

Taverns and Drinking in Early America. *By Sharon V. Salinger.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. xi + 309 pp. Tables, maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$42. ISBN 0-801-86878-5.

Reviewed by Madelon Powers

“Let us open the doors of colonial taverns,” suggests Sharon V. Salinger in *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (p. 7). True to her proposal, she opens those doors wide. She covers all thirteen of the original English colonies, addresses intriguing issues of class, race, and gender, and synthesizes the secondary literature while adding significant primary research of her own.

Salinger acknowledges that the colonial tavern business defies easy description. Licensing policies, regulations, and enforcement varied greatly over region and time. Even the term “tavern” was not consistently used; both officials and customers haphazardly employed “public house,” “ordinary,” and “inn” as synonyms for “tavern.” Yet some characteristics of taverns were universal, or nearly so. All sold alcohol, usually beer, wine, and spirits such as rum and brandy. Most provided food of unpredictable quality. Further, colonial licenses required taverns to offer lodging to travelers, though often this meant a bed shared with a stranger. Tavern buildings varied considerably as well. As Salinger observes, “Some owners constructed their establishments specifically to be public houses; others tacked a sign on the door of their houses and opened for business” (p. 6).

The scope of Salinger’s study is broad, both geographically and chronologically. She examines scores of taverns in the thirteen colonies, grouping and comparing them regionally as institutions of New England, the Upper Mid-Atlantic, the Chesapeake, and the South. She also looks at both urban and rural establishments within each area. Her regional approach is both effective and unusual, for most scholarly work to date has consisted of case studies of a city, colony, or single region at most. Indeed, her approach indicates how far the study of colonial taverns has progressed in recent decades; the literature is finally extensive enough to make a synthesis possible. Where published data

are lacking, Salinger fills in the gaps with her own original research, using diaries, letters, drawings, newspapers, court proceedings, and governmental records.

In addition to its geographic breadth, Salinger's study is chronologically sweeping. It begins with the origins of English and Dutch drinking customs, follows their flowering in the New World in the 1600s, and ends with the richly developed tavern culture of the 1770s. To her credit, Salinger weaves these many threads of time and place into a coherent and comprehensible whole.

Principal themes in Salinger's analysis are "exclusion" and "specialization" in tavern life. Colonial tavern groups, and later the taverns themselves, were clearly differentiated by such factors as class and ethnicity. While seventeenth-century free men of all stations and ancestries might frequent the same establishment in a small community, this did not mean they all socialized together in some sort of rough frontier democracy. On the contrary, Salinger argues, they were keenly aware of their class and ethnic distinctions, and they fraternized accordingly. As she remarks, "Most taverns drew from all ranks of society, but all ranks were no more equal there than anywhere else" (p. 243).

By the eighteenth century, taverns became ever more specialized in their clienteles, which were composed of "knots of men rightly sorted," in the words of contemporary physician and tavern-goer Alexander Hamilton (p. 82). Particularly in urban areas, the elite, middling, and laboring classes each adopted their own favorite haunts, with groups often subdividing further by ethnicity, occupation, and religion. Within their respective establishments, these tavern companies pursued such widely popular pastimes as treating, toasting, joking, singing, gaming, and storytelling. Yet though their activities were similar, these "knots of men" each developed their own group identity based on shared backgrounds as well as a sense of loyalty to the particular tavern catering to "their sort." Salinger presents many examples of this trend toward tavern specialization, showing that it occurred earlier and more commonly than historians have supposed. In doing so, she drives home her point that historians must recognize "the tavern's exclusionary nature, instead of envisioning the space as essentially inclusive" (p. 5).

While respectable male tavern-goers of all classes also applied the exclusionary principle to women, servants, free blacks, slaves, and Native Americans, Salinger notes that this was not the case in the many “disorderly” taverns in the larger seaport cities. Here, in defiance of governmental regulation and polite custom, the lower strata of society enjoyed their own more freewheeling version of tavern culture. From Boston to Charleston, proprietors of “low” taverns illegally sold liquor to servants, slaves, and Indians, and they hosted obstreperous clienteles composed of “both men and women, whites and blacks, free and unfree” (p. 50). Though elite leaders in the various colonies repeatedly vowed to eliminate such objectionable establishments, in practice these authorities did just the opposite. The reason was revenue. Licensing fees, taxes, and other monetary considerations, in addition to popular demand, made colonial authorities loath to limit or close down taverns permanently.

Despite Salinger’s disclaimer that her book “does not assess the tavern as a business” (p. 5, n. 12), she nevertheless provides considerable information on tavern proprietors, patronage cycles, and laws regulating tavern operations. Particularly impressive are her maps of tavern density in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston in successive eras. She also graphically illustrates the customer bases of two Philadelphia taverns, constructed by comparing city tax rolls to one proprietor’s account ledger and another’s estate inventory. Further, she provides statistical charts on female proprietors in rural areas versus port cities. Salinger’s information on these various aspects of the tavern trade is sure to interest the business historian.

Because the scope of Salinger’s study is very broad, her coverage of some subjects is understandably perfunctory or uneven. And because a good portion of her work is a synthesis of previously published research, much may seem very familiar to scholars already well versed in the subject. Yet Salinger has produced a remarkably comprehensive and useful overview of colonial taverns. She brings together a wealth of information not available in any other single source and adds new data and observations of her own. Overall, Salinger’s book provides an excellent introduction to the lively world of colonial tavern culture.

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