CHAPTER 2

Looking for the "Afro" in Colono-Indian Pottery

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Colono-Indian pottery was formally described by Ivor Noel-Hume in 1962. Noel-Hume was familiar with unglazed, low-fired, plain earthenwares that he had found at Williamsburg and that had been found at many other colonial sites from the Carolinas to Delaware. The most common vessel form was described as a simple, flat-bottomed bowl, but he mentioned that sometimes forms that were imitations of European vessels appeared. Because the material was somewhat similar to both prehistoric and historic (19th century) Indian wares in Virginia, he called the pottery Colono-Indian ware. He used this name despite his belief that the ware continued to be made after the colonial period.

Although Noel-Hume thought the ware to have been made by Indians, he considered it to have been used by Afro-American slaves. A synopsis of his reasoning (Noel-Hume 1962: 5) follows:

1. The unglazed ware is inferior to glazed wares.
2. Glazed wares were within the financial reach of all except the poorest colonists.
3. That the unglazed ware is found in towns and wealthy plantation sites implies that both have a common point to which the ware was applicable.
4. Slaves would have developed European tastes in ways of cooking and table wares.
5. Slave holders would not likely have purchased glazed vessels for use by slaves.

His conclusion was that the slaves used ceramic vessels made by Indians. He wrote (Noel-Hume 1962: 5) that, "the astute Indians may have found a useful
market amongst the slaves and would have tailored their wares to styles acceptable to these customers."

Noel-Hume's contention that the pottery was made by Indians was based on ethnographic descriptions of Pamunkey pottery manufacture in Virginia (Speck 1928, Stern 1951). References to similar pottery may also be found for the Catawba (Fewkes 1944, Harrington 1908) as well as for other Indian tribes stretching to the lower Mississippi River Valley (Swanton 1946: 549).

Since Noel-Hume's original description, two short studies of Colono-Indian ware in the Atlantic coastal area have been published (Binford 1965, Baker 1972). In the first of these, Binford (1965) describes imitation European vessels from an Indian site in eastern Virginia. In the other, Baker (1972) treats the historic trade of pottery by the Catawba Indians of South Carolina. Beyond these two major works, several shorter references concerning Colono-Indian wares from many parts of the Southeast have appeared (e.g. Florida: Fairbanks 1962; Tennessee: Polhemus 1977; South Carolina: South 1974, Lees and Kimery-Lees n.d.).

Polhemus (1977) and South (1974) have suggested that the wares may have been made by Afro-Americans. This suggestion was based upon a casual observation of the similarity of modern Ghanaian and Nigerian pottery to the Colono-Indian ware of South Carolina. With this important observation the lid was cracked on a box of ideas that has sat covered with dust in the darkest corner of North American historic sites archaeology—the contribution of Afro-Americans to the pottery we call "Colono-Indian."

Reconsidering the Colono-Indian Ware

Beginning the reconsideration of Colono-Indian ware, there are two major questions that need to be answered. They are:

1. Who made the pottery we call Colono-Indian ware and when did they make it?
2. Who used the pottery and what were their patterns of selection?

Who made it and when?

It is possible that all three of the major ethnic groups in eastern North America made the wares, but I think we can rule out Euro-Americans since they dominated the ceramic market with European products. The wares were most certainly made by either Indians or Afro-Americans.

There is clear and well-documented evidence that Indians have made pottery that fits the general category "Colono-Indian." Catawba vessels are presently on sale in gift shops and museums throughout the eastern United States.
Furthermore, there is documentation of the manufacture and sale of these items by Catawba Indians stretching back to the early 19th century (Harrington 1908, Speck 1928, Fewkes 1944, Stern 1951, Baker 1972), and there is at least one reference to late 18th century manufacture and sale (Simms 1841).

