

The Journey of Miles Brewton's Bottle



What can a single artifact tell us about people of the distant past? Not enough, it usually seems. It's a truism in this business: archaeologists are people who need a lot of data to say a little. Interpretations of historic sites are built gradually, from a myriad of silent sources: subtle layers of soil, sometimes tens of thousands of fragments of ceramics, glass, bone, bricks, and nails, or bags of dirt and rubble. In rare cases, however, we recover a single artifact that speaks volumes about people who lived on that site long ago.



Fig. 1. Detail of impressed monogram, "Mbrewton," on the wine bottle ascribed to Miles Brewton. (Photo: Rick Rhodes for The Charleston Museum.)

Such was the case with a spectacular monogrammed wine bottle, the property of one "MBrewton," that surfaced in the excavation of an elite Charleston-area townhouse dating to the turn of the nineteenth century (fig. 1). The tale of the bottle—who owned it, how it was used, and how it landed where it did—broadens and complicates our understanding of life under slavery in colonial Charleston. For it appears that somewhere in the course of the use-life of the artifact, Miles Brewton, a wealthy merchant and slave trader, lost possession of the bottle to his now-anonymous bondsmen. What's more, the bottle's retrieval by archaeologists on a site some distance from Brewton's

home has prompted a rethinking of the events that create archaeological deposits from living households.

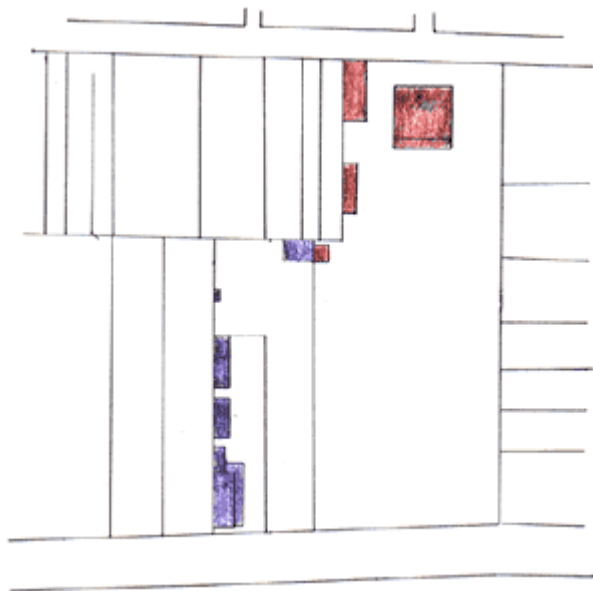


Fig. 2. Map of 14 Legare Street and surrounding neighborhood, c. 1820. The layout of the property, as amended by George Edwards, is shown in purple. The adjoining Miles Brewton property is shown in red. (Map: Martha Zierden for The Charleston Museum.)

Charleston, long famous for its preserved colonial and antebellum architecture and its role in the Civil War, has become equally well known as a cradle of African American history and culture. The city was the port of entry for the majority of Africans forced from their homes during the eighteenth century to a life of bondage on American plantations. The Africans' sheer numbers and their relative isolation on plantation tracts combined to create a dynamic creole culture that evolved through the centuries and remains a defining social force. Despite the richness of African American culture in the lowcountry, however, surviving material culture is sparse; there are not enough sweetgrass baskets, slave tags, examples of ironwork, or buildings to fill the almost daily requests from museum planners and documentary filmmakers.

Archaeological materials attributable to people of African descent are also few, despite the claims of the discipline that all people are equally reflected in the ground. Archaeologist Charles Fairbanks pioneered the excavations of Georgia Sea Island slave settlements in the 1960s, searching for "Africanisms," those items unmistakably African in appearance and use; the results were disappointing. Archaeologists now take a broader approach, and expect that African and European people in colonial America may have used the same manufactured goods, but in different ways. Defining those "different ways" remains the task at hand. This is especially so on urban lots, where black and

white residents lived together, but in separate worlds, as they did in Miles Brewton's household.

The archaeological odyssey that resulted in the discovery of the bottle began on Legare Street (fig. 2). The lot was acquired by the Johns Island planter Francis Simmons in 1800. He built an imposing three-story brick single house, a kitchen/slave quarter, a carriage house, and a privy on the north side of the property, and rented out a modest complex already in existence (c. 1780) on the southern lot. The next owner, Beaufort planter George Edwards, acquired the property in 1818. After taking possession of both lots, he demolished the rental complex and built imposing walls, gates, and an L-shaped garden which covered the southern half of the property and the entire rear third of the lot. Excavations uncovered much on the life and work of the nineteenth-century household, but they also revealed great quantities of refuse deposited during the eighteenth century. It appears that Edwards later reused much of this debris in filling and leveling his garden, but the trash originated as a "dump" of ceramics, glass, colono wares, animal bone—and the bottle monogrammed "Mbrewton"—on the then-unoccupied 14 Legare lot.



