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Ceramic Analysis at Fort Vancouver NHS

Fort Vancouver, located in present-day Vancouver, Washington, was a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) trading post and administrative center from 1825-1860. It passed into the hands of the U.S. Army in 1860 and was managed as a part of the Vancouver Barracks until it burned to the ground in 1866. Today, Fort Vancouver National Historic Site encompasses 210 acres of land that contain the site of the original HBC fort. The National Park Service (NPS) has been hosting archeological research at Fort Vancouver since 1947 (Caywood 1954), resulting in an unrivaled HBC-era artifact collection, with over 2 million catalogued artifacts. This study focuses on over 20,000 English-manufactured ceramic sherds excavated from households at HBC Fort Vancouver. Fort Vancouver is a premier historical archeological site in the Pacific Northwest, and the well-documented spatial definition of the various ethnic groups living and working at the fort provides an ideal setting to explore the complexity of culture, class, and identity through material culture.



Spode ceramics recovered at the Fort Vancouver site (NPS Photo)

At the apex of its western expansion in the 19th century, the HBC encountered an incredible environment to procure furs, trade with Native Americans, and diversify its efforts into agriculture, industry, and commerce. Early HBC administrators were smitten with the southwestern Washington landscape and the temperate, if rainy, climate, reminding many of Scottish heritage of their far-away homes. Upon its dedication on March 18, 1825, Sir George Simpson, wrote of Fort Vancouver:

The Establishment is beautifully situated on the top of a bank about 1¼ Miles from the Water side commanding an extensive view of the River the surrounding Country and the fine plain below which is watered by two very pretty small Lakes and studded (sic) as if artificially by clumps of Fine Timber. The Fort is well picketed covering a space of about ¾ths of an acre and the buildings already completed are a Dwelling House, two good Stores an Indian Hall and temporary quarters for the people. It will in Two Years hence be the finest place in North America, indeed I have rarely seen a Gentleman's Seat in England possessing so many natural advantages and where ornament and use are so agreeably combined (Merk 1968: 123-124).

The HBC employed people from amazingly diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It was not uncommon to have English and Scottish administrators managing Native Hawaiians, Iroquois, and French-Canadian *Métis* in the same work party; and all of these male employees married equally among local Native American populations. Within this historic setting were some of the most elaborate and some of the simplest Euroamerican households present in the Pacific Northwest between ca. 1825-1846.

The various Chief Factor's Houses constructed within the fort were the largest and most elaborately decorated and outfitted structures in the Pacific Northwest. On the opposite end of the scale, the many dozens of structures that housed the majority of the employees of the Company were simple, 20 by 20 feet structures with earthen floors and little furniture. Yet, all of these households shared one common feature (at least archeologically); they all had and used Spode-manufactured ceramic wares, arguably the best ceramic earthenwares that England had to offer.

The Spode/Copeland & Garrett/W.T. Copeland Company ("Spode") firm is associated with fine English ceramics, and has been the "Potter and English Porcelain Manufacturer to His Royal Highness" since 1806, and was nearly the sole provider of ceramic wares to the HBC between ca. 1836-1847 (Sussman 1979:8-9). These beautifully decorated ceramic vessels served a dual function in this fur trade social setting, not only providing functional table and tea wares, but arguably serving as objects of desire based upon their beauty and economic value. Much like the settlement itself, these ceramic wares became the ultimate fusion of a place where

"ornament and function are so agreeably combined."

Every archeological excavation of an HBC-associated structure at Fort Vancouver has yielded sherds of English ceramic wares. In fact, it is not uncommon for Spode-manufactured transfer print decorated white earthenware sherds to represent upwards of 25% of archeological assemblages from the fort and its associated Employee Village (Caywood 1954; Chance 1976; Chance et al. 1982; Hoffman and Ross 1972a and b, 1973a, b, and c, 1974 a, b, and c, 1975; Ross 1976; Thomas and Hibbs 1984). The well-documented and spatially defined ethnic groups living and working at Fort Vancouver provide a nearly ideal setting to explore culture, class, and identity through ceramic analysis.

