

**TILDON EASTON:  
The Rediscovery of an Alexandria Potter**

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## Foreword

The Alexandria Archaeology Publications series is composed of papers on various aspects of research conducted under the auspices of Alexandria Archaeology, a division of the Office of Historic Alexandria, City of Alexandria, Virginia. The authors include professional staff members, university students, and Alexandria Archaeology volunteers. Editing of the papers has been kept to a minimum. It should be understood that the papers vary in tone and level of technicality, since they were originally directed toward many different audiences.

We are pleased to offer the papers within this series and in so doing are opening our “manuscripts on file” - including professional conference papers, background documentary studies, student course papers, and volunteer research papers - to professionals and public alike.

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Pamela J. Cressey, Ph.D.  
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With a history of pottery manufacturing dating from the 1790's to the 1870's, and a history of archaeological excavation and research dating from 1965 to the present day, the City of Alexandria is fortunate to have in its collection artifacts from six local pottery sites.

While five of the potters were well-known from documentary studies, the sixth had remained a mystery until two years ago, when his kiln was discovered in the side of a modern construction trench at 1406 King Street. A marked sherd found at the site identified the pottery manufactory as that of Tildon Easton. The focus of my recent (and on-going) study has been the analysis of over 5,700 sherds of pottery from the kiln site, and the comparison of Easton's pottery forms and decoration with those of his predecessors and competitors in Alexandria. This study will provide guidelines for archaeologists and collectors to use in the identification of Easton's unmarked wares, and will enable us to recognize his wares on other archaeological sites in Alexandria. The apparently short life span of the Easton Pottery makes these wares a particularly useful archaeological dating tool.

All that was previously known about Tildon Easton was one advertisement in the Alexandria Gazette for June 10, 1841 which announced the opening of his "New Stoneware and Earthen Ware Manufactory... on Peyton Street, between King and Prince Streets, Alexandria, D.C." No marked pieces of his pottery had been found in 20 years of archaeological excavation in Alexandria, and an appeal to stoneware collectors in the Washington area newspapers produced no examples or information.

While the discovery of Tildon Easton's kiln has permitted an in-depth examination of his wares, details of his personal life remain sketchy. An extensive archival study of local tax, census, church and newspaper records, conducted by Alexandria Archaeology volunteers, allows only a brief view into his life from 1835 to 1846.

A member of the Trinity United Methodist Church by 1835, Easton was a young man between the ages of 20 and 30 when he went into business in 1841. According to the 1840 Census, his household included six other people: five white females and one black male. Three

individuals in the household were engaged in manufacturing or trade. Although the relationship of these individuals cannot be fully determined, the household apparently included his wife, Rebecca, age 25, his mother-in-law, Rebecca Cook, age 61, and three young girls.

The tax rolls list Easton as a tenant on King Street in 1842 and 1843, at a property adjacent to, or possibly including, the kiln site. This may have been the Easton residence, as only a dwelling and liquor store are listed as being on this property. The last mention of Tildon Easton is in 1846, when the tax rolls list him under his mother-in-law's name at a property on the 1100 block of Wilkes Street. Although Tildon appears in no later records, his wife, Rebecca, is listed in the 1850 Census. No mention of Tildon Easton's death appears in the church records or the local newspaper, and so his fate is unknown. It would appear that Easton's Pottery Manufactory operated on King Street from 1841 until no later than 1844, and that he died or left Alexandria (and his wife?) by 1847.

One might speculate that Easton was unable to compete with the long established and successful Wilkes Street Pottery, which operated from 1813 to 1876, and with competition from the newly mechanized Potteries in Baltimore. New manufacturing techniques in the 1840's were also making glass containers less expensive, and they were rapidly replacing stoneware for use in household and food storage.

The archaeological information provided by the Tildon Easton Pottery Site was, fortunately, more complete than the historical record. The brick pottery kiln was discovered in a building trench on Alexandria's main street in October 1983. When the first marked sherd was found with the name TILDON EASTON, the importance of the find was recognized. Arrangements were made to return the following year to excavate the remainder of the kiln and a portion of the surrounding waster pile prior to development of the site. Two weeks of excavation by Alexandria Archaeology staff and a total of 20 volunteers were followed by over a year of washing, labeling, sorting, cataloging, and analysis.

The kiln was 12 feet in diameter, constructed of brick with a brick rubble core. It appears to have been an updraft kiln, with a flue channel encircling the firing chamber and crossing the center of the floor from a fire box at one end. Two post-holes adjacent to the kiln indicate the presence of a shed roof. A large quantity of kiln furniture and a few pot sherds were found in the flues, including pieces of one almost complete jar. Sherds found in the flue were decorated with cobalt, characteristic of Easton's stoneware. However, their lack of a salt-glaze indicates that the sherds fell into the flue during the firing process and had not been touched by the salt vapors in the main firing chamber.

