

The Etiquette of Calling Cards

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The custom of carrying calling cards began in France in the early 1800's, spreading quickly throughout Europe before becoming vastly popular in the United States. Calling cards were carried by the "well-to-do" ladies who made a point to 'go calling' on friends and family on a specified day of the week or month, depending on their location and proximity to neighbors. When visiting friends, or 'making calls,' a card would be left in a card receiver at the front door or parlor, even if the person they were visiting was home.



Calling card receivers (trays) were set out on marble top entry tables.

The trays were usually silver or silver plate and had a rich, ornate design. Cards were carried in a variety of finely crafted cases made of sterling, mother of pearl, tortoiseshell, velvet, ivory, and more.

Hundreds of thousands of cards were printed from 1800 through the 1890's. The lady's card was larger in size than the small breast pocket size carried by gentlemen. Styles evolved from hand-penned cards to simple print, then hidden name, and even tiny envelope insert cards. Sometimes a loving greeting was added, though the card alone was considered a message.

It was considered a "red-letter day," a term that originated with the tradition of marking holy days in a church calendar in red, when a young 'maid' or man was granted his or her first visiting card. As for babies whose cards were sent out by their parents, theirs was 'the tiniest and daintiest of cards, fit for fairies!' according to one Victorian Lady, Margaret Sangster, in her etiquette book entitled *Good Manners For All Occasions*.

The fashions of calling cards varied with the trends; sometimes middle initials were fashionable, other times not; some cards were ornate, while others were of a "severe style," particularly for the gentlemen.

In the book *Decorum*, published in 1877, the following recommendations were made for refined visiting card etiquette: 'Visitors should furnish themselves with cards. Gentlemen ought simply to put their cards into their pocket, but ladies may carry them in a small elegant portfolio, called a card-case. This they can hold in their hand and it will contribute essentially (with an elegant handkerchief of embroidered cambric) to give an air of good taste.'