Ceramic Investment by Enslaved People at The Hermitage, TN

1. Introduction

In the early 1820s, Andrew Jackson radically reorganized The Hermitage, his cotton plantation outside of Nashville, Tennessee, to accommodate his growing political ambitions and personal fortune. Reorganization included construction of a Greek-revival brick mansion, four duplex slave dwellings in the Field Quarter, and brick and frame slave dwellings in the Mansion Backyard. Jackson also added to his enslaved workforce, doubling the population in five years and expanding the number of skilled laborers working in and around the new Mansion.

2. The Hermitage Assemblages

Archaeological data from the Hermitage indicates that the new Mansion Backyard organization and management increased enslaved people’s access to goods (Thomas 1995, 1998; Galle 2004). Recent research suggests that slave living behind the Hermitage mansion, who worked in skilled occupations, acquired ceramic vessels of greater value than enslaved families living in the outlying Mansion Backyard (Bates et al. 2014).

To test observed differences in acquisition patterns of non-essential goods between the two communities, we employ two new methods for measuring financial investment in ceramics over time and space. Specifically, we examine whether Mansion Backyard residents invested in expensive ceramic types more than Field Quarter residents around the new Mansion.

3. Hypotheses

To test for differences in financial investment between the two communities, we examine specific artifact attributes that serve as proxies for access to non-essential goods.

Ceramic Vessel Type Abundance

Based on previous separate analyses of forms and decorations, we examine the interaction of these attributes in vase types.

We expect that Mansion Backyard residents acquired more expensive ceramic vessels than Field Quarter residents, and tablewares relative to their counterparts at the Field Quarter.

4. Variation in Ceramic Vessel Type Abundance

We create six ceramic vase types based on a combination of form and decoration. To assess investment in each vase type, we use an artifact abundance index.

\[ \text{Total Vessel Count} \times \text{Category Count} \]

This index is based on the discriminant of an Artifact Group 2 that does not differ in date or that varies in a predictable manner (Nafsoon et al. 2008; Galle 2004, 2000). For these assemblages, the Artifact Group 2 = total ceramic set. The density of ceramics recovered from excavations at the site does not correlate with time.

We report that Mansion Backyard index scores should be consistently higher than those at the Field Quarter for each decorated type.

\[ \text{Mansion Backyard scores are greater than the Field Quarter scores for each decorated type.} \]

\[ \text{Similarity of decorated tableware and Decorated with Printed Decoration scores confirm the expected difference in investment patterns;} \]

\[ \text{similarity of Phase 05 decorated flat tableware scores may be explained by a decrease in decorated plate cost by the 1850s.} \]

5. Average Ceramic Vessel Price

Given the patterns in broad vase type abundance, do we see significant differences in the money invested in specific vase types?

Average Ceramic Vessel Price: Similarly, Mansion Backyard residents invested greater funds in those same ceramics, reflected in an estimation of average weighted vase price.

Glass Tableware Abundance: A further measure of investment, we expect that Mansion Backyard residents also expended more resources on glass vases and drinking wares.

Average Ceramic Vessel Price Continued: Phases 02 – 05: Overlapping values reflect a similar ability to invest in higher-priced vessels reflecting overlapping population prior to Jackson’s reorganization and in the years following.

Price estimations over time are intriguing:

1) Phase 02: Overlapping values reflect a similar ability to invest in higher-priced vessels among the enslaved population prior to Jackson’s reorganization and in the years following.

2) Phases 03 and 05: Increasing differences between the Field Quarter and Mansion Backyard expenditures. Shocks purchased for skilled occupations living in the backcountry had greater opportunities to save cash with those skills, increasing their ability to purchase non-essential goods.

By Phase 05, differences between the fields can be seen in the Mansion Backyard residents’ willingness to spend on non-essential goods, while Field Quarter residents select less expensive, undecorated alternatives.

5. Variation in Glass Tableware Abundance

Glass vessels in forms such as bowls, tumblers, and mugs were available in shops alongside ceramic tablewares. The abundance of these simple glass tableware suggests the material was used to furnish homes in the field and surrounding community.

6. Conclusions

The abundance of decorated ceramic tableware indicates a greater investment of resources in the Mansion Backyard community consistently over time. The higher decoratedscores at the Field Quarter indicate a greater investment of resources in the Field Quarter.

The abundance of decorated ceramic tableware at the Field Quarter suggests a selection of those less expensive vessels over decorated equivalents. The ceramic price and glass tableware data illustrate increasing differentiation over time in expenditures on non-essential goods.

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