

Long-separated plate pieces offer insight

NOT ALL archaeological discoveries are made in the field.

Two plate fragments, unearthed more than 20 years and a half-mile apart on the Monticello grounds, illustrate that point.

Back in 1981, during restoration of the garden retaining wall – the 1,000-foot-long stone wall separating the orchard and vegetable garden – workers discovered a cache of glass and ceramic vessel fragments. Among them were pieces from approximately three dozen plates, saucers, and tea cups. Of these items, 28 were of hand-painted Chinese export porcelain.

Monticello archaeologists concluded that the cache was deposited in 1808, when Jefferson undertook a massive leveling and wall construction effort that resulted in the long, flat vegetable garden seen today. However, Chinese porcelain, the dominant ware in the garden wall cache, was not the luxury item in 1808 that it had been in the previous few

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decades. By the early 19th century the popularity of Chinese porcelain was waning, as English and other European porcelains became fashionable. This fact suggested to archaeologists that Jefferson's dinnerware collection might not have kept pace with the latest ceramic trends.

COMMENTS?
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Analyst Beth Clites cataloging artifacts in Monticello's archaeology lab.

TJF

That was an eminently plausible explanation, until Karen Smith made a discovery of her own in Monticello's archaeology lab.

Smith, curator of archaeological collections, noticed that the distinctive blue-and-white decorative pattern on a plate fragment excavated in 2003 from a subfloor pit at Site 8, a slave quarter site located about a half-mile from the mansion, was very similar to that on a piece of plate from the garden wall cache unearthed in 1981. Intrigued, she took the two pieces and placed them side by side. They not only resembled each other, they fit together perfectly.

But how had these two pieces of the same plate become separated in the first place? And why?

The subsequent attempt to answer those questions included revisiting some previous assumptions, and led to a changed view of some material aspects

of life in the late 1700s at Monticello, for both Jefferson and his enslaved field hands.

The occupation of Site 8 dates securely between 1770 and 1800, based on a number of independent lines of evidence, including the analysis and dating of ceramics and other items from the area where houses once stood. House 1, the structure associated with the subfloor pit in which the porcelain

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Plate pieces reunited

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plate fragment was found, is the earliest of the four known houses at Site 8 and dates from about 1770 to 1780 – at least 28 years from the 1808 date ascribed to the garden wall cache in which one of the matching plate fragments was found.

However, a further look at documentary sources revealed that the 1808 garden wall was not the only one Jefferson commissioned for the area just above the orchard. According to entries in his Garden Book from early 1774, Jefferson had workers construct a stone wall for an early Monticello vegetable garden. The “dumping” of the broken glass and ceramics at the site around this time makes more sense in light of the unequivocal date for House 1, since the plate had to break and be carried down the mountain before or during the occupation of the Site 8 house. Revised

dating of the garden wall cache to the mid-1770s also says something about Jefferson’s attention to style: His table and tea furnishings apparently were not out of date after all.

Variation in the amount of porcelain found at Site 8 and at other sites with comparable data seems to bear out a later arrival of Chinese porcelain to slave households. The status of Chinese porcelain as an expensive luxury item in the latter part of the 18th century may account for why it does not show up in more than incidental amounts on slave domestic sites until the 1790s. In 1774, the occupants of House 1 seem to have viewed the porcelain plate as an item, broken or not, worth taking home. Thirty years later, they would in all

likelihood only have been interested in an unbroken one.

“The plate is a very cool discovery, and a tribute to Karen’s keen eye,” said Fraser Neiman, Monticello’s director of archaeology. “But what gives it real value is our ability, through rigorous dating and comparative research, to tell a larger story about shifting fashions and preferences in Jefferson’s time and gain more insight into domestic life on the plantation.”

More information about the archaeology work at Site 8 can be found online at www.monticello.org/archaeology/survey/site07-08.html.



These two fragments of the same plate were excavated from sites located a half-mile apart.

TJF