

# African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

---

Volume 9  
Issue 4 December 2006

Article 22

---

12-1-2006

## Strategic Consumption: Archaeological Evidence for Costly Signaling among Enslaved Men and Women in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake

Jillian E. Galle  
Monticello, [jgalle@monticello.org](mailto:jgalle@monticello.org)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

---

### Recommended Citation

Galle, Jillian E. (2006) "Strategic Consumption: Archaeological Evidence for Costly Signaling among Enslaved Men and Women in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 , Article 22.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol9/iss4/22>

This Dissertation Abstract is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

**Dissertation Abstract:  
Strategic Consumption: Archaeological Evidence  
for Costly Signaling among Enslaved Men and Women  
in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake**

**By Jillian E. Galle**

**Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.  
May, 2006.**



**This broadly comparative study explores the complex social, economic, and ecological dynamics that facilitated the participation of enslaved African Americans in the eighteenth-century Consumer Revolution. The application of signaling theory to archaeological data from 19 slave quarter sites in the greater Chesapeake region of Virginia underpins this analysis. This study demonstrates that throughout the eighteenth century slave consumption of costly imported goods was influenced by a number of contextual variables. The extent to which increasing urban populations, economic and agricultural diversification, and a slave quarter's proximity to the owner's house shaped consumption are modeled using multiple regression. The significant positive relationship of costly goods with agricultural diversification and the growth of urban centers suggests that a slave's ability to consume such items was linked closely to the increasingly competitive social and economic environment within the eighteenth-century Chesapeake.**

**The data used in this study indicate that four main signaling strategies were at work in the Chesapeake. Since metal buttons are associated primarily with eighteenth-century male garments, quarters with high button discard and low refined ceramic discard suggest the persistence of single-sex residences for young adult men throughout the eighteenth and into the early-nineteenth centuries. Households that almost exclusively invested in refined ceramics and those that were able to consume similarly high amounts of both buttons and refined ceramics may point to kin-based households anchored by women and men who worked extraordinarily hard to establish a foot-hold in a culture and economic system that sought to exclude them in every way. These households may have included few to no children, thereby enabling their members to translate their labor more easily into imported consumables. This study uncovers the complex processes that drove the consumption of costly goods and demonstrates that they likely functioned as essential components of localized and regional signaling systems that provided social and economic benefits to the most competitive and successful signalers.**