

CATAWBA POTTERY IN THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY ERA: A VIEW FROM THE SOURCE

by
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Abstract

Written accounts of the Catawba Indians during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries indicate that their potters engaged in a thriving ceramic trade as early as the 1770s and regularly peddled their wares as far afield as Charleston. The scant documentary evidence of this trade is often cited by researchers who identify Catawba “River Burnished” pottery among “Colonowares” from Anglo-American and African-American contexts in the Lowcountry. Recent archaeological excavations at New Town (1781–1820) in Lancaster County, South Carolina, have recovered substantial ceramic assemblages from the Catawbas’ home base. Analysis of these assemblages provides a basis for comparison with “Colonoware” collections and may provide a key for attributing some low-fired earthenwares to their ultimate sources.

The frequent incidence of “colonoware” sherds in eighteenth and nineteenth-century archaeological contexts throughout South Carolina has spawned considerable speculation and debate about the cultural origins and meanings of such wares (Anthony 1979, 1986; Baker 1972; Beck 1995; Blumer 2004; Cooper and Steen 1998; Drucker and Anthony 1979; Espenshade and Kennedy 2002; Ferguson 1980, 1990, 1992; Groover 1992; Joseph 2004; Joseph et al. 2004; Lees and Kimberly-Lees 1979; Lewis 1976; South 1974; Steen et al. 1996; Wheaton et al. 1983; Wheaton and Garrow 1985; Zierden et al. 1986). Documentary accounts indicate that Catawba Indian potters engaged in a thriving ceramic trade throughout the region during the Federal period (Gregorie 1925; Simms 1841; Smyth 1785), and researchers have attributed certain colonowares from Anglo-American and African-American contexts to Catawba Indian sources. However, in the absence of well-documented comparative samples from contemporaneous Catawba habitation sites, such attribution had been, as Ferguson (1980) noted, “indirect.”

Recent archaeological excavations at New Town, the Catawbas’ primary Federal-period settlement in Lancaster County, South Carolina

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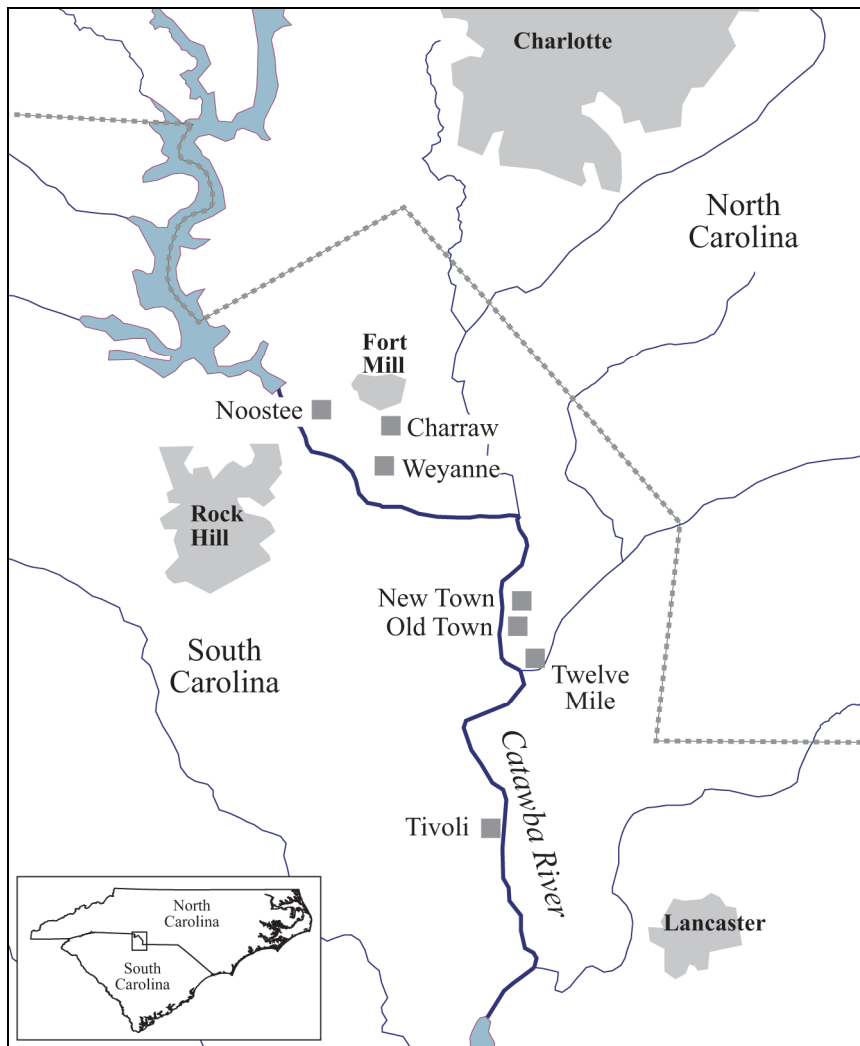


Figure 1. Map of the Catawba Indian homeland showing selected sites that have yielded Catawba pottery of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

(Figure 1), have filled this comparative void (Davis and Riggs 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006). These investigations, undertaken between 2003 and 2005 by the University of North Carolina, recovered almost 62,500 sherds and vessel sections that amply illustrate the character and variability of Catawba pottery at its source during the heyday of the ceramic trade. Analysis of these assemblages establishes a baseline for

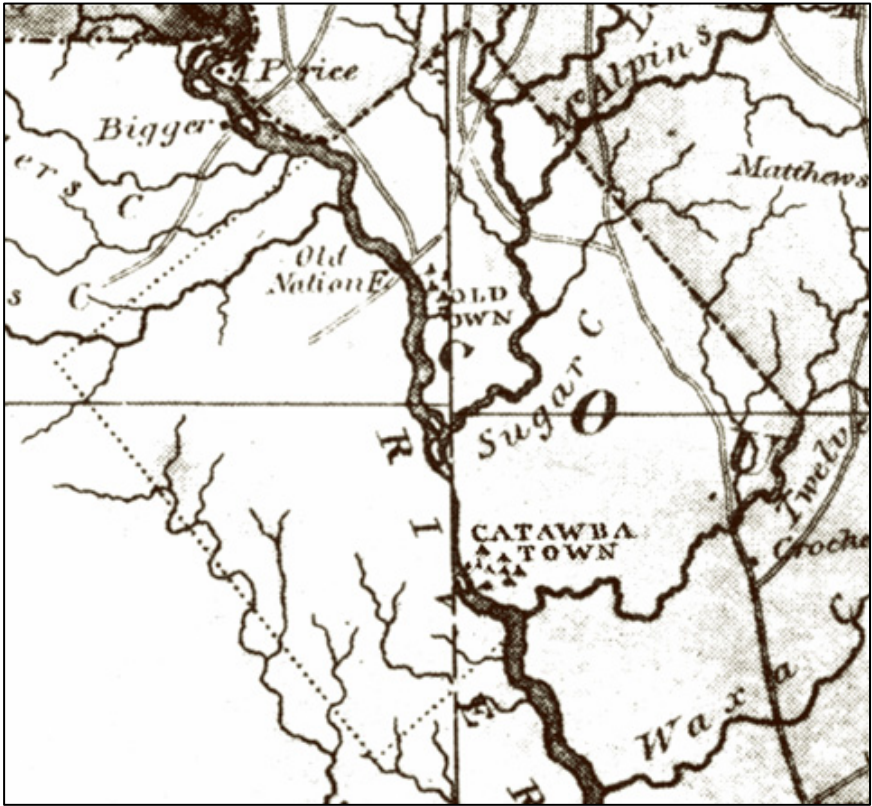


Figure 2. Portion of a map titled “The First Actual Survey of the State of North Carolina,” by Jonathan Price and John Strothers, 1808, showing the Catawba Reservation established in 1763. The settlement labeled “Catawba Town,” established at the close of the American Revolution and abandoned by about 1820, was also known as New Town.

