

The Stoneware Jug and More Ceramic Vessels: Seneca Village's Number One Houseware



The fragment of the stoneware jug with a cobalt watch-spring design is shown. Photo courtesy of the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History.

Abstract

This is a fragment of a stoneware jug, a common houseware in Seneca Village in the early 19th century. By examining the physical features and researching its history, I was able to determine the jug's significance to this time period and community. I address its possible uses, where it could have been created, what the structure and design of the shard signify, and its relation to the contemporary world.

This artifact is a fragment of a salt-glazed stoneware jug with a cobalt blue watch-spring spiral design.¹ The shard is most likely from the body of the jug, as shown through its curvature. This artifact, among others, was excavated in 2011 from the Wilson house, where All Angels Church sexton William Wilson lived with his family in 19th century Seneca Village. We can learn about the lives of Seneca Villagers through these objects. Stoneware vessels, such as jugs, crocks, bottles, and mugs, are typically utilitarian, used for food preservation and storage.

¹ "Painted 'Watch-Spring' Salt-Glazed Stoneware Jar/Jug Body Sherd," NYC Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center, accessed July 21, 2021, https://archaeology.cityofnewyork.us/collection/search/seneca-village-210472-painted-watch-spring-salt-glazed-stoneware-jarjug-body-sherd/context/all-angels-sc-6b-wilson-house-demolition-9531-168/page/1/view_as/grid.

Depending on how elaborate the designs are, these vessels can be ornamental jugs.² Although analyzing this artifact can reveal a lot of information, there is still confusion on the history of this particular stoneware jug. This essay will address the many unknowns about this object, focusing on the object's appearance and what that implies about its use and the artifact's importance to Seneca Villagers and the present.

Technical Details

This artifact is made of stoneware, a durable and commonly used ceramic often referred to as 'everyman's ware.'³ It has a cobalt watch-spring spiral, a popular design among stoneware vessels, as most of these ceramics have a blue, ranging from cobalt to aquamarine, hand-painted motif. It has a salt glaze which increases its durability and gives the jar an orange peel-like texture. Stoneware can be made in many ways, such as hand throwing, slip casting, press molding, and using pottery machines.⁴ According to the NYC Archaeological Repository, this object was wheel-thrown. Mainly stoneware artifacts were discovered when excavating Seneca Village, due to the durability of stoneware and its large presence in the households in the community. Stoneware is considered more expensive than earthenware because it is more durable; however, stoneware is less expensive than porcelain, which is not used for storage vessels, because it is too costly and fine. First manufactured in 15th-century Germany, stoneware was popular because "its salt glazes made for harder and safer containers than porous earthenware vessels with lead-based glazes."⁵ Because stoneware is very resistant and sturdy, it is very practical to hold food and be of everyday use in the kitchen.

Not much is known about the creation of this specific artifact; however, similarities in design to local potters in New York and New Jersey can reveal information about how this artifact was made, as the jug was likely created and distributed in the US. The Crolius and Remmey families were seen as New York City's best-known potters, famous for their decorated early-19th century wares. Many of their products, and the ceramics of the numerous US potters they mentored, have structures and motifs similar to this artifact.⁶ The Crolius pottery was very close to the African Burial Ground. This area of downtown Manhattan, on the south-southwestern shore of the Collect Pond in Five Points, was called "Pot Baker's Hill." Captain James Morgan, a German immigrant who established a pottery business in New Jersey,

²Meta F. Janowitz, "New York City Stonewares from the African Burial Ground," *Chipstone*, accessed July 21, 2021, <http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/412/Ceramics-in-America-2008/New-York-City-Stonewares-from-the-African-Burial-Ground>.

³ De Witt, Karen. "Stoneware: A Craft from America's Past." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Nov 30, 1978. <https://www-proquest-com.ezproxy.bgc.bard.edu/historical-newspapers/stoneware-craft-americas-past/docview/123578606/se-2?accountid=31516>.

⁴ "North American Stoneware," Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum, accessed July 12, 2021, <https://apps.jefpat.maryland.gov/diagnostic/Post-Colonial%20Ceramics/NorthAmericanStoneware/index-NorthAmericanStoneware.html>.

