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Pottery, Intercolonial Trade, and Revolution: Domestic Earthenwares and the Development of an American Social Identity

ABSTRACT

The American colonists were a discontented lot from the beginning. Some were fleeing religious persecution, while others sought alternatives to their options in the homeland. When they arrived in North America many headed for the frontier, but many also settled in cities that served as collection points and shipping centers for a network of trade that extended far into the heartland. During the 18th century, manufacturing centers developed to process the skins, fibers, and minerals gathered in the interior. Colonists north and south, even though they faced different experiences, shared challenges that set them increasingly apart from their ancestral homelands. As a result, a unique social identity was being forged. The vastness of the land caused long-distance communications, facilitated by trade, to be the bond for social cohesion for both people on the frontier and people in the coastal cities. In the days before electronic communication, shipping was the fastest and most reliable medium for communication and trade between the major population centers. Although other manufactured goods, like textiles, were more important in economic terms, the trade of domestically

produced earthenwares, easily visible in the archaeological record, serves as mute testimony to the development of a unique social identity, and the formation of this independent nation.

Introduction

Archaeological research has revealed the presence of three easily identifiable types of slipdecorated, lead-glazed red earthenwares manufactured in Philadelphia on coastal sites dating to the third quarter of the 18th century (Steen 1989). These sites (Figure 1) range from Nova Scotia to Barbados (Table 1). This work considers the origin and distribution of these wares and the social implications of the phenomenon. Archaeological collections in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Williamsburg, Virginia; Edenton, North Carolina; and Charleston, South Carolina; have been examined. Archaeological reports and personal interviews and letters provided evidence for the presence of Philadelphia earthenwares at the other sites mentioned herein. Primary and secondary documentary evidence for colonial economic and social development has been examined in general, and manuscript shipping records for Charleston and Edenton were examined in detail, as were synthetic studies of colonial trade and economics (Steen 1985, 1989).

TABLE 1 SOME LOCALITIES PRODUCING PHILADELPHIA EARTHENWARES

Location

Pensacola, FL
St Augustine, FL
Edenton, NC
Brunswick Town, NC
Charleston, SC (urban)
Charleston area plantations
Williamsburg, VA
Delaware
Newburyport, MA
Bermuda
Barbados

Fortress Louisbourg, NS

References

Ashley Chapman 1996, pers. comm.
JulieWizorek 1993, pers. comm.
Steen 1985
South 1985, pers. comm.
Bastian 1987; Joseph et al. 1993; Zierden 1996
Lewis 1978; Carillo 1980; Steen 1993;
Ivor Noël Hume 1985, pers. comm.
Hermann 1984
Faulkner et al. 1978
Marley Brown 1989, pers. comm.
James Legg 1996, pers. comm.
Barton 1981



Figure 1. Some sites yielding Philadelphia earthenwares.

Material Culture

While thriving redware traditions were found in the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast (Turnbaugh 1985), in the South redware potters were few (Greer 1981), and large amounts of domestic redwares are a rarity in pre-1780s contexts (Carnes-McNaughton 1995). The presence of numerous almost whole, unused lead-glazed redware vessels (Figure 2) at the Wessington House site (Figure 3) in Edenton, North Carolina, thus presented an interesting question.

This collection was unearthed in 1980 when a pipeline was dug through a buried cellar. This utility trench ran adjacent to Granville Street (beneath the sidewalk) at the edge of the Wessington House lot, in the heart of the old downtown of Edenton. A local historian reported the discovery, and archaeologists and students volunteered to salvage the rich deposit. Lenses of sand and rubble covered a thick layer of domestic debris called the trash lens by the exca-Artifacts recovered from the cellar invators. cluded thousands of sherds of lead-glazed redware that appeared to be the remains of a cask of ceramics broken in transit. Also present were domestic artifacts, including porcelain, saltglazed stoneware, tin-glazed wares, and other English ceramics, as well as bottle glass, nails, bone, and dozens of small finds.

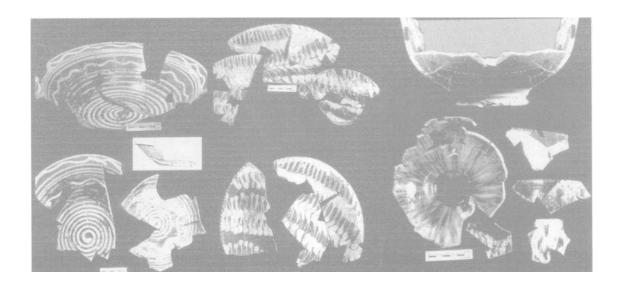


Figure 2. Philadelphia earthenwares from the Wessington House site, Edenton, NC.

