

THE ART OF DINING

A Taste of Providence's Golden Age

Food and the formal customs associated with dining were an important part of 19th century life, especially for upper-class families like the Lippitts. Mary Johnson Lincoln, founder of the Boston Cooking School, wrote in 1883, "The degree of civilization is often measured by the cuisine." Rigid social customs influenced everything from how and which guests were invited, appropriate clothing to wear during the event, how the table was set, selection of the menu, how it was eaten, and how it was served. To produce sophisticated multi-course meals that reflected well on the family took several trained servants, each excelling at defined roles supervised by their employer. At Lippitt House, it was Mary Ann Lippitt's (1823-1889) responsibility to oversee the housekeeping and entertaining duties. These were in addition to the numerous volunteer and advocacy activities expected of the wife of a prominent Providence businessman and politician like Henry Lippitt (1817-1891).



Seymour-Joseph Guy, *The Contest for the Bouquet: The Family of Robert Gordon in Their New York Dining-Room, 1866*.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Explore how the Lippitt family entertained friends and family and the work necessary to bring elaborate meals to table during Providence's Golden Age. This exhibition was part of the statewide 2017 À La Rhody program celebrating Rhode Island's food culture.

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TAKING TEA

Taking afternoon tea was a common social occasion for upper-class women. In her 1875-1886 journal, Mary Ann Lippitt notes several tea invitations from other prominent Providence ladies. Mary Ann hosted her own teas in the Lippitt House Reception Room served at 4:00 p.m. Since these social occasions were women only, a more casual style of dress evolved in the late 1870s for this type of home entertaining.

Tea gowns were designed to be worn when receiving guests at home. Unlike most other 19th century dress, it did not require a corset underneath. This type of informality was only appropriate while in one's own home. The comfort, compared to more restrictive day dresses and evening gowns, made it a popular style of clothing in the late 19th century. Mary Ann Lippitt purchased her gowns from New York and Paris couturiers.



Tea gown by Mademoiselle Jensen, Robes & Confections, 1880s, New York. The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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ART OF COOKERY

Household manuals became popular in the late 19th century and were an essential part of women's education. Mrs. Beeton's 1861 *The Book of Household Management*, aimed at middle-class English women with instructions on cookery and housekeeping, advised readers: "The object, then, is not only to live, but to live economically, agreeably, tastefully, and well."

Fanny Merritt Farmer's *A New Book of Cookery* followed in this tradition. First published in 1912, Mrs. Farmer became head of the Boston Cooking School in 1894 before starting her own School of Cookery in 1902 for training housewives. She also published several other books on cooking. She quotes food chemist Joseph König in *A New Book of Cookery*: "The art of cookery, when not allied with a degenerate taste or with gluttony, is one of the criteria of a people's civilization."



Janet M. Hunter (1897-1977)

A copy of Farmer's book was owned by Janet Hunter, granddaughter of Henry and Mary Ann Lippitt. When Janet lived at Lippitt House, her mother Abby Lippitt Hunter employed three female servants, all born in Ireland. It would have been part of Janet's general education to know how to run her future household and supervise servants when she married.

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LADIES LUNCHEON

On Friday, September 28, 1877, Mary Ann Lippitt hosted a “Lunch Party” at Lippitt House. The menu consisted of eight courses: oysters on the shell, sweetbreads (veal organ meat) with tomatoes, quails on toast with currant jelly, lobster salad, tomato salad, ice cream birds’ nests (ice cream in spun sugar), fruit, cake, and coffee. The meal was also accompanied by sherry and champagne. Mary Ann invited twelve, but only seven ladies accepted her invitation including her younger sister Abigail Pope Balch.

Meals were served in the Russian or “à la russe” style. Each course was brought from the Butler’s Pantry to the table by the footman, Edward Bennett, and presented to diners. The center of the table displayed fresh flowers, bon bons and other chocolates, petit fours, and fresh and dried fruits. The final dessert course was displayed on the sideboard until served. It was expected to take one hour and twenty minutes to serve an eight course meal, each course arriving at ten minute intervals.



