



June 2007 Newsletter

One More Look into the Water – Colonoware in South Carolina Rivers and Charleston’s Market Economy

By J. W. Joseph*

Introduction

In the March issue of the *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*, Chris Espenshade and Leland Ferguson debated the meaning of intact Colonoware vessels that have been recovered from South Carolina’s rivers. In *Uncommon Ground* (1992) and “The Cross is a Magic Sign” (1999), Leland Ferguson had noted hobby diver’s recovery of intact Colonoware vessels from Southern Carolina’s coastal rivers, including some with “X” marks on their bases, and posited that their presence in these rivers reflected African religious practices and offerings. Espenshade noted a number of scholars, including Ferguson, have seen the recovery of intact Colonowares from river settings as a direct representation of ritual behavior and challenged this association. He observed that “X” marked Colonowares had also been found in terrestrial settings and that plantation refuse was frequently tossed into coastal rivers. Both Espenshade (2007) and Ferguson (2007) noted that the diver-recovered vessels lack good proveniences, and both also recognized that a proportionately larger number of intact vessels were recovered from South Carolina’s rivers than had been found on terrestrial sites.

Ferguson’s interpretation that the whole Colonowares found in rivers represented ritual offerings was based in part because these vessels were intact. While Espenshade notes that rivers were also used as plantation dumps, this does not explain the recovery of intact

Colonoware vessels, which would have been less likely to have been thrown away in large numbers, although whole pots of various types are found in refuse contexts. However, there is a third explanation for the appearance of complete Colonowares in coastal rivers that involves neither rituals nor refuse. As originally posited by Brian Crane (1993) and as revisited as part of the analysis of the Charleston Judicial Center site (38CH1708) (Joseph 2004, 2005), I believe that many of the whole pieces of Colonoware found in South Carolina's rivers were the product of capsized canoes transporting Colonoware for sale or barter in Charleston's markets. Based on the analysis of Colonowares from the Judicial Center site, I have proposed that Colonoware's typology should be re-constructed to recognize Market Wares, which were made in the plantation villages for sale in Charleston's markets, and Village Wares, which were made for use in the village (Joseph 2004). Those interested in the typology are encouraged to review the *South Carolina Antiquities* article – this article reviews Charleston's market economy, Colonowares, and enslaved African Americans' use of canoes to transport goods to and from the markets.

Colonoware and the Market Economy

Because the Judicial Center site is located in downtown Charleston, the significant quantities of Colonoware recovered from the site were unlikely to have been made on the multiple urban lots that comprised the property and that furthermore exhibited a sandy substrate unsuitable to Colonoware manufacture. Extending between King and Meeting Streets on the north side of Broad Street in the heart of Charleston, the Judicial Center site exhibited its highest densities of Colonowares from the decades of the 1730s through the 1760s. (The Colonowares recovered from this site are discussed and illustrated in the September, 2005 edition of *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* [[Joseph 2005](#)] and the reader is referred to that article for

illustrations and further discussion.) By decade, Colonoware accounted for 15.97% of all of the ceramics from 1730s features, 25.96% of the pottery from features of the 1740s, 12.06% of all of the ceramics from the 1750s, and 8.93% of the pottery from the 1760s. These decades were ones in which Native Americans had been forced into South Carolina's backcountry following the end of the Yemassee Indian War in 1718. Tensions were so great after the war that a 1721 act forbade Native Americans from entering colonial settlements. The Catawba Indians would coalesce out of the dispersal of tribes into the backcountry, but the Catawaba would not come into existence until the 1760s and their trade of pottery to the lowcountry would not begin until the 1780s. Thus, the Colonial-era Colonoware found at the Judicial Center site was likely made on the plantations by African Americans as well as enslaved Native Americans and was most likely introduced to Charleston through the market economy.