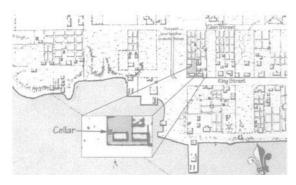


Figure 3. Edenton, NC in 1769, with inset of Wessington House lot.

The artifacts in the cellar deposit dated from as early as the 1720s to the late 1760s and early 1770s. Artifacts in the topsoil included materials dating through the 19th and 20th centuries. A small number of these found their way into the lower strata, but analysis of vessel mends and matches clearly showed that they were intrusive. Numerous links between the topsoil and lower levels indicated contamination that can be attributed to the nature of the excavations (salvage) and other post-depositional factors including the construction of fences and ditches, the planting and removal of trees, gardening, and landscaping, as well as bioturbative factors, such as tree growth and rodent burrowing. The preponderance of material evidence thus confirms a deposition date of the early 1770s at the latest for the layers filling the cellar. The later artifacts are intrusive.

Documentary (Moore 1985) and archaeological evidence suggest that the cellar was filled between the time when James Hurst obtained the property in 1758 and when the Sauthier map of 1769 was drafted (Figure 3, inset). The deed states that structures were present when Hurst obtained it, but nothing was shown in the area of the excavation on the Sauthier map. Since Hurst mortgaged his property in 1768 for eight times its purchase price, it is assumed that he had either completed new construction or was financing it at that time.

The redwares were familiar, but could not be sourced. Other researchers had suggested they were Metropolitan Slipware, North Carolina Moravian wares, and Pennsylvania German slipwares. None of those identifications really fits, however. They were too early to be Moravian (South 1968, 1970), too late to be Metropolitan Slipware (Noël Hume 1969), and somehow just did not seem quite right for the slip-decorated folk pottery wares common in the Pennsylvania countryside (Watkins 1950; Cullity 1991).

Since the person believed to be responsible for the redwares, James Hurst, was identified in land records as a "Merchant and Mariner" and was the owner of both coasting and ocean-going ships and since there were no known redware potters nearby during that period (making overland distribution unlikely), it was necessary to look for sources accessible by water.

Research into pottery made in Germany, Great Britain, and the northern United States found no exact matches with the redwares from the Wessington House site. Such redwares were found, however, at archaeological sites throughout British America in domestic contexts (Table 1). This research led to the discovery of a then unpublished article on Philadelphia potters (Bower 1985), which featured pictures of identical wares manufactured in Philadelphia during the time period in question.

Later, archaeological collections from excavations at Benjamin Franklin's Franklin Court (Independence National Historic Park) were examined (Giannini 1981). A wide variety of lead-glazed redwares which were clearly manufactured locally were easily identified (Figure 4). Many, like the black-glazed, sgraffito, combed, and sliptrailed wares were similar to ceramics in the Wessington House collection and from other North Carolina and South Carolina contexts. But because of the lack of obvious distinctive characteristics, it was not thought that they could be identified with confidence at this level of study.

Three decorative types, however, stood out as unique and are easily identifiable, even from

photographs and drawings. These appear to be the type of ceramics described by potters of the period as "Philadelphia Earthenwares." wares were advertised as such in Maryland and Rhode Island in the late 1750s (Bower 1985:276). Potter Jonathan Durrell, then working in New York, clearly stated in a 1773 advertisement that he was making "Philadelphia Earthenware . . . striped and coloured dishes of divers colours . . . and a variety of other sorts of wares too tedious to particularize" (New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury, 15 March 1773 cited in Steen 1989:57). Potters and consumers thus recognized the wares as distinctive for a minimum of about 20 years. This is important, because similarly decorated pieces are found in later contexts (Bivens 1972)

The ceramics in the Franklin Court collection are valuable because they were clearly manufactured locally, as evidenced by the presence of both finished and waster sherds, kiln furniture, and firebrick. The contexts from which they were recovered were well dated to the period under discussion—the 1760s to 1770s (Cosans 1975).

Archaeologist Beth Bower (1975, 1985) identified dozens of potters that were active in Philadelphia during the period between 1751 and 1775. At least five pottery shops were located in the blocks adjacent to Franklin Court on Market Street, between Third and Fifth Avenues (Figure 5). These potters included the Duche family (Anthony, Anthony, Jr., Andrew, and James); Alexander Bartram; Jonathan Durrell; and Richard, William, and Valentine Standley.

