Who's Been Eating off

Michael Weinberg

Washington, D.C., during the Presidency of Andrew Jackson, must have been a pretty raucous place. The first 4 decades of the New Republic's Government were dominated by the genteel aristocracy of Virginia (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe) and Massachusetts (the Adams family). Jackson's election in 1828 ushered in a whole new segment of the population, people who grew up on and were beginning to tame the American Frontier.

The Federal Government was expanding as it wrestled with new and difficult issues: westward expansion, commerce and banking issues, infrastructure (roads, canals, etc), and the social issue of slavery. Serving in the Congress in the 1830s was not a full-time job, and most Congressmen and Senators stayed in Washington City only while the legislative bodies were in session. Rather than having to buy a second home, the men of the Congress (and often government officials from the Executive and Judicial Branches) stayed in Hotels or Boarding Houses while in town, often using their rooms as offices and entertaining in the public rooms. They received a 'per diem' ($8) so the expense of living away from home was not a severe financial burden. Certainly, a much different environment than exists in our Nation's Capital now!

The term "Washington City" is an uncommon designation for the District of Columbia, in use for a relatively limited time before the Civil War. So my attention was immediately drawn to a 10" medium blue plate in Peg Sutor's case during Antiques Week in New Hampshire. The scene on the plate was handsome enough: Thomas Mayer's "Cattle & Scenery" pattern, with horses, cattle and sheep in a bucolic setting. What set this example apart, however, was a medallion in the top border: "Jesse

Brown, Washington City"! Who, I asked myself, was Jesse Brown and why did he have 'personalized' dinner plates. Was he a wealthy, land-holding member of Congress, evoking his rural origins by having cattle and horses on his dinner service? Or was it a hotel or boarding house, classy enough to order personalized dishes from Staffordshire?

Google is a marvelous tool in these kinds of situations. A relatively short time in front of my computer yielded some fascinating results. "Jesse Brown", it turns out, was a person, the proprietor of the "Indian Queen Hotel" in Washington City, between 6th and 7th St. along Pennsylvania Avenue (now approximately the site of the Federal Trade Commission and the Capitol Bar & Grille). Brown had purchased the property in the late 1820s (about the time Jackson was elected), renovated the existing hotel, renamed it the "Indian Queen" because of a large, carved Native American statue that stood in its entry-way, and made it one of the largest and most popular hotels in the city during the 1830s. In that sense, the Indian Queen was similar to the U.S. Hotel in Philadelphia, a building known to Historical Staffordshire Collectors from Tams' Foliage Border Series.

But The Indian Queen was not your ordinary hotel, and obviously, Jesse Brown was not your ordinary Washington Boarding House proprietor. Many of the most distinguished political actors of the period dined at the hotel. In the early 1830s (probably in 1832, after Jackson won re-election to the Presidency), the Hotel was the site of a 'retirement' dinner in honor of Henry Clay (the losing candidate), attended by former President John Quincy Adams and probably other noteworthy political figures. John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster and even Davy Crockett are known to have dined at the

Indian Queen, Sam Houston stayed there when he came to Washington as an ambassador for the Cherokee Nation in the mid 1830s, and Creek Indian Chiefs were housed there when brought to Washington to meet government officials (they enjoyed the meals, it is recorded). And Samuel Colt, it is reported, stayed at the hotel while in Washington obtaining his first patent for the Colt Revolving Pistol in 1836.

Two specific events give this hotel a special place in American History: in 1841, 6 weeks after his inauguration, President William Henry Harrison died of pneumonia. Vice President John Tyler, who was living at the Indian Queen, was inaugurated there on April 6, 1841, with Jesse Brown as one of the witnesses. And perhaps more significantly, in April of 1830, at a Jefferson Day celebration attended by most of the country's political leadership, Andrew Jackson uttered his infamous toast: "Our Federal Union, It MUST be preserved." Historians credit this statement, and John C. Calhoun's response supporting States' Rights, as one of the opening salvos in the political debate over slavery and secession.

Where was THIS plate when all of these important events in the history of this country were unfolding? The Dictionary of Blue & White Printed Pottery states that the floral border on the Mayer plate is similar to one introduced by Wedgwood in 1824, so it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the Mayer dinner service was purchased for use by the hotel in 1830. Was it on the table when Jackson spoke his famous toast? Was it in the pantry for the post-inaugural meal for President Tyler? Did Davy Crockett or Sam Houston eat off of it? Daniel Webster or John C. Calhoun? Rarely can Transferware Collectors link an individual piece of pottery to so many historical events! Are there other pieces from the dinner service at the Indian Queen Hotel floating around? Have members of the Club seen other pieces with similar medallions? Certainly, the names of other hotels and hotel proprietors have been noted on the underside marks of transferware: remember the large Foo Dog tureen from Mr. Ruddock's Hotel in New Orleans (TCC Bulletin, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp. 10-11). Happy Hunting!!

Author's Note: At the Rhinebeck show in October, 2007, Bill Kurau brought for my inspection (and purchase), a soup bowl in the Cattle Scenery pattern with the Jesse Brown, Washington City medallion. Shall we see if we can find an entire place setting?

Images Courtesy the Author