During this period, the HBC ranked their employees in a hierarchical socioeconomic structure (Hussey 1957; Hamilton 1984, 1990; Ross 1976) of four socioeconomic classes: Proprietors, Commissioned Officers, Servants, and Charges (Ross 1976: 15). These socioeconomic classes were also ethnically segregated. By 1845 the palisaded fort site had grown to over 241,000 square feet, and contained 35 separate structures. This immense area and all of its support structures housed only approximately 35 Scottish and British-descent Officers and "gentlemen," with their *Métisse* and Native American wives. The remaining approximate 250 servant-class employees and their families were restricted to the Company Village (with a total estimated population of 600), or in one of several other local HBC settlements. These restrictions were so strictly enforced that male employees of non-gentleman status and non-European descent were not allowed within fort gates at night or within its domestic structures at any time of the day (Hussey 1957).

Utilizing HBC Fort Vancouver socioeconomic classifications and the salary data for these classifications and ethnic segregation within these classes, this study will seek to correlate variations in household artifact assemblages with household economic ability, socioeconomic classification, and probable household occupant ethnic identities (see [Table 1](#)). Ceramic vessel sherds from four separate sites in the Village (Operation 14, House 2, 3, and 4) (Kardas and Larrabee 1969; Kardas 1972; Thomas and Hibbs 1984) and two in the Fort (the Chief Factor's House and the Bachelors Quarters Privies) (Hoffman and Ross 1973b) were analyzed for specific data variables, which include date ranges of manufacture, vessel form, manufacturer, decoration type, minimum numbers of vessels of each type (MNV) and pattern names (see [Table 2](#)).

Quantitative Analysis of Ceramic Vessel Wares

The use of ceramics as indicators of status of households is probably the result of the near omnipresence of ceramic vessels found on 18th, 19th, and 20th century historical archeology sites. The durability of ceramics allows for high levels of recovery, and the revolution of developing technology and increased transportation capabilities in 18th century England resulted in a near worldwide dominance of Staffordshire potteries' ceramic shipments including Spode wares. The majority of ceramic wares in this study were available to households from the Fort Vancouver Sale Shop. Vessels were shipped from England to the Columbia Department at HBC expense and sold to inhabitants of the fort at non-uniform mark-up prices.

The number of vessels in each household assemblage was compared by estimated length of occupation, number of occupants, and volume of excavations ([Table 2](#)). Based on these results, the average numbers of identified vessels per year of occupation, per number of occupants, and per cubic meter of archeologically excavated matrix were computed. These data are likely skewed by many factors, including artifact depositional patterns and the varying archeological recovery methodologies applied to each site. The results compare the number of broken ceramic vessels that ended up in the archeological record, not the total number of ceramic vessels representative of a household. The results only capture the results of accidental breakage through time, not the entire number of ceramic vessels likely present in a household at any one time. The average number of broken vessels per household per year is probably revealing of dining practices and behaviors, as well as the relative quantity of ceramic vessels present within a household.

The Chief Factor's House and Bachelors Quarters Privy

The Chief Factor's House breezeway assemblage represents a breakage and disposal rate of 25.5 vessels per year, or just over 2.1 vessels per month (see [Table 2](#)). The daily trips with loaded dishes of hot food between the kitchen and the Chief Factor's House, as well as the daily cleaning of these vessels between meals, obviously resulted in the breakage of vessels. This breakage rate may also be reflective of HBC ownership of these place-settings, as the kitchen staff probably did not take as great of care of these vessels as they would have if the vessels were personally owned. The spring, 1841 Inventory of "Articles in Use, Chief Factor's House Pantry," (HBCA B223/d/136 not in references) shows 260 "EW" (earthenware) ceramic vessels. If 25.5 vessels per year were broken, and the 1841 inventory is used as a benchmark, then daily use of this assemblage resulted in an attrition rate of just under 10% of the vessels per year.

