

Spotlight on Alexis Smith: Snuff Culture of Aristocratic Women in Antebellum America

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Alexis Smith wanted her research to be “something new, exciting, and slightly edgy.” She found snuff.

Snuff, one of the most popular recreational drugs in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, is a powdered tobacco inhaled through the nostrils and will be the subject of Alexis’ thesis paper. Piqued by her “Global History of Tobacco and World Health” seminar led by Dr. Robert Proctor, Alexis’ longtime interests in history evolved to include American tobacco culture as well. Even before her in-depth research into snuff began, Alexis had success with publication. She wrote an article titled “‘Satisfiers,’ Smokes, and Sports: The Unholy Marriage Between Major League Baseball and Big Tobacco” that was published in the November 2007 issue of the *Sport History Review*. After this initial article, Alexis wanted to integrate her love for American colonial history and her new found interest in tobacco culture. The result is her thesis on the social history of snuff.

Alexis researches the cultural history of snuff in antebellum America with a particular focus on the use of snuff by aristocratic women. She has found that middle-class men and women commonly used snuff for medical purposes. At the time, men condemned the “celestial powder” as an unladylike practice that made a woman unattractive. Despite the social disapproval, upper-class women still sniffed the tobacco as a recreational drug in private and social settings with female company. Such American elites to use snuff were Abigail Adams and Dolley Madison. The drug culture of snuff in America was prolific yet

underground, as Alexis discovered.

Due to the unspoken nature of the use of snuff in eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries and the creativity of her research focus, Alexis initially struggled to find sources for the foundation of her study. She is one of the first and only persons to study the history of snuff in the United States, as it was a taboo subject of its time. As only a small number of researchers know about snuff, even fewer take the time to learn about the effect of snuff on the lives of the American aristocrats. With a limited scope of secondary sources, Alexis relied on online databases for her primary sources. Through these primary sources, she was able to understand snuff in its historical context, prior to the invention and popularization of the industrial cigarette roller in 1880. Such online archives as *The North America Women’s Letters and Diaries*, *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, and the *Dolley Madison Digital Edition* have proved invaluable to Alexis during her research.

While Alexis turned to primary sources for most of her information, she found that these could be lacking as well. There was little primary source evidence to be found of American in the physical act of sniffing. Alexis raised even more questions during this phase of her research progress: “Why did Americans omit the social rituals of snuff from their written history? Was pinching snuff such a mundane activity that it did not merit mention?” Alexis met the most challenging aspects of her research by forming more questions and re-directing her original hypothesis.

Alexis has overcome the many obstacles in her research that have arisen due to its unique nature. Since she is researching a very narrow field with



Figure 1: Painting of Mrs. Richard Alsop holding a snuff handkerchief and silver snuffbox by American artist Ralph Earl in 1792. A bold and taboo statement of its time, this painting is one of the few existing images of a woman with snuff paraphernalia. (Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, “Mrs. Richard Alsop, 1792,” Ralph Earl: *The Face of the Young Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 45.)

very few colleagues to collaborate with, Alexis hopes her thesis “will serve as a springboard for other scholars interested in a snuff sub-culture.” With previous work exhausting the history of pipes, chewing tobacco, and cigarettes, Alexis is at the forefront of American history research by uncovering the snuff culture of women in antebellum America. She unloads the secrets of aristocratic living to draw possible parallels to the drug culture of today’s socialites. Alexis has realized that people are surprised to hear that Dolley Madison was one of the initial trendsetters responsible for popularizing snuff, and so uses this fun fact to draw people’s interest. While many Americans today may not know what snuff is, Alexis brings the history of snuff culture to the present.

Alexis graciously points to the mentorship of Dr. Caroline Winterer as a reason for her research success. Dr. Winterer, an assistant professor in the Department of History and the Director of History Department Honors

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Program, is a leading researcher on the pre-20th century cultural and intellectual history of America and the transatlantic. Alexis has the privilege of studying with Dr. Winterer as well as Dr. Hilton Obenzinger, associate director of the Hume Writing Center, and Dr. Benjamin Stone, curator for American and British History at Green Library. In her Writing the Honors Thesis (PWR 193) class, Alexis has benefited from the support of her peers in writing her research thesis. She plans to present her finished research thesis to the History Department in May in addition to submitting a paper for publication to scholarly journals specializing in American cultural history.

When she began her research in the culture of snuff tobacco in antebellum America, Alexis did not know where she would end. Her participation in undergraduate research has given Alexis the opportunity to make a lasting, first-hand contribution to her field of study.



ALEXIS SMITH is a senior preparing to graduate with honors from the history department and a minor from the Spanish department. Originally from Portola Valley, California, Alexis enjoys working as the House Manager in Kairos Co-Op and a Stanford campus tour guide. In her spare time, Alexis plays golf, hikes in the foothills, cooks for friends, gardens, and practices her Spanish and Portuguese.