

TCC Members Stick Together

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From fragments to tea service (well almost!)

It was a day of broken dishes, sticky tape, and laughter. In the heart of Philadelphia, the National Park Service Independence Living History Center has an Archaeology Laboratory where millions of pottery fragments are the focus of research, and where visitors are welcome to see the work in progress. A few local TCC members got together to offer their expertise on transferware and were welcomed with open arms. Deborah Miller, Assistant Laboratory Director & Outreach Coordinator seemed thrilled when we proposed a one-day, blue-printed, intensive workfest, and with the approval of Jed Levin, the Lab's Director, we met on Monday December 7, 2009 at 10am.

It was short notice but four of us were available, Randy Boyer, Chet Creutzburg, Peggy Sutor, and Pat Halfpenny. Debbie Miller gave us an introduction to the excavation. We were fascinated to hear we were dealing with the contents of a privy. As at least two people commented we felt privy-legged to be there! The fragmentary artifacts were recovered from archeological excavations conducted between 2000 and 2003 prior to, and during, construction of the National Constitution Center.

The particular site relevant to us was a block bounded on the east and west by 5th and 6th streets and to the north and south by Sassafras (now Race) and Cherry Streets. Between these two streets was an alley known as Cresson's Alley (*Figs 1 & 2*). The Cresson's were, in this case, Joshua and Caleb Cresson of Philadelphia and in the fastest growing area of the Britain's second largest city after London, the Cresson's owned most of our block and were selling real estate. ¹

In 1790 Caleb Cresson himself lived at 43 Cherry, and was recorded as a merchant. His neighbors were tradesmen, bricklayers, carpenters, shoemakers, brush makers - all occupying Cresson's tenements and properties. By 1801, 43 Cherry Street was occupied by Caleb Christian, gentleman, and his neighbors were listed as a merchant, a schoolmaster, a shipmaster and a "clerk in the mint". It seems the area was an up and coming neighborhood and typical of the middling classes who began to furnish their tea and dinner tables with fashionable blue printed earthenware. Following up on his sticking day, Randy Boyer discovered an online archaeological report with extremely interesting references to the use and disposal of blue printed pottery at a nearby site in Hudson's Square, and we encourage members to read it. ² Excerpts from the report, prepared by Randy, are presented separately.

The easy way for early 19th century householders to dispose of refuse was tip it into the privy. It was privies at the back and adjacent to Cresson's house that yielded the pottery we were to work on (*Fig 3*). We couldn't wait. Large tables were spread with a blue feast. Debbie had already begun. There were some partially reconstructed pieces and the rest of the shards had been sorted into the darker and mid blues of the first decades of the 19th century and into the paler blues of the later, Romantic period. Each group was further sorted into 4 piles - bases, rims, mid-sections, and larger bits like pieces of handles and spouts. Linking all these together was a liberal salting of fragments so small I would call them flakes. It wasn't a good idea to start with this last class!

We all pounced. Somehow there was a magnet-like attraction as Randy's hand hovered momentarily and then descended on part of a bowl - surprise, surprise it was his beloved Richard Jordan pattern and he made short work of finding pieces and sticking them together. Chet went straight for the dark blue hoping for some historical American view; by the time he got pieces stuck together he had assembled teabowls from an as yet unidentified design (unidentified by us that is) and a teapot in the "Three Pagodas" or "Thatched Huts" pattern (*Figs 4 & 5*).

For some reason yet to be understood Peggy first chose a complex shape and pattern that gave her a lot of grief but the final satisfaction of having partially restored a jug from the Cambrian Pottery with pattern of "Chinese River Scene with Temple and Pyramids" (*Fig 6*). My first instinct was to sort out some bases of the same pattern, find some rim sections and fill in the bits in between. Oh if it had only been that simple! I found four or five teabowl bases, and I put together substantial sections of rims, but could scarcely get any of the tops and bottoms to match up - where did those middle bits go? Was Chet hiding them? To make it even more difficult we couldn't find the pattern in books or the TCC database - I'm sure some member knows it - please share the knowledge (*Fig 7*). The saucer with matching pattern had an interesting foot rim - similar but not the same as a saucer with an impressed Clews mark - also retrieved from the site (*Figs 8, 9, & 10*).

For most of the morning I made myself feel useful by logging onto the TCC Database pretty frequently trying to identify the patterns everyone was working on. We all soon learnt that it was better to work on a couple of patterns. Spending time away from one, while working on the other, allowed us to return with fresh eyes and to find the elusive fragments we had been convinced were not on the table. Gradually we began to have fewer fragments and more fairly complete vessels. Debbie couldn't resist helping and her nimble fingers and experienced hand showed how it should be done - even Jed couldn't resist the lure of the ceramic jigsaw and we all sat companionably matching, discarding, and sticking.