The lowcountry's plantations operated on a task labor system that has been reviewed by a number of historians, most notably Phillip Morgan (1982, 1983). Task labor assigned enslaved African-Americans tasks that they were responsible for, and once complete, African-Americans were free to use their remaining time as they chose. Many raised crops, fished, trapped, baked, and produced crafts, and Morgan (1983) notes that African-Americans were active in Charleston's markets, trading their produce for income. Morgan records garden crops, fruit, fish, bread, tarts, cakes, milk and cheese as produce that African-Americans sold in Charleston's markets. While not noted by him as a product for sale, it is likely that African-Americans also sold crafts of their manufacture, specifically sweet grass baskets and Colonoware pots. It is interesting to note that African-American women continue to sell sweet grass baskets at the intersection of Broad and Meeting streets in downtown Charleston, the present day "four corners of law" that was the home to Charleston's first market in the early 1700s. The sale of sweet-

grass baskets here as well as in the 1750s market that continues to operate on Meeting Street, speaks to a long-held tradition of African-Americans bringing their crafts for sale to Charleston.

Brian Crane, in his dissertation on the Colonoware from the Heyward-Washington House in Charleston, conducted Neutron activation analysis of a sample of the pottery from this urban Charleston house site, which revealed that the clay sources came from multiple locations. This suggested to Crane that the Colonoware was not made at an outlying plantation associated with the Heywards, but instead came from multiple plantations, and he observed that these pots “were probably traded” (Crane 1993:137). Crane noted that the lowcountry’s African-Americans were active in the market trade and transported their goods to the market by canoe. Crane (1993:126) reported the reminiscence of Francis Bremer, who wrote “On the country side was heard the songs of the negroes as they rowed their boats up the river on their return from the city, where they had taken their small wares – eggs, fowls, and vegetables – for sale, as they do two to three times a week.” Crane (1993:131) notes several newspaper accounts of African-American activities in the markets and also reports a 1732 *South Carolina Gazette* notice that stated, “a canoe, with three men and a boy in her, was over-set, a going to James Island; and two men and the boy were drowned.” Based on these observations, Crane suggested that the significant numbers of intact Colonoware vessels found in the South Carolina lowcountry’s rivers represented overturned canoe loads of Colonoware on its way to market.

Support for this interpretation is found in a large collection of Colonoware acquired by the Acacia Collection, one of the largest collections of African-American arts and crafts in the south. The Acacia Collection has more than 35 intact or largely intact Colonoware vessels that were reportedly purchased from a diver who collected them from an undisclosed location on the Cooper River (Joseph 2004). This collection exhibits an array of forms, including large and

small bowls, handled jars, flared mouth jars, and other vessels. Representative examples from this collection are shown on Acacia's website (www.acaciacollection.com/gallery/colona.html) and are on display in the Ownens-Thomas Carriage House Museum in Savannah.

The analysis of the Judicial Center Colonowares demonstrates that Colonoware was an important element in urban Charleston household pottery from the 1730s up through the 1760s, a time in which Native American interaction with Charleston was non-existent. This Colonoware thus must have been made by the lowcountry's African-Americans and brought to Charleston for sale or trade in the markets. As they traveled to the city by canoe, the occasional capsized vessel would have resulted in numbers of intact vessels going into the water. African Americans participation in Charleston's market economy offers the best explanation for the numbers of Colonoware vessels found in the coastal rivers of South Carolina.

Conclusions

There is no question that divers along South Carolina's rivers have recovered significant numbers of whole Colonoware vessels. There are questions about where they were recovered and their contexts. But the over-riding question concerning intact Colonowares in lowcountry rivers is "Why were they there?"

Leland Ferguson has posited that the river-found Colonowares reflect African ritual behaviors and offerings. Water was a significant element in several African cosmologies and Ferguson's interpretation has merit. However, the large numbers of intact vessels (16 reported by Ferguson, the 35 plus in the Acacia collection, as well as others that have not been reported) suggests that the association is greater than explainable by ritual alone. As first noted by Crane and as outlined above, I believe that much of the Colonoware found in the rivers is a product of market activities by the lowcountry's African-Americans.

This assumption can only be tested by future research. I suggest the following avenues are available for researching the context and association of these river-found Colonowares.

(1). Request that hobby divers provide the general location of their Colonoware discoveries and specifically the river where it was found. If intact river-based Colonoware is a product of transport to market, then it would be expected that significantly greater quantities should be found on the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, which led to Charleston, as well as lesser amounts on Pee Dee, Waccamaw and Sampit rivers which led to Georgetown and the Beaufort River which led to Beaufort. (It should be noted that the existence of markets in Georgetown and Beaufort is unconfirmed, but presumed to be the case.) Conversely, if Colonoware came into the rivers through ritual actions, then the distribution should be more wide spread as well as more even, since there were plantations and large numbers of African-Americans on all of South Carolina's coastal rivers. It could be argued that the frequency of river-bound Colonowares would actually be expected to be greatest furthest away from the urban areas, where African-Americans lived in greater isolation and hence had greater opportunity to practice traditional religions.

