

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL DETECTIVE STORY

It was assumed that the excavations on the block bounded by West Street and Washington Street, south of Second Street, would provide archaeologists with an opportunity to study households of blue collar laborers. Also, it was hoped that artifacts from Wilmington's early nineteenth century Free Black community would be found on this block. Unfortunately, the property selected for excavation on West Street, failed to produce artifacts that could be dated to the time when blacks lived there, which was between 1810 and around 1845. The archaeologists did recover materials, dating after 1845, that could be linked to households of white blue collar workers. They also uncovered a rather perplexing situation, requiring some archaeological detective work.

The documents examined by the historians showed that only white laborers and other households of similar economic standing lived on West Street after 1845, and continued to live there to the end of the century. Two privies dating to this time, circa 1860, were found during the excavation of the selected property on West Street. Both privies contained artifacts that probably came from a residence on the property. These artifacts included mostly ceramic vessels for food serving, and glass vessels such as tumblers, spirit bottles, and medicinal bottles. It appears that at least two families or households had dumped trash into the two privies. One privy contained a single layer of trash that dated to around 1860. The lower layer contained mostly ceramics with transfer printed designs (Plate 15), and the upper layer had mostly undecorated wares, such as ironstone dishes (Plate 16).

The different dates and the contrasts in the ceramics suggests that the two trash layers were from two different households. The second privy, which is just southwest of the first, had somewhat similar ceramics, but were generally of cheaper varieties. The close dates of the second privy and the top trash layer of the first suggest that they may be linked to the same household.

