Domestic Queensware in Kensington-Fishtown: Excavating Philadelphia's Waterfront Neighborhoods

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Cover Page Footnote
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Domestic Queensware in Kensington-Fishtown: Excavating Philadelphia’s Waterfront Neighborhoods

George D. Cress, Thomas J. Kutys, Rebecca L. White, Meta F. Janowitz, Samuel A. Pickard

Ongoing archaeological excavations undertaken by URS/AECOM along the I-95 corridor in Kensington-Fishtown in Philadelphia have brought to light 18th- and 19th-century domestic and industrial life along a 3 mi. section of the Delaware River waterfront. Excavation has revealed over 400 shaft features, yard deposits, and industrial foundations, yielding over a million artifacts. A small quantity of domestic “queensware” has been recovered from barrel and wood-lined box privies, and from an early 19th-century drain feature. The recovery of domestic queensware in Kensington-Fishtown has shown that this ware had become part of the domestic fabric of early 19th-century consumers in this part of the city.

Introduction

A wide variety of prehistoric and historical features and sites have recently been identified in the neighborhoods approximately 2 mi. north of Center City Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Fig. 1). These neighborhoods—Northern Liberties, Kensington, and Port Richmond—have been the focus of archaeological excavations related to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) and the Federal Highways Administration’s long-term, multiphase project to improve and rebuild the section of I-95 that passes through Philadelphia. Ongoing archaeological excavations undertaken by AECOM (formerly URS) along the Philadelphia I-95 corridor have brought to light evidence of the diverse 18th- and 19th-century domestic life and industrial development along a three mile section of the Delaware River waterfront. Over 400 shaft features and yard deposits have been excavated yielding over a million artifacts. This article will discuss the more complete queensware vessels recovered from barrel and wood-lined box privies, and an early 19th-century drain feature. Domestic queensware manufacturers utilized American raw materials to produce refined earthenware similar to the imported creamware and pearlware from Great Britain (White et al., this issue). The recovery of American queensware from several sites in Kensington-Fishtown has revealed that this ware had become part of the domestic fiber of early 19th-century consumers in this part of the city.

Project Area Historical Background

During the early 1600s, the Philadelphia region was settled by European colonists, many of whom came from Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands. At that time, the vicinity was known as “Shackamaxon,” after the Lenape name for the area. In the 1680s—before there was a city—the area was the headquarters for William Penn and his lieutenants as they planned the new “greene country towne” of Philadelphia (Dunn and Dunn 1982: 1, 3–5).

The village of Kensington was established in the early 18th century, approximately 2 mi. north of present Center City Philadelphia,
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development. As early as the 1840s, the Kensington street grid was filled in with new residences and businesses, and the waterfront was built up with wharves, both public and private. The establishment of large scale shipbuilding facilities, railyards, iron and steel foundries, steam-powered textile mills, and glass factories helped earn the area the nickname “Workshop of the World.” During this time, Port Richmond became a major rail depot and port facility. Each of the developments described made its own mark on the landscape of the city and left unique traces behind in the ground in the form of archaeological sites and artifact deposits.

By far, the largest number of artifacts and the most significant examples have been recovered from privies. To date, approximately 400 shaft features have been excavated. The artifact deposits have been recovered from the shafts of wood-lined box, barrel, and

Figure 1. Aerial view of I-95/GIR project area in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with sites discussed in this article marked. Interstate 95 runs across the image, following the Delaware River at bottom. The white box outlines the project area. (Inset map, Varle [1802]; base map ArcGIS® World Imagery [copyright © Esri, all rights reserved], map by Thomas J. Kutys, 2017.)
situated between an I-95 bridge abutment and the structure at 1028 Shackamaxon Street. Previous disturbance from the construction of the I-95 bridge abutment in the early 1970s had eliminated approximately 90% of the backyard. The undisturbed area excavated was no greater than 4 ft. wide, north to south, narrowing to 3 ft. wide (fig. 2).