Fig. 3. Outlines of deep creek or marsh areas, as indicated on the 1739 Roberts and Toms map of Charleston, are shown in green. The outline of the Miles Brewton house, to be constructed in 1769, is shown for perspective. The low-lying marsh discovered on the two archaeological sites is likely an extension of these creeks; such details are not shown on the 1739 map. (Map: Martha Zierden for The Charleston Museum; from "The Iconography of Charles-Town at High Water," 1739, by B. Roberts and W. H. Toms, facsimile in 1884 Charleston City Yearbook, on file at The Charleston Museum.)

But whose refuse was this? Miles Brewton, a financially and socially successful

merchant, built a grand house at 27 King Street, beside and behind 14 Legare, in 1769. Brewton and his family died at sea in 1775, and his house passed to his sister, Rebecca Brewton Motte. She and her family had barely taken possession when Charleston fell to the British during the Revolution, and the house was occupied by invading officers.



Fig. 4. Colono ware from 14 Legare Street, Charleston. The globular jars shown here are a traditional African form. (Photo: Rick Rhodes for The Charleston Museum.)

So how did Brewton's wine bottle and, by association, his domestic refuse, wind up on the unoccupied lot the next street over? The thousands of artifacts, and even the soil itself, from the rear yards of both lots provide some clues about the possible route. At some point the common boundary between 27 King and 14 Legare was a swamp (fig. 3), rather than the present brick wall. Pollen and phytolith (plant cell) analyses suggest that a pre-occupation tree-covered swamp quickly became an open "bog" before it was filled and leveled in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps residents of the Brewton household crossed this unimproved, seemingly unclaimed strip on their way to dump refuse on some other, yet-undeveloped tract.

But who was hauling the trash from King Street to Legare Street? Not Miles Brewton. Brewton may have poured wine from his monogrammed bottle. But we can rest assured that he never touched the household trash. Even if the cleanup of Brewton's trash occurred after the property changed hands in 1775, the slaver's sister is equally unlikely to have attended to such matters herself. Almost certainly the people responsible for the archaeological event represented by the trash pile were black slaves, actors who too often remain invisible and silent, in archaeology as well as history.

The Brewton property housed about a dozen enslaved Africans in the eighteenth century, but none are known by name. These African bondsmen and women have also remained frustratingly anonymous in the archaeological record. On townhouses such as these, a half-dozen privileged white people and a dozen or more

enslaved black people lived together—in separate social and physical spheres, but in close proximity, with the work yard the domain of the enslaved. But the refuse of all residents lies combined in the ground, making the possessions and activities of the materially poor nearly impossible to isolate.



ig. 5. Map of the 14 Legare and 27 King properties, prior to construction of the 14 Legare townhouse. The c. 1769 Brewton complex is shown in red. The buildings on the 12 Legare lot, as revealed through archaeology, are shown in blue; these architectural features are the ones filled with eighteenth-century refuse. The three adjoining blue squares indicated by an arrow on the 14 Legare lot (left side) are the original source of refuse. The area of low-lying swamp or marsh, as revealed through archaeology, is shown in brown. The excavation areas in which marsh soil was encountered are shown as square outlines. (Map: Martha Zierden for The Charleston Museum)

Brewton's refuse contained a number of colono ware vessels that certainly originated with the African residents. Some exhibited European characteristics, such as crenellated rims and raised footrings, but most are in the styles commonly associated with African vessels—globular jars and shallow bowls (fig. 4). While these vessels point to an African presence among the European consumer wares, the elegant bottle provides the greatest source of speculation on the affairs and activities of the bondsmen who moved the trash.

For it is tempting to suggest that more than refuse disposal took place in the swampy land unclaimed by white owners. As several scholars have suggested, urban slaves who lived in such close proximity to their white owners came together in ways that were “seen but unseen” by the dominant culture. Perhaps the bottle traveled to the swamp full, part of a social gathering of African people, rather than empty, as part of a haul of refuse. The bottle could have

been a pilfered item, or one reused after Brewton discarded it. The unlikely presence of the bottle led scholars on the site to revisit another anomalous archaeological deposit excavated ten years earlier on the Brewton lot (fig. 5). An oval pit of charcoal may be the remains of an outdoor hearth in the Brewton portion of the swamp. Filled with charcoal, tobacco pipes, wine bottle fragments, and a broken colono ware pot, it may be also evidence of social activity, rather than simply refuse disposal. Outdoor cooking and gathering around a central fire are documented cultural preferences of Africans brought to America.

