

Minding Your Manners

During the 1800s, all types of behaviors and activities were regulated by an extensive system of rules or etiquette. Etiquette helped distinguish the middle and upper classes from working people and immigrants, who often did not have the time, money, or knowledge to follow these rules. The etiquette of introductions, conversation, carriage riding, courtship, visiting, church, school, home, and eating meals were detailed in many publications. People who wanted to learn how to behave by these standards often bought these books and followed their instructions.

The following list of “errors to be avoided” at the table is excerpted from Thomas E. Hill’s popular, late 19th-century *Manual of Social and Business Forms*.

- Never fill the mouth very full.
- Never attempt to talk with the mouth full.
- Never explain at the table why certain foods do not agree with you.
- Never introduce disgusting or unpleasant topics for conversation.
- Never pick your teeth or put your hand in your mouth while eating.
- Never call loudly for the waiter, nor attract attention to yourself by boisterous conduct.
- Never wipe your fingers on the tablecloth, nor clean them in your mouth.
- Never make a display when removing hair, insects, or other disagreeable things from your food. Place them quietly on the edge of your plate.
- Never permit yourself to engage in a heated argument at the table. Nor should you use gestures, nor illustrations made with a knife or fork on the tablecloth.
- Never use anything but a fork or spoon to feed yourself. [In the 1700s and earlier many people ate with their knives].
- Never expectorate [spit] at the table; also avoid sneezing or coughing. It is better to get up quietly from the table if you have occasion to do so. A sneeze is prevented by placing the finger firmly on the upper lip.

Suggestions for the classroom:

1. Discuss why these rules were used. How many are still followed today? Why? Discover what modern etiquette book writers, such as Miss Manners and Emily Post, say about dining etiquette.
2. Make up a list of the rules used in your classroom as your “etiquette of school.” Compare to the 19th-century list.
3. Have students act out one of the errors to be avoided so that classmates can identify the inappropriate table behavior.

The Etiquette of Calling Cards

Calling cards became a part of etiquette in Europe in the early 1800s. At this time, wealthy people, especially women (who were barred from most education and professional jobs), spent a lot of their time in social pursuits. These activities included going to parties, teas, picnics, and balls, visiting other people, traveling, attending church services, and doing charitable activities. Calling cards became a way to control who was “in” a social circle and who was “out”. The practice soon spread to America and became very common in the mid to late 1800s.

Calling cards were used to introduce people to one another, to announce a person’s presence at someone’s house or at a party, and to let someone know that a visitor had come while they were not at home. Homeowners even built entrance halls or waiting rooms in their homes so that visitors would have a space to wait in while the person they were visiting decided whether to see them. The calling card was supposed to make a good impression. The type of paper, the way it was printed, even the time it was left told someone about the person visiting them and how to place them in the social hierarchy.

When a new family moved to or visited a town, the lady of the house would start making calls so that everyone would know that her family had arrived. A lady would receive calls only at a certain time. These days and times were engraved on her calling cards. Sunday was never a visiting day. Only close friends and relatives visited then. A newcomer waited until she received cards from neighbors, then visited the people who left cards.

When calling, the caller often remained in the carriage while her servant took the card and handed it to the servant who answered the door. The card was brought to the lady or gentleman of the house, who would then decide whether to receive the caller. If the person was ‘not at home’, it was a rejection of the visitor. The person in the house might give his or her card to the caller. If they didn’t, this usually meant he or she was not interested in furthering the acquaintance. If the card was given, there was hope for the relationship to grow.

Formal calls were made following ceremonial events such as engagements, marriages, or childbirth, and as an acknowledgement of hospitality. After a specific event, it was courteous to make a call within a week for all condolences and congratulations. Visits were brief, lasting less than thirty minutes. It was polite to leave within a few minutes if another caller arrived. The caller could leave a message without greeting the family by turning down a specific corner of their card to express sympathy, congratulations or affection.

A proper calling card was to be white and made of fine textured paper, but not heavy or stiff. The lettering should be engraved, not printed by hand. The recommended size for a gentleman’s card was 3 x 1½ inches, the married woman’s card was 3½ x 2¼ inches, an unmarried daughter used the same card as her mother with her name in smaller type added under her mother’s name. On all cards, the name was centered and the street address, when used, was on the lower right-hand corner. The time and date of an afternoon tea would be engraved or handwritten on a calling card and used as an invitation.

Activities:

Discuss why people used calling cards in the 1800s. Do we use calling cards today? What do we use instead?

Make a calling card to take with you to the Becker House. When entering the house give it to the maid to introduce yourself.