In the far western portion of the eastern United States, ware made by Indians in imitation of European forms was described in the 18th century when Du Pratz (1758: 178-179) (see also Swanton 1911, p. 2 and Swanton 1946, p. 549) stated that the Natchez, "also [made] dishes and plates like those of the French." Du Pratz goes on to say that as a curiosity he had the Indians make him some pottery modeled on his own European earthenware. Neitzel (1965: 45-47, 54, 87) has recovered vessels with shapes similar to European forms from the Fatherland Site—the Grand Village of the Natchez in the present state of Mississippi. Types from Georgia, Florida or Alabama including Kasita Red Filmed (Jennings and Fairbanks 1940), Mission Red Filmed (Smith 1948), and San Marcos Plain and Red (Goggin 1952) show some formal similarities to European ceramics. However, these types are associated with other traits such as incising and paddle stamping that are obviously within the American Indian ceramic tradition. These materials are not usually included within the Colono-Indian rubric established by Noel-Hume.

Although detailed information for comparison has yet to be extracted and presented, there is an obvious qualitative difference between the Indian wares from the Gulf coastal areas and the Colono-Indian materials of the middle Atlantic coast. Paradoxically, in the middle Atlantic coastal area there are few traditional American Indian traits associated with Colono-Indian pottery, and the only archaeological association from the colonial period of Colono-Indian wares with Indians has come from the site of the Nottoway and Weanoc Indians of southeastern Virginia (Binford 1965). Importantly, there was Indian-African admixture among the people responsible for creating this archaeological site (Lewis Binford, personal communication, 1978).

Thus, both the historical and archaeological evidence show that during the early colonial period some American Indian groups of the Gulf coastal plain were making pottery that seems related to European wares. In the middle Atlantic coastal area there is clear historical evidence of Indians making Colono-Indian wares in the late 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. On the other hand, the tie of Indians to the production of these wares in the first half of the 18th century on the middle Atlantic coastal plain is weak; and the style of Colono-Indian ware, once it is firmly associated with Indians of the Carolinas and Virginia, bears only slight resemblance to prehistoric Indian materials. Furthermore, the materials are not commonly similar to any specific European forms.

In excavations at the original site of Charles Towne in South Carolina, Stanley South (1971: 102-105, and personal communication, 1978) found Colono-Indian ware in the fortification ditch that the colonists cut across Albemarle Point. This ditch was constructed in 1670 and began to fill in by
1680. From archaeological evidence, South believes the ditch to have filled within a few years. Thus, in the first decade of the South Carolina colony, fully developed Colono-Indian ware appeared within the town.

In subsequent work at the Indian site adjacent to the site of the original Charles Towne, South (personal communication, 1978) reports several pits containing colonial period Indian ceramics of the York Ware Group (South 1976: 28-29). One of these pits contained a small sliver of glass among the Indian sherds, and a charcoal sample from the pit has give a date of A.D. 1770 ±80. All of these ceramics were prehistoric in style. There was no Colono-Indian pottery in this collection of late Indian material from a site adjacent to the early site of Charles Towne.

To date there is no known Indian site of the colonial period in South Carolina that has produced Colono-Indian pottery. The Scott’s Lake Site (Ferguson 1973, 1975) is probably a site visited by John Lawson in 1701 when he made his famous trip through the Carolinas (Baker 1974). Examination of thousands of sherds from this site has so far failed to reveal any sherds of Colono-Indian ware. Likewise, David Phelps of East Carolina University in North Carolina (personal communication, 1978) reports no indication of Colono-Indian ware being associated with known Indian sites in his recent researches. It seems that in the Carolinas and Virginia, the Nottoway and Weanoc materials excavated by Binford (1965) are the only examples of Colono-Indian wares being found in known Indian sites of the 17th or 18th centuries, and there were Afro-Americans living at this site.

While Colono-Indian artifacts have little representation on Indian sites, they are consistently found on Euro-American and Afro-American sites of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (see Baker 1972 and Noel-Hume 1962). Thus, the archaeological record seems to be telling us that while history reports that these wares are associated with Indians during the last two hundred years, they are firmly associated with Euro-Americans and Afro-Americans during the first century of occupation. In other words, during the early part of the occupation of the Carolinas and Virginia, the archaeological record indicates that these wares are more closely associated with non-Indians than with Indians. Since Euro-Americans had their own ceramic traditions which arrived in this continent fully intact, the archaeological implication is that these wares were made by Afro-Americans.