The Remer site is named for the family that occupied the property in the late 1700s and early 1800s. The first member of the family to reside on the site was Matthew Remer. Matthew’s father, Godfrey Remer, immigrated to Philadelphia from Germany in the early 1750s and eventually settled in the village of Kensington, as the area was then known. Godfrey was a butcher by profession and after purchasing a lot on Shackamaxon Street near the corner of Richmond Street in 1770, he built a house for his growing family (this property is now beneath I-95) (Philadelphia Department of Records [PDR] 1791).

In 1778, Godfrey Remer purchased an adjoining property—including the current 1026 Shackamaxon parcel—for the newly married Matthew, who moved into a frame house

Figure 2. Archaeological excavation in progress at the Remer Site. (Courtesy of AECOM (URS), 2009.)
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already present on the site (Remer Family Papers 1778; Remer Family Papers 1781: 3). A ship carpenter by trade, during the Revolutionary War Matthew served in a militia artillery regiment raised from among the men living along the Kensington waterfront. His most notable contribution to history occurred on the eve of George Washington’s famed crossing of the Delaware River to attack Hessian forces in Trenton, New Jersey. As men and equipment were being assembled for that assault, Matthew Remer was one of six men who were handpicked to inspect and repair the boats that would carry Washington and his troops across the ice-choked river (Keyser 1879: 415–418).

After Matthew Remer’s death in 1804, the house passed to his widow Sarah and then their children upon her death in the 1820s. By the late 1830s, Matthew and Sarah’s daughter, Elizabeth Conver Strawn, bought out her siblings and became the sole owner of the property. The property was divided among her four daughters upon her death in 1853, with Eliza Conver receiving the frame house on the current 1026 Shackamaxon parcel. Eliza resided in the house at 1026 Shackamaxon for brief durations from the 1850s through the 1870s, but usually rented it out to tenants, who included a comb maker, a cigar maker, and a poultry seller. She returned with her family in 1878 and resided there until her death in 1898 (AECOM 2018).

Initial machine excavation revealed that approximately 90% of the 19.5 × 154 ft. property had been destroyed by the construction of the adjacent concrete highway abutment. All that remained of the once intact backyard was a narrow strip of ground, about 3–4 ft. wide, along the northern property boundary. Within this undisturbed strip of backyard, archaeologists found a total of 67 historical features associated with the use and development of the Remer property. Of the historical features excavated, 37 were post holes associated with former outbuildings or fences, 20 were trash pits, and 10 were barrel privies and wood-lined box privies. These barrel and box privies contained large amounts of household refuse related to several successive generations of the extended Remer family.

The artifacts from many of the features on the Remer family property date from the late 18th through the mid-19th century. Most of the ceramic and glass artifacts are from vessels used in dining, food preparation, and storage. A colorful assortment of hand-painted tea saucers, made in England in the years after the Revolutionary War, highlights the significance of the tea ceremony as part of social customs. A ribbed pocket flask and case bottles may have been used on the dining table, although these vessels were designed to transport beverages on sea voyages or on long overland journeys. A bone domino provides a look at leisure activities and entertainments during this time period (AECOM 2018).

Most of the Philadelphia queensware recovered from the Remer site consisted of hollowware and tableware sherds, though the assemblage did include five identifiable vessels. The most striking queensware vessel from the site is a nearly complete “Common-" or “Chinese-shape” bowl with a very light, almost-white body, yellow (Munsell 2.5Y 8/6–7/6) glaze, and extensive olive/olive-yellow (Munsell 10.0Y 4/4–5/6) speckled decoration (possibly copper oxide) on the exterior surface (FIG. 3). This bowl was very well potted and thin walled. It also exhibits some minor manufacturing flaws and kiln damage. Two pinhead-sized inclusions on the lower body and underside of the base appear to be pieces of coal trapped in the clay during manufacture. In addition, there are possible soot streaks (under the glaze) on the exterior at the junction of the body with the foot ring that likely occurred during the initial bisque firing.