The ceramics under discussion are three basic types that were separated from many others because of their distinctive, easily identified decorations. Wasters of all three types demonstrate their local provenance. These are termed Philadelphia trailed wares, combed wares, and clouded wares. They share some characteristics: they all have a coarse, friable, red-orange paste and a white slip decoration. They have a thick, yellowish lead glaze. The trailed and combed wares are accented with splashes of green (powdered

copper), while the clouded wares are decorated with splashes of brown (powdered manganese). These accents range in appearance from individual dots to flowing trails of color that puddle in the base of the vessels.

The trailed wares are usually seen in large flaring-sided basins or bowls. At the Wessington House, these ranged in size from 12 to 14 in. (ca. 30 to 36 cm) in diameter and 4 to 6 in. (10 to 15 cm) deep. The decoration consists of trailed lines of slip applied directly to the body, beginning on the flattened, everted rim. There, a wavy line is framed by two annular bands. A spiraling line then circles the body two to four times before terminating. A reserve is formed, where a second wavy line is seen. The spiral begins again and usually continues to a point in the center of the vessel. In a few cases another reserve and wavy line can be seen on the base or the base is not decorated at all.

The combed ware vessels are drape-molded plates with coggled edges. They range in size from about 6 to 12 in. in diameter (15 to 30 cm) and are usually fairly shallow—1 to 2 in. (3 to 5 cm). The combed decoration, difficult to describe, is seen in Figures 2, 4. Basically, the decoration is formed by applying thick parallel bands of white slip which are then distorted with a "comb" tool. This is not like the classic fine combing of combed-and-dotted slipwares of Staffordshire (Noël Hume 1969:107), but is more like marbling in its effect. Philadelphia potters did, in fact, use classic fine combing and sgraffito decorations on similar vessels, but they were among the wares that could not consistently and confidently be sorted out. As with the trailed wares, green splashes of copper often accent the decorations of combed, sgraffito, and marbled wares.

The third distinctive type is termed clouded wares. These are consistently found on small pedestaled "Oriental Shape" bowls (Cosans 1975) about 6 in. (15 cm) in diameter and 4 in. (10 cm) deep. The body fabric of these wares is a little more refined, and the vessel walls are thinner. The decoration consists of white slip that

seems to have been poured into the vessel and sloshed around. The final effect varies from a consistent, neat coverage of the vessel interior, to a more sloppy effect, with slip pouring over the rim onto the vessel exterior in places and allowing the red body to show through in others. In some cases the slip forms lobes like the petals of a flower. The bowls are glazed inside and out with a thick, yellowish lead glaze. Powdered manganese was splashed onto the vessel interiors, providing a red to purplish brown accent.

This is not the full range of wares manufactured in Philadelphia, however, Figure 4 shows others. The local potters made blue-and-gray stonewares that cannot be easily separated from German Westerwald wares. They made black-glazed bowls, mugs, and chamberware similar to the black-glazed redwares of New England. Trailed, sgraffito, combed, marbled, and plain redwares are also found, but the decorations are

common on both domestic and English wares. In 1774 the first porcelain factory in America was established in Philadelphia and in the early 19th century refined earthenware factories were established in the area.

These three slip-decorated, lead-glazed earthenwares, which were clearly manufactured in downtown Philadelphia in the blocks adjacent to Benjamin Franklin's Franklin Court complex during the third quarter of the 18th century, can be easily and reliably identified, even from photographs, making them particularly valuable to archaeologists. Their wide distribution suggests that these were ceramics that were identified by the potters themselves as "Philadelphia Earthenware" in newspaper advertisements (Bower 1975, 1985; Steen 1989) and were, presumably, identifiable as such by potential buyers.

This was not folk pottery (Brunvand 1986:4-6), but rather was made expressly for sale by full-

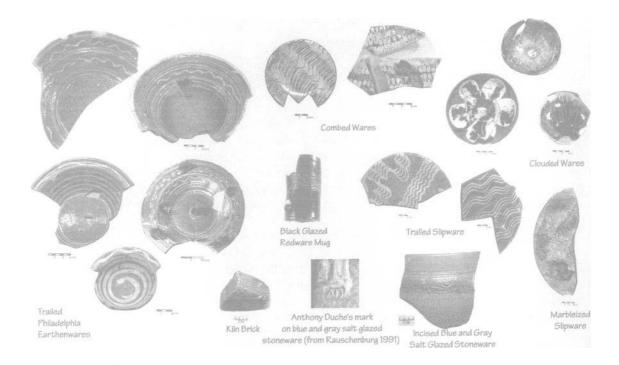


Figure 4. Philadelphia ceramics from Franklin Court.

