

COLONOWARE

OVERVIEW AND IMPORTANCE IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Jar Vessel
Drayton Hall, Charleston, SC
c. 1750-1830

Introduction

Colonoware is a type of pottery created by enslaved Africans, their descendants, and Native American groups from the American colonial period to the mid-1800s. As the slave trade grew in the colonies, the interactions between Africans and Native Americans increased, thus triggering an exchange of ideas and—as we see with colonoware—ceramic practices. Both groups were also influenced by European traditions, a change observed mostly with the new forms of pottery produced. Colonoware is recovered from most historical (post-European contact) archaeological sites along the East coast of the U.S., but it significantly varies depending on the region. The colonoware from South Carolina, for example, is more heavily associated with sites inhabited by enslaved Africans and African Americans, whereas Virginian colonoware seems to have been mostly produced by Native American groups. Archaeologists use colonoware to understand the daily lives of those using and making pottery in early America.

Works Cited

Herskovits, Melville. 1958[1941]. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Second edition. Beacon Press, Boston.

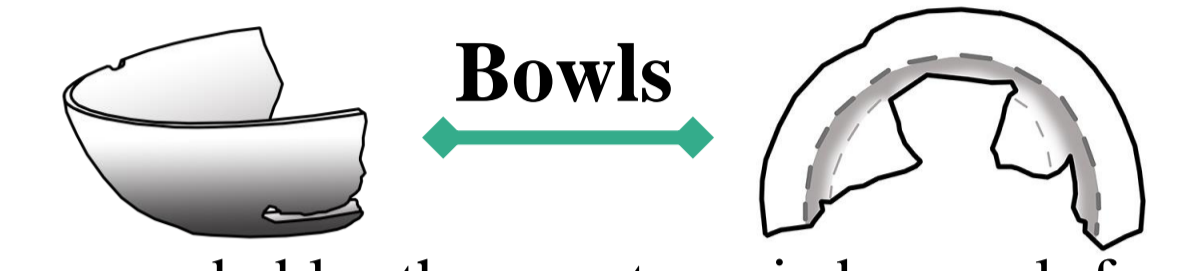
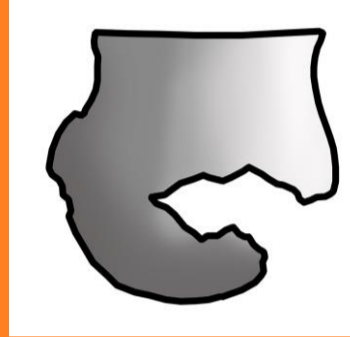
Singleton, Theresa A. 1999. An Introduction to African-American Archaeology. In *I, Too, Am America* *Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*, pp. 1-20. Edited by Theresa A. Singleton. The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.



Vessel Forms

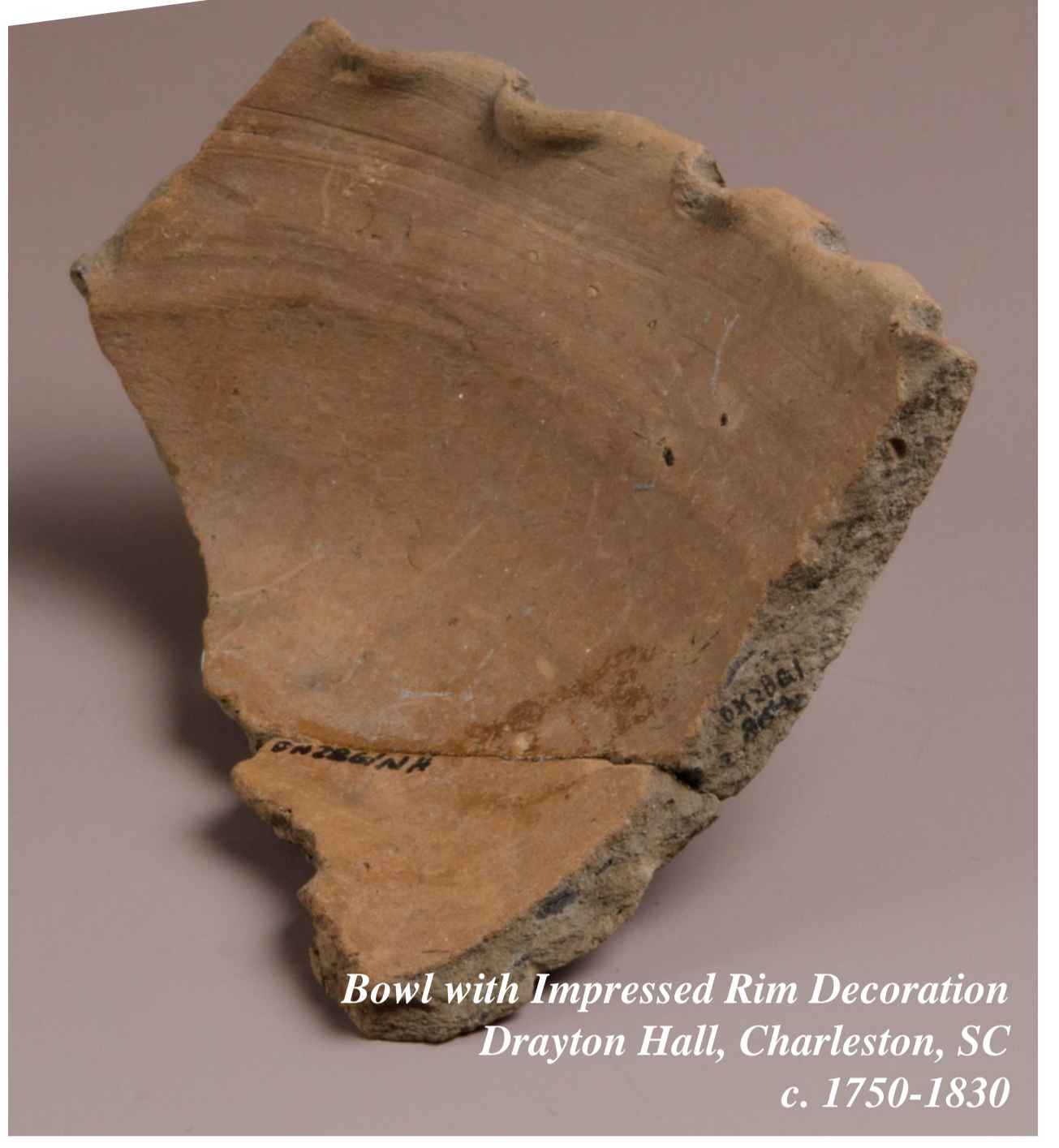
While general observed vessel forms are summarized here, wide variability in terms of size, shape, and decoration exists—even within each of these categories.