Whether such activities were sanctioned, or simply tolerated, by the white population is unknown. There is increasing evidence to suggest that the growing African slave population was able to acquire and maintain some level of independence through sheer force of numbers and calculated negotiation. The city, in particular, provided bondsmen and women with opportunities to work "within the system." Tolerated and negotiated activities included buying and selling goods, traveling and socializing, possessing firearms, and pilfering rations. Though a variety of measures were taken to curtail such activities, evidence that they flourished nonetheless may be found in the commentary surrounding the 1822 Denmark Vesey slave insurrection. The official testimony contains innumerable descriptions of meetings and discussions among trusted and seemingly loyal servants. The behavioral negotiations that culminated in the events of 1822 began a century earlier.

Groups of slaves sometimes met and socialized under the master's watchful eye, but more often gathered in the physical corners and cracks of the slaveowner's landscape: a street, alley, kitchen, shop of a slave "working out," or perhaps a still-wooded tract. A yet-untamed swamp in the rear of a household that presented a well-ordered facade perhaps presented yet another opportunity. Permission to haul away trash may have evolved into an opportunity for clandestine gathering, long enough to be enjoyable or transact business, but short enough to avoid arousing the master's concern. Perhaps the spot was used time after time.

There hardly seems a less likely candidate to reveal aspects of slave life than a British wine bottle made for America's colonial elite. And the recovery of Miles Brewton's wine bottle on a site other than Miles Brewton's own clearly raises more questions than it answers. On a basic level, it serves as a warning to archaeologists inclined to equate all refuse recovered on an urban lot with the former residents of that lot only. The associated refuse deposit, when coupled with careful analysis of botanical data, has led to reconstruction of an urban environment that was, in the late eighteenth century at least, not yet completely ordered and defined. More significantly, the bottle has allowed us to speculate on the players—black and white—involved in the creation and manipulation of the urban environment to suit the needs of multiple residents.

Further Reading:

The newest and best summary of the archaeology of African Americans is edited by Theresa Singleton, *"I, Too, Am America": Archaeological Studies of African American Life* (Charlottesville, 1999). Singleton's introduction summarizes development of the field of study, from Charles Fairbanks's search for "Africanisms" to the current emphasis on creolization. The most complete and accessible study of colono wares is Leland Ferguson's *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* (Washington, D.C., 1992).

Two excellent texts guided the discussion of slave activities as "seen but unseen." The concept is best articulated by Bernard Herman in his article "Slave and Servant Housing in Charleston, 1770-1820," *Historical Archaeology* 33 (1999): 88-101. Theodore Rosengarten discusses this aspect of slave life in the plantation setting in *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter* (New York, 1986). Ira Berlin's new text, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), provides an insightful discussion of negotiated activities, as well as many other issues surrounding slavery in Carolina.

The best study of Charleston architecture is Jonathan Poston's *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City's Architecture* (Columbia, 1997). Poston discusses the contributions of African American craftsmen and the dwellings of African Americans throughout the text. The book also contains pertinent essays by Bernard Herman and John Vlach. Architecture and archaeology are discussed by Martha Zierden and Bernard Herman in "Charleston Townhouses: Archaeology, Architecture, and the Urban Landscape, 1750-1850" in *Landscape Archaeology: Reading and Interpreting the American Historical Landscape*, edited by Rebecca Yamin and Karen Metheny (Knoxville, 1996), 193-227.

The discussion of archaeological material culture is based on the path-breaking work of Ann Smart Martin. See her article "Material Things and Cultural Meanings: Notes on the Study of Early American Material Culture," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., 53 (January 1996): 5-12. The most comprehensive study of material culture in Charleston is by Maurie McInnis, *The Politics of Taste: Classicism in Charleston, South Carolina, 1815-1840* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1996).

The interaction of cultural groups as reflected in archaeological materials may be found in Martha Zierden, "A Trans-Atlantic Merchant's House in Charleston: Archaeological Exploration of Refinement and Subsistence in an Urban Setting," *Historical Archaeology* 33 (1999): 73-87. The best new interpretation of these same materials may be found in an essay by Ellen Shlasko, "Frenchmen and Africans in South Carolina: Cultural Interactions on the Eighteenth-Century Frontier," in *Another's Country: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on Cultural Interactions in the Southern Colonies*, eds. Joe W. Joseph and Martha Zierden (Tuscaloosa, in press).

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