

12-1999

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Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 4, Issue 1-3, 1999, pages 6-6.

<http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/>

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Dishing Out New Ideas

By Lisa Hudgins

On a farm outside of Albany, New York, a small group of archaeologists, curators, and collectors gather each summer to compare notes, network, and argue about British ceramics. Irreverently dubbed "dish camp," this increasingly popular program is designed as an open forum in which experts and novices alike can learn and exchange ideas—a type of pottery "think tank." Its growing success can be attributed to its founder, Don Carpentier, a craftsman with a vision for community learning and a talent for recreating the past.

The class is set in a recreated historic village, called Old Eastfield, which consists of restored homes from around New England. There is no running water or electricity on site, so those who elect to stay in the 19th-century tavern may find themselves reading or playing dominoes by candlelight, and awakening to a brisk jog to the outdoor lou at first light. Water is plentiful if you have the strength to pump it from the well, and first thing in the morning, the slight chill is sure to awaken even the groggiest resident. Overall, the experience is refreshing and enlightening, as one comes to appreciate the complexity of farm living in the early 19th century and the difficulties which had to be overcome to make the pottery, which was the topic of discussion.

The program consisted of three days of lectures and discussions, led by ceramics historians from around North America and England. The real issue of the conference seemed to be finding a balance between the historical, archaeological, and curatorial views of ceramics. A great deal of informal discussion centered

around the need to work as a team to incorporate archaeological data with historical research in museum collections and exhibitions. A series of fledgling ideas involved interpretation of sites, regional approaches to archaeology, and the need for greater communication in an evolving multidisciplinary atmosphere.

The program schedule was quite diverse: sites from Staffordshire, Canada, and Virginia were represented in lectures. This year the program included a discussion of the distribution and pricing structure of ceramics, based upon recent research into invoices and daybooks of New York dealers. Archaeological site reports from two New York sites were provided as a tangible balance to the documentary research. An afternoon demonstration by a redware potter made obvious the talent and hard work that was involved in the pottery manufacture in England, while discussions from the Staffordshire potteries focused on new archaeological discoveries, including caches of similar redwares at Staffordshire.

Quite obviously, the

highlight of the conference was the ceramics themselves. Collectors, archaeologists, and curators brought wares from their collections to be displayed in the center of the room, where attendees could look to their heart's content. A wide range of wares from luster wares to mocha, pearlwares to pineapple, graced the tables at one time or another. Each owner was happy to provide the history behind each piece, and the attendees eagerly listened and asked pointed questions about location, technology, or manufacturer. By the end of the class, it was difficult to say good-bye to the group of enthusiasts who carried their wares down the gravel roads to their cars, which were parked at the edge of the village—already planning for next year's class on pottery technology.



Ceramicists gathering at Old Eastfield. (Photo by Lisa Hudgins)