

Full Circle: John Bartlam's Porcelain Returns to the Carolinas

By Lisa Hudgins



Figure 1: Bartlam porcelain sherds excavated at the Cain Hoy site (38BK1349). (Photos by Stanley South)

When John Bartlam came to South Carolina in the 1760s, he was intent on establishing a potworks that would rival ceramics produced by any of the factories in his native Staffordshire. He went on to create creamware and porcelain wares that found their way into the Carolina backcountry and onto ships destined for England. Now 200 years later, some of Bartlam's porcelain has found its way back home to the Carolinas.

Early research on Bartlam's ceramics began in North Carolina, where archaeologist Stanley South found pieces of Staffordshire-style creamware at the Bethabara and Wachovia excavations in the 1960s near Old Salem. In the following decades, South, along with Brad Rauschenberg and George Terry, traced

the unusual creamware back to the pottery of John Bartlam and his assistant William Ellis.

When South moved to South Carolina in 1969 to work at the SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA), he began to find examples of the unusual creamware at other archaeological sites: Ninety Six, Fort Watson, and Camden. Excavations in 1991-92 at Cain Hoy, on the Wando River in Berkeley County near Charleston, revealed that Bartlam was indeed producing a refined earthenware they dubbed, "Carolina creamware." But archaeologists also discovered he was making a soft paste blue and white porcelain (Figure 1). The delicate porcelain, decorated in Bartlam's signature style, became the subject of some debate. In 2007,

it was recognized as the first porcelain produced in America. Subsequent research has established a unique chemical signature for the Bartlam porcelain, making it easy to distinguish from its English-made counterparts.

Armed with a stylistic and scientific profile, ceramics experts began searching in earnest for intact pieces of Bartlam porcelain. By 2011, four tea bowls had been discovered in England. At auction, the Bartlam porcelain saw prices far above expectations. In 2013, a tea bowl was sold at Christies for \$146,500. Five years later, Woolley and Wallis auctioned a small teapot for £460,000. As of this writing, a



Figure 3: Bartlam porcelain saucer. (Courtesy of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) at Old Salem, NC)

total of 11 pieces of Bartlam porcelain have been located, including five tea bowls, five saucers, and the teapot.

Several pieces have found their way back to the United States. The teapot (Figure 2) was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Other tea wares found homes at the Chipstone Foundation, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts-Boston. And in 2018, one of the saucers (Figure 3) found its way to the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Old Salem, less than a mile from where the search for John Bartlam began. The saucer is on display there, along with the excavated sherds that excited ceramics scholars nearly 30 years ago.



Figure 2: Bartlam porcelain teapot. (Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)