comparison with “colonoware” collections and may provide technological and stylistic keys for definitively attributing some (or most) of the low-fired colonowares from South Carolina contexts to Catawba Indian potters.

New Town is situated in the uplands overlooking the Catawba River near Rock Hill, South Carolina, in the Piedmont homelands where Spanish explorers first encountered the towns of Catawba and Yssa in the mid-sixteenth century (Hudson et al. 1984) (Figure 2). As the primary native power of the piedmont interior, the Catawbas (also known as the Esaus or Nassaus) absorbed numerous refugee groups displaced by colonial “shatter zones” in the early eighteenth century (Adair 1930

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[1775]; Merrell 1989; also see Fitts, this volume). As late as mid-century, these diverse refugee groups maintained distinct identities and cultural traditions. A catastrophic population collapse in 1759 brought about a final coalescence and ethnogenesis of a single, unified Catawba identity. By the time of the American Revolution, the Catawba Nation constituted a single settlement near the mouth of Twelve Mile Creek, at the southern edge of a 15-mile square reservation surveyed in 1764. After Revolutionary War disruptions and a year-long sojourn in Virginia, the American-allied Catawbas reformed their community as New Town a few miles north of the former settlement at Twelve Mile. Elkanah Watson visited New Town in 1785 and found a scattered village of log houses (Watson 1856). Bishop Thomas Coke saw the settlement in 1791, and noted: “We now made a visit to the Catawba Indians. Their Nation is reduced to a very small number, and chiefly live in a little town, which in England would be only called a village (Coke 2005:160).” New Town gradually diminished during the 1810s as families transferred to a still newer town across the river. The New Town settlement was completely abandoned in the 1820s following the death of community leader Sally New River (Brown 1966).

Archaeology at New Town

The site of New Town occupies approximately 12 hectares on a wooded ridge that borders part of the Waxhaws’ Old Fields on the east side of the Catawba River (Figure 3). Researchers identified the site based upon contemporary maps, documentary accounts, and Catawba oral traditions. Intensive surface reconnaissance and metal detector survey of the New Town locality have identified seven separate clusters of Catawba ceramics and Federal-period manufactured goods. These clusters correspond to individual cabin seats or small hamlets; the diffuse community configuration appears consistent with an 1815 description of New Town as “6 or 8 houses facing an oblong square” (Jones 1815).

Excavations at six of these cabin loci total approximately 800 sq meters (Davis and Riggs 2004a, 2005, 2006). This work, conducted over three summers, exposed chimney bases and hearths, cellar pits, borrow pits, peripheral dumps, and sheet midden deposits that date ca. 1790–1820. These investigations have recovered over 86,000 artifacts, including a wide array of diagnostic Federal-period materials, such as English-made pearlware and creamware sherds, bottle glass and glassware, coins, cast iron vessel fragments, riding tack hardware, ammunition, and jewelry.

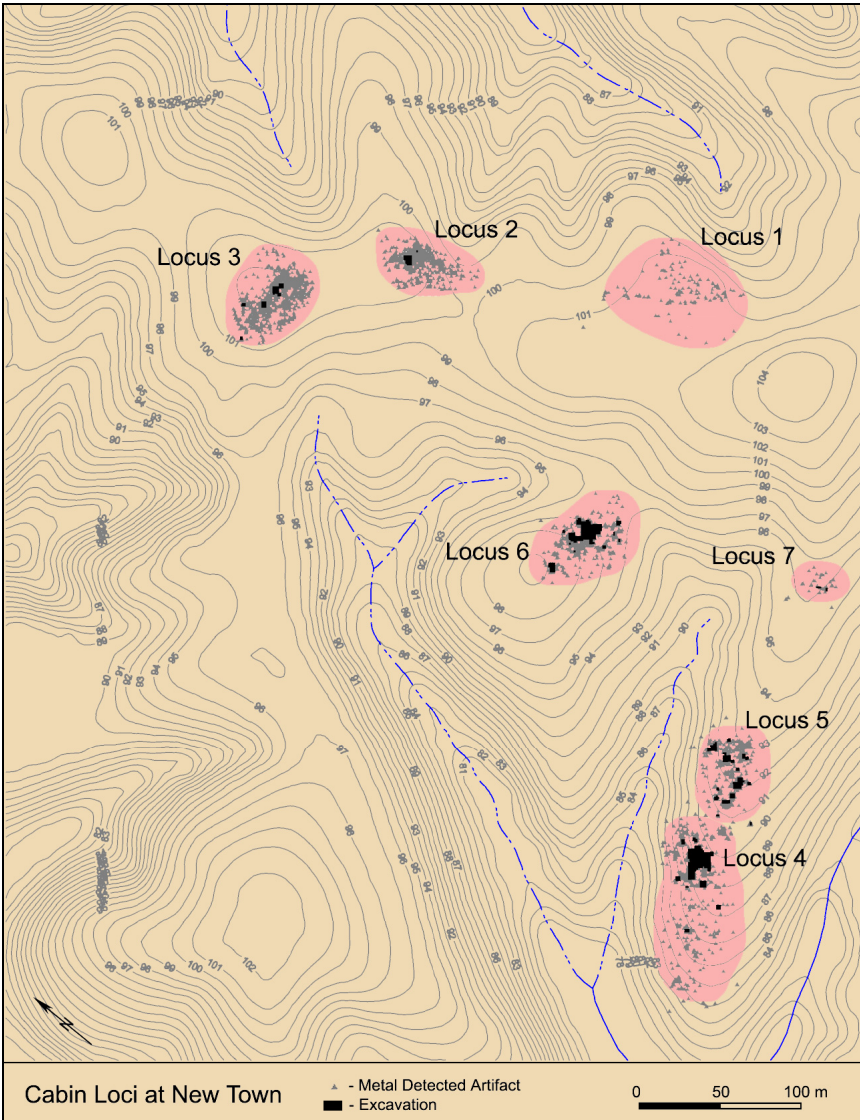


Figure 3. Topographic map of New Town showing the distribution of metal-detected artifacts and the location of excavation units. Each of the artifact clusters represents a log cabin seat or group of cabins.