Jars Jar forms are typical of traditional African and Native American pottery-making, and they were continually made during the colonial period. They are distinguishable by a globular or rounded body, a restricted neck, and sometimes a handle.



Bowls

Bowls are probably the most varied vessel form in colonoware assemblages, not just in size and surface treatments, but also in shape. Specifically, many colonoware bowls have flat bottoms, mirroring the flat-bottomed plates of European tablewares and representing the intention for some colonoware to be sold in European-American markets.



Bowl with Impressed Rim Decoration
Drayton Hall, Charleston, SC
c. 1750-1830

Function

Potters likely produced colonoware for both their own use and for sale in local markets. Even though we can rarely know the specific functions of each vessel form, we can make a few guesses:

- **Jars** were most likely used more frequently for cooking and food processing. They also typically have food residue on the interior and exterior of the rims.
- **Deep, sloping bowls** could have been used for both cooking and eating.
- **Bowls decorated with European designs** (typically various rim decorations) or that have flat bottoms similar to European plates were likely intended for the local market
- Although we can guess at different functions, in general it is difficult to know for sure. Likely, many vessels were used for multiple purposes, and these functions possibly changed significantly over time.



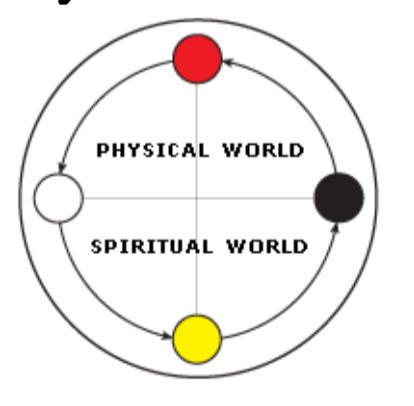
Jar Base
Drayton Hall
c. 1750-1830

WHY IS COLONOWARE IMPORTANT?

In many studies of early America, scholars can use historical records to understand the lives of past peoples. However, these documents are very European-centric, and archaeologists must use other evidence to study marginalized groups, like enslaved Africans and African Americans. Colonoware is one of the only artifact types that we can exclusively attribute to this culture, most other historical artifacts being made and/or used by Europeans or European-Americans. By studying the physical attributes of colonoware, archaeologists can, to a certain extent, reconstruct the narrative of African and African American culture during early America.

The BaKongo Cosmogram

For decades, archaeologists have studied colonoware vessels marked with an “X,” connecting them to the West African BaKongo cosmogram, which depicts a “+” with the horizontal axis symbolizing the boundary between the living and the dead, and the vertical as the path between these worlds. Some scholars relate the marks on colonoware to this symbology, arguing for a retention of West African religious practices in America. However, debate continues over this theory; many argue that the marks on colonoware do not significantly resemble the cosmogram. Some scholars also criticize looking for “Africanisms” (Herskovits 1958; Singleton 1999), arguing that it focuses too much on physical survivals of African culture to the extent that archaeologists ignore the complexity and ever-changing nature of African identity.



(Top) *BaKongo Cosmogram*;
(Bottom) *Marked Colonoware Base*
(Leland Ferguson, National Park Service)