The greenish decoration on the exterior surface suggests that this bowl was intended for use at table, rather than in some functional capacity in the kitchen. This is confirmed by a lack of use wear, in the form of stir marks, on the interior surface. Although bowls were likely produced by many of the domestic
Figure 3. Chinese/Common-shape queensware bowl with green copper oxide decoration from Feature 6 at the Remer Site. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2010.)

Figure 4. Three biscuit queensware saucers from Feature 1 at the Remer Site, including a detail of rim damage on one. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2010.)
queensware potteries, the only mention of them in Philadelphia so far discovered appears in John Mullowny’s advertisements for the Washington Pottery (Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser 1811).

Fragments of a pitcher with a very soft, light buff body and yellow (Munsell 2.5Y 7/6–7/8) glaze were recovered from Feature 1. This pitcher, missing its spout and base, had lost most of its glaze, though the remaining glazed areas are characterized by brown streaks and greenish patches in the style of decoration used by Thomas Whieldon in the 18th century and imitated in this country by John Bartlam at Cain Hoy (Hudgins 2009: 72, 73; Hunter 2009: 94). Some of the sherds also feature what appears to be raised decoration molded into the clay. While this piece exhibits some of the characteristics attributed to domestic queensware, it may represent an earlier attempt to make refined earthenware in Philadelphia.

The same feature (Feature 1) produced three biscuit-fired saucers, all well vitrified, ranging in color from pale yellow (Munsell 2.5Y 7/4) to very pale brown (Munsell 10YR 8/4–7/4) (FIG. 4). This matching set of unglazed wasters includes freestanding, wedge-shaped foot rings and shows evidence of lathe trimming. Additional manufacturing defects were observed, including a small, pushed-down area on the rim of one saucer that occurred prior to firing, and blackened areas around the rim of another, probably the result of exposure to smoke during firing.

These waster saucers are identified as Philadelphia queensware based on common characteristics and visual comparison with glazed examples from other sites. Two of the Philadelphia queensware potteries advertised saucers among their output; however, neither pottery was located in proximity to the Remer site in Kensington. It remains unclear where these saucers were manufactured. At present there is no indication that any member of the Remer family worked as a potter, laborer, or apprentice at any of the known potteries. As mentioned above, the saucers are well vitrified and appear very highly fired when compared with other examples of Philadelphia queensware, characteristics that may suggest they represent the improvements in durability and strength that were advertised by Mullowny in September 1812 (Lancaster Journal 1812).

**Gunner’s Run South Site**

The Gunner’s Run South site encompassed sections of two city blocks between East Berks Street and Gunner’s Run, Richmond Street, and Wildey Street. Like much of northeastern Kensington, urban development in the area did not really begin until the late colonial era, and even then the area remained relatively rural. By the mid-18th century, the site formed the southeast corner of a large block bounded by Prince, Cherry, Queen, and Wood streets (now Girard Avenue, Montgomery Avenue, Susquehanna Avenue, and Richmond Street, respectively). Through the first decades of the 19th century, families of fishermen and shipwrights—such as the Bakers, Hills, Crampes, Broadwaters, Gossers, Rices, and Bakeovens—predominated as the residents of houses scattered along Richmond and Susquehanna, while a nearly 2 ac. plot of land, encompassing much of what would later be the properties fronting on Berks, Wildey, and Hewson streets, was owned by the family of Philadelphia tailor Jacob Maag and then Christian Sheetz (Evans 1750; Paxton 1813; Whitely 1820; PDR 1750; PDR 1803).