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Figure 4. Fragments of Catawba-made vessel rims (interior view), handles, and podes found at New Town.

Characteristics of New Town Pottery

The collection of artifacts from New Town also comprises almost 62,500 low-fired earthenware sherds and 593 ceramic tobacco pipe fragments attributable to the Federal-period Catawba occupation (Figures 4 and 5). These sherds include 30,088 sherdlets smaller than two centimeters in diameter, which were counted but not classified further.



Figure 5. Catawba-made clay pipes from New Town. The pipes in the middle row and top left are decorated with incisions and punctuations. The specimen in the top row, second from left, is a toy tomahawk effigy pipe with a missing bowl. The two pipes at upper right also are toys.

Among the remaining 32,411 analyzed sherds are 4,748 rim fragments, 2,765 basal portions, 24,651 body sherds, 245 appendages such as handles, lugs, and podes, and one complete ceramic bottle and stopper.

Clays used for New Town pottery typically fired medium golden brown to dark buff, similar to modern Catawba wares. Minority hues range from pale buff to tan to pale gray. All of the New Town pottery probably derives from immediately local clay sources; active Catawba clay pits are located within two miles of the site, and contemporary observers noted that New Town potters got their clay “from the river.” Most of the sherds appear temperless, with very fine mica flecks that are natural constituents of the clay. However, some sherds exhibit moderate quantities of medium-grained sand, and a few sherd bodies contain relatively coarse-grained, mixed sand (Figure 6). The varied aplastic

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Figure 6. Cross-section view of Catawba sherds from New Town.

content of New Town sherds probably reflects the character of available pottery clays rather than additive material. A number of later nineteenth-century observers noted that Catawba potters employed very fine-grained “pipe clay” which they mixed in proportion to coarser-grained “pan clay” to achieve desired textures for different products (Holmes 1903; also see Harrington 1908). In general, ceramic tobacco pipes from New Town exhibit very fine-grained bodies while large cooking jars exhibit the coarsest bodies.

The vast majority of New Town vessels appear to have been coil built, although vessel bodies exhibit strong coil integrity and seldom break on coil junctures. A few small, relatively crude “pinch pots” appear to be toys. The bodies of elbow-form ceramic tobacco pipes were press-molded with bowl and stem holes bored into leather hard clay (see Figure 5).

Vessel wall thicknesses range from 2 mm to 10 mm, with an average thickness of 5.2 mm. Vessel walls are evenly thinned and uniform as a consequence of intensive scraping and trimming of leather-hard vessels during the manufacturing process. As Harrington noted in 1908, Catawba potters used steel or cane knives or mussel shells to scrape vessel surfaces (Harrington 1908:404).

Exterior finishes are exclusively plain, in most cases with secondary burnishing or polishing. Mooney (Holmes 1903), Harrington (1908), and others observed Catawba potters burnishing or rubbing vessels with water-tumbled quartz pebbles, and finishing less accessible nooks and



Figure 7. Catawba pan recovered from a cabin hearth at Locus 4. Note the black smudged interior.

crannies with bone burnishers. Thirty-five incised sherds with shallow, over-smoothed straight lines were recovered, and these all derive from a single beaker with podes. Most ceramic tobacco pipes are dry-incised or etched with a variety fine-line geometric patterns and tic marks (see Figure 5).

Interior finishes of completed, functional vessels are typically well-smoothed or burnished and smudged black (Figure 7). This layer of carbon serves to waterproof vessels and fills or obscures interior surface irregularities. In 1815, Calvin Jones noted that the New Town potters burned their vessels “with bark which makes the exposed side a glossy black.” Seventy years later, James Mooney observed Catawba potters filling vessels with broken bark for firing, then inverting the vessels to achieve smudged interiors (Holmes 1903).

Approximately 10% of rim sherds are decorated with orange or red pigment, typically applied to contrast against the blackened fields of lip interiors (Figure 8). Three sherds are painted with a silvery-blue pigment. Lumps of orange pigment recovered from New Town contexts appear to be desiccated commercial sealing wax, the Catawba pigment of choice noted in Simms’ 1841 account in the fictional “Loves of the Driver.”

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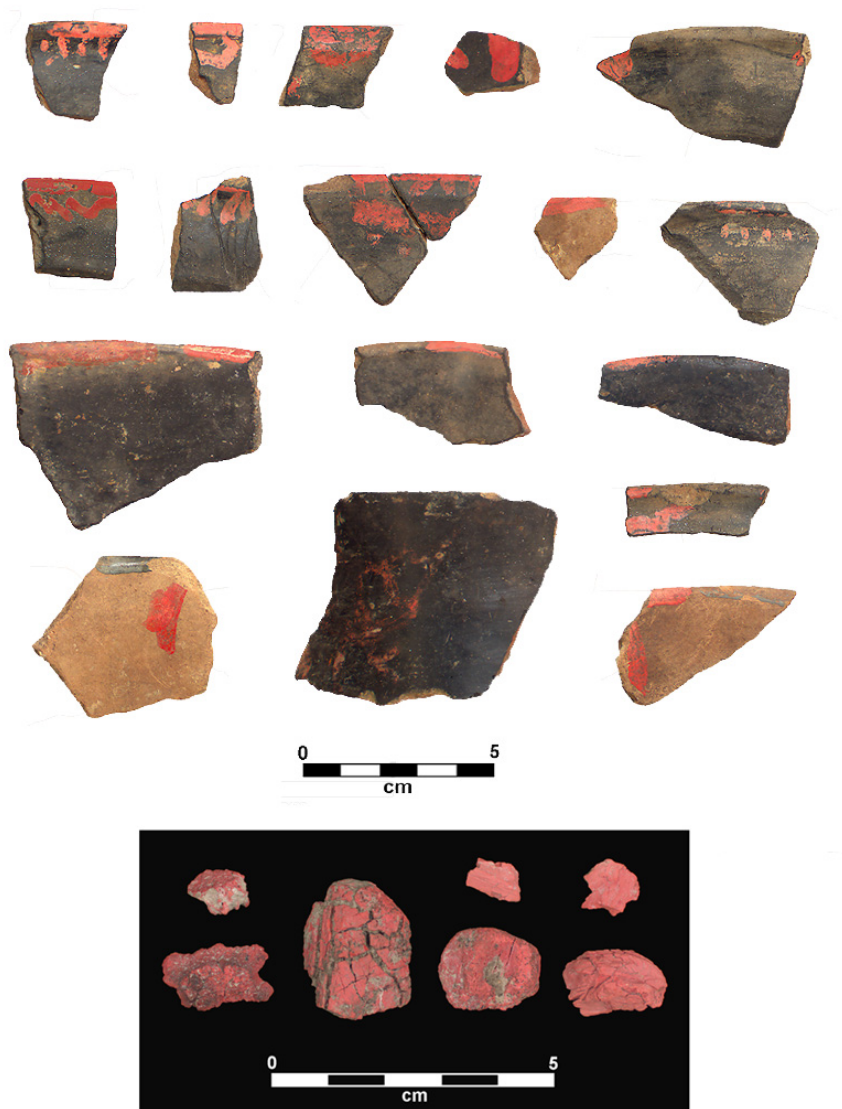


Figure 8. Painted sherds from New Town (top) and lumps of red sealing wax (bottom). The sealing wax is thought to have been used as paint pigment.

