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Charleston Delftware: A Cold Case from the SCIAA Archives
By Lisa R. Hudgins

The prevalence of police dramas on prime time television has made the concept of a "cold case" part of popular culture. But every day, archaeologists and historians live with their own set of cold case files...details over which they occasionally lose sleep, or sites that have that one persistent question will haunt even the busiest investigator. Sometimes it takes years for the question to be resolved.

When a forensics case is reopened, or when archaeologists revisit the files from a previous excavation, they use a type of surrogate data to recreate the scene—maps, photographs, or illustrations, which were made at the time of the original excavation. Just as a coroner cannot always perform a second autopsy, archaeologists cannot re-excavate a feature; they must rely on these proxies to recapture the essence of a site. Yet the data that must be used does not always provide enough information. For example, it is difficult to reproduce exactly the color and texture of the soil. Intrusions into a feature can't be embraced completely even through the use of photographs or maps. So even as techniques become more advanced and imaging more precise, the difficulties with using surrogates for archaeological data remain.

A recent project seemed to demonstrate the pitfalls encountered when trying to identify unknown archaeological remains using photographs. An archaeological "cold case" from the SCIAA files was reopened while completing a survey of Charleston ceramics. In the 1970s, a site excavated by SCIAA archaeologist Richard Polhemus, yielded thousands of delftware sherds, deposited sometime after 1770 when civic improvements were made to Charleston's wharves. The site was adjacent to the location of a tavern, which opened in the 1740s, and was surrounded by warehouses filled with goods imported into Charleston's bustling wharves.

When the site was originally excavated, dozens of delftware patterns were recovered, with many vessels still nested together. At that time, the archaeologists contacted ceramics experts to establish a place...
or time of origin. Some of the scholars suggested a French or Scottish origin, but no definitive identification was made at the time. After several attempts, the search for the source of the delftware was abandoned to more pressing matters. The information was filed away for future reference.

When the site data from that delft cache was recently revisited, the patterns were again analyzed for the time and place of origin. In the 30 years since the original discovery, substantial advances have been made in identifying the world ceramics markets for this period. But when the data was presented to modern scholars, it met again with mixed results. The technical challenges, combined with the complex history of delftware in Charleston, may explain the conclusions reached by our new panel of experts.

**Charleston and the Delft Trade**

The South Carolina low country is no stranger to tin-glazed ceramics. When the Spanish settled at Santa Elena, they brought with them elegant blue and white maiolica plates and bowls. In the 17th century, British delftwares were imported in barrels for resale in trendy Charleston shops. These colorful wares were an affordable alternative to porcelain, and graced the corner cupboards in many Charleston homes. However, while tin-glazed pottery was a relatively new phenomenon in Western Europe, it was no newcomer to the ceramics landscape. Tin-glazed wares began being produced in the Middle East and Southern Europe after the introduction of Chinese porcelain into the world market—about the 9th century CE. Beautiful blue and white Chinese porcelain wares flooded the market and threatened to claim a huge share of the pottery trade. Western potters began scrambling for ways to offer similar products to the consumer with minimal production cost.

![Fig. 3: Playing card pattern delftware from Charleston. (SCIAA photo)](image)

The answer was found in tin-glazed ceramics: low-fired clay vessels covered with a glaze of lead, ash, and tin. This combination produced earthenware with an opaque finish that could be decorated with blue designs similar to the imported porcelain. They were known as *maiolica* in Spain, *maiolica* in Italy, or *faience* in France and Germany. Originating in the Middle East, tin-glazed pottery arrived in Europe sometime in the 6th century and was ubiquitous by the end of the 16th century. Its popularity waned in the mid 1700s, and then experienced resurgence until the end of the century.

While the production of delftwares spread throughout Europe, they did not necessarily find their way to the colonies. The English Navigation Acts of 1651 and 1660 and the non-importation proclamation of 1672 prevented importation of ceramics from non-British sources like Holland, France, Portugal, and Spain. Customs officials were ordered to seize and destroy any illegal shipments, reducing the number of wares available to colonial customers. Yet, despite these trade restrictions, some importation occurred. Shipping records, advertisements, and archaeological evidence bear witness that cargos of continental pottery entered colonial ports during this period. The ban was not "officially" lifted until 1775, just prior to the American Revolution.

**Identifying The Charleston DelftWares**

Given the omnipresence of tin-glazed ceramics, is it possible to distinguish the source of the delft pottery found in Charleston? Using only photographs and archaeological report data, I contacted experts from the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, to ask that question.

The variability in the decoration of these delftwares suggests more than one source for the collection. The vitreous *kawaart* layer, or lead glaze, used on several of the designs...
is typically associated with Dutch delftware. Also, the blue and white landscape designs seem to be reminiscent of Dutch designs created during the 18th century (Fig. 1). Production of delft in the Netherlands in the 1780s included what has been called Boerendelftsch, a type of “peasant” delftware with crudely outlined designs. English potters also produced a simply detailed delftware; perhaps a result of the “industrialization” of delft works in Europe. Mass production and high volume may have generated the crude quality of the designs painted on our vessels (Fig. 2).

One pattern in particular intrigued the scholars consulted in this project. Shards depicting the “playing card” pattern seen in Fig. 3 were discussed at length. The pattern has been found in archaeological remains of the Shapiro House at Strawberry Banke (Portsmouth, NH) and a punch bowl of the pattern is in the collection at Winterthur (L. Grigsby, pers. comm. 2008). In an effort to narrow down the origin of the card pattern, I contacted the staff at the Elliott Avedon Museum and Archive of Games in Ontario, Canada. Historically, French, Dutch, and English playing cards carried the four suits seen on the Charleston delft sherd—clubs, spades, hearts, and diamonds—while Germany used a different motif, incorporating balloons, acorns, hearts, and leaves (Fig. 4). While ceramics with card motifs were made in English, French, and Dutch factories, this specific pottery design was unfamiliar to many of the scholars.

Archaeology by Proxy
Despite the availability of photographs and descriptions of the ceramics from Charleston, both ceramics historians and stylistic complexity of low country trade during and after the Revolution. Museum collections along both sides of the Atlantic have pieces that match patterns in this collection, but which remain unidentified to date. While the delftware continues to be a mystery, it is hoped that new technologies for identification of artifacts, as well as improved electronic communication, will continue to improve the process for identifying archaeological remains. As advances in forensic science have solved previously “unsolvable” mysteries, we are looking forward to closing this archaeological “cold case.”

For more information on tin-glazed ceramics, check out the following websites:

Museum of London
http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/

Texas A&M Nautical Archaeology
http://nautarch.tamu.edu/PortRoyal/tinglaze/index.htm

Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum
http://www.jcfpat.org/diagnostic/index.htm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/hd/maio/hd_maio.htm

Victoria and Albert Museum
http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/ceramics/index.html