From the 1820s through the 1840s, the block saw a period of increased development, with many of the remaining large tracts subdivided and Berks Street opened between Richmond and Wildey streets. On the northwest side of the block, Philadelphia merchant Manuel Eyre sold off the land that Jacob Maag (and, later, his daughter) had owned; some went to smaller property owners, like fisherman Jacob H. Faunce, and some to glass manufacturer William Bennett, who also bought up parcels of land at the corner of Richmond and Berks that had once
belonged to the Baker family. Along Richmond Street and Susquehanna Avenue more homes occupied by fishing and shipbuilding families sprang up and were interspersed with the homes of glass workers employed at the nearby Union and Dyottville glassworks. In addition to houses, the block also had taverns, shoe stores, and a bakery (PDR 1809; PDR 1810; PDR 1826; PDR 1832; PDR 1834; PDR 1835; PDR 1836; PDR 1841; Smedley 1862: 12; Hopkins 1875; USBC 1850: 351A–353A; USBC 1860: 176–178, 182, 184–186; McElroy 1837: 8–9, 15, 35, 46; 51–52, 68, 99–101, 134, 184; McElroy 1841: 42, 62, 84, 107, 215; McElroy 1845: 56, 286, 316; McElroy 1849: 39, 57, 141, 179, 299; McElroy 1850: 85, 156, 197; McElroy 1862: 535; Public Ledger 1849). In the early 1850s, the volunteer firemen of the Kensington Hose Company moved their firehouse to a location on Richmond Street near Susquehanna Avenue (Public Ledger 1853).

After the Civil War, the area became more industrialized, and the demographics of the block changed. When the fire department was professionalized, the Kensington Hose Company house was replaced by the Sykes & Son Nut and Bolt Works, and what remained of the Bennett land was subdivided to build row homes for workers, as more of the inhabitants were being employed in factories, iron foundries, shipyards, and mills (PDR 1855; PDR 1873; PDR 1876; Hopkins 1875; Costa 1870: 850; Costa 1875: 156, 389, 715, 1240, 1438; Costa 1876: 157, 329, 715, 1243, 1442; Costa 1877: 323, 550, 691, 1251, 1352, 1390–1391; Costa 1878: 337, 734, 1232, 1500–1501; Costa 1879: 95, 376, 779, 1261, 1504; Costa 1880: 95, 396–397, 823, 1320, 1469, 1507; James Gopsill 1884: 262, 408, 790, 1233, 1556, 1573, 1713; JGS 1889: 157, 278, 286, 378, 526, 613, 1257, 1285). The houses and remaining buildings along Richmond Street were demolished in about 1922, when this portion of Richmond Street was widened and incorporated into Delaware Avenue (PDR 1921; PDR 1922). Over the next several decades, a majority of the homes on Hewson Street and Susquehanna Avenue were razed for the expansion of industry. Most of the houses on the Berks Street side of the site were able to hold on into the 1960s, when they too were demolished to facilitate the construction of I-95 (PDR 1966).

**Feature 386**

Domestic queensware was recovered from an early 19th-century drainage feature near the corner of Berks and Richmond streets, consisting of a wooden flume constructed at the bottom of a 15 ft. wide ditch. The ditch probably served to drain the surrounding land in the late 18th century. Soils in this location were, characteristically, poorly drained seasonally and probably required a drainage system prior to the construction of houses along Berks and Richmond streets. The ditch appears to have been filled in by the early 19th century, with a large number of late 18th- and early 19th-century domestic artifacts mixed in the fill deposit (FIG. 5).
Figure 6. “Gritted” queensware pitcher from Feature 386 at the Gunner’s Run South Site. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015).