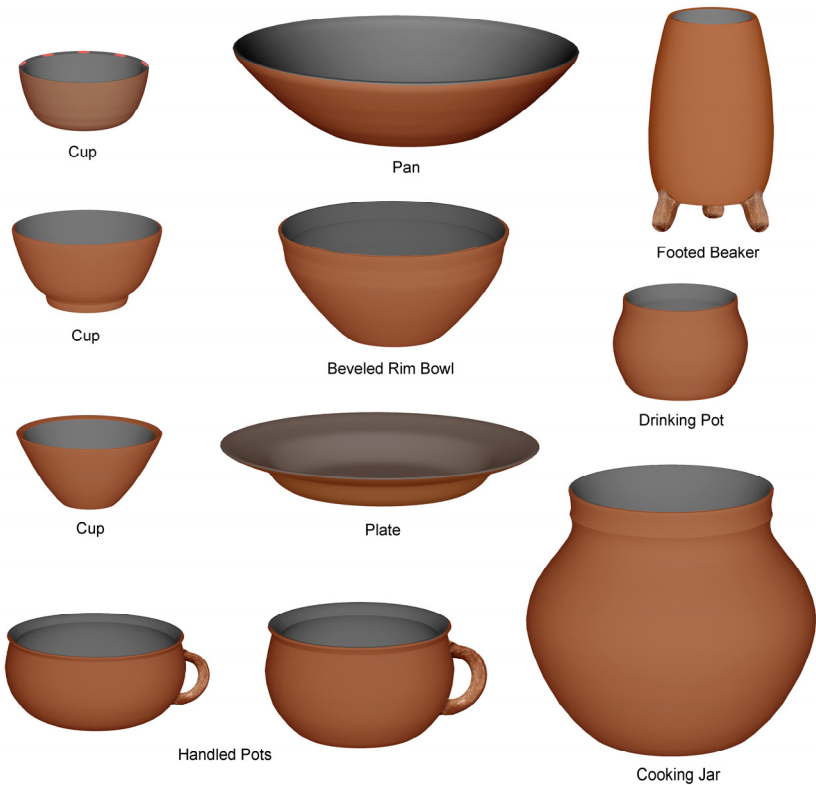


Figure 9. Range of vessel forms represented at New Town. These computer-generated vessel models are based on measured profiles of rim and basal sherds.

Catawba Vessel Assemblage at New Town

The New Town vessel assemblage includes pans, jars, bowls, plates, bottles, cups, and handled pots, as well as unique forms (Figure 9). The most common vessel form is a flat-based pan, with either trapezoidal or gently excurvate wall profiles, that closely resembles English milk pans and brass cooking kettles (Figure 10). Pan rims are frequently thinned with interior tapers or bevels that terminate in well-defined, square lips. Documented pans range in size from 13 cm to 29 cm in diameter and up to 12 cm in height. These vessels appear to have functioned in both cooking and food service.

Large, beveled-rim bowls are morphologically similar to pans, but have proportionately smaller flattened bases (Figure 11). Documented

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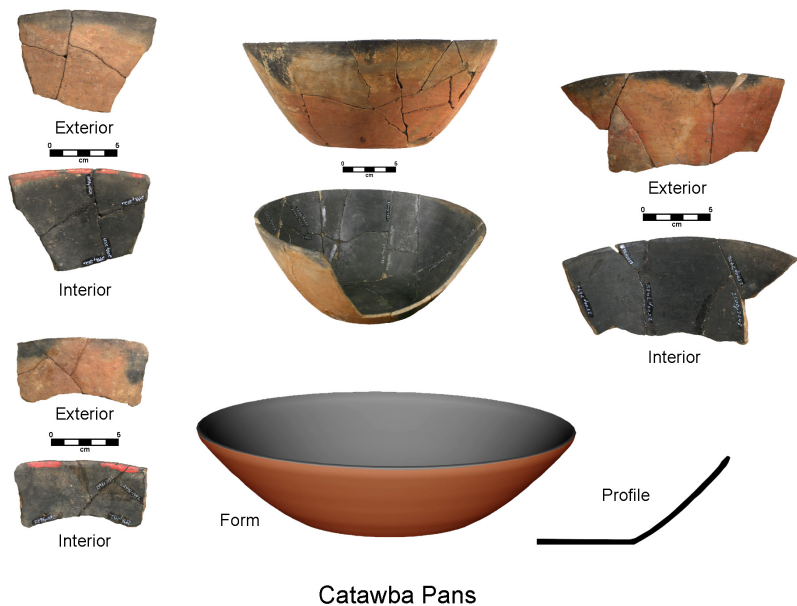


Figure 10. Earthenware pan form and representative sherds from New Town.

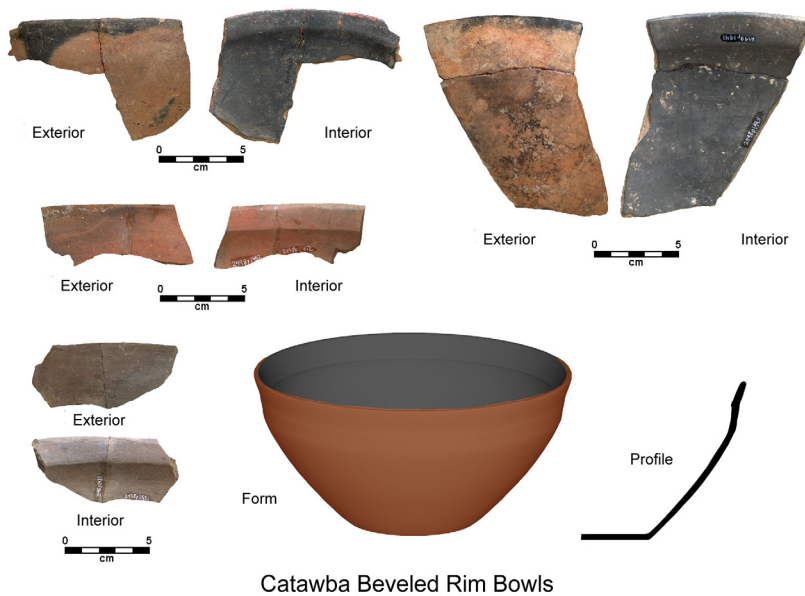


Figure 11. Earthenware beveled-rim bowl form and representative sherds from New Town.

examples are 26 cm to 28 cm in diameter. These bowls exhibit gently curving wall profiles surmounted by narrow vertical rims. Rim interiors are well-defined by a broad, beveled facet.

Recurvate-walled jars with everted thickened or collared rims and flat bases appear to be adaptations of traditional native cooking jars (Figure 12). These cooking jars range from 17 cm to 22 cm in (orifice) diameter, with approximate capacities of three liters to six liters. Ten percent of New Town rims are attributable to this distinctive form. A much smaller mode of this collared vessel form, with 9 cm to 12 cm orifices, is provisionally classed as a drinking pot (Figure 13). Other small, globular, flat-based “drinking pots” evince simple rims.

