



**A Transferware Murder Mystery
Episode 2 in a Transferware Detective's Saga**

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Just as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot were never without baffling cases to solve, the work of a TCC Database detective is never done. Pattern identification mysteries abound, but rarely do they involve the investigation of foul play.



The Montpelier Mystery Sherd

Recently, I was performing my role as volunteer ceramics researcher in the Archaeology Lab at Montpelier, the historic home of President James Madison. The lab curator approached me with an urgent request, "Please help us to solve this 'murder!'" The staff archaeologists had recently unearthed a group of transferware plate sherds found in the swept yard area between the Southeast and Southwest duplexes, which served as houses for enslaved domestic workers. Clutched in the curator's hand was evidence of the dire deed in progress, identified as "Vessel # 1079" (Fig. 1). A very small sherd with brown transfer printing depicted a male figure towering over another male figure who was lying on the ground at water's edge. The arm of the standing figure was extended, pointed menacingly at the prostrate man. The image was a bit vague; but ... might the tall man be clutching a weapon in his hand? Which transferware pattern could possibly have depicted such a dastardly deed?



Fig. 1: "Murder Pattern" sherd.

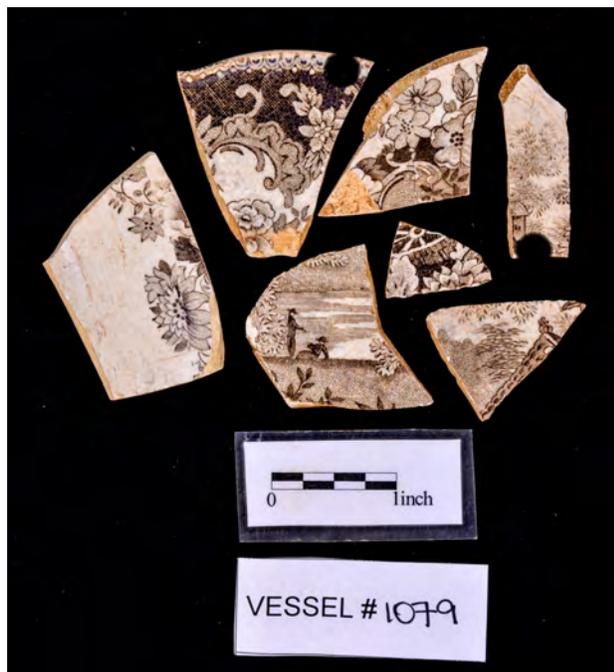


Fig. 2: Additional "Murder Pattern" sherds.

A mystery indeed! More clues were essential. Evidence was sought. The Archaeology Lab was scoured and well-labeled boxes led me to tangible items for close examination. A small plastic bag, labeled Vessel #1079, contained additional brown transfer-printed sherds which had been unearthed in the same area (Fig. 2). With magnifying glass firmly in hand, I sorted through the sherds and attempted to find any that might have originally been joined together. Several "mends" were possible, shedding some light on the border design and overall pattern. However, a "Eureka!" moment occurred with the discovery that the reverse side of a small sherd contained the partial mark "Swis/R.Steve", clues which were helpful in determining both the maker and the name of the pattern (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: "Murder Pattern" sherd with printed mark.

I immediately performed the next obvious investigatory step, a consultation of the TCC Database. Fortuitously, the "Swiss" pattern, a series of Romantic European views produced by the firm Ralph Stevenson (and Son), active 1810-1835, was represented with two pattern records showing different central views: ID #8029, a green-printed 8-inch scalloped plate (Fig. 4) with printed mark (Fig. 5), and ID #8446, a pink-printed 8-inch scalloped plate (Fig. 6) with printed mark (Fig. 7).



Figs. 4 (left) and 5 (above): TCC DB Pattern 8029 plate and mark.



Fig. 10: "Murder Pattern" sherds with border design elements.

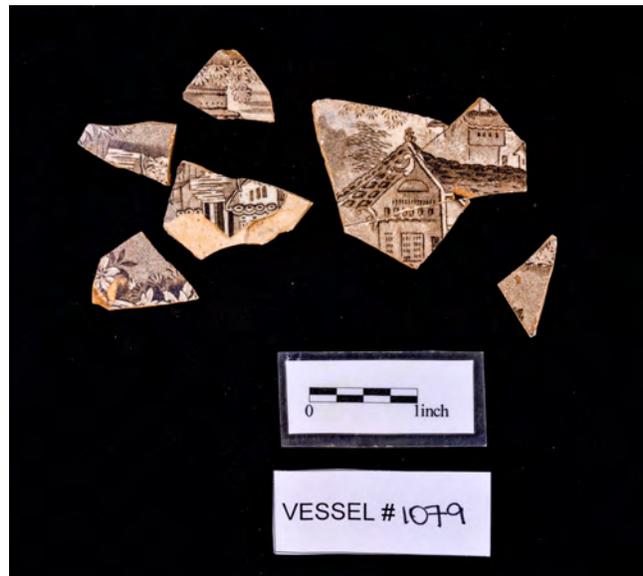


Fig. 11: "Murder Pattern" sherds with central pattern elements.