Not surprisingly, the Chief Factor's House leads these figures in the number of broken vessels per year, and in the number of broken vessels represented per person. The estimated number of occupants is based upon the number of residents of the Chief Factor's House and of the kitchen, not the number of clerks who dined on a daily basis in the Great Hall of the

structure. The ceramic vessels used for the daily meal in the Great Hall were company-owned, as is recorded in the annual "Items In Use" inventories for the Chief Factor's House (HBCA). This may skew the data on a personal ownership basis, but it does not reduce the recorded wealth of this particular household.

The disposal behavior in the breezeway between the Chief Factor's House and the kitchen is reflected in the relatively high level of vessel recovery there, 97.1 vessels per cubic meter. The relatively low rate of recovery in the Bachelors Quarter's privy likely indicates that purposeful disposal of ceramic vessels in privies was not a common behavior. Chamber pots were likely accidentally dropped into the privy contents, while many of the rest of the table ware vessels found in privies probably represent individuals moving and disposing of their excess goods.

Village Households

A surprising result in these data is the relative richness of the number of broken ceramic vessels per estimated number of occupants for the House 2, House 3, and the Operation 14 households. Each of these household assemblages had more than 20 broken vessels per estimated number of occupants, with House 2 and the Operation 14 households having more than 25 broken vessels per person (see [Table 2](#)). This unexpected richness of vessels per person in these Village households indicates an emphasis on the acquisition of these goods. The Operation 14 site is associated with a Scottish cooper, John Johnson, who had a slightly larger annual salary than most other occupants of the Village. It is also probable that Johnson used ceramic vessels as table ware in England. These findings suggest that the occupants of House 3 were of similar origin or socio-economic class as the Johnson household.

The House 3 assemblage's figures, yet again, are eye-catching, with an astounding 167.3 ceramic vessels recovered per cubic meter of excavated sediment. This, again, is a strong representation of a household with economic means, with trash disposal behaviors concentrating refuse centralized in the household remnants. The low level of recovery noted for the Operation 14 household is likely a reflection of the large scale of the excavations, with the highest volume of excavated sediment represented among any of these households.

These ceramic data can also be examined for indications of the presence of women in these households. Assemblages associated with the presence of women and children in the household had a greater number of vessels than those without the presence of women and children. Unfortunately, there is not enough historic data directly associated with the occupants of the House 2, 3, and 4 sites to make this hypothesis testable. This association is only generally supported by more general historical data about the HBC and Fort Vancouver.

Distribution of Vessel Types

The ceramic assemblage for each household was divided into four functional vessel types: Tea wares, Table wares, Hygiene wares and Storage wares (see [Table 3](#)). Tea wares consisted of teacups, saucers, slop bowls, and tea pots. Table wares consisted of both serving dishes and individual place settings. Hygiene wares included washing basins, soap dishes, and chamber pots. The quantitative distribution of all functional types of recovered ceramics show surprising similarities in the overall percentages of Tea wares between the two class-divided household assemblages, and great differences in the percentages of Table wares and Hygiene wares.

This study assumes that there will be significant differences in the economic value of ceramic vessel assemblages, (based upon vessel functions, and decoration types) observed in assemblages from Gentleman Class households inside Fort Vancouver and Servant Class households in the Company Village. In order to test this hypothesis, the number of vessels from each functional class (Hygiene wares, Storage wares, Table wares, and Tea wares) in the sample recovered from each household will be compared ([Table 3](#)). These results compare the number of broken ceramic vessels that ended up in the archeological record, not the total number of ceramic vessels used in a household. These results only capture the breakage of ceramic vessels through time, not the entire number of ceramic vessels likely present in a household at any one time.

When looking at both the individual households, and the mean percentages of functional ceramic assemblages by HBC-defined social classes, apparent differences are noted ([Table 4](#)). There are also noted differences in the relative percentages of specific vessel forms between Gentleman and Servant class households, specifically for slop bowls, vegetable dishes, pitchers, side plates, soup tureens, and wash basins.