Waster dumps surrounded the kiln, containing fragments of pottery and kiln furniture shoveled out of the kiln between firings. It is only the burnt, warped, under-fired or broken fragments discarded in these waster dumps that have survived as examples of Easton's work. A number of sherds found in the waster dumps cross-mend with sherds found in the flues, indicating that they had been shoveled out of the kiln following the last firing. Thus it appears that the kiln did not collapse during firing, but was deliberately dismantled.

The position of the adjacent well indicates that it post-dates the kiln site. It was filled with trash at the turn of the century, prior to a land-filling operation. Because of extensive land-filling in the early 20th century, with four feet of overburden, the kiln floor and waster pile survived for over a century and were virtually undisturbed at the time of our discovery.

Because of the strong business ties which are known to have existed among the Alexandria potters, we must look at Tildon Easton and his wares in the context of the Alexandria pottery tradition. An historical survey of Alexandria potters has been made by Malcolm Watkins and others.

The earliest known Alexandria potter, Henry Piercy, emigrated from Europe (Saarbrucken, Lorraine) to Philadelphia prior to the American Revolution, and came to Alexandria in 1792. His first advertisement in the Alexandria Gazette states that his wares were "equal to any work in Philadelphia or elsewhere." Henry Piercy had previously worked in

Philadelphia, as had his two brothers. They produced glazed and slip decorated earthenwares in the Germanic tradition. Henry Piercy's wares are well-known from several Alexandria excavations: His kiln site, his Fairfax Street house, and his King Street China, Glass and Dry Goods shop.

Alexandria earthenware, much of which can be attributed to Henry Piercy, has been recognized on all Alexandria's archaeological sites dating from the late 18th/early 19th centuries. Thomas Hewes, Thomas Fisher, Lewis Plum, and James Miller were among potters who worked with Piercy between 1795 and 1801. Most Alexandria potters apprenticed with or formed a partnership with an established Alexandria potter prior to establishing their own business. Thus, while it is possible to identify Alexandria pottery, it is difficult to make attributions to a particular potter. Earthenware from the Fisher and Plum Pottery sites has been recovered, and a comparison of these artifacts with those from the Piercy sites is planned for the near future. The Plum, Wilkes Street, and Easton Potteries produced both earthenware and stoneware.

Nearly one-half of the sherds recovered from the Easton waster dump are earthenware. Half of the earthenware sherds are from unglazed flowerpots. The majority of Easton's flowerpots have plain, rounded rims and measure two, four, or eight inches in diameter. Flowerpots with seven and eight inch diameters were embellished with a double rim, and are reminiscent of an earlier style of flowerpot produced by Lewis Plum between 1813 and 1821 and decorated with rouletting and wavy combed lines. These forms are both similar to flowerpots produced at Wilkes Street.

Six flowerpots and two flowerpot trays from the Easton site are decorated with a pie crust rim and flange. An uneven green glaze is found on the exterior of most of these pots. Wares such as these were produced by no other Alexandria potters. They are, however, reminiscent of much earlier English forms and glazes.

Other glazed earthenwares include plain milk pans, large storage jars (glazed only on the interior), and small bowls. These forms are very similar to those produced elsewhere in

Alexandria, although the Wilkes Street and earlier potters appear to have used a wider variety of rim treatments. Only three slip decorated sherds were found, and are unlikely to be products of the Easton kiln.

Stoneware may have been produced in Alexandria by 1799. A few stoneware jug rims were among sherds recovered from the Piercy pottery site on Washington Street and are attributed to Lewis Plum. Plum worked with Piercy and then succeeded him on that site. William Reynolds is known to have produced stoneware in Alexandria in 1807. John Swann began stoneware production at the Wilkes Street Pottery in 1813 after an apprenticeship with Lewis Plum. An analysis of the stoneware produced at Wilkes Street was undertaken by Suzita Myers and published by Alexandria Archaeology in 1982.

John Swann's early wares included bulbous jugs with reeded rims and a grey or brown salt glaze, much like those produced by Plum. By 1820, he was producing grey salt-glazed stoneware with simple cobalt decoration, consisting of scalloped or wavy lines or plain vines. He may have been influenced by the Baltimore pottery of Henry C. Remmey, which was advertised in the Alexandria Gazette in 1820.

In 1825, the Wilkes Street Pottery was sold to merchant Hugh Smith who, with his son, operated the business until 1841. The potter B.C. Milburn operated Smith's Pottery from 1831, and purchased it ten years later, in the same year that Easton opened his Pottery. The pottery from the Smith period is more exuberantly decorated than that of Swann, exhibiting more fully developed floral designs. Many marked examples of Smith pottery are decorated with elaborate trailing vines, often with a single flower.