By the end of the day, 4:30 or so, we had got to know those fragments pretty well. We began to have an idea of the kinds of blue printed pottery that middle class Philadelphians purchased. We had questions. Did the customers order services in their preferred pattern or did they have to take what was on offer? How much control did the importer, retailer, customer, have in the patterns that were shipped? How and why did these wares end up in privies? The questions didn't have absolute answers but promoted discussions, suggestions, and observations; sometimes we worked in silence as we concentrated, other times we laughed as we made up pattern names for the pieces. We didn't complete every piece on the tables, we couldn't identify every pattern, but I think we did not disgrace the TCC, in fact we have been invited to return and continue our work. Debbie can guarantee lots of pots, but not necessarily transfer printed wares.

Additional photos (Figures 11 - 23) are attached - any comments from members will be welcomed. Fig 19 has an Anderson & Tams mark, but none of the other pieces had any helpful clues. If any member feels they would like to join us when we have another TCC members group day at the archaeology lab, let me know and I will let you have details. And, if you don't live near to Philadelphia why don't you see if there are any archaeological digs near you that need shard washers, stickers etc. It is very rewarding and you might even have some fun.

Note by the Web Administrator: several other TCC members have visited the Living History Center Archaeology Laboratory. Sue and Frank have been there three times! It is indeed a wonderful experience. More information: <http://www.nps.gov/inde/ilhc.htm>.

¹ Toogood, Anna Coxe, *Historic Resource Study Independence Mall: The 18th Century Development Block Three Arch to race, Fifth to Sixth Street*, Cultural Resources Management Independent National Park: January 2004 http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/inde/hrs/hrs3.htm