Tea ware vessels were the most common functional type among all of the archeological households, other than the Bachelors Quarters Privy (Late) assemblages. The higher percentage of Tea wares in all of these household assemblages most likely results from the ease of breakage of thin earthenware vessels with handles. Handled teacups of this era are difficult to store and transport, and they do not stack as easily as flat Table wares. Dropping one of these vessels is more likely to result in their breakage than dropping a dinner plate of this era.

The high percentage of Tea wares in these assemblages matches the relative frequencies of teacups and saucers recorded in the Fort Vancouver Sales Shop inventories (HBCA). The Fort Vancouver records for the Sales Shop Inventories for the years 1826, 1833, 1836, 1839,

1840, 1841, 1843, and 1852 shows a mean percentage of each functional type of 60.05% for Tea wares, 44.04% for Table wares, and 16.58% for Hygiene Wares (Figure 1).

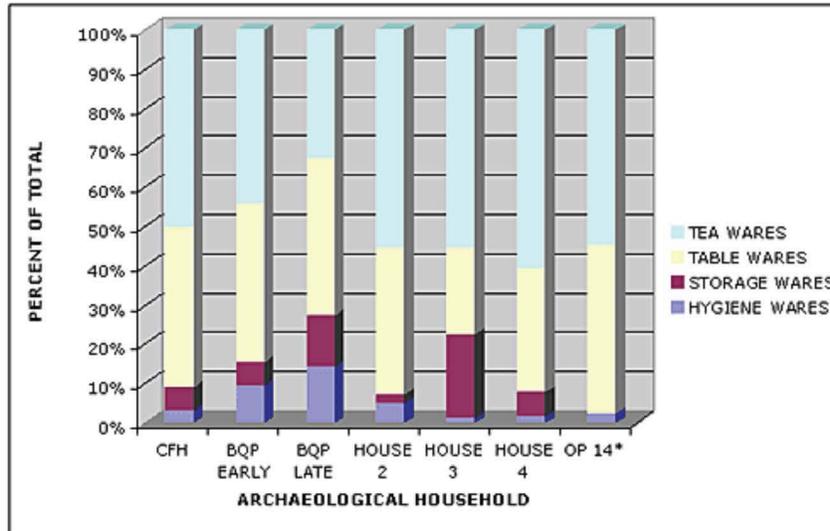
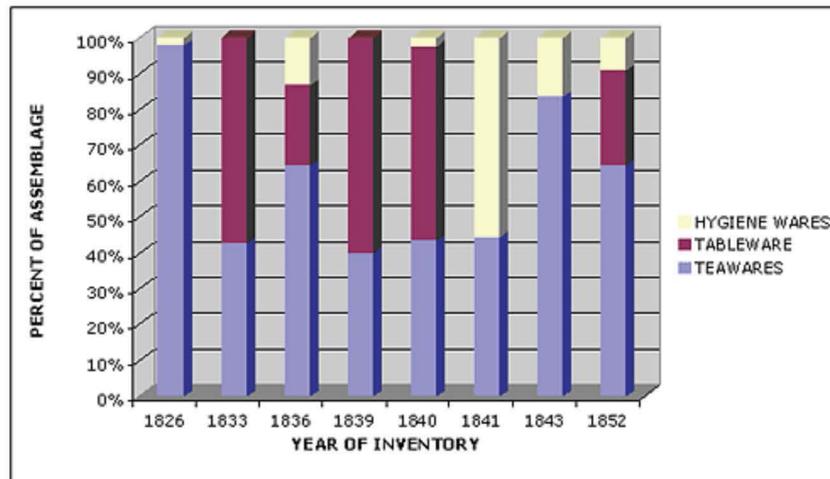


FIGURE 1. Graphical Representation of Percent of Total Assemblage by Archaeological Household of Functional Categories of Ceramic Types.