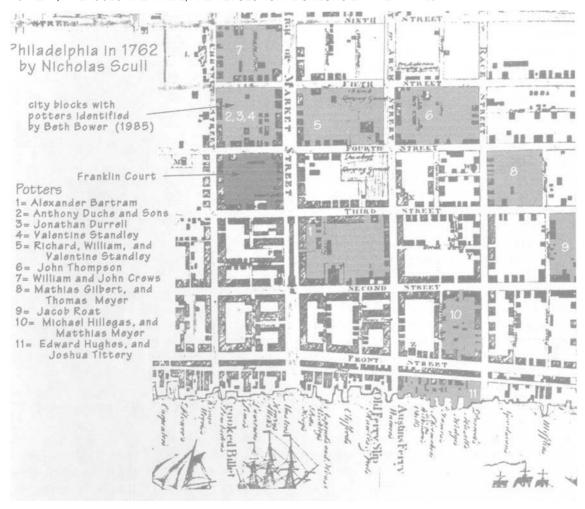


Figure 5. Downtown Philadelphia in 1762, with potters identified by Bower (1985).

time potters, most of whom were probably wage earners rather than shop owners. The decorations and vessel forms draw on European traditions, particularly German and English, but by the 1750s most of the potters were American-born, and most were trained professionals. This was not a full-scale industry during this period, but it provided a foundation for the emergence fully industrial refined earthenware and porcelain operations in the Philadelphia-Trenton area by the 1810s (Myers 1980).

Intercolonial Trade, Philadelphia Earthenwares, and the Growth of an American Social Identity

Research into the economic relations among the British North American colonies revealed quickly that economic historians considered intercolonial trading to be of limited interest (Johnson et al. 1915; Clark 1929; U. S. Bureau of the Census 1965; Clowse 1971; Shepard and Walton 1972; McCusker and Menard 1985; Steen 1989). In terms of the overall economy of the British

empire, the entire trade of manufactured goods among the colonies had limited significance.

A search for references to domestic pottery being traded among the colonies yielded almost nothing—passing references in the secondary literature of colonial manufacturing and trade (Clark 1929). Yet pottery sherds provide some of the best material evidence of this intercolonial trading. So the pottery trade, though unimportant in the greater scheme of things, is an avenue for exploring the broader mechanisms of intercolonial trading and social interaction. Archaeological evidence thus can be used to provide material proof of activities that are passed over by the documentary record. Archaeology, in this and many cases, is more sensitive than the documentary record, yet it is the documentary evidence that reveals the deeper meaning (Geertz 1973, 1983) of the phenomenon.

Although direct documentary evidence is lacking, the archaeological evidence shows that wares from Philadelphia were being shipped to the other American colonies on a much wider basis than was previously thought. To summarize a detailed argument briefly, intercolonial trade patterns were varied (Steen 1989). There were essentially three types of ports: those which shipped directly, those which transshipped heavily, and those which contributed to the trade.

The larger agricultural exporters, like Charleston and the sugar colonies, sent most of their goods directly to Britain. The smaller ports, like Edenton, gathered local products and sent them to larger aggregation centers, with few vessels crossing the Atlantic. The large ports of the North both provided ships for the agricultural ports and exported the produce of their regions.

Where Philadelphia and other northern ports differed most from the southern agricultural ports is that although the volume of their shipping was greater overall, they consistently shipped and received the bulk of their commerce not from Great Britain, but from the other colonies. Charleston, on the other hand, shipped the majority of its goods directly to England and Europe, receiving manufactured goods in return—rather



Figure 6. Downtown Charleston in 1770, with blocks yielding Philadelphia earthenwares highlighted.

than cash in many cases, causing great consternation (Johnson et al. 1915:88; Sellers 1934; Clowse 1971).

Colonial economics were affected by numerous factors (Shepard and Walton 1972; Sheridan 1984; Nash 1979). Although the economy grew overall, there were definite bi-polar tendencies. Rice or tobacco might sell for \$50 one year and \$500 the next. Tariffs might suddenly be raised, or a bounty might be put on the production of a particular crop-indigo, for instance (Coclanis 1989). So when English merchants trading with Charleston or other agricultural ports refused to pay cash, sending goods instead, it caused serious financial difficulties for whichever colony was affected. In an evolutionary sense, however, this was good, because it forced merchants to be more creative. By the third quarter of the 18th century, Charleston merchants had intricate relationships with traders and merchants throughout British America (Rogers and Chesnutt 1968-1985). These relationships were largely based on trust, because long distance connections were too tenuous to control. So many trade partners were tied by religion—Quakers, for instance; ethnicity—French Huguenots like Henry Laurens, who had relationships with other Huguenots in the colonies; or by family ties.