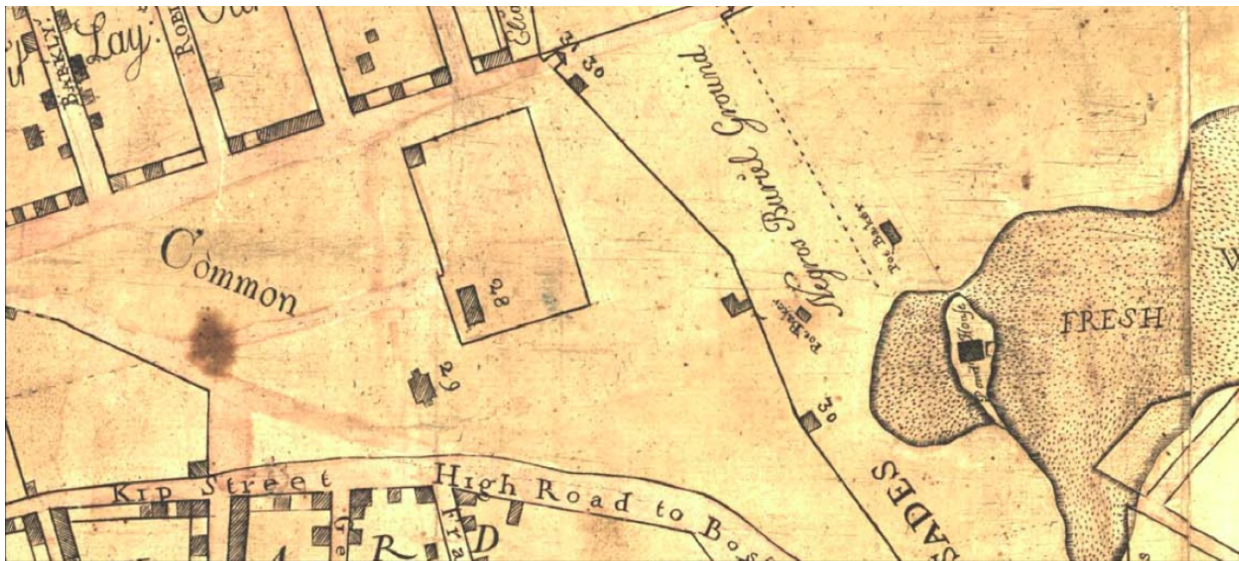
⁵ De Witt, "Stoneware: A Craft."

⁶ Janowitz, "New York," *Chipstone*.

mainly created pottery with brushed-on decorations in cobalt blue. Based on excavations of his work, the most typical pottery found had blue spiral or watch spring motifs, either existing as a single motif or combined with others to make elaborate decorations.⁷



A jar attributed to Morgan pottery, Cheesequake, New Jersey, 1775–1784. Goldberg, Warwick, and Warwick, "The Eighteenth-Century," Chipstone.



A map of Five Points. Two boxes next to the burial ground are labeled "Pot Baker," one being Crolius' pottery. "The Maerschalk Plan of New York City." Map. 1755. Accessed July 21, 2021. <https://www.green-wood.com/2012/crolius-potters/>.

⁷ Arthur F. Goldberg, Peter Warwick, and Leslie Warwick, "The Eighteenth-Century New Jersey Stoneware Potteries of Captain James Morgan and the Kemple Family," Chipstone, accessed July 12, 2021, <http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/411/Ceramics-in-America-2008/The-Eighteenth-Century-New-Jersey-Stoneware-Potteries-of-Captain-James-Morgan-and-the-Kemple-Family>.

Ceramic vessels were an important commodity that was often imported from Holland, China, Germany, and England to the places that wanted them.⁸ As a result of devastation and warfare in the German countryside, many moved to the Westerwald region, helping the pottery industry grow. In the early 1700s, more turmoil led Protestants and Germans to flee to America. German immigration explains why North American stoneware is heavily influenced by German pottery traditions and why there was a large presence of Germans in the pottery industry in the 19th century.⁹ There is a slight possibility that the stoneware jug was made in Germany and imported to the US with the Westerwald pottery tradition, but evidence suggests that the painted design is a North American pottery tradition.



