USEFUL INFORMATION ON INVENTORIES

Researchers are indeed fortunate that there are at least two, and sometimes three, copies of many sorts of probate records for the area of Old Somerset County, Maryland. Old Somerset County comprises the present areas of Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester Counties in Maryland and part of Sussex County, Delaware. Somerset County is fortunate that its courthouse has not undergone the ravages of fire which so many other county courthouses have suffered. Therefore, not only do the county records survive, but also the provincial court copies, which were sent to the provincial government office from the counties prior to 1776. In the case of Somerset County, since Worcester County was separated from the parent county in 1742, Worcester clerks copied the appropriate records of individuals who would have been in that part of Old Somerset which became Worcester County. In addition, the Maryland State Archives is in possession of a number of original inventories from the area of old Somerset.

Among the types of probate records, bonds, wills, inventories, and accounts provide substantial information for the family and local history researcher. Of these records, perhaps the inventories offer the most varied information about an individual and the time and area in which he/she lived. Inventories were documented in Old Somerset from the inception of the county. The major purpose of an inventory was to prevent the removal of portable wealth before creditors could be reimbursed for any debts which might be owed to them.

It is instructional to note that although not everyone left a will, many more people left inventories of their estates. These inventories tell not only the name of the deceased but when the inventory was taken of the estate and the county in which the decedent lived, as well as his occupation. The appraisers are also listed with information as to whether they were literate or not. Next of kin are also listed with their state of literacy. When a person died without a will, an administrator was named by the court. Usually that person was a widow or some other relative.

Wealth was not a criterion for having an inventory. Nor was sex. A person need not be a wealthy male to have an inventory. Widows, less often unmarried women, also had inventories made. Inventories would not have been made for a deceased woman if her husband still survived. Hardly ever were inventories made for children.

Almost always, inventories appear to have been made primarily for whites, but some were inventories were for free blacks. Inventories were limited to free persons. Neither indentured servants nor slaves had inventories taken for their estates.

It appears that there were not inheritance taxes or estate taxes during the colonial period. Rather there was a filing fee and remuneration for the appraisers and administrator.

What, then, does an inventory tell us about an individual and the type of lifestyle which he lived? The items listed will usually give a clue as to occupation. One can tell something about the literacy of the individual or of his learnedness or intellectual curiosity. Furnishings also tell a great deal about an individual. Types of materials in inventories of people of various ages, sex, locations, or wealth are also illustrative. Imports can also be observed as well as “fashion.” Level of lifestyle may also be ascertained from the type of garments and furnishings in one’s inventory.
For the agricultural historian, there is considerable information. Servants and slaves, often named, were included. Types and number of livestock with their approximate ages, various tools and types of equipment were also included.

The layout of a house and farm may also be ascertained from an inventory. Agricultural wealth, number and type of animals on one’s property, kinds of crops, presence or absence of slaves or indentured servants, types of machines or tools used by the deceased may also be indicated. Unfortunately, unlike the situation in New England, Old Somerset County appraisers did not include land and buildings in the inventory of an estate.

Historians might also be interested in private ownership of weapons. Guns provide information about defense as well as food hunting. Those interested in the study of medicine will also find information about illness and prescriptions for illness. The types of information which one can glean from inventories is almost limitless.

At different times, inventories were valued in different ways. Initially, inventories were evaluated in terms of pounds of tobacco. Later, the local currency or “crown sterling” might serve as the basis for an appraisal. Inventories were usually made relatively soon after the death of the owner. Such things as “rancid” food, “damnified” fish, and “half rotten” porridge are indications of the timely manner in which inventories were taken.

The significance and usefulness of inventories rests in the detailed account of possessions and the accuracy with which the inventories seem to have been taken, and also in the fact that they are available for every “hundred” of Old Somerset from the time the county was formed.