Hygiene wares are more prevalent in Gentleman Class households than in Servant Class households (see Table 3). These vessel forms (wash basins and chamber pots) are probably indicators of wealth and Victorian ideals of cleanliness that took hold in upper class households of England and North America during the 1840s (Blumin 1989; Dudden 1983 neither in references; Wall 1991).

A comparison of the percentage of functional types recovered from each household versus the percentage of functional types recorded at the Fort Vancouver Sales Shop further tests assemblage differences between Gentlemen and Servant Class households. To date, only one, for the year 1842, has been identified. The following percentages of functional types are determined: Tea wares (50.96%), Table wares (44.04%), and Hygiene Wares (8.34%) (see Figure 2). It is suggested that these percentages are a close estimate of the average percent of functional types of the total ceramic assemblage available for purchase at the Fort Vancouver Sales Shop through time.



Tea

FIGURE 2. Percent of each Functional Type of Ceramic Vessels Represented in the Fort Vancouver Sales Shop Inventories for the Years 1826, 1833, 1836, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1843, and 1852 (HBCA B223/d/ series).

wares are represented by teacups, saucers, and slop bowls (see Table 4), and although expensive and arguably more susceptible to breakage (especially handled cups), were shipped in great quantities because of their association with the popular tea trade. The Fort Vancouver Sales Shop records also list a great quantity and variety of imported teas. In 1839 alone, a total of 920 pounds of three types of tea was recorded in the Sales Shop Inventory (HBCA B223/d/118).

The surprising number of Tea wares recovered from the Servant Class household assemblages, however, is probably the result of differing functional uses of many of these vessels compared to their intended functions. "Slop bowls" accounted for 20.08% of the total

assemblage of all Servant Class households (Table 5). These slop bowls are all without handles, and are undecorated, or banded, or hand slip decorated, representing some of the least expensive wares available. In addition, six slop bowls from the House 2, House 3, and House 4 assemblages (12.5% of the total) had signs of use wear consistent with the heavy scraping of spoons and knives, especially on their interiors. Such use wear is consistent with using these bowls for eating soupy dishes with larger chunks of meat or vegetables in them, and not with using them for "tea slops." Two of the teacups from these households also had similar use wear patterns along their inner bases.

There are few individual serving size bowls represented in the assemblages, with most formal dining of soups being accomplished with the relatively expensive and large "soup plates," which have deep wells and large rims (Ross 1976). The presence of slop bowls in the archeological assemblages of the Servant Class Households, and their near absence in the Gentleman Class Households (only one slop bowl was recovered), suggests that they were not actively used at Fort Vancouver as tea slop bowls. The gentlemen of the fort seemed to have little use for slop bowls, and apparently did not use them in their formal tea drinking, whereas the HBC servants probably did not have a formal tea drinking practices, but had a greater need for hollow Table wares for individual servings, likely soupy meals.

Table wares are the second-most common functional type of ceramic in the Sales Shop inventories, and in both the Gentleman and Servant Class household archeological assemblages. This is, not surprisingly, due to the obvious need for ceramic vessels for both serving and consuming food. Large diameter flatware vessels such as plates and platters are some of the most useful of any of the ceramic vessels represented in these assemblages, and were easy to ship without high breakage rates.

Some of the greatest variation in the quantity of specific vessel forms noted between the class-differentiated households came from Table ware vessels. Large differences are noted specifically with vegetable dishes, pitchers, sugar bowls, side plates, and soup tureens (Table 4). The quantities of these vessels are greater in Gentleman's Class Households than in Servant Class Households. Totalling all of these vessels between the class-differentiated households results in a ratio of 51 vessels for the Gentleman Class Households to 15 for the Servant Class Households. The largest disparities are for vegetable dishes with an 8 to 1 ratio, and for side plates, with a 27 to 3 ratio between the class-differentiated households.