Afro-Americans came to this continent with a long tradition of producing low-fired earthenwares (e.g. Mathewson 1974, Mathewson and Flight 1972). In West Africa where the majority of North American slaves originated (Bean 1975, Herskovits 1964: 116-117), there are well-developed techniques of pottery manufacture, and some villages specialize in the manufacture of these wares. Archaeological evidence indicates that trade in special ceramics extends at least to the 15th and 16th centuries (Mathewson and Flight 1972), and it is probably older than this. Of contemporary groups, Forde (1970) mentions that
among the Nupe of the Niger-Benue confluence, the villages of Jebba Island, Baro, Badeggi and Bida are famous for their pottery and they have a regular trade in both pots and clay. The main products are reported to be small water jugs and large water containers. Talbot (1968: 115) states that, "From the Congo to the Niger and the Nile the pottery of Mangbutu [in southern Nigeria] is superior to that of any other."

These contemporary references together with the archaeological references give testimony to the firm tradition of manufacturing low-fired earthenware in West Africa. Certainly many of the Africans, brought to this country as slaves, brought knowledge of the well-developed technology of West African pottery production with them.

As I have mentioned earlier, Polhemus (1977) has noted the similarity between Colono-Indian vessels and artifacts from Ghana. He states (Polhemus 1977: 314):

The Ghana vessels are flat bottomed, fine grit or sand tempered, plain burnished, and bear the incised 'X' on the base which many 'Colono-Indian' vessels from South Carolina also possess. Other than through a detailed analysis of the composition of paste and temper the Ghana sample could not be differentiated from vessels excavated in South Carolina.

One alternative hypothesis may be that the modern African vessels and the Colono-Indian vessels are similar because in each region the manufacturers tried to imitate European forms. The result would be a similarity due to a common stimulus rather than direct connection. For clarification we need to look at the prehistoric repertoire of African potters in comparison to Colono-Indian materials to see how much the former may have influenced the latter.

Of the Colono-Indian ware from Virginia, Noel-Hume (1962: 7) states:

It is certainly true that some of the more elaborate shapes can be identified with European prototypes, but the vast majority of the vessels have only two features in common with any European ware, a flat bottom and a slightly everted rim that is more sophisticated than those that occurred on prehistoric forms. [Here Noel-Hume is referring to prehistoric forms of Indian vessels from eastern Virginia].

He continues:

These features, particularly, the flattening of the base, mark a turning point in the evolution of Virginia Indian pottery and it is reasonable to suppose that that change would not have occurred when it did, were it not for the advent of European colonists. This, in my view, is as far as one can safely go in endowing the simple bowl shapes with European characteristics.
From South Carolina, flat bottoms and bowl forms also seem to be common Colono-Indian characteristics (Baker 1972). From the Cambridge cellar, a site occupied in the latter part of the 18th century, Baker (1972: 24-25) identified eleven of the thirteen identifiable forms as bowls, and seven of these bowls were identified as being flat-bottomed.

Flat-bottomed bowls are present in southeastern North America in prehistoric times (see Caldwell 1958 for some examples), but they are never a common prehistoric trait along the Atlantic coastal plain. Additionally, an examination of West African archaeological reports reveals that there are examples of flat-bottomed bowls from that area that date as early as the time of Christ. Matheson (1974: 155) illustrates bowls from northern Ghana that have flat bases and flaring rims. Profiles of these African vessels are quite similar to profiles shown by both Baker (1972: 23) and Noel-Hume (1962: 10). These comparisons indicate that the basic form of what appears to be the majority of 18th century Colono-Indian ware was known in prehistoric times in Africa as well as parts of southeastern North America. The flat bottomed bowls showing up in South Carolina and Virginia may have nothing to do with European imitations, and they could relate to a continuation of the lengthy African ceramic tradition.

The decorative techniques of both Colono-Indian pottery and historic Indian pottery may well point to the influence of African pottery. In West Africa the most common techniques for decoration and surface finishing are burnishing, incising, and impressing designs with a roulette (Cardew 1970: 12-13). The burnishing is done with a small pebble or with a string of baobab seeds. Rouletting is done with a small carved stick or a small length of plaited fiber (Leith-Ross 1970: 185; Dark 1973: 71-73). The designs of carved roulettes include bold checks, diamonds and complex patterns of vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines.