However, a nagging thought caused this detective to remain unconvinced. There was a discrepancy in these findings: neither "Swiss" pattern in the TCC database contained any figures. Why would the Montpelier "Swiss" pattern have them? Two other "Swiss" pattern views were mentioned in the Additional Information portion of the TCC pattern records, one on a plate on p. 426 in WilliamsWeber1978 and another on an 8.25 inch plate on p. 319 in Williams2008. A consultation of these two volumes in my reference library confirmed a dearth of figures in all four versions of the pattern, printed on similarly-sized plates. An Internet search to find any other examples of the pattern was fruitless. The conclusion to be drawn from this observation was that perhaps the group of brown printed sherds unearthed in the archaeological dig came from more than one broken vessel, one with the figure-less "Swiss" pattern, and another vessel (or vessels) with a pattern which contained figures. A second search for the two tiny figures among the thousands of patterns in the TCC Database left the mystery unsolved and this detective bleary-eyed.

Clearly, legwork was necessary, and fortuitously the 2015 TCC Annual Meeting in the UK provided a golden opportunity to "pound the pavement" and view thousands of ceramic vessels in search of the elusive "murder" vignette. Multiple visits to the Ceramic Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum provided no clues. However, during the private home tour of the exquisite Parkes collection, among the plethora of beautiful blue and white transferware objects, one stopped me in my tracks: a lidded jug (Fig. 12) which rested precisely at my eye level upon the breakfast room mantle. Clearly printed on the left side of the jug were the two figures depicted on the sherd!! (Fig. 13).

However, these men were not engaged in any nefarious behavior ... they were merely ... fishing. A tiny, very slim pole was clearly visible and the placement of the standing man's limbs was consistent with this sporting activity. The nearly identical figures on the small brown printed sherd from Montpelier lacked the fishing pole, suggesting that perhaps the copper plate used for the transfer may have been worn down or perhaps the engraver simply omitted the pole. A printed mark on the underside of the jug indicated that it was the "Lyme Castle" pattern (Fig. 14) which Colin Parkes had documented beautifully as Pattern No. 467 in the TCC Database. The very tiny figures shown in the pattern record had previously been completely overlooked by this sleuth.



Fig. 12: Lyme Castle jug.



Fig. 13: Lyme Castle jug detail.



Fig. 14: Lyme Castle jug mark.

Satisfied that two different documented transferware patterns were represented by the brown sherds from the archaeological dig, and that no murder had been committed, Detective Bouterie was prepared to declare the case "closed." However, almost immediately, the "Lyme Castle" discovery proved to be a false lead, a red herring!

While writing up the findings for Montpelier, I performed a final quick Internet search, hoping that perhaps a brown printed version of the "Swiss" pattern might have surfaced, a photo of which would greatly enhance my report. Incredibly, an eBay dealer had just listed a large brown-printed "Swiss" platter. The pattern for this platter had a wide central reserve to fill, thus it had to include more elements than would be needed to fill the smaller reserve of a plate. Therefore, this more panoramic view of the romantic scene contained not only the requisite similar chalet, woodlands, flowers, and trees, but also ... similar figures at the edge of a lake or pond (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Brown-printed "Swiss Pattern" platter.

This new evidence disproved the "Lyme Castle" connection, and strengthened the assumption that the sherds at Montpelier came from a single large "Swiss" patterned platter. A secondary examination of the brown sherds revealed them to be very substantial in composition, further supporting the conclusion that they all came from the same sturdy vessel. Mystery solved. Report written. Case closed.

However, a transferware detective's work is never done! The beautiful brown platter must now be entered into the TCC Database, although its role as the unsung hero in the solving of a murder mystery must remain forever unmentioned in the new pattern record.

References

Williams2008: Williams, Margie J. The Charm of English Pink: Volume I, The Pots. Newcastle, California: Altarfire Publishing, 2008.

WilliamsWeber1978: Williams, Petra with Weber, Marguerite R. Staffordshire Romantic Transfer Patterns: Cup Plates and Early Victorian China. Jeffersontown, Kentucky: Fountain House East, 1978.

Credits

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