² <http://www.phillyarchaeology.org/reports/pdf/block2.pdf>

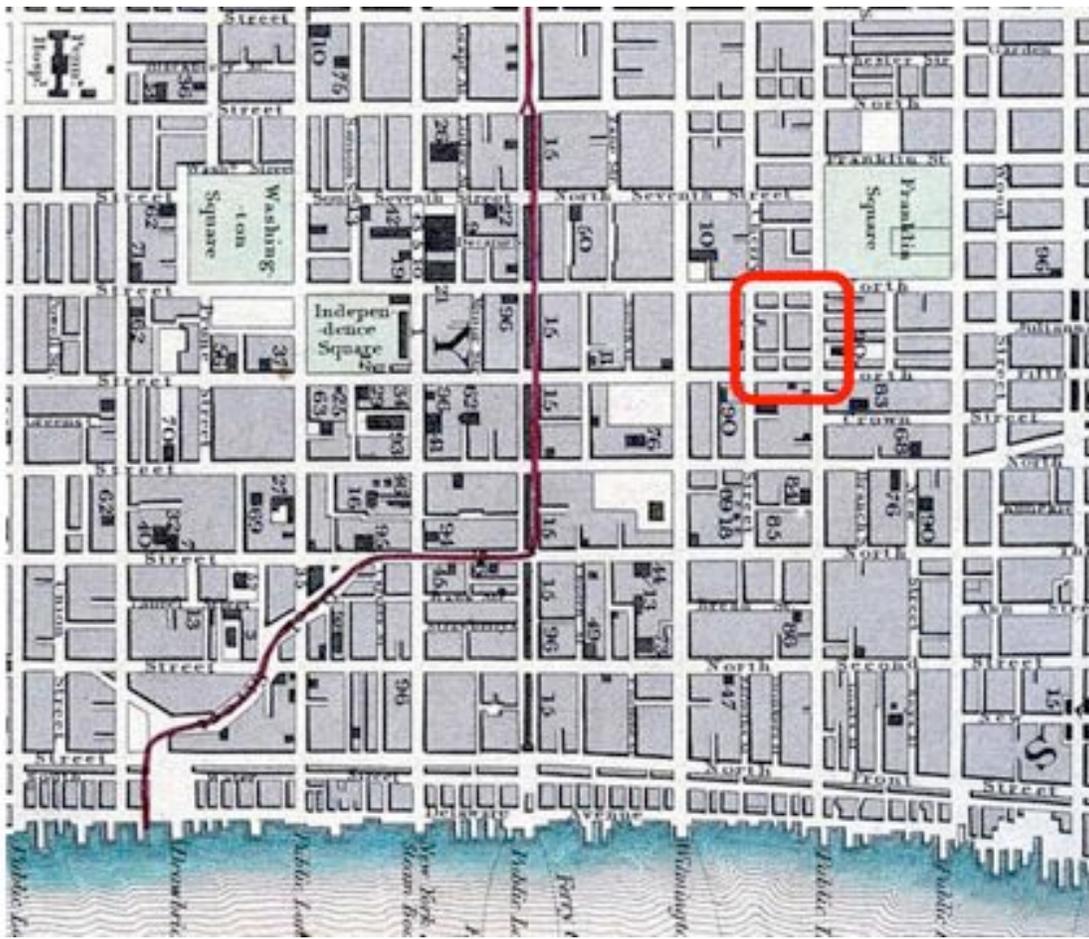


Figure 1

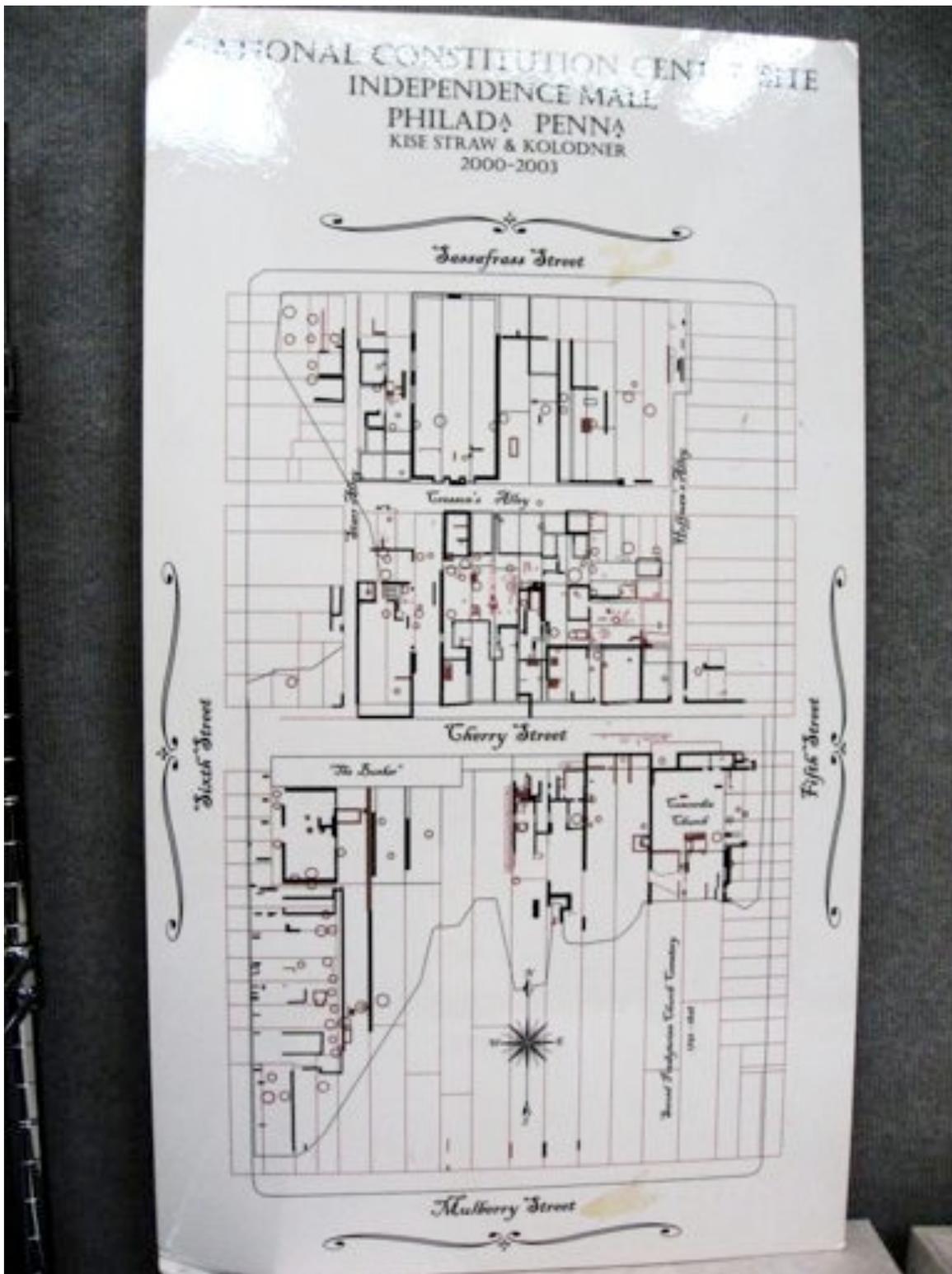


Figure 2