Detail image from Mary Ann’s journal
September 28, 1877

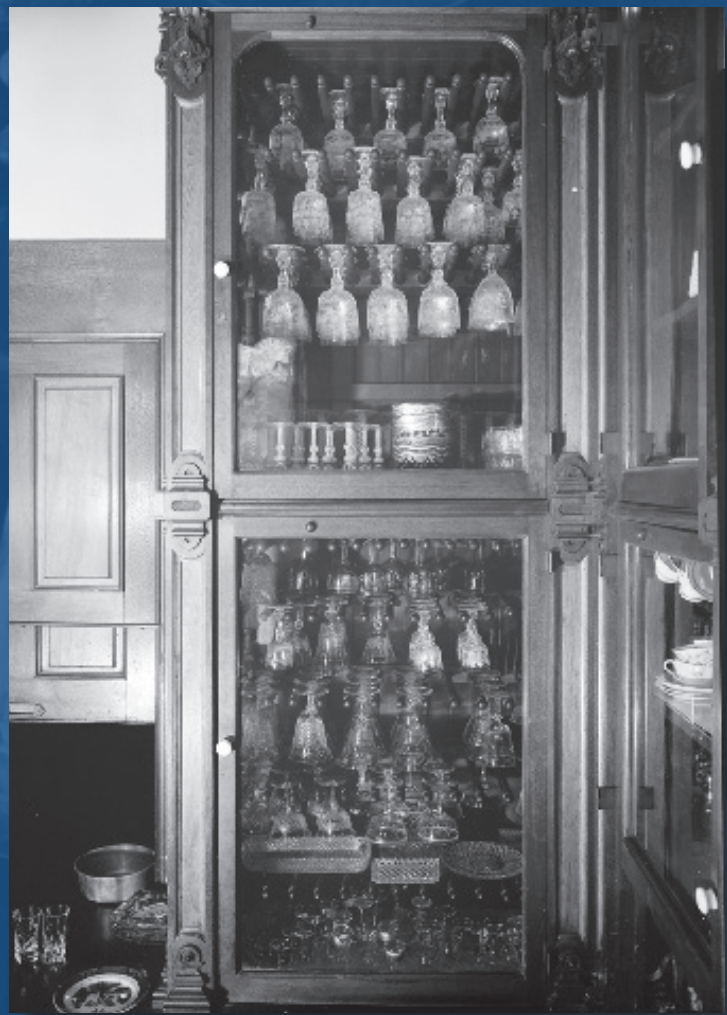
Mary Ann Balch Lippitt, ca. 1880s

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TABLE SERVICE

Mary Ann Lippitt planned meals in consultation with the Lippitts' hired cook. In 1875, the cook was Mary Brooks, born in Maryland. Mary Ann noted menus in her journal and recorded whether the quantity was sufficient for the number of diners. In household management, efficiency was important.

Table service and the care of china, glass and silver was charged to footman Edward Bennett with assistance by William Mason, the waiter. Plated dishes were carried from the kitchen across the service hall and dirty ones were removed for washing through the pass door as each course was cleared. Charles Ranhofer, chef at the acclaimed Delmonico's Restaurant (1862-1896) instructed in his 1,000 page cookbook *The Epicurean* "The dishes, plates, etc., should be removed noiselessly, one by one; and never piled one upon another, after the hasty fashion of second-class hotels."



Butler's pantry, April 1958
with working pass door.
Historic American Buildings Survey

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PROHIBITION IN RHODE ISLAND

The Music Room is a space where gentlemen might have retired after dinner for drinks (kirsch, brandy, chartreuse), cigars, and cigarettes before joining the ladies in the Drawing Room for tea and conversation. Studying the 1893 Probate Inventory, alcohol was an important part of entertaining at Lippitt House. The glass and silver services included:

- 1 Bohemian beer set
- 1 glass liqueur set
- 1 liqueur case with 4 decanters
- 45 claret glasses
- 30 sherry glasses
- 22 white wine glasses
- 1 pair claret decanters

- 1 red sherry decanter
- 3 white wine decanters
- 1 champagne pitcher
- 1 pair champagne coolers
- 1 wine basket & three decanters
- 1 cut glass ice bowl
- 13 glass tumblers

However, not all Rhode Islanders at this time imbibed.

In 1875, Henry Lippitt ran successfully against fellow Republican and Prohibitionist Rowland Hazard II for governor in a tight race. As a result of the large influx of immigrants to Rhode Island, prohibition was a battle issue often dividing native-born Protestants and new immigrants. Rhode Island was a “dry” state in 1852-1863, 1874, and 1886-1889. In 1889, state law said local cities and towns could decide by popular local election whether to be wet or dry.



Thomas Eakins, “The Chess Players” 1876.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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DINING WITH *YOUR* FAMILY

This exhibition describes the dining customs of the Lippitt family in the Victorian era. Here we encourage you to share the dining traditions of your family in our contemporary era.



Lippitt Family Holiday Dinner, ca.1945

- ◇ Draw an object or objects that represent an important aspect of your family's dining traditions, and/or
- ◇ Describe a tradition in writing.
- ◇ What do you think our dining traditions tell us about the era in which we live?

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