Figure 7. Diamond pattern hollowware sherds from the Gunner’s Run South Site (left from Feature 386 and right from Feature 674); contemporary pearlware and English yellow-glazed vessels (both from a private collection) shown for comparison. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015).
A nearly complete pitcher from this feature (386) stands approximately 6.5 in. tall with a diameter of about 5.5 in. at its widest point. The yellow (Munsell 10YR 7/6) exterior body features an area of thin, horizontal, lathe-cut bands (entire band is approximately 1.5 in. wide) sandwiched between two applied bands of crushed calcined flint that cover the remainder of the exterior entirely. The body of the pitcher is slightly darker than other observed queensware vessels (Munsell 10YR 8/3, “very pale brown”). The large, extruded strap handle features a series of narrow, vertical ribs closely matching those on the body. The end of the handle terminates in a distinctive trimmed V-shape. One of the most subtle, yet striking, features of this pitcher is the presence of eight, pale-green dots over the calcined flint, each approximately ¾ in. in diameter (difficult even for the naked eye to see). These dots, four on each of the calcined flint bands, are intentionally arranged in an alternating pattern between the bands. It is unclear whether this added green decoration is so faint because of post depositional processes, or it was merely an unsuccessful attempt at decoration. Minor manufacturing flaws on the pitcher include shallow gouges from trimming on the interior and exterior of the straight collar (particularly around the bottom edge of the pouring lip, which is missing), and some additional calcined flint in one area just above the base (FIG. 6).

An advertisement for the Washington Pottery from 30 October 1812 lists a wide variety of vessel forms and provides a tantalizing reference to “plain and gritted pitchers”: “Among the articles are cups and saucers, sugars and creams, gal, quart, pint & half pint pitchers plain, do. do. do. Gritted” (Democratic Press 1812). The use of the term “gritted” may have been an attempt to describe the decoration exhibited on the recovered pitcher. This technique of employing crushed calcined flint as decoration has been found on ceramic wasters recovered during salvage attempts at the Portobello Potteries in Edinburgh, Scotland (Haggarty 2011: 303, 304). Two sherds with a distinctive pressed diamond pattern represent the other queensware vessel recovered from Feature 386. The form appears to match contemporary small pitchers or creamers, with one of the fragments exhibiting a small section of a fluted neck (FIG. 7). Another hollowware sherd, featuring a variation of the molded diamond pattern, was recovered from a wood-lined box privy (Feature 674). Both sherds have splashes of green decoration (copper oxide) over the molded patterns. The diamond design represented on these sherds is similar to patterns found on contemporary pearlware, English yellow-glazed wares, and white felspathic-stoneware vessels. Queensware potters were known to create plaster-of-paris molds directly from English vessels. This process was described in detail by Chester County potter Thomas Vickers in his letter to Thomas Rotch in 1817 (Vickers 1817; White et al., this issue). Press molding produced standardized forms and enabled additional types of surface decoration, such as these diamond patterns.

Additional evidence of Philadelphia queensware was recovered from several wood-lined box and barrel privies at the Gunner’s Run South site in Fishtown. Although research into these properties is ongoing, the vessel forms and decorative techniques warrant mention in this article.

A large porringer recovered from a barrel privy (Feature 476) is nearly complete, except for the missing base and a portion of the ridged strap handle (FIG. 8). The rounded body and very slightly flared (almost straight) rim closely resemble those of an undecorated pearlware porringer from the Smith-Maskell site (28Ca0124) in Camden, New Jersey (Kutys et al., this issue). The rim diameter of the queensware porringer (5 in.) is slightly larger than that of the Camden example. This porringer form was also noted among the “mixed ceramic assemblage” recovered during salvage operations at the site of the Portobello Potteries in Scotland (Haggarty 2011: 276).

The porringer’s yellow glaze (Munsell 2.5Y 7/6–7/8) has a distinctive orange hue that
Figure 8. Queensware porringer from Feature 476 at the Gunner’s Run South Site. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015.)

Figure 9. Octagonal queensware plate with green copper oxide rim decoration from Feature 93 at the Gunner’s Run South Site. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015.)
molded plates have no foot ring and feature olive-green (Munsell 2.5GY 4/4) copper-oxide coloring along the edges of the rims (Fig. 9). This green rim decoration varies from very dark to nearly invisible and is clearly an imitation of contemporary shell-edge motifs (though without the molded shell pattern). The glaze itself is a yellow/olive-yellow (Munsell 2.5Y 7/6–6/6) color over a rather soft, light buff body.

