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A Bone to Pick: An Unusual Tableware from the Victorian Era

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In 1980, archaeologists braved late-winter weather in Baltimore to conduct a salvage excavation at the future site of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. Given three weeks to gather as much archaeological data as possible, archaeologists working for Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Research, Inc., of Delaware managed to excavate an astonishing 52 features—wells, privies, structural foundations, and cellars—associated with Baltimore's 18th- and 19th-century past (McCarthy and Basalik 1980). One of the brick-lined privies located in the back of a lot on Lee Street contained a large assemblage of faunal remains as well as ceramics and glass dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Basalik 1994). Documentary research showed that during this period, the property was the location of the Aged Men and Women's Home of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington Conference, a church-sponsored retirement home for elderly African Americans (*Afro-American* 1931: 23; Methodist Episcopal Church 1908: 77). Many of the home's residents were formerly enslaved individuals who had no living or known family members to care for them in their final years (*Afro-American* 1901: 8).

Among the ceramics found in the privy were four unusual "paisley-shaped" white earthenware vessels made by the East Liverpool Potteries Company, operating in East Liverpool, Ohio, from 1901 to 1907 (FIGS. 1 and 2). What were these vessels, and how were they used? How did they fit into the larger world of dining and manners in the late-Victorian era, and, more specifically, how were they used at the Aged Men and Women's Home?

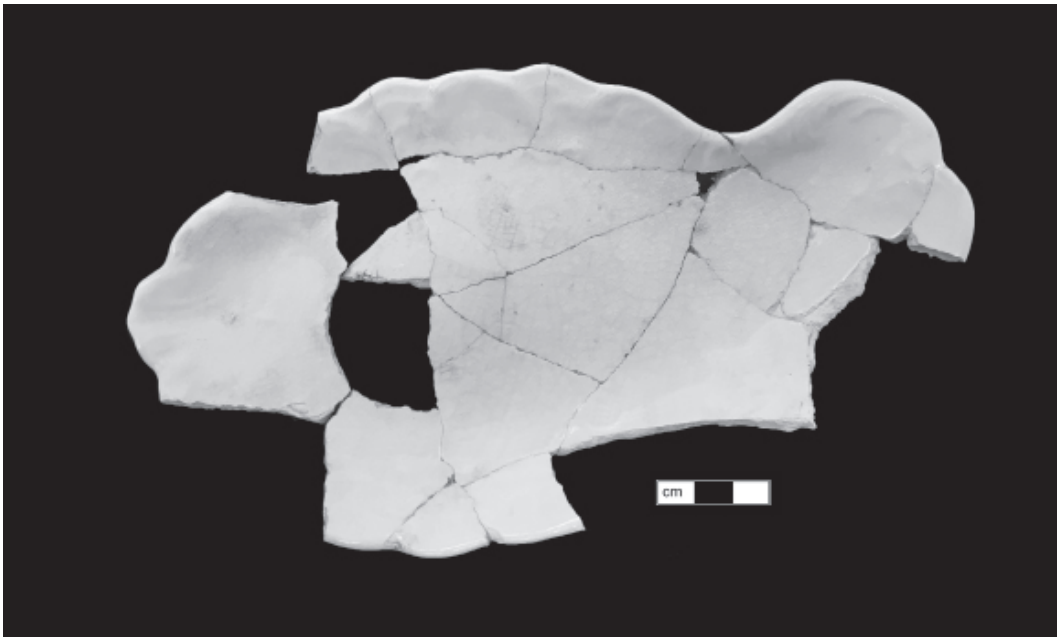

Figure 1. A bone dish or salad plate from the aged home. (Photo by Patricia Samford, 2017; courtesy of the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory.)