(2). Request that hobby divers indicate the number of Colonoware vessels recovered from a location, as well as the presence of Colonoware sherds, if observed. Submerged Colonoware that resulted from canoe transit should result in the recovery of multiple vessels, or vessels and fragments, at a specific location. Conversely, ritually discarded vessels should represent single events, although there is the potential that ritual activities may have occurred repeatedly at a single location.

(3). Record the variety of forms reported by hobby divers. Vessels being shipped to market should exhibit a variety of forms although bowls and jars would be expected to

predominate, given Colonowares' use in cooking and kitchen activities. Ritual vessels would expect to primarily be jars and bowls since the rituals cited by Ferguson involve the use of these vessels as containers.

(4). Examine the Acacia collection for marks. Ferguson notes that a number of the marked vessels have been found in rivers and associates both their marking and river-context with ritual use. The Acacia Collection, as reported to the author, bears the characteristics of a capsized canoe load of Colonoware and one of the vessels shown on their site is decorated. If "X" marked vessels are observed in the Acacia collection, the frequency of these marks and their placement may shed new light on possible alternative meanings to "X" marks, perhaps related to market activities. It is worth noting that South Carolina's most prominent African-American potter, Dave, who made stoneware pottery in Edgefield District from the 1830s through the Civil War, marked some of his pieces with an "X" in addition to signing them with his name and the date. Dave's Edgefield wares were definitely made for sale, and his use of the "X" may suggest a market-based meaning for this mark.

(5). Examine river-born Colonoware vessels for use-wear marks. If these vessels were being transported for sale at market, they presumably were "new" vessels that would not exhibit use and wear marks. Conversely, intact vessels with use-wear marks are more likely to be the product of refuse disposal or ritual use.

It is important to realize that neither argument on river-born Colonoware is mutually exclusive. Colonoware could have been thrown into coastal rivers as part of ritual activities and also dumped into rivers by capsizing canoes on their way to the markets. Largely intact pieces may have also been swept into the river as part of refuse disposal and finally, Colonowares may have accidentally been dropped into rivers during other activities. However, it is as important to

recognize, as Espenshade noted, that crediting all river-based Colonowares to ritual behaviors simplifies our understanding of African-American life and agency in the lowcountry. As we look through the water of the past, we see that African-Americans were integral to all aspects of lowcountry culture, a culture they helped shape and fire.

Note

* The author, J.W. Joseph, Ph.D., R.P.A., is a vice-president, project manager, and archaeologist with New South Associates.

References

Crane, Brian

1993. *Colono Wares and Criollo Ware Pottery from Charleston, South Carolina and San Juan, Puerto Rico in Comparative Perspective*. PhD Dissertation, Department of American Civilization, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Espenshade, Christopher Y.

2007. *A River of Doubt: Marked Colonoware, Underwater Sampling, and Questions of Inference*. *The African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*, March 2007.

Ferguson, Leland G.

1992. *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.

1999. "The Cross is a Magic Sign": Marks on Eighteenth-Century Bowls in South Carolina. In *"I, Too, Am America": Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*, edited by Theresa A. Singleton, pp. 116-131. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.

2007. *Comments on Espenshade's Marked Colonoware, Underwater Sampling, and Questions of Inference*. *The African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*, March 2007.

Joseph, J. W.

2004. *Colonoware for the Village – Colonoware for the Market: Observations from the Charleston Judicial Center Site (38CH1708) on Colonoware Production and Typology*. *South Carolina Antiquities* 36(1-2):72-86.

2005. *African American Archaeology and Colonowares from the Charleston Judicial Center Site (38CH1708)*. *The African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*, September 2005.

Morgan, Philip K.

1982. Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700 to 1880. *William and Mary Quarterly* 39(4):563-599.

1983. Black Society in the Lowcountry, 1760-1810. In *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, edited by Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, pp. 83-142. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago.

Return to June 2007 Newsletter:

<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news0607/news0607.html>