

Right on Target: a Transferware Discovery at President Madison's Home

By Leslie Bouterie

Montpelier is the historic estate of James Madison, the fourth president of the United States, and his devoted wife Dolley. Located in a bucolic setting in Orange, Virginia, Madison's family home was greatly improved and expanded during his years in the White House (1808-1816). It ultimately served as a retirement retreat after his many years of government service. With the long ownership of the property and lengthy time in residence, the family left a plethora of evidence about their lives. Archaeologists have been excavating the remains of early 19th century trash deposits, slave quarters, and work areas related to the larger home and plantation at Montpelier for the past twenty years.

The Archaeology Lab at Montpelier is always a flurry of activity. Archaeologists, interns, students, and volunteers excavate, sort, clean, label, identify, photograph, mend, and interpret the many objects. My volunteer role as a ceramics researcher enables me to contribute to this ongoing effort. Artifacts gleaned from carefully planned and executed excavations provide valuable clues about the daily lives of the Madisons, their workers, guests, and the enslaved community, as well as the objects they created, purchased and used.

Among the bounty of artifacts unearthed from the many archaeological sites are thousands of transferware sherds. Many different types of vessels have been found, printed in many different colors, with many different patterns. Unfortunately, the sherds are often just a few centimeters in size, making pattern identification difficult. These small fragments might show a minuscule portion of a leaf, tree, building, or floral or diaper border with the remainder of the piece and reverse side simply a plain ground. These ubiquitous motifs were repeat-



Fig. 1: Transfer-printed Sherd.

ed on thousands of different patterns. Without finding related sherds to complete more of the vessel or pattern there is rarely a way to identify pattern or maker.

Occasionally, however, Mother Luck shines on the ceramic researchers. On a recent Wednesday, an enthusiastic young archaeologist shared one of the latest finds, a single small earthenware sherd, transfer-printed in purple. Fortuitously, in this instance, both sides of the sherd were printed with very distinctive designs. Depicted on the front of the vessel was a very tiny target, mounted on three legs, standing atop a stippled ground, with portions of a building to the left. (Fig. 1) Although the target motif narrowed down the field for pattern identification, it was the reverse of the sherd, despite its minuscule size, that contained a mother lode of information. (Fig. 2) Key portions of the printed mark were visible! The number "31" was printed within a floral



Fig. 2: Sherd, Printed Mark.



Fig. 3: No. 31 Teapot, Printed Mark.

and scroll-framed cartouche, indicating that it was Pattern "No. 31." Also clearly readable was "T. Mayer."

TCC *Pattern and Source Print Database* pattern ID #7768 documented "No. 31," also referred to as *Sling-*

shot. The transfer-printed mark on the sherd, a match for the printed mark on the teapot in the pattern record (Fig. 3), contained the maker's name "T. Mayer"

indicating that the vessel was made by Thomas Mayer, a firm in operation from 1826-1838. Further research revealed that the inclusion of the words "Stoke-on-Trent" in the printed mark made it possible to date both the sherd and the teapot c.1826-1835, as the firm was situated in Stoke-on-Trent during that time. It subsequently moved to Longport c.1836-1838, and revised the maker's mark to "T. Mayer/Longport" to reflect the new location, as noted with Mark 2569 on p. 423 of Godden's *Encyclopedia of British Pottery and Porcelain Marks*.

In the TCC Database record, an image of the full pattern is pictured on a black transfer-printed lidless teapot, 11 inches long, 5.5 inches wide, 6 inches high (Fig. 4). In the left foreground, an athlete in Greek sporting garb wields a slingshot, aiming for a small three-legged target to the right...the same target depicted on the sherd! Two similarly-attired male figures recline on the grass in the foreground while watching this attempt. A mountainous landscape with classically-columned buildings fills the background. (Fig. 5)

The placement of the target in the pattern also provided clues to vessel identification. When comparing the central pattern of the teapot with that of the ceramic fragment, a slight difference can be found in the distance between the target and the building to its left. On the sherd, the target nearly abuts the building, while on the teapot, the target is farther to the right and is separated by a body of water. (Figs. 6, 7) This variance suggests that the "No. 31" pattern printed



Fig. 4: "No. 31" lidless teapot.