This tendency for the colonies to trade among themselves indicated a growing economic independence that would soon translate to political independence as England tightened the noose of taxation to finance its colonial ambitions. The non-importation movements leading up to the American Revolution demonstrated to the colonists that they could stand alone if need be.

Although the tariffs and enumerations hit consumers throughout the colonies, the people hit hardest by this were the ones most likely to be involved in the coastal trade: the manufacturers, planters, merchants, and shippers (Sellers 1934; Weir 1970, 1983; Bridenbaugh 1976; Nash 1979). Misery loves company, so another important function of intercolonial trade was to bring colonists into contact to commiserate. The result of this commiseration was the strengthening of social ties among the colonists. This was effected both through the written word and through the movement of people representing all of the social classes from slaves and sailors to planters and merchants. The ideas they carried with them fueled the resistance to the various "Intolerable Acts," encouraged the non-importation movements that began in 1768, and led to the American Revolution.

The trade among the colonies has not been as fully explored by economic historians as other aspects of trade because of its statistical insignificance, and the contacts forged through trading relationships are emphasized by social historians more for their political significance. It is argued here however, that regardless of its relative economic importance, the relationships among the colonies that coastwise trading encouraged allowed the colonists to stand together when they were threatened by English policies and to band together and fight when the time came.

James Hurst of Edenton, Henry Laurens of Charleston, and Valentine Standley of Philadelphia had very different experiences, but they are representative of the colonists at large. The decisions they made as individuals helped to shape the development of an American social identity that was distinct from their identification of themselves as British subjects. Without a robust and identifiable set of symbols and cultural understandings that allowed them to identify themselves as a distinct entity, the American Revolution could not have happened.

But the coalescence of the American colonists as a nation seems inevitable, in retrospect. The colonization process has been explored at length by archaeologists and historians and is central to the practice of historical archaeology (Wallerstein 1974, 1980; Lewis 1976; Braudel 1979; Schuyler 1988). Since the colonists themselves were often at odds with their mother country because of religious persecution, lack of personal freedom, and reduced economic opportunities, the colonies were growing away from the mother country from their inception, as events like Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia indicate (Fischer 1989:255). But with the French and Indian War, the colonists faced the cold fact of being forced, largely, to protect themselves while the British fought a global war. After the war, they added injury to insult by raising tariffs to finance it (Weir 1970:12). The various trade acts—the Stamp Act and Townshend Acts-imposed on the colonies after 1763 caused prices to rise and led to increased indebtedness.

In Charleston, artisans were particularly irate that British merchants were importing increasing numbers of slaves to take their jobs while they fell further into debt (Sellers 1934; Nash 1979). Beginning in Boston, artisans and mechanics began to rally around the concept of punishing the British by agreeing to boycott import manufactured goods. Merchants, manufacturers and Southern planters soon followed suit (Rogers 1969; Bridenbaugh 1976; Nash 1979).

During the terms of the various Non-Importation agreements, merchants who imported goods from England were boycotted and even became the focus of mob violence. When Thomas Shute, a Charleston shopkeeper (Figure 6) advertised in 1770 that he had received goods from Philadelphia "All of American Manufacture" it was in response to this political activity. He had imported flour, bread, mustard, beer, cider, vinegar, soap, chaises and riding chairs, horse collars, saddles and harnesses, cast iron kettles and dutch ovens, and brass fire dogs. Most important for archaeologists are the earthenwares: "milk pans, large and small jugs, chamber, butter and flower pots, jars, quart and pint mugs, porringers, bowls, dishes, plates, basons, sugar pots, pudding pans, and a variety of small items" (South Carolina Gazette 1770).

There is no lack of documentation for the years leading up to the American Revolution, so the lack of mention of earthenwares in other advertisements and political statements suggests that the more visible outward manifestations of domestic manufactured goods—like the cloth and leather used to fashion clothing—were more important symbolically than ceramics. By wearing home-spun cloth, people were effortlessly able to make a strong political statement. Ceramics, on the other hand, were relegated more to the privacy of the home and would require effort and explanation for their significance to be evident.

Yet to the modern observer considering archaeological evidence, ceramics are the clearest symbol of this revolutionary activity. Despite being, perhaps, too quotidian for mention at the time, these ceramics are a clear manifestation of a political movement that swept the colonies and the world. This reminds archaeologists of the tenuous and easy to miss connections between mute artifacts and culture process—even when it is taking place on a monumental scale.

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