Rouletting was so popular in West Africa that when maize, a New World plant, was introduced, it created a stir in the pottery industry. Corn cobs served as ready made roulettes, and archaeologists in Africa use cob marked or impressed pottery as a horizon marker (Willet 1962, Stanton 1963) for the colonial period. In North America it has been noted that even though maize is an ancient plant, cob impressed pottery is rather recent. In the type description of Dan River ceramics from North Carolina, Coe and Lewis (1952) commented:

The use of corn cobs to roughen the exterior surfaces of pottery vessels was general practice among historic tribes in the Southeast, although it never appeared to produce a dominant type of surface finish. Alachua Cob Marked in Florida occupies a comparable position to Dan River Cob Impressed from North Carolina. Cob marking has been frequently observed in Georgia and southern Virginia but usually incorrectly labeled net impressed, finger nail punctations or walnut roughened. In all cases it appears in the historic context.
Examination of the "Southeastern Bibliography of Pottery Type Descriptions" reveals eight east coast types that have cob surface finishing (Broyles 1967): Alachua, Clarks Hill, Dan River, Caraway, Clarksville, Pensacola, St. Johns, and Etowah. With two exceptions, St. Johns and Etowah, all of these have been demonstrated to be from the historic period. Thus, in a collection of pottery type descriptions that extends north to Virginia and Kentucky and west to Texas, corn cob surface finish on pottery has been identified in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. These states were colonized early and were the focus of slave importation into the Southeast.

Not only does there seem to be a flourish of cob marking in the Southeast during the colonial period, but there is also a revival of check stamping during the historic period (Caldwell 1950: 7-8). In some cases this new check stamping is large and bold and reminiscent of the check stamping seen on modern African vessels and applied with a roulette (Leith-Ross 1970: 185; Dark 1973: Plates 178-181).

The study of Colono-Indian pottery at this stage is full of paradoxes, and this consideration of surface treatment is another example. There is little doubt that the pottery we call Colono-Indian was made by either Afro-Americans or American Indians. Both of these groups have a tradition of manufacturing plain and burnished ceramics, so the finish of the ware could have come from either tradition. On the other hand, both traditions also expressed a rich variety of other surface finishes that are not commonly found on Colono-Indian ware. When other finishing traits similar to those in West Africa such as check stamping and cob marking are seen in the Southeast, they occur not on Colono-Indian ware but on ceramics that come from sites attributed to American Indians. Perhaps when we begin to understand this paradox we shall begin to understand more fully the nature of the relationship between the three ethnic groups in the southeastern portion of North America during the colonial period.

Combining this evidence for the Afro-American manufacture of some Colono-Indian ware, we see most importantly that African people had a long tradition of manufacturing low-fired coiled and molded earthenwares and that the archaeological materials from the early colonial period are consistently found on sites occupied by Afro-Americans. The predominant vessel forms are similar to those made in Africa in prehistoric times and the major method of surface finishing which is plain (smoothed) or burnished is common in prehistoric Africa. Not only is the early Colono-Indian ware reminiscent of African wares, but African ceramic styles may have influenced American Indian wares in the case of cob marking and the revival of check stamping.

Who used the ware?

The problem of who used the Colono-Indian ware is not quite so confusing as the question of who made it. The people who used the ware dropped
pieces of broken ceramics around their occupation sites, and these broken pieces are easily retrieved through archaeological research. We have only to identify the occupants to identify the users of the pottery. Beyond this excellent archaeological record, we have some historical references to the people who used Colono-Indian ware as well as some first-hand experience.