Sherds of stoneware vessels made by the Crolius/Remmey families, Manhattan, New York, ca. 1720–1765. The fragments display variants of the spiral motif. Janowitz, "New York City Stonewares from the African Burial Ground," *Chipstone*.

Social Meaning

My object connects to the theme 'Kitchen and Foodways' because it can be used in conjunction with other containers or vessels in the kitchen. Foodways include customs of food production, preservation, preparation, presentation, etc., the stoneware jug fitting into the preservation category. Stoneware was often mass-produced and widely used, making it the predominant houseware in American households. The Wilson family left behind many vessels used to store food products. The jug most likely held liquids, similar to glass wine bottles and stoneware beer bottles that were also employed as liquid containers. The jug was a pragmatic vessel for carrying water for drinking, bathing, and other activities.

Before refrigeration, many jugs held pickled foods (such as oysters), butter, cider, and Holland gin (puzzle jugs). Stoneware jars could hold raisins (referred to as jar raisins), oils, pickles, and sometimes honey.¹⁰ Stoneware jugs were seen as a household essential, but in the

⁸ Olive R. Jones, "Commercial Foods, 1740-1820," *Historical Archaeology* 27, no. 2 (1993), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616237>.

⁹ Goldberg, Warwick, and Warwick, "The Eighteenth-Century," *Chipstone*.

¹⁰ Jones, "Commercial Foods."

contemporary world, jugs are not utilized often due to the creation of different vessels and the development of technology. Mason jars and refrigeration eventually led to a decline in handmade household stoneware.¹¹ Today, jugs are made of ceramic, metal, and plastic—plastic jugs being more commonly in use. Jugs were used to hold liquids, but now every drink product comes in its purpose-made container, decreasing the demand for storage vessels. Therefore, a stoneware jug is similar to contemporary glass jars, plastic tupperware, reusable cups/bottles, and other containers that are sold empty and can hold foodstuff.



A puzzle jug made by Staffordshire pottery in the 19th century. Puzzle jugs were used to create a game out of drinking, as the objective was to drink without spilling through the holes. This jug says “GENTLEMEN COME TRY YOUR SKILL /I'LL HOLD YOU SIXPENCE IF YOU WILL /YOU CANNOT DRINK UNLESS YOU SPILL.” (Sourced by <http://www.antiques.com/classified/Antique-Porcelain---Pottery/Antique-Pitchers/Antique-Staffordshire-pottery-puzzle-jug--19th-century>)

Additionally, in the present, durability and purpose are not the only concerns with houseware, as sustainability and aesthetics have become important values. For example, glass mason jars, formerly only used for the preservation of pickles, jams, and other foods, gained popularity when many saw their potential for aesthetically pleasing and creative uses. Many began using them to hold iced teas and alcoholic drinks as opposed to using cups, an element in home decor, or as containers for objects other than foodstuffs. Like other ceramics and delicate materials, if impacted, stoneware can break. Therefore it is seen as more sustainable to use robust containers. Today, the material of choice is performance plastics, as its versatility allows us to make improvements in all industries. Performance plastics are usually cheaper, easier to shape, lighter, and more efficiently produced than ceramics. They also have the long-life quality that

¹¹ De Witt, "Stoneware: A Craft."

ceramics possess, but are more recyclable when necessary; therefore, they are more sustainable. The true environmental costs for plastics are lower than ceramics given the exceedingly high sintering temperatures and that the ceramic materials typically have longer decomposition lifetimes than plastics. Weight differential and recyclability advantages increase the environmental value proposition of plastics over ceramics.¹²

Stoneware jugs do not have as much of an impact on present-day life since we have developed different types of vessels and containers. We can compare stoneware practices from then and now, as technological advancements have occurred through the last two centuries. It is important to study what and how this artifact was used, because it can reveal information about 19th century Seneca Village kitchen practices. Because of the lack of resources available about Seneca Village and its residents, we have the responsibility of discovering more about their daily life through the objects left behind.

¹² Mark Shriver and Brian Reuss, "Plastics vs. Ceramics: The Battle of the Durables," in *Environmental Corner*, [Page 9], excerpt from *The LAPD Magazine*, December/January 2015-2016.

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