Hygiene wares are the least common of the functional types represented in either the Sales Shop Inventories or the archeological assemblages. Although they were some of the largest ceramic vessels represented in this assemblage, washbasins are, amazingly, some of the least expensive vessels recorded in the Fort Vancouver Sale Shop inventories (averaging just over 2 Schillings each). Their relative ease of shipment may have been a factor of their low price, as their deep bowl shapes allowed for easy stacking of vessels (HBCA 223/d/ series).

Although not recorded in the Fort Vancouver inventories, it is assumed that Chamber Pots were relatively expensive vessels, due to their complex hollowware forms, the presence of handles, and a lid, all of which likely complicated their shipping potential. Chamber pots are recorded almost exclusively within the fort, other than the anomaly of six chamber pots recorded at the House 2 household. The presence of these chamber pots at the House 2 site is even more difficult to explain when one also remembers that privies have not been archeologically identified in the Village, raising questions as to how the occupants of the House 2 site were using these vessels.

A comparison of the mean percentage of these functional types between the Fort Vancouver Sales Shop inventories and the Gentleman and Servant Class Household assemblages yields some interesting results (Figure 2). The Gentleman Class households had a more similar distribution of functional types compared to what was available for purchase in the Sales Shop than that recorded for the Servant Class households. As discussed above, the high frequency of Tea wares in Servant Class households is likely the function of the availability and need for relatively cheap, handleless slop bowls. This high frequency is offset by the relatively low percentages of both Table wares and Hygiene wares in comparison with both the Sales Shop inventories and the Gentleman Class household assemblages. In short, these data seem to show that the occupants of Gentleman Class households were acquiring and using ceramics at almost the same relative frequency of their availability, whereas the occupants of Servant Class households were more selective, or less able to acquire these goods at their relative levels of availability.

Due to the presence of excellent documentary records on the valuation of ceramic vessel forms at the Fort Vancouver Sale Shop during most of the period of occupation, and the prevalence of transfer print decorated wares, vessel form was used to calculate the economic value of ceramic assemblages. Index values were generated by dividing the cost of the cheapest ware type on each list into the cost of other types, at each mark-up level. The index values were developed using the known price mark ups for the Summer of 1845: HBC Gentleman class employees (25% mark up), HBC Servant class employees (50% mark up), HBC Owyhee (Native Hawaiians) Servant class employees (200% mark-up) and non-HBC employee (100% mark up) levels.

These results show that, after the final costs of shipping these goods to the Columbia Department are weighed in, the average value of ceramic assemblages in Servant Class

Households are nearly equal to, if not greater than the average value of ceramic assemblages in Gentleman Class Households (see [Table 6](#)). The Servant Class Households have a higher mean average index value when considering both the "list" prices and the tariff prices. This indicates that the economic value of ceramic vessel assemblages in households in the Village were greater than those in households within the Fort, especially when one considers both the earning potential differences and the tariff differences for these households.

In addition to the differences between class-differentiated households, there are notable index value differences between Servant Class Household assemblages. There is a 77% difference between the highest and lowest values for the indexes. The Operation 14 and the House 3 households both have similar, high-ranking index results, while the House 2 and House 4 sites have much more modest index values. The historical association of the Operation 14 household to the Cooper, John Johnson, and his slightly higher annual income of 25£ per year help to explain the higher index values for this site. It is likely that the occupants of the House 3 site had similar economic means, or at least the social drive to acquire more, and more expensive ceramic vessels. This may be the best indication yet of ethnic differentiation of occupants of a HBC class Servant household without historical evidence, based upon archeological data.

Conclusions

This study proposed to find evidence of the ethnic origin of the occupants of archeological households in the HBC Village at Fort Vancouver. Yet, neither the historical nor the archeological data show substantially different quantitative or qualitative patterns in ceramic data between HBC Village households to make statistically valid arguments on consumer choice based upon ethnic origins. The data probably do indicate that many Village households were occupied by successive, relatively short term occupations by family groups, each with their own semi-matched transfer print decorated ceramic sets.