Today, users of Catawba pottery, which is made in the Colono-Indian pottery tradition, are members of the general public who buy pieces as curios. For the late 18th and early 19th century, Baker (1972: 13-15) has compiled information indicating that the Catawba Indians sold their wares to both White and Black people in trading trips to the coastal plain. Baker infers from the frequency of references that more Black people bought the wares than Whites. Although there is no quantitative data to support this interpretation, I feel Baker is correct. Likewise, we do not have an quantitative data to determine the proportion of Colono-Indian ceramics used by either Black or White people. I suppose that the poorest people of both groups were using the majority of Colono-Indian ware, although some more “well-to-do” people may have used it for specialty cooking. William Gilmore Simms (1841: 122) stated that, “it was a confident faith among the old ladies, that okra soup was always inferior if cooked in any but an Indian pot.” (Interestingly, okra is an African plant.)

In examination of South Carolina and North Carolina archaeological reports, I find that there is a paucity of Colono-Indian ware from domestic and military sites of the 19th century. South and Widmer’s (1977) careful subsurface survey of Fort Johnson in South Carolina revealed no Colono-Indian pottery at that Civil War site. The excavation of three early to mid-19th century sites in the piedmont has likewise produced no Colono-Indian pottery. Excavations at Pinckneyville in Union County (Carrillo 1972), the Howser House in Cherokee County (Carrillo 1976), and a house in Brattonsville in York County (Wilkins, Hunter and Carrillo 1976) failed to recover a single sherd of Colono-Indian pottery even though these sites were located only a few miles from the heartland of the Catawba Nation. Farther to the west in Spartanburg County, Stanley South found no Colono-Indian pottery at the Price House (South 1970). Lees and Kimery-Lees’ recent study (n.d.) of Limerick Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina has revealed a definite drop in the frequency of Colono-Indian ceramics in the 19th century on that plantation. The only possible 19th century occurrences of Colono-Indian pottery are from the Cambridge Cellar (Baker 1972) in Greenwood County and the Kershaw House in Camden (Lewis 1977). If the Colono-Indian materials from these sites do date to the 19th century, they are early, and it is more likely that the artifacts from both sites are from the 18th century.

Thus, while there are references to the 19th century use of Colono-Indian pottery, the archaeological material is infrequent and suggests that there is a greater frequency of material from the early part of the century. The combined historical and archaeological data suggest that even though the piedmont
Catawba Indians were making some Colono-Indian pottery during the 19th century, the majority of the wares were being used in the coastal plain—most probably by poor people, most probably slaves.

Without a doubt the 18th century is the "century of Colono-Indian pottery." While there is a dearth of Colono-Indian pottery from 19th century sites, scarcely a non-Indian 18th century site has been excavated in South Carolina and coastal North Carolina that has not produced sherds of this ware (see also Binford 1965: 86). Of sixteen late 17th and 18th century sites in South Carolina for which I could find data, fourteen produced Colono-Indian ware. In many cases it was in great profusion.

In the excavation of Fort Moultrie of the Revolutionary War, South (1974: 181) reports that 37 per cent of all ceramics recovered were Colono-Indian ware. (Contrast this to the absence of Colono-Indian ware from Fort Johnson of the Civil War.)

On other sites of the 18th century, Colono-Indian ware shows up in varying frequencies with the high being that represented at Fort Moultrie. The remainder of the ceramics from these 18th century sites are imported wares from Europe. My feeling at this point is that the occurrence of Colono-Indian ware on these sites represents a scarcity of ceramics; the pattern of occurrence suggesting that they were more scarce during the 18th century, the colonial period, than during the 19th century. This scarcity was probably most strongly felt by poor people who resorted to their own resources as well as those of their neighbors to meet their needs; the Colono-Indian pottery of the 18th century seems to reflect that resort.

The Black Potters of the West Indies

South's recovery of well-developed Colono-Indian ware from the fortification ditch at the early settlement of Charles Towne helps draw our attention toward the possible non-Indian origin of these wares. Interestingly, many of Charles Towne's early settlers came not from England but from the established colony of Barbados (Wood 1974), and while we do not have any direct historical reference to slaves making pottery in South Carolina, there is evidence of their early association with this craft in Barbados (Handler and Lange 1978: 135-144).

