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Sensory Worlds in Early America

Peter Charles Hoffer

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Over the past half-century, historians have greatly enriched our understanding of America's past, broadening their fields of inquiry from such traditional topics as politics and war to include the agency of class, race, ethnicity, and gender and to focus on the lives of ordinary men and women. We now know that homes and workplaces form a part of our history as important as battlefields and the corridors of power. Only recently, however, have historians begun to examine the fundamentals of lived experience and how people perceive the world through the five senses.

In this ambitious work, Peter Charles Hoffer presents a "sensory history" of early North America, offering a bold new understanding of the role that sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch played in shaping the lives of Europeans, Indians, and Africans in the New World. Reconstructing the most ephemeral aspects of America's colonial past?the choking stench of black powder, the cacophony of unfamiliar languages, the taste of fresh water and new foods, the first sight of strange peoples and foreign landscapes, the rough texture of homespun, the clumsy weight of a hoe?Hoffer explores the impact of sensuous experiences on human thought and action. He traces the effect sensation and perception had on the cause and course of events conventionally attributed to deeper cultural and material circumstances.

Hoffer revisits select key events, encounters, and writings from America's colonial past to uncover the sensory elements in each and decipher the ways in which sensual data were mediated by prevailing and often conflicting cultural norms. Among the episodes he reexamines are the first meetings of Europeans and Native Americans; belief in and encounters with the supernatural; the experience of slavery and slave revolts; the physical and emotional fervor of the Great Awakening; and the feelings that prompted the Revolution. Imaginatively conceived, deeply informed, and elegantly written, *Sensory Worlds of Early America* convincingly establishes sensory experience as a legitimate object of historical inquiry and vividly brings America's colonial era to life.

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