This pattern is supported by historical documentation of the HBC fur brigade system, in which voyageurs, trappers and their families traveled to the Snake River, the Salt Lake region, or the Sacramento Valley to trap fur bearing mammals (Hussey, 1975). These brigades of 90-120 people were gone for up to nine months of the year, vacating their Fort Vancouver/Village households typically from September to June. The ca. 1846 Covington Map of Fort Vancouver shows a mixture of family-named structures and structures labeled as "Servants" in the Village. Could it be that the family-named structures are associated with year-round occupants of the Village (and probably craftsmen), while the "Servant" labeled structures are seasonally occupied structures that could be occupied by any group of voyageurs returning from another trapping season? If so, the ceramic data alone could not be used to differentiate the details of occupant make-up of these structures.

Using historic and archeological data, it can be argued that each of the Village households had more ceramic vessels than they could reasonably afford. The numbers of broken vessels per household indicate that these ceramic assemblages had greater economic value than the estimated yearly household income should allow. This suggests that a great social value was placed on these ceramics, a social value as great or greater than their economic value. I argue that the people in the Village who had the most to gain from acquiring these high priced, yet fragile goods with limited utility for a mobile family unit were the wives of the voyageurs, trappers, and craftsmen who lived in the Village. These ceramic data are probably most indicative of is the presence of women in these households. Changing social structures in the British fur trade at Fort Vancouver based upon the immigration of Americans over the Oregon Trail and the Anglicization of HBC Gentleman's wives created new demands for ceramic vessels among Native American and *Métis* women.

In her study of the *Métis* children of fur traders in the Willamette Valley, Juliet Pollard makes an argument, "the fact that some *Métis* children were white, while others looked more like their native parent, led to divisions in the fur trade family...[I suggest] that, in general, the child with lighter skin and Euro-American features received the lion's share of societal rewards, while their more darkly skinned brothers and sisters were treated like Indians" (1990: xxii). That the mere biological luck of the draw with the "whiteness" of *Métis* children having an affect on their future lives, it is not hard to imagine that the mothers of these children would make every effort to give them even a perceived social advantage through the acquisition and use of these fine English wares.

I argue that the social demands and advantages in a highly mobile and diverse population changed the consumer behavior of the women of the Village who, although they could not directly shop at the Fort Vancouver Sales Shop, could demand that their husbands acquire these ceramic goods with their meager salaries. It may be also possible that these women used their culturally-inherited hunting and gathering techniques to forage for resources such as salmon, huckleberries, and camas bulbs to be traded to the HBC directly for these ceramic wares (Hussey 1957). Unfortunately, the historic data cannot support these suppositions, and there is no real way to discover how the occupants of these structures acquired these goods.

Much as Diana Di Zerega Wall found with mid-19th century middle class households of New York City, the women of the HBC Village may have been "constructing domestic worlds" with their acquisition and use of these English-made ceramic wares (1991: 78). Indeed, period reminiscences record that the wives of the Gentleman class had little direct dealings with the

operations of the fort. Fort Vancouver's most famous Chief Factor, Dr. John McLoughlin's daughter, Eloisa, told an interviewer in 1878 that, "When my father had company, he entertained them in the general mess room, and not in the family mess room. The families lived separate and private entirely. Gentlemen who came trading to the fort never saw the family. We never saw anybody" (Hussey 1977: 64). This clearly denotes a gender-based separation of public and domestic worlds in the HBC class structure.

In summation, it is argued that the acquisition and use of these ceramics can be seen as an attempt by the *Métis* and Native American women of Fort Vancouver to reinforce their social standing in an ever-"whitening" society, and perhaps train the next generation of *Métis* to become socialized in the etiquette proper of becoming the wife of an HBC gentleman, or recently immigrated American. The high numbers of ceramic vessels present in all archeological households, regardless of socio-economic status, indicates a high social value for these fragile commodities that surpasses even their high economic status.

Learn more about [Fort Vancouver NHP](#), and about [archeological research](#) at the fort.

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