



# **Alice Morse Earle and the Domestic History of Early America (Public History in Historical Perspective)**

*Susan Williams*

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Author, collector, and historian Alice Morse Earle (1851–1911) was among the most important and prolific writers of her day. Between 1890 and 1904, she produced seventeen books as well as numerous articles, pamphlets, and speeches about the life, manners, customs, and material culture of colonial New England. Earle's work coincided with a surge of interest in early American history, genealogy, and antique collecting, and more than a century after the publication of her first book, her contributions still resonate with readers interested in the nation's colonial past.

An intensely private woman, Earle lived in Brooklyn, New York, with her husband and four children and conducted much of her research either by mail or at the newly established Long Island Historical Society. She began writing on the eve of her fortieth birthday, and the impressive body of scholarship she generated over the next fifteen years stimulated new interest in early American social customs, domestic routines, foodways, clothing, and childrearing patterns.

Written in a style calculated to appeal to a wide readership, Earle's richly illustrated books recorded the intimate details of what she described as colonial "home life." These works reflected her belief that women had played a key historical role, helping to nurture communities by constructing households that both served and shaped their families. It was a vision that spoke eloquently to her contemporaries, who were busily creating exhibitions of early American life in museums, staging historical pageants and other forms of patriotic celebration, and furnishing their own domestic interiors.

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