PLATE 15
WILMINGTON BLVD.
BLUE TRANSFER PRINTED VESSELS

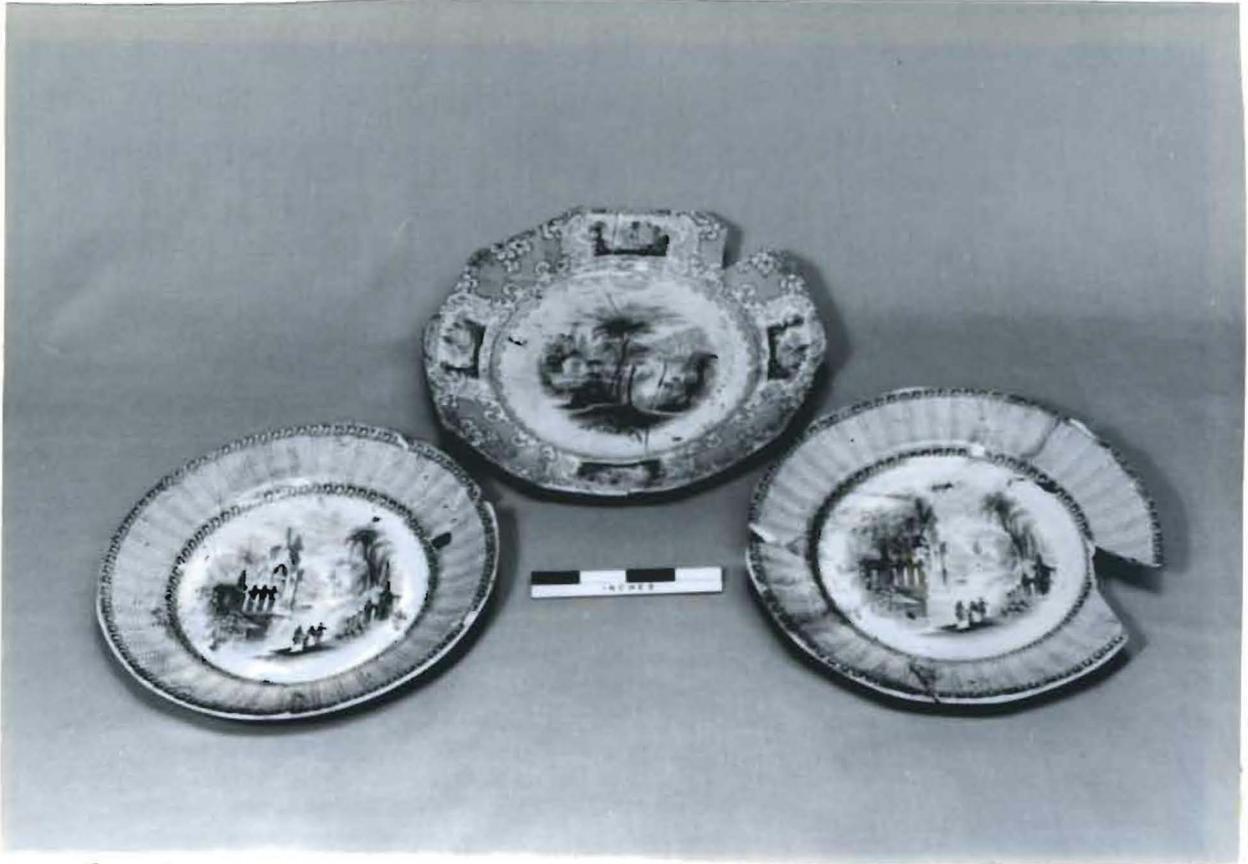


PLATE 16
WILMINGTON BLVD.
IRONSTONE VESSELS



There was no mention in the historic documents of any business on the property that was excavated, nor were any indicated in the vicinity of this property. However, the items from both privies indicated that some type of business was there around 1860 and possibly earlier. The second privy contained the highest number of clothing related items of all the trash deposits in the seven block area. These items included brass buckles, 30 buttons of different types, 378 brass straight pins, and several hooks, eyes, and snaps. These are the type of items one would expect from some type of clothing store, like the earlier "slop shop" on Market Street. Also found in the privy was a very high number of lamp glass fragments, over 1000 pieces of glass from lamp chimneys, and 33 fragments from press molded lamp bases. Both trash layers in the first privy also had a very high number of lamp glass pieces. In fact, the top layer produced over 2000 pieces, along with some whole lamp bases.

It is possible that these materials came from some type of dry goods store or from a household. It is within reason for a family to break, over several years, the number of lamps represented by the glass fragments in the privies. Nevertheless, the high number of clothing items does suggest that a store of some type existed on this property, and that a family or families also lived on the property, possibly renting space above the shop.

The historic documents show that only blue collar workers lived along this part of West Street after 1845. But when the archaeologists studied the artifacts, particularly the ceramics, from the two privies, they found that this may not have been the case. The ceramics from the lower trash layer of the first privy, and all the ceramics from the second, were of very cheap varieties, in no way as expensive as the dishes from Dowdall's bottling works on Front Street. In fact, many of the dishes from the second privy were some of the cheapest that could be bought at the time. Strangely, this was not the case for the dishes from the top layer of trash in

the first privy. Most of these dishes were of ironstone, which had greatly increased in popularity after 1850, and also increased in price. Overall, the ceramics from this layer were more expensive than those from the household living at Dowdall's business. Though the second privy contained very inexpensive dishes, it did produce some rather unusual items for a blue collar household, such as a wooden chess piece, toys such as a tin soldier, a wood whistle, a toy lead and wood broad axe, and a porcelain doll (Plate 17); in addition to a violin bow fragment with ebony and mother of pearl inlay.

Why would the historic documents indicate West Street as a neighborhood of blue collar workers on the one hand, while the ceramics and other items dug up from a property in this neighborhood indicated that at least a "middle class" family and possibly a more well-to-do family had lived there. Here was an archaeological puzzle to be solved.

Through the process of elimination and deductive reasoning, the archaeologists came up with possible explanations. First, the trash in the top layer of the first privy and the trash in the second privy may have indeed been thrown away by a somewhat well-to-do household that lived on this property at a time when the rest of the neighborhood was strictly blue collar workers and their families. Thus, the historic documents on this area are incomplete.

A second explanation is that the information on the cost of the ceramics from the privies is wrong. The pricing information used was too high. Thus, the ceramics do in fact indicate a household of a blue collar worker.

The first explanation is possible, but the records from this time period in Wilmington are very extensive and appear to be quite complete. Also, the lower trash layer in the first privy does suggest that this property was occupied by a worker's household, as shown by the documents. Therefore, this explanation may be incorrect.

PLATE 17
WILMINGTON BLVD.
PORCELAIN DOLL HEAD & TIN SOLDIER



The second explanation appears also to be incorrect. The prices of the ceramics used have been shown to be accurate for many areas of the country, as they are based on actual price lists for ceramics. Therefore, this explanation may be incorrect.

There is a third explanation, but one which cannot be presently confirmed or denied. It is possible that the household that deposited trash in the upper part of the first privy was a family falling on hard economic times. This family moved into the property at the time they had run into financial difficulties and did not have very much money. They brought with them what was left of their good china, which eventually broke and was thrown away in the first privy, to fill it up. At the same time they were throwing trash in the second privy while it was in use as a privy. While they were using this second privy, they were eating off of very inexpensive dishes, but still had some items, such as the toys, from their life during better times. Thus the artifacts found in these trash deposits reflect financial position that the household no longer enjoyed.

The excavation of this property on West Street indicates how archaeology can provide information on people that may be missing or hard to find in historic documents. We have learned here something about the types of people living in a blue collar neighborhood in mid-nineteenth century Wilmington, and that, as today, people both prosper and are hurt by the economic events of the times.