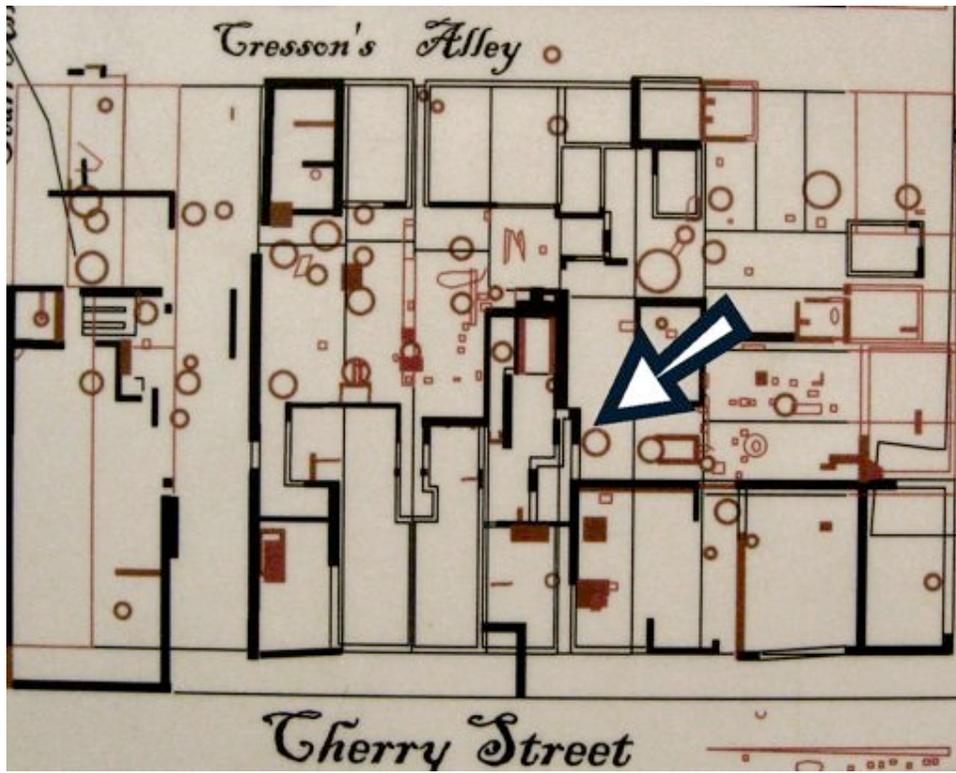


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

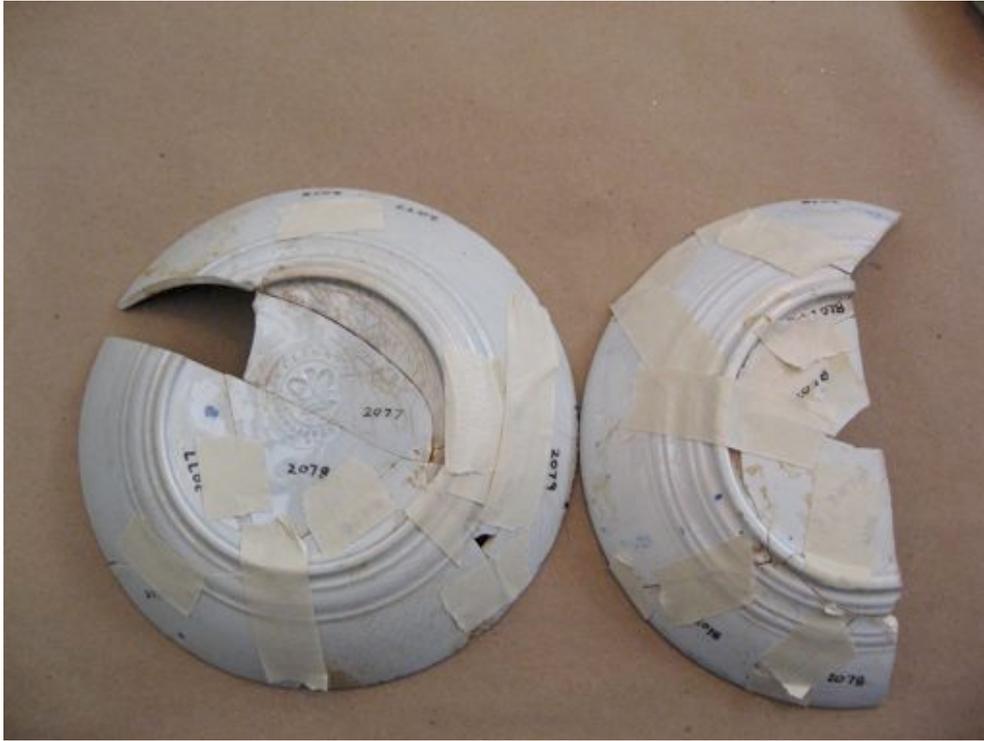


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23