

When then wasn't when then was, or something like that:

A new look at artifact dating, consumer behavior, and flea markets,
with reminiscences of Delaware traditional recycling practices.

Edward F. Heite
Heite Consulting

A paper prepared for presentation at CNEHA, Wilmington, Delaware, 19 October 2002

While excavating the Bloomsbury site in Kent County, Delaware, we confronted several discoveries that caused us to seriously re-examine old assumptions about class, consumption patterns, the use of dating tools, and behavior differences between persons of different economic levels.

Most important, in my opinion, was the realization that different people, or groups of people, in the same community might relate differently, at a fundamental level, to their material-culture environment.

Documentary research had established that the site's occupants were poor tenant farmers, living on land that was poorly drained, heavy with clay and relatively infertile. This low-status, dirt-poor tenant house site was occupied from the middle of the eighteenth century into the second decade of the nineteenth century. As one should expect for any household of the period, the family's table settings included creamware, pearlware, and a large quantity of red-bodied utilitarian earthenware. In particular, a site occupant evidently took great pains to assemble a tea set of a certain pattern of creamware from several different sources. The resultant collection at least indicated that the individual was conversant with the newly introduced fashion of sets of china, which Josiah Wedgwood was promoting in order to sell more dishes. It's interesting to note how quickly an idea could have transferred from the stylish London show rooms to the backwoods of Kent County.

While the site occupants were enjoying their stylish tea ware, a large stoneware jug broke. One part, which we recovered from the well, was the face mask of a later

bellarmine jug, traditionally dated to the end of the seventeenth century or the beginning of the eighteenth century, at the very latest.



Figure 1: This is the Bloomsbury mask, enlarged somewhat.

Before we invoke the “heirloom factor,” it is important to note that there were at least three such jugs on the site, all of them a half-century old when the site was first occupied. The mask portion was found in the construction deposit of a well (excavation register 182J) that was dug about 1770. Another specimen of the same ware had been broken, and then re-used as a dipper or basin in another well that was dug around 1798 and closed before 1814.

Our traditional concept of a site’s artifact assemblage presumes that the newest artifact dates each deposit, but the preponderance of artifacts will date the period of greatest activity, as reflected in the mean ceramic date. Even though the house was built when these jugs were already a half-century old, we should be able to comfortably dismiss their heirloom value, especially since they clearly received hard use on this site.



Figure 2: This outbuilding is nothing special, nor are the vehicles stored in and around it. Standing a few miles from the affluent suburbs of the state capital, this building near Chapeltown still is an unnoticed utilitarian structure.

Instead, we must remember that they were utensils in use by a household, an everyday part of the environment, even though today we would call them antiques. In an era when Strawberry Shortcake bed sheets bring big money on eBay, it is sobering

to realize that our ancestors considered an object's useful life as lasting as long as the object remained useable.

Any late eighteenth century assemblage containing three bellarmine jugs will return a noticeably early mean ceramic date, and of course a very early initial date.

Such early ceramic dates might also indicate a class of consumer behavior that might result from scarcity, or personal taste, or poverty, or isolation from the larger market. At Bloomsbury, these four factors might not apply, since the tenants, though poor, were clearly conscious of the latest trends in consumer behavior.

Alternatively, I suggest that the bellarmine jugs may be evidence for the lively Delaware custom of trading goods at twice-weekly markets. The court towns of New Castle, Lewes, and Dover, had proprietary charters for markets to be held on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The market in Dover continues in unbroken existence to the present day, but it is held on Tuesdays and Fridays. In the nearby town of Smyrna, there was no chartered market, but we have evidence that the two days were observed as market days anyway.

It is not uncommon to find century-old ceramics and tools offered for sale, not as antiques but as useful utensils, at the Dover market. This same market existed when the Bloomsbury site was occupied. When the Bloomsbury housewife wanted jugs for water or other liquids, she would naturally have gone to the "sale," as we call it.

During my own childhood, we ate off a mixture of blue willow china that is today considered a collection of valuable antiques. When we children broke a few pieces, my mother would buy replacements from the many second-hand dealers who regularly set up at the sale. It was not unusual for us to eat our breakfast cereal from bowls that were a half-century old, just as the bellarmine jugs were about that old at Bloomsbury.

We found another clue to market activity at Bloomsbury. Aside from nails and a few parts of implements that probably were in use at the time the house was abandoned, all the ferrous scrap on the site was cast iron. No substantial amount of wrought iron was present, although there were pieces of at least three cast iron pots scattered about the site.

Cast iron had no value on the local market, because it could be re-used only in a furnace or foundry, neither of which existed in the central Delaware market area. On the other hand, any piece of wrought iron could be converted into useful tools by a blacksmith or a farmer with a forge. Nearly every estate inventory of the period includes a quantity of scrap iron, to which a value was assigned.

Even in my grandfather's day, in downtown Dover, the local metal dealer would take scrap in exchange for new metal. As a child, it was my job to knock the brass bushings out of old iron fittings. My grandfather would exchange the brass for new metal shapes from the yard a block away. Brass was money, but any metal could be exchanged. My grandfather could exchange clean cast iron as well, which was not the case during the eighteenth century when the nearest foundry was sixty miles away overland.

A frugal farmer, in an economy where cash was almost nonexistent, could appreciate the real value of an old jug that still held water, or a worn-out tool that contained reusable metal.

While our farmer might stretch the family budget to assemble a nearly matching tea set from offerings at the sale, the intrinsic value of household utensils was their survival value for their owners. When the neck broke off the old stoneware jug, its bottom half could still serve many years as a ladle or basin.

But do these behaviors indicate poverty? It could be argued that a very long date range is a marker for poverty. Clearly, second-hand goods will find their way down the economic ladder. I recall one plantation site in Virginia where the Chinese Export Porcelain was found in the trash of the slave quarters and not in the big house. When the old stuff went out of fashion, it went to the quarters.

We must remember that we are looking at these artifacts from the perspective of a society where last year's shoes simply cannot be worn in public, or last year's car has lost much of its value by the mere act of being a year old.

Instead, I submit, the sum of the evidence at Bloomsbury, from the creamware, to the stoneware jugs, to the lack of wrought iron, reflects the recycling mentality of a society where goods were constantly being re-sold until they retained absolutely no utility whatever. Then, as now, the regular town sale offered a quick and easy way to exchange goods and meet consumer demand without resorting to outside sources of

supply. It was, and is, a market in which all classes of society participated on a relatively level playing field that characterizes a barter economy in which goods are valued according to usefulness and not according to arbitrary money prices set by the world market.

Bloomsbury has demonstrated that eighteenth-century consumer behavior cannot be evaluated by twenty-first century perceptions of value and style. Still, I wouldn't advise tearing up a Strawberry Shortcake bed sheet to make scrub rags.