Much of B.C. Milburn's pottery is distinguishable by slip-trailed decoration. Vines and flowers are again dominant motifs. Pottery styles indicate the work of at least two different decorators. After Milburn's death in 1867, his sons continued to operate the pottery for nine more years.

Milburn and his sons operated the Wilkes Street pottery for 36 years, leaving a great deal of pottery to be found in archaeological excavations and in antique shops. Unlike Easton, Milburn left many details of his history, and even some living relatives.

The pottery produced by Milburn for H. Smith and Co. in the 1830's provides the closest parallel to Easton's stoneware.

Of 138 stoneware vessels identified from the Easton waster dump, bottles, jars, and milk pans account for 88 percent.

All of Easton's milk pans and jars are decorated with brushed cobalt vines and flowers, arranged in a wavy horizontal band around the upper portion of the vessel. All of the vessels have a similar arrangement of decorative elements, although the execution varies from careful brush strokes to quick slashes. While Easton's stoneware decoration appears the same from all sides, the Wilkes Street potters generally utilized central floral motifs with vines radiating out from either side, with sparse decoration on the back of the vessel.

Easton's stoneware milk pans, ranging from eight to 15 inches in diameter, have squared rims, pouring spouts, and lug handles. They are similar in form to those produced by Smith and Milburn, but with straighter sides.

Easton's jars are straight sided with curved shoulders, a squared rim, and lug handles. Easton's simple squared jar rims contrast with the rounder rims from the Swann and Smith periods at Wilkes Street, and with the more complex mechanical rims employed by Milburn at Wilkes Street after 1831.

Bottles and jugs were not decorated by any Alexandria potter. Easton's bottles are straight sided, with strap handles springing from the shoulder and long straight necks. The straight double rims imitate those of glass bottles formed with the lipping tool after 1840, and were also used by Milburn on broad, squat jugs.

Three stoneware flowerpots, four, five, and six inches in diameter, are decorated with straight and wavy bands of cobalt. These are the only vessels which have cobalt around the rim, and are the only stoneware flowerpots known from Alexandria.

Easton also produced small (three inches diameter) straight sided bottles which may have held ink. These have a lead glazed interior and a simple rounded rim. At least five of these bottles have been identified, included two grey and two orange salt-glazed jars and one buff-colored waster in a bisque state, with no exterior glaze. Other bisque fragments of small bottles were also found in the flues under the kiln floor. It is thought that they were intended to fire to an orange color.

A number of orange or brown glazed bottles and pocket flasks appear to be made of this same clay. It is lighter in color and finer in texture than clays used for most of the Easton wares and by other Alexandria potters. Spectrographic analysis of clay and sherds from all other Alexandria pottery sites was conducted by Dianne Douglas at Winterthur to determine place of origin. The study showed local clay to have been used in all of the specimens provided. Easton may have imported a lighter clay, or, more likely, added calcined bone to the clay to impart a lighter color. A large number of animal bones, including over 250 cow phalanges, were found in the Easton waster pile, and may have been obtained from a tannery located two blocks from the pottery site. The calcined bone could have been used to improve the color or the firing properties of the clay.

In summation, Easton's stoneware follows the Alexandria pottery tradition of Smith and Milburn in the use of the local grey-firing clay with no interior slip, and in the tulip-like flower and spiked leaf decoration. The major differences are the circumferential designs used by Easton in contrast to Smith and Milburn's front-facing patterns, and Easton's plainer, squared rims. Two innovations of Easton's are his use of a glaze on the interior of the small ink bottles, and his use of a lighter colored clay. Easton's earthenware is not easily distinguishable from that of the Wilkes Street and earlier potters, apart from the distinctive flanged, green-glazed flowerpots.

The Easton Pottery was the only one in Alexandria to produce flasks, stoneware flowerpots, and ink bottles. The Wilkes Street potter and the Easton Pottery both are known to have produced milk pans, jars, jugs, bottles, and probably churns, pitchers, and apothecary pots. The Wilkes Street pottery also made chamber pots (in the Swann period), butter pots, water coolers, spittoons, and banks, none of which were found at the Easton site.

Currently, Easton's wares are only known from the discarded fragments of his waster pile. Future identification of Easton pottery on residential sites will document whether Easton was successful in firing, and selling, his wares in Alexandria.

Easton's wares, at first glance, appear to be very similar to those of the Wilkes Street Potters, and can be readily identified as "Alexandria pottery." On closer examination, the aforementioned distinguishing features can be used to identify the wares of Tildon Easton, produced in Alexandria in the early years of the 1840's.



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