Mullowny placed several advertisements for the Washington Pottery that specifically mentioned plates; however, he never identified any type of decoration or pattern. An advertisement for a Pittsburgh merchant also offered plates without providing the name of the manufacturer:

Just received a large and general assortment of India, German, French, English & American Goods ... China and American cups and saucers, Green and blue edged, Liverpool china, and

makes the vessel stand out among the other domestic queensware examples. To date, none of the newspaper advertisements for domestic queensware mention porringers, although it is possible that this common form was included under the term “etcetera,” which was frequently used in the advertisements.

It is also possible that this porringer was made by one of the British potteries producing yellow-glazed wares between about 1785 and 1835 (Miller 1974: 11). English yellow-glazed ware, as the name implies, refers to the application of a colored glaze over either a creamware or pearlware body (Miller 1974: 11). The lack of decoration and the somewhat soft, off-white/buff body of the recovered porringer are two characteristics that seem to suggest local manufacture and differentiate the vessel from English contemporaries.

Three matching, octagonal plates were recovered (Feature 93), and the most complete example measures 7.5 in. in diameter. These molded plates have no foot ring and feature olive-green (Munsell 2.5GY 4/4) copper-oxide coloring along the edges of the rims (Fig. 9). This green rim decoration varies from very dark to nearly invisible and is clearly an imitation of contemporary shell-edge motifs (though without the molded shell pattern). The glaze itself is a yellow/olive-yellow (Munsell 2.5Y 7/6–6/6) color over a rather soft, light buff body.

Just received a large and general assortment of India, German, French, English & American Goods ... China and American cups and saucers, Green and blue edged, Liverpool china, and

Figure 10. Rouletted queensware sherd from Feature 93 at the Gunner’s Run South Site, shown with a redware teapot with similar collar rouletting recovered from the Remer Site. (Courtesy of AECOM; photo by Thomas J. Kutys, 2015.)
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American plates, American teapots, pitchers and mantle ornaments. (Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette 1814)

This advertisement may indicate that green- and blue-edged plates were available from both Liverpool and American manufacturers. To date, several versions of green-edged queensware plates have been recovered from archaeological excavations, although at present the authors are not aware of any blue-edged examples.

A hollowware sherd from the same feature (93) displays a rouletted or engine-turned geometric pattern on the exterior surface. The decoration on this sherd, possibly the shoulder of a teapot or pitcher, closely resembles the motif along the rim of a redware teapot recovered from the Remer site (Fig. 10). As both the Columbian and Washington potteries in Philadelphia offered vessel forms in red, black, and yellow without providing additional details, it is possible that these potteries produced the same forms in both redware and queensware.

Conclusions

Archaeological investigation along the I-95 corridor in Northern Liberties, Kensington, and Port Richmond is a large, multiyear project with ongoing individual property research and artifact analysis. The excavations in these Delaware River waterfront neighborhoods have produced a wide variety of artifacts, providing a glimpse into the domestic lives of people from many backgrounds and occupations during the 18th and 19th centuries. Although domestic queensware was produced for a relatively brief period, the ware’s presence in several features throughout the neighborhood demonstrates its widespread availability to households across the city.

The queensware recovered from the ongoing I-95 project is providing evidence of new vessel forms and decorative techniques, while also revealing information about consumption patterns within the close-knit riverfront neighborhoods. This article is an attempt to provide preliminary information on queensware from these neighborhoods. Domestic queensware recovered from this project will be the subject of future articles, with a more complete analysis available online at: <http://diggingi95.com/>.

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The authors would like to thank Stephen W. Tull and the staff of AECOM’s Burlington office for assistance and encouragement on this project. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration. In particular, we recognize the continuing support of Dr. Catherine Spohn, cultural resource professional, and Elaine Elbich, portfolio manager, PennDOT District 6-0. We are also grateful to Dr. Maria O’Donovan for editorial expertise and the anonymous reviewers for their comments.

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