Two types of pottery manufacture, wheel-made and coiled or molded pottery, were engaged in by the slaves of the Lesser Antilles including Barbados. The manufacture of wheel-made sugar pots is recorded as early as the period between 1650 and 1670. Historical references mention slaves using their own wares by the fourth and fifth decades of the 18th century. (Certainly this activity may be much earlier than the first historical reference.) Beyond this, there is evidence of slave potters and more recent non-slave potters manufacturing
pottery using non-kiln and non-wheel technology on the islands of Antigua and Nevis (Handler and Lange 1978: 140-141; Handler 1964).

Wood points out that many of the early settlers from Barbados settled in South Carolina. The historical references mentioned by Handler and Lange clearly suggest that the slaves who accompanied these settlers may well have been engaging in the manufacture of pottery in a slave context prior to their arrival in the Carolina colony. Thus, while we have no direct historical reference to these people's making pottery in South Carolina there is evidence from the colonies in the Lesser Antilles.

The Importance of Style in Colono-Indian Pottery

In conclusion I would like to comment on the importance of the evolution and diversity of style in Colono-Indian pottery. Within this easily formed artifact are the expressions of thousands of common people. Both Afro-Americans and American Indians may have had a hand in creating the wares. European artifacts provided some models for imitation, and whoever selected the vessels for use—whether they were Red, Black, or White—helped direct the course of this evolution.

The production of these wares involved a plastic medium and they were easily made. As personal tastes or markets changed, potters could have easily altered the production of their wares. Crafters could have imitated European forms, Indian forms or African forms, or they could have made up new styles in the course of production. It would be quite interesting to see the difference between the forms used by Whites, Blacks, and Indians at the same point in time. The difference in form should represent the difference in concepts of style and function among the different groups.

For this type of study, determination of the temporal placement of these wares is not difficult. We are able to date 18th and 19th century sites with great accuracy. Ceramics including Colono-Indian ware are frequently found and they are well preserved. In many cases, the beginning of such a study will involve simply looking at previously published reports. Expansion of the study will involve the investigation of many archaeological sites in the Southeastern United States.

"Well, What Are We Going to Call It Now?"

My primary purpose in presenting this information has been to encourage archaeologists to use more imagination when considering the ware we have been calling Colono-Indian. The suffix, Indian, while not incorrect in all cases, unduly limits this pottery. Although I am not excited about contributing a new
name to add to the mass of coined verbiage in the archaeological literature, many archaeologists have asked me, "Well, what are we going to call it now?"

I think Noel-Hume was correct when he used the prefix "Colono" for the wares he found in Virginia. Even though he knew then and we know now that these types of wares were made after the Revolution, the birth and primary use of this ware in the New World was certainly during the colonial period. The problem seems to be only with the suffix. Polhemus (1977) has suggested by use (although not too seriously) that this ware be called "Colono-Black." However, since we know some wares of this style to have been made by Indians, this name also seems inappropriate.

Perhaps the best course is to drop the suffix and simply call the ware "Colono Ware." Certainly the correct usage would be Colonial Ware, but that sounds rather stuffy and also as if it were ware produced in the Mother Country for use in the colonies or ware produced by the colonies as an important export. On the other hand, "Colono Ware" has a casual sound befitting a product that was casually produced to fit the everyday needs of the populace. Besides, it has the advantage of dropping a word from the archaeological lexicon.

Summary

In summary, the most frequent occurrence of Colono Ware in the Southeast is in the late 17th and 18th centuries. Lesser amounts appear in archaeological sites of the 19th century and some of the wares continue to be made today. The frequency of occurrence of the pottery is probably directly related to shortages of glazed wares.

We are sure that some Indians made this pottery throughout the historic period. However, this material is most frequently found on Afro-American and Euro-American sites of the 17th and 18th centuries. West Africans have a long tradition of producing early forms of Colono Ware, and I believe it a reasonable hypothesis that Afro-American slaves made much if not most of the Colono Ware we see in the archaeological record.

There are historical references to all three major ethnic groups in the Southeast being involved with either the production or use of Colono Ware. Thus, the form of the wares found on archaeological sites of these ethnic groups should represent their tastes in style and concerns for function. Studies of dated collections of Colono materials should help significantly in evaluating the changing conceptual worlds of the three diverse groups of people brought together in southeastern North America.
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