Fig. 5: "No. 31" teapot, Center detail.



Fig. 6: Sherd, target detail.



Fig. 7: Teapot, target detail.

on the sherd was sized to fit on a smaller, possibly round or rounded vessel, such as a small plate or cup, while a slightly modified and elongated version of the pattern was produced to fill the larger and longer horizontal field of the teapot.

The Thomas Mayer firm at Stoke-on-Trent produced several popular pattern series, one of which is named "Olympic Games," found on dinner wares and tea wares. The series contained at least eleven titled, and one unidentified, views of sporting patterns, and was printed in "blue, black, brown, green, purple and shades of pink or red" as documented by Dick Henrywood in *TCC Bulletin*, Winter 2009 (Vol. X No. 1), p. 3-4. However, although pattern "No. 31" is related in subject matter, it is not part of the "Olympic Games" series. A comparison of the "No. 31" (*Slingshot*) pattern (shown on the teapot in Fig. 8) with the similarly configured "Archery" pattern in the "Olympic Games" series (shown on a 9-inch plate in

Fig. 9; printed mark shown in Fig. 10) reveals obvious differences. Although both patterns contain an active sporting figure in the left foreground, two reclining figures in the right foreground, and a small target and classical buildings in the background, the quality of the patterns is markedly dissimilar. The "Archery" pattern is produced with a more detailed, complex engraving; the finely printed design fills more of the pattern ground, with less of the white reserve visible; and the border design is wider and

more elaborate. Even the cartouche in the printed mark for the “Archery” pattern, although very similar, is more elaborate than that of “No. 31.” (Figs. 3 and 10)

Information about the use of the ceramic vessel printed with the “No. 31” pattern can be gleaned by examining and interpreting the location and depth of the archaeological excavation in which the sherd was found, as explained by Director of Archaeology and Landscape Restoration at Montpelier, Dr. Matthew Reeves: “The fragment of transferware was located in what we call the South Yard, a collection of outbuildings including three slave quarters, two smokehouses, and a detached kitchen that were immediately adjacent to the mansion. Within the South Yard, the sherd was located to the north of one of the smokehouses (see Fig. 11). Other artifacts located in this area provide evidence for the deposits being a downslope trash scatter from the duplex slave quarter just upslope from this trash deposit. The possibility exists that prior to breakage, this small plate or cup might have been used in the main house, or more likely was an item purchased by an enslaved family at market for use in their home. Archaeologists have found similar transferwares at slave quarters across the property (including at the homes for field slaves). We have located thousands of transferware sherds this season, and in previous excavation seasons. This winter we will be cataloging and sort-



Fig. 8: “No. 31” teapot.



Fig. 9: “Olympic Games/ Archery” plate.

ing these sherds in anticipation of our February ceramics workshop where we will be mending the ceramic sherds.”

The tiny target-printed sherd of “No. 31,” along with the thousands of other artifacts unearthed at Montpelier, provide a window into the lives of those who lived and worked on the estate. The transferware sherds invite discovery and identification to augment this history, and the investigative efforts and assistance of ceramic enthusiasts are encouraged. The forthcoming TCC Annual Meeting, which will be held in Charlottesville, Virginia from October 23-26, 2016, will include a visit to Montpelier, with guided tours, presentations, and a hands-on Archaeology Workshop. While examining selected sherds found on the estate, and working with staff archaeologists, meeting participants will be encouraged to summon their best detective skills and to share their pattern knowledge. All areas of expertise will be welcomed as the unearthed sherds represent many transferware collecting areas: American Views, Chinoiserie, Floral and Botanical, and Romantic Themes.

The collaborative efforts of the Archaeological team of staff members, students and volunteers continue unabated. The valuable ongoing archaeological discoveries help to ensure that ceramic identification and subsequently enhanced interpretation at Montpelier stay right on target.



Fig. 10: “Olympic Games/Archery” printed mark.



Fig. 11. Overhead shot of excavations in the South Yard of the mansion. The white arrow shows the location of the excavation unit where the transferware sherd was located.