Ceramic Variation Among Slave Quarter Sites at The Hermitage, TN

Lynsey A. Bates1, Leslie Cooper2, Beatrix Arendt3, and Jillian E. Galle

1University of Pennsylvania/The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS); 2 DAACS; 3Monticello Department of Archaeology

1Introduction

Variation in enslaved people’s access to valued goods at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage plantation has been investigated in two ways. On the one hand, similarities of goods suggest similar social strategies within the enslaved community (Thomson 1995, 1996). On the other hand, variation in these goods indicates the opportunistic behaviors that were capitalized for specialized task work (Galle 2004).

Building on these previous studies, and the recent development of a time-series chronology, we comparatively analyze ceramic assemblages from enslaved households to evaluate differential access to goods over time and space.

2Measuring Variation in the Assemblages

We compare ceramic assemblages from five structures located in two distinct quartering areas: the Field Quarter, and possibly the refurbishment of the Mansion Backyard area. These changes in plantation organization and management at the Hermitage may have led to disparate investment strategies adopted by enslaved people. Jackson’s standardization scheme included the construction of a brick mansion, outbuildings, four duplex dwellings in the Field Quarter, and possibly the refurbishment of the Mansion Backyard area. In the early 1820s, Jackson revised the landscape of the property and expanded cotton production.

3The Hermitage Assemblages

We categorize sherds with identifiable forms into three groups: serving, dining, and utilitarian vessels. Serving vessels are non-essential forms ready as plates, pitchers, teapots, and other dishes. Dining vessels are essential forms necessary for consumption such as platters, cups, plates, and bowls. Utilitarian vessels are non-associated with dining, including milk jugs, pottery, and chamberpots.

To measure variation, we use an artifact abundance index (AAI), which captures the number of segments of a single hand-made artifact group. This measurement is more reliable than absolute data since the baseline group either does not burn with time, or burn more in a predictable way (Nunn et al. 2000). To determine an Artifact Group for the Hermitage assemblages, we examined several artifact classes by comparing their square root densities (count per area of phase) with mean ceramic dates (Galle 2006). We determined that the Mansions Backyard near the Jackson household had more opportunities to perform skilled tasks (Galle 2004), and thereby had greater access to specialized, non-essential forms, such as serving vessels.

4Hypotheses

We anticipate that the distribution of these attributes diverges in two ways:

1. Residents living in the Mansion Backyard near the Jackson household had more opportunities to perform skilled tasks (Galle 2004), and thereby had greater access to specialized, non-essential forms, such as serving vessels.

2. Field Quarter residents acquired fewer serving forms and more decorated vessels relative to their counterparts at the Mansion Backyard. Increased specialization and more expectations after 1820 (Thomson 1995) limited the Field Quarter residents’ access to all ceramics over time.

5Variation in Vessel Form

40 60 80 100 120 140 160 180 200

Field Quarter

Mansion Backyard

Artifact Group 5 (Artifact Group 6)

Mansion Backyard: Triplex

Field Quarter: Triplex

Field Quarter: Duplex

Mansion Backyard: Duplex

Mansion Backyard: Single

Field Quarter: Single

In contrast to expectation, the abundance of serving vessels is low at the Mansion Backyard. Surprisingly, abundance values of dining vessels remain higher relative to other forms over time at both areas. Overall, the pattern of investment in forms is remarkably similar at both areas.

6Variation in Decorative Genre

Given the similar patterns in form, do we see variation in decoration?

To address this question, we examine different decorative genres on utilitarian earthenwares. We analyze absolute values for these genres (Miller 1989) to determine affordable versus expensive wares. We explore the same decorative assemblage data for other forms using the same data for plates.

From Miller’s work with decorated vessel tiles, we explore the following relative scale of refined earthenwares from least to most expensive:

Undecorated

Edged Ware

Transfer-printed Ware

Serving vessels remain higher relative to other forms over time at both areas. Finally, the least expensive wares, Undecorated and Edged Wares, are more abundant at the Field Quarter than the Mansion Backyard.

7Conclusions

Variation in forms and decorative genres suggests that, while those at the Hermitage had access to the same types of ceramic forms, there are differences in relative investment in decorative types. Through our analyses, we find that Field Quarter residents did not invest as much in the costlier transfer-printed wares as their Mansion Backyard counterparts, they acquired printed vessels more than any other decorated vessels. Residents at the Mansion Backyard invested in costly vessels relative to their Field Quarter counterparts. In line with Galle’s (2004) analysis, the data here suggests that people living in the Mansion Backyard focused their efforts on acquiring non-essential goods, perhaps another indication that this area was used for specialized tasks.

*References*


4The most expensive refined earthenwares, Transfer-Printed Wares, are the most abundant of the decorated vessels at both the Mansion Backyard and the Field Quarter. Inhabitants in both areas clearly chose to invest in these costly wares. In addition, the abundance of this decorative genre decreases over time. This shift may be linked to the increase in Undecorated wares over time, with the introduction after 1840 of ironstone and hotel wares.

We infer from these results that residents of both areas invested in tablewares, though to a greater degree at the Mansion Backyard.

In contrast, the Mansion Backyard values for Transfer Print decrease over time. This may be linked to the introduction after 1840 of ironstone and hotel wares.

We hypothesize that occupants of the Mansion Backyard consistently invested in these types of vessels over time.