did use physical evidence were often treated as pariahs