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China in Seneca Village

Abstract

_____ In this essay, I will talk about the social role this plate had, and what it meant both to the Wilson family and to guests who would have seen and used said plate when visiting. I will also talk about the pattern and material of the plate in relation to its value, and its relation to English ceramic history and consumer culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.



Plate (Photo courtesy of the NYC Archaeological Repository).

The artifact is a piece of a plate or platter with a printed underglaze “Blue Willow” pattern, which was very popular during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the picture above, you can see that it is about thirteen centimeters long and on the piece you can see a willow tree, a pagoda, and part of a boat in the river. Some of the glaze has chipped off, and some parts have been discolored from the original white and blue. The artifact was found in the Wilson house. The Wilsons were a large family that lived near the All Angels church in Seneca Village, where William, the head of the house, was the sexton. Using articles about ceramics, specifically the history of Asian-inspired wares in the western world, and their significance in middle-class communities, I have come to these conclusions: the plate belonged to one member of the Wilson Family and was only used by that one member, and the plate itself might have been

used as a sign to others that the Wilsons were well off. It may have been a way to show members of the community, or other guests who came to their home, that they were not poor or struggling, in a country where Black people were seen as less than human. The pattern and material of the plate tell us a lot about the consumer culture of that time, specifically what type of wares were highly sought after and when.

At first glance, this plate fragment might look like an imported Chinese plate. However, this plate was probably made in Staffordshire, England. The plate is supposed to resemble an imported ware, but it is just an imitation because while Asian wares were extremely popular at the time, they were also very expensive. When the importation of Chinese porcelain began, it gave many potters the goal to figure out how to make it themselves. This led to multiple innovations in pottery and many new types of wares, including our plate fragment. The plate is refined earthenware, also known as “china,” and “semi-porcelain.”¹ It is different from normal earthenware because it is more compact. The artifact itself can be classified as “China glaze,” which is an imitation of Chinese porcelain “via the filter of English porcelain.”² One reason China glaze came into being was many English potters were unable to make porcelain due to a 1775 patent on porcelain made out kaolin and Gowan stone, which was what porcelain was being made out of in Europe, held by Richard Champion. Because this patent did not stop potters from using said materials at all, they used it to create something resembling porcelain.³ This type of ceramic originated in England and it is believed that China glaze production began in Staffordshire around 1775.⁴ In the 1760s, the market was full of creamware whose prices were dropping due to less demand and oversupply. China-glaze was the product that would save the industry and give potters “a better price for their efforts.”⁵ It was not as expensive as actual porcelain, so those of the middle classes were able to afford them. The Willow pattern was introduced in 1790 by Josiah Spode and was based on the Mandarin pattern, also created by Spode.⁶ According to the Spode exhibition online, both the Mandarin pattern and the Willow pattern were based off of a chinese pattern called *Two Birds*.⁷ The Willow pattern was incredibly popular and thus has many versions, and is considered the most enduring pattern. With the

¹ "Introduction to Ceramic Identification – Historical Archaeology." Accessed July 21, 2021.

<https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/histarch/ceramic-types/introduction/>.

² Miller, George L., and Robert Hunter. 2001. “How Creamware Got the Blues: The Origins of China Glaze and Pearlware.” *Ceramics In America*. Accessed July 21, 2021

<http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/11/Ceramics-in-America-2001?s=Chinese>.

³ Miller, George L., and Robert Hunter. 2001. “How Creamware Got the Blues: The Origins of China Glaze and Pearlware.” *Ceramics In America*. Accessed July 21, 2021

<http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/11/Ceramics-in-America-2001?s=Chinese>.

⁴ Miller, George L., and Robert Hunter. 2001. “How Creamware Got the Blues: The Origins of China Glaze and Pearlware.” *Ceramics In America*. Accessed July 21, 2021

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⁵ Miller, George L., and Robert Hunter. 2001. “How Creamware Got the Blues: The Origins of China Glaze and Pearlware.” *Ceramics In America*. Accessed July 21, 2021

<http://www.chipstone.org/article.php/11/Ceramics-in-America-2001?s=Chinese>.

⁶ Samford, Patricia M. "Response to a Market: Dating English Underglaze Transfer-Printed Wares." *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1997): 8. Accessed July 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616524>.

⁷ "Spode Exhibition Online." Accessed July 25, 2021. <http://www.spodeceramics.com/>.

popularity of Asian-styled wares, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that those who owned it would show them off.



Willow patterned plate. (Photo courtesy of Hawk Tolson, Ellen Gerth, and Neil Cunningham Dobson, "Ceramics from the "Blue China" wreck." *Ceramics in America* 2008)



Two Birds Pattern. (Photo courtesy of the Spode Exhibition Online)

Ceramics, pottery, and plates hold a lot of cultural significance. The kind of wares you use to serve guests can have an effect on your social status. Upper-middle-class women bought more expensive wares, such as porcelain, to use at gatherings and parties to maintain their social positions by impressing their acquaintances.⁸ It is possible that this was the case in Seneca Village as some of the residents were members of the middle class, and porcelain was found at the excavation sites, including at the Wilson House. This also means that our very own plate fragment might have also been used for entertaining because Asian and Asian-styled wares were highly sought after. Another reason the plate could have been used as a tool to gain or maintain status is that there is evidence that middle-class African Americans were sensitive to what their white counterparts thought of them. According to Diana Dizerega Wall, “Many middle-class African Americans, however, frowned on domestic service jobs for men the jobs that characterized most men of Little Africa because whites looked on it as demeaning “women's work”. ”⁹ If the men cared about their occupations and how that affected their public image, then why wouldn't the women care about what kind of dinnerware they had and how that affected theirs?

When it comes to personal use, there were differences between European American households and African American ones. In some African American households, it was found that instead of using sets of matching plates, each individual family member may have had his or her own individual dishes that he or she used at daily meals.¹⁰ Wall agreed with anthropologist Alice Baldwin-Jones and believed that the reason for this difference is “In the face of slavery where people of various cultures were brought together as property and [were] treated as less than human, [one was forced] to create an identity for oneself ... [a] sense of individuality that would lead to using unmatched dishes, and other personal items to create such an autonomy.”¹¹ This means that the plate may have belonged to only one member of the Wilson family, and they might have chosen this plate with the willow pattern specifically, and possibly had more wares with a similar aesthetic to match. Porcelain and certain types of China are still quite expensive today, and owning them is a sign of wealth. While decorated wares are less common now than they were back then, people still collect them for decoration and display instead of use. The culture of expensive ceramics has not changed significantly. The rarer, more delicate, and more beautiful the ware, the more people will be impressed by it, now with the added element of age.

In conclusion, despite outward appearances, the plate that our artifact was a part of has a much larger part in the Wilsons lives, and in general ceramic history. It was a part of a member of the Wilson family's home identity, using the plate to foster individuality because they would have been the only member with that plate and possibly that style of ware, the style being China glaze. China glaze, and Asian style wares in general, were highly sought after in western society,

⁸ Wall, Diana Dizerega. "Examining Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century New York City." *Historical Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (1999): 113. Accessed July 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616674>.

⁹ Wall (1999): 104. Accessed July 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616674>.

¹⁰ Wall (1999): 115. Accessed July 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25616674>.

¹¹ Baldwin-Jones, Alice “Historical Archaeology and the African American Experience.” Paper submitted for Historical Archaeology, Program in Anthropology (1995): 3-4

and that desire led to innovations in English pottery. The desire to own Asian wares had both commercial and social significance, which we can connect to the Wilsons and how they might have wanted people to perceive them, all from a piece of a plate.

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