Plates and slightly deeper soup plates appear to be direct copies of creamware and pearlware analogs, with broad, well-defined marleys, wells with rounded walls, and flat bases with no footrings (Figure 14). Plate marleys are typically slightly concave, with thinned and rounded lips. In some instances, plate brims are slightly fluted with finger molding. A number of plate rims are scalloped, and some are edge painted in direct emulation of English shell-edge decoration. Several plate base interiors exhibit knife scoring and other use-wear traces that attest the use of these vessels in table dining with knives and forks. Plate diameters range from 20 cm to 26 cm, with an average diameter of 23 cm.

Small bowls and handle-less cups frequently exhibit pedestal bases or bases with molded or applied footrings (Figure 15). These 8 cm to 16 cm diameter vessels exhibit vertical rims with narrow interior bevels that define rounded or slightly everted lips. Other cups exhibit simple flat bases, and a number are decorated with red or orange paint (Figure 16).

Small, one-handed globular pots are characterized by squat, bulbous bodies, broad flanged lips, and large flattened loop handles (Figure 17). These resemble English chamber pots in form, but measure between 16 cm and 18 cm in diameter, and more likely were used as porringers. Similar handled pots are documented in late nineteenth-century ethnographic collections.

A unique, incised beaker is the only vessel with podal supports that has been reconstructed (Figure 18). Other flat basal sherds with tripodal supports may represent small kettles or pipkins. Wide-mouthed, short-necked bottles or beakers are represented by a number of neck and rim fragments, but the complete vessel profiles could not be reconstructed. Pitcher forms are not readily distinguished, although one polished, incised, punctuated-and-painted sherd may derive from a pitcher handle/wall juncture. Other unique forms include a small, keg-shaped

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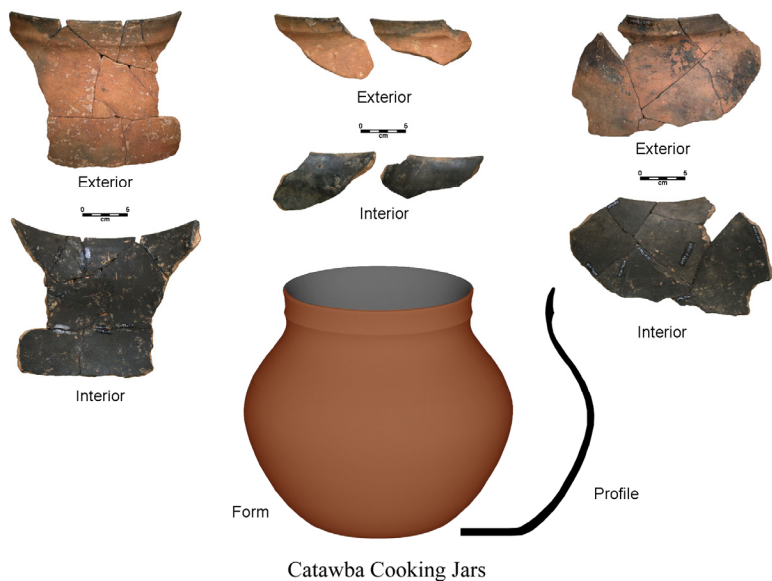


Figure 12. Earthenware cooking jar form and representative sherds from New Town.

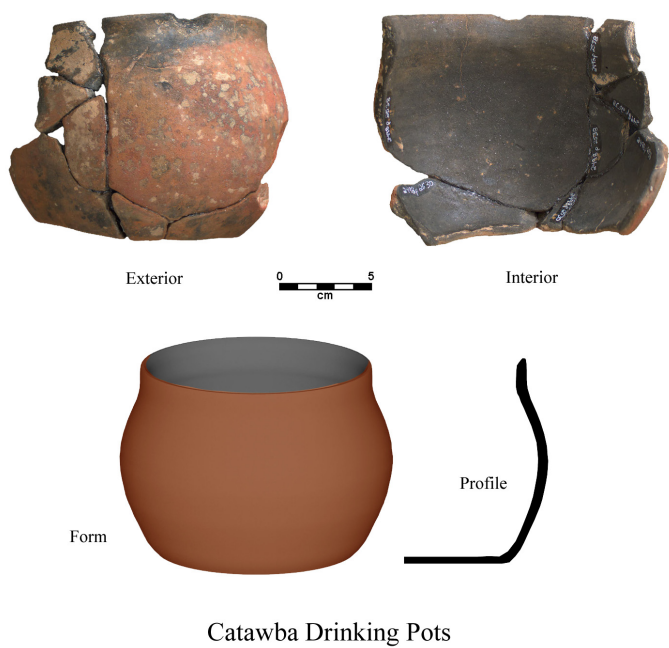


Figure 13. Earthenware drinking pot form and representative sherds from New Town.

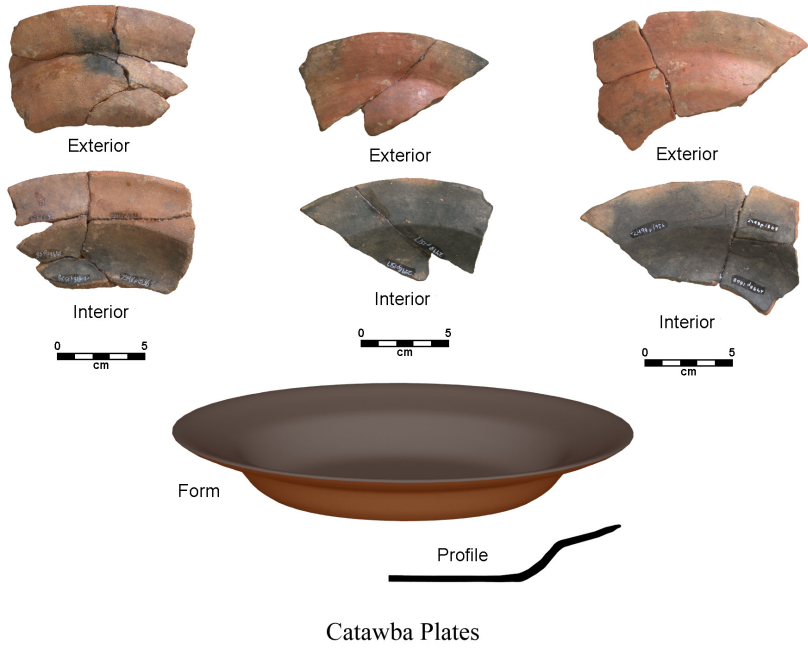


Figure 14. Earthenware plate form and representative sherds from New Town.

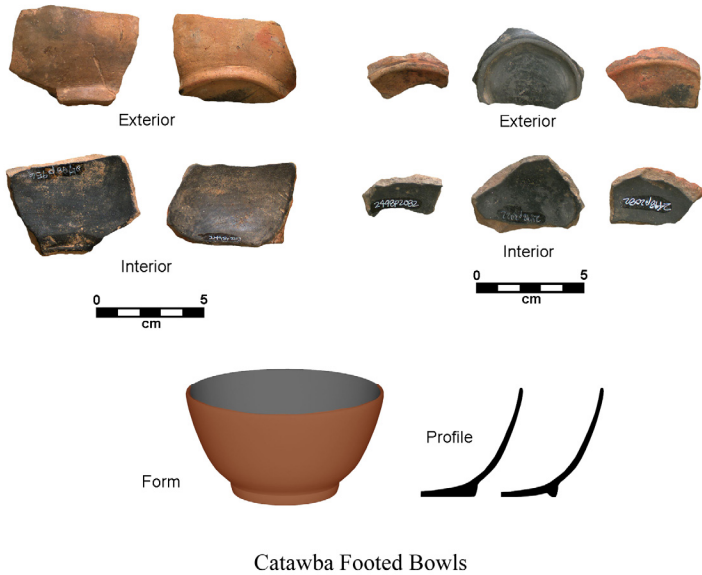


Figure 15. Earthenware footed bowl form and representative sherds from New Town.

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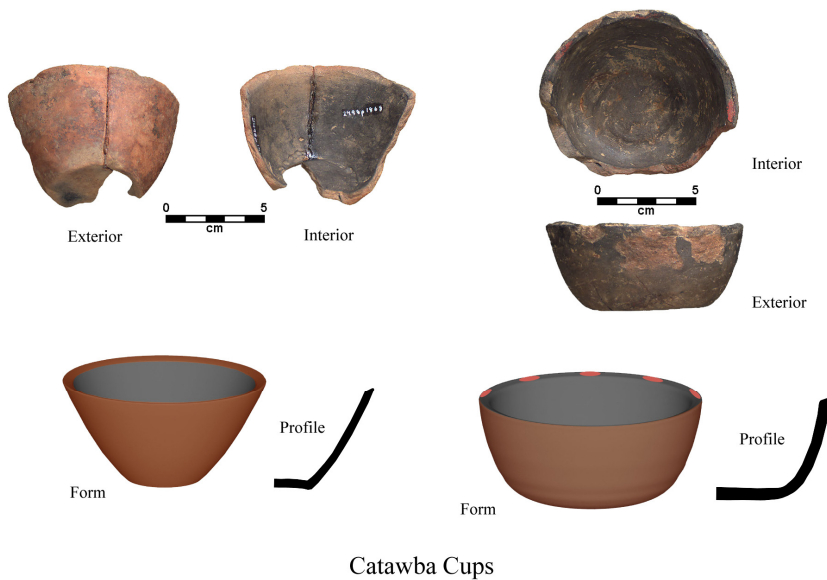


Figure 16. Earthenware cup forms and representative sherds from New Town.

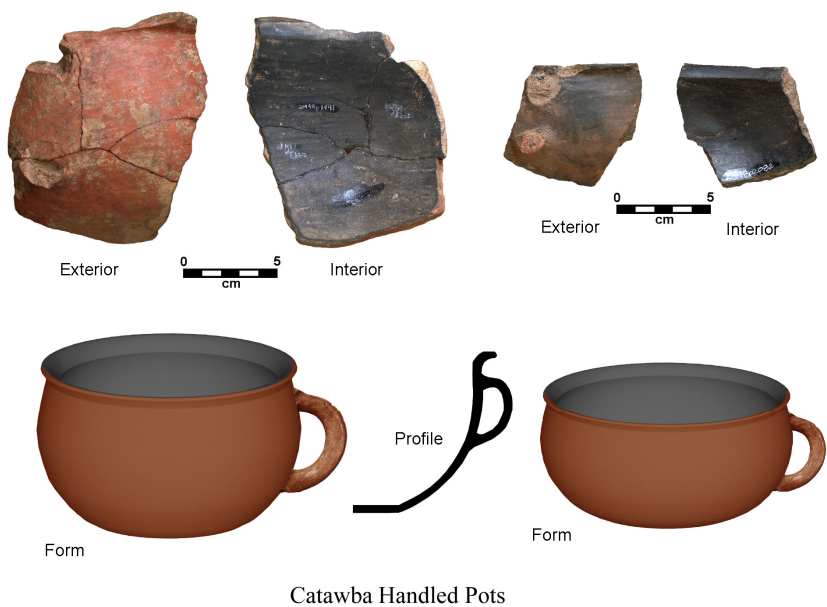


Figure 17. Earthenware handled pot forms and representative sherds from New Town.

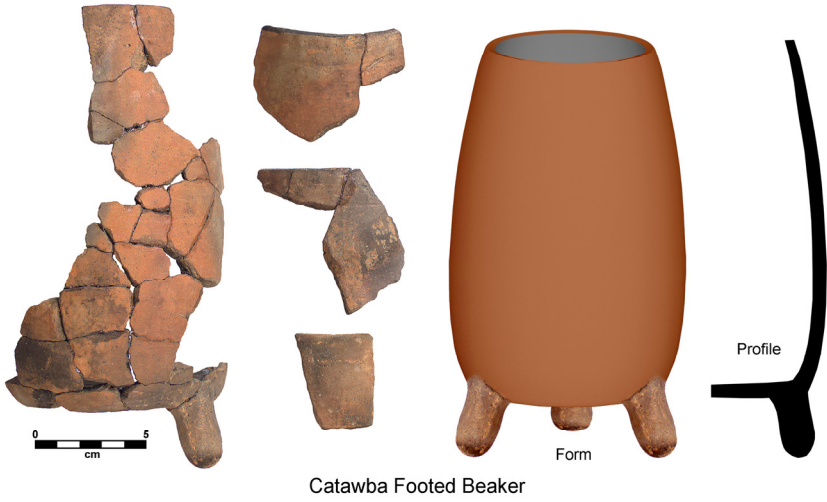


Figure 18. Earthenware footed beaker form and representative sherds from New Town.



Figure 19. Earthenware bottle, stoppers, and other vessel fragments from New Town.

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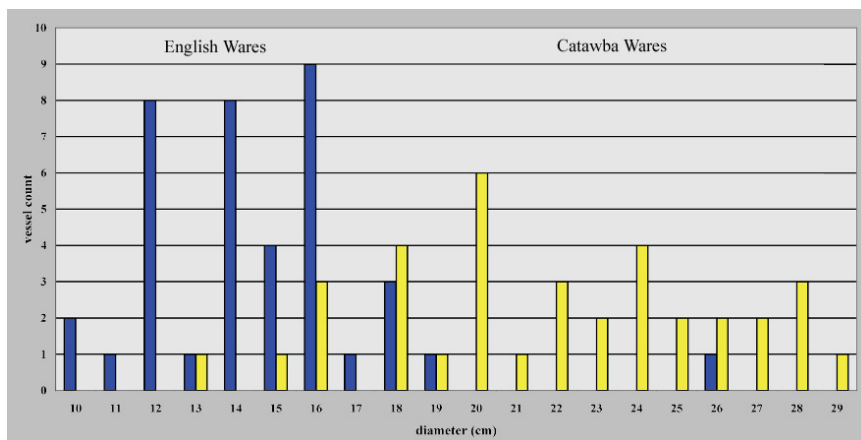


Figure 20. Frequency histogram showing the size distribution (as measured by rim diameter) of English-made and Catawba-made hollowware serving vessels at New Town.

bottle, probable bottle stoppers, and a polished and painted toy tomahawk pipe (Figure 19; also see Figure 5).

Many of the New Town vessel forms either duplicate or approximate English ceramics from the same contexts. Comparison of vessel size distributions reveals that the Catawba wares and English wares form a complementary size continuum, with Catawba pottery spanning the larger end of the spectrum (Figure 20). This complementarity suggests that Catawba wares were not simply “poor man’s china” but instead articulated with the Catawbas’ highly informed consumption of imported ceramics.

Pottery Production and Trade

The absolute and relative abundance and diversity of Catawba wares at New Town indicates that native ceramics played a conspicuous, even omnipresent, role in the life of the community. Widespread evidence for ceramic production at the site bolsters this view and suggests scales of production far greater than domestic demand required. Broad, shallow, linear trench features appear to be clay curing facilities of the type used by contemporary Catawba potters (Baker, personal communication 2003). Pottery waster dumps include heavily over-fired sherds that probably represent firing furniture (Figure 21). Faceted and polished burnishing stones occur at most of the cabins, and are particularly concentrated around Loci 2 and 3 (Figure 22). Such burnishers are



Figure 21. Over-fired Catawba earthenware vessel fragments from a probable waster dump at Locus 3.

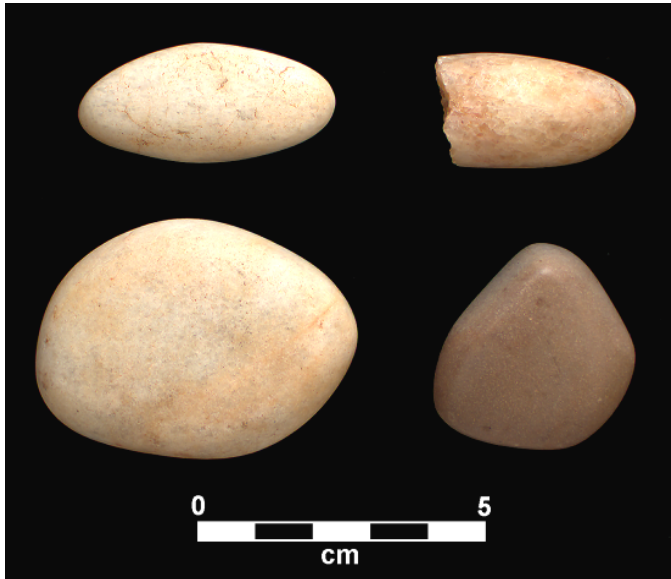


Figure 22. Burnishing stones from Locus 2 at New Town.

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typically highly curated, heirloom tools that seldom occur in archaeological contexts. Recovery of more than a dozen such tools (and fragments) in community refuse at New Town is unusual, and may indicate larger scales and higher intensity of ceramic production for commercial sale.

When Calvin Jones visited New Town in 1815, he witnessed a bustling ceramic industry aimed at American markets. Jones noted:

Next to Newtown ... Men gone hunting and fishing. Women making pans — Clay from the river — shape them with their hands and burn them with bark which makes the exposed side a glossy black. A pitcher a quarter of a dollar. Sell pans frequently for the full [measure] of meal. Saw some sitting on their beds and making pans.... [Jones 1815]

Such trade wares from New Town are well represented in Federal-period archaeological assemblages from Tivoli (38LA299 and 38LA301), Gen. William R. Davie's Lancaster County plantation (ca. 1805–1820) located 12 km south of the Catawba settlement (see Figure 1). Contexts at the main house site and slave quarters, excavated by University of North Carolina archaeologists in 2006, yielded substantial quantities of Catawba pottery (n=1,586 sherds) indistinguishable from that found at New Town (Figure 23). At Davie's residence, Catawba sherds (n=631) constitute 45% of the Federal-period ceramic assemblage. Thin-bodied, black burnished or polished hollowwares with red-painted accents, referable to the River Burnished type (Ferguson 1990), are well represented in the main house collection. Deposits at the slave quarters yielded 955 Catawba sherds, approximately 58% of the ceramic collection. These are primarily plain or lightly burnished utilitarian wares that derive from pans, cooking jars, and plates. It is unclear whether the slaves at Tivoli procured their pottery directly from Catawba traders or were provisioned with this pottery by their master or overseer. While some of the Catawba pottery at Tivoli may represent curios from Davie's former Revolutionary War comrades-in-arms, the preponderance of Catawba wares at the slave quarters are clearly utilitarian wares used for everyday cooking and dining.

The New Town potters regularly took their trade wares farther afield as well. In the fictionalized "Loves of the Driver," William Gilmore Simms noted that during his boyhood in the 1810s:

... it was the custom of the Catawba Indians... to come down, at certain seasons, from their far homes in the interior, to the seaboard,

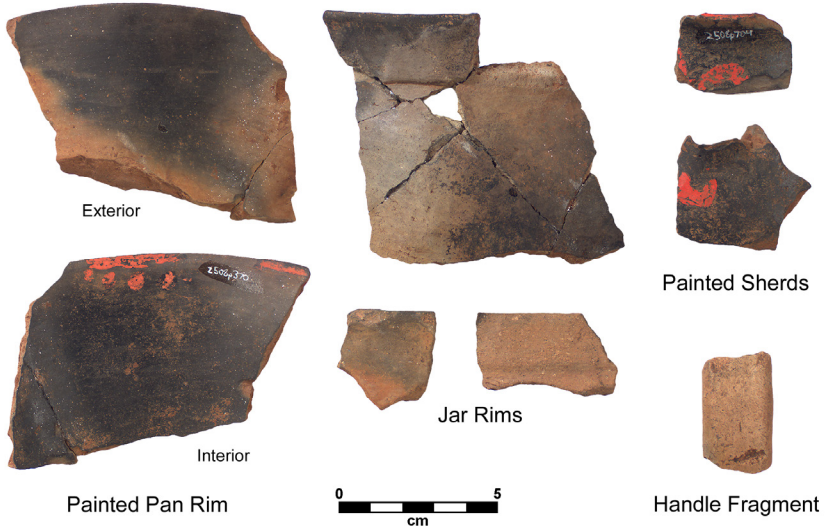


Figure 23. Catawba-made pottery from Tivoli.

bringing to Charleston a little stock of earthen pots and pans ... which they bartered in the city They did not, however, bring their pots and pans from the nation, but descending to the Lowcountry empty handed, in groups or families, they squatted down on the rich clay lands along the Edisto, ... there established themselves in a temporary abiding place, until their simple potteries had yielded them a sufficient supply of wares with which to throw themselves into the market. [Simms 1841:122]

Because the entire Catawba population at this time was fewer than 300 individuals, and the entire cohort of Catawba potters numbered less than 100, it is quite likely that Jones and Simms met or observed many of the same potters. Phillip Porcher, an antebellum resident of St. Stephens, recounted that "... the Catawba Indians ... traveled down from the up-country to Charleston, making clay ware for the negroes along the way. They would camp until a section was supplied, then move on, till finally Charleston was reached ... their ware was in great demand" (Gregorie 1925:21). Charley Watson, a former slave from Winnsboro, South Carolina, recalled that "De Indians fetch their pots and jars to sell" on the plantation in the 1850s (Rawick 1972:189).

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Significance and Implications

These accounts indicate that we should expect that the “clay ware” produced by the New Town potters would occur in archaeological contexts “from the up-country to Charleston,” particularly in Federal-period slave contexts. Although itinerant Catawba potters used local clays and built their wares at or near points of sale, their pottery should closely resemble the New Town ceramics in terms of technology, style, and execution. However, as identified in archaeological literature that deals with colonowares from Federal-period contexts in South Carolina, Catawba trade pottery has been narrowly defined as a very well-made, thin-bodied, polished or highly burnished ware with fine paste, often with painted decorations, that occurs in a limited range of vessel forms. Ferguson more properly distinguishes this specific type as “River Burnished.” Evidence from New Town indicates a much wider range of synchronic variation in Catawba wares, with examples that encompass much of the diversity documented within the broader class of “colonowares.” Thus, it appears likely that Catawba trade ceramics are significantly underreported in many Federal-period contexts. Under-recognition of Catawba trade ceramics due to restrictive sorting criteria has obvious interpretive implications for the convoluted ascriptions of agency and meaning in the production, distribution, and consumption of colonowares that dominate the current literature.

Diachronic variation in Catawba ceramics complicates the colonoware debate. Recent “colonoware” literature asserts that Catawba trade ware was largely a post-Revolutionary phenomenon (Joseph 2004), and attributes earlier colonowares to other sources. The time depth of the Catawba ceramic trade is unclear, but evidence points to widespread distribution of Catawba wares as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Late colonial-period Catawba contexts at Old Town, located one mile from New Town, yielded an assemblage of burnished pans, patty pans, teacups with footrings, polished bowls, and polygonal plates (Figures 24 and 25). These well-executed wares indicate that Catawba potters were already accomplished at producing hand-built facsimiles of English ceramics prior to the American Revolution and reveal a nuanced understanding of English table assemblages that informed Catawba ceramic production and use. Such wares may have been produced in quantity for the local Scots-Irish Waxhaws settlements and marketed farther afield as well.



Figure 24. Partially reconstructed Catawba earthenware plate from Old Town. This 16-sided form appears to be a direct copy of an English plate.

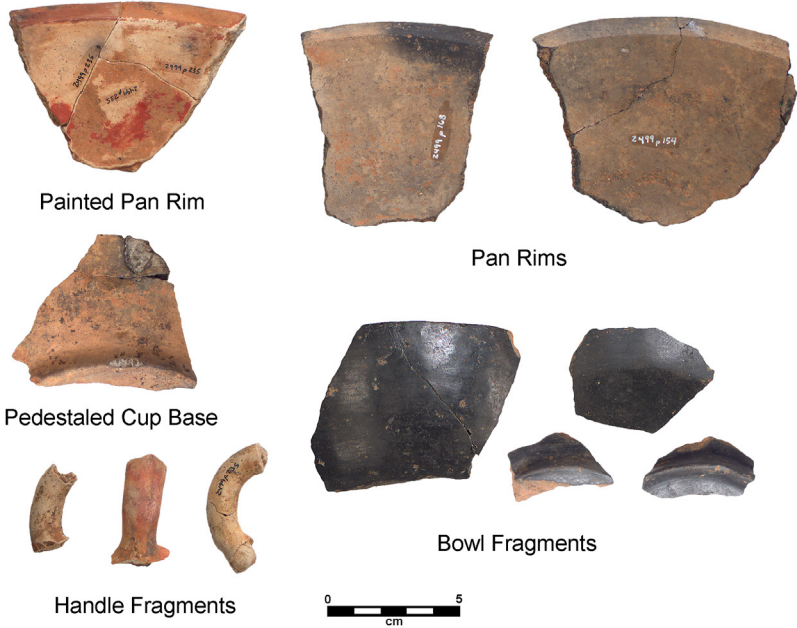


Figure 25. Fragments of Catawba earthenware vessels from Old Town (c. 1760–1775).

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Figure 26. Potsherds from the ca. 1760s Catawba village near the mouth of Twelve Mile Creek.

A slightly earlier (circa 1760) collection of Catawba ceramics from nearby Twelve Mile Creek appears more traditional in character, with thick-bodied, burnished vessels such as hemispherical bowls, recurvate-walled jars, and slightly carinated bowls, as well as thin-walled, flat-based pans with beveled lips (Figure 26). Most of these wares, while not as precisely executed as the later New Town ceramics, are still directly comparable to contemporaneous heavier-bodied colonowares (see Joseph 2004).

Surface collections from documented Catawba village sites of the 1750s (i.e., Cheraw Town, Weyanne, Noostee) (see Figure 1) are dominated by plain and burnished ceramics similar to those from Twelve Mile Creek, with attributes such as interior beveled lips and flat bases that presage the New Town wares. These 1750s collections also include stamped, cordmarked, and brushed-surfaced wares, treatments that may derive from various Piedmont parent traditions but which are lacking in later assemblages. Such ceramic variability appears even more accentuated within and between village contexts from the 1720s (see Fitts, this volume). This diversity may reflect the polyethnic character of the Catawba Nation in the decades between 1710 and 1760. After 1760, the ultimate coalescence and complete integration of former refugee groups resulted in the ethnogenesis of a culturally unified Catawba Nation (Merrell 1989). This sociopolitical situation parallels the emergence of a single, homogeneous ceramic tradition that evolved



Figure 27. A mid-twentieth century Catawba potter selling her wares. Photograph taken in 1941 by Joffre Coe (RLA negative number 1187).

into the familiar Catawba pottery still produced today in the homelands of York County.

The internal homogeneity of Catawba wares produced after the French and Indian War may reflect potters' responses to the growing market demands of an expanding ceramic trade, commercial forces that canalized previous ceramic diversity into forms and textures that appealed to European and African customers. The resultant Catawba "colonowares" evolved in form, execution, and decoration with the changing market. This dynamic technological tradition, fueled and shaped by market demands, became the touchstone of Catawba identity (Figure 27).

The potters of New Town were heirs to an ancient technological tradition that they adapted to contemporary commercial and domestic needs. While many of their peer groups in the eastern United States abandoned traditional domestic ceramics, the Catawbas refined their wares into products that helped to preserve their economic autonomy. In turn, the continuing economic viability of the pottery trade, as it

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transitioned from functional pottery to tourist wares to art pottery for the Indian Arts and Crafts market, has sustained Catawba pottery as the longest surviving, unbroken ceramic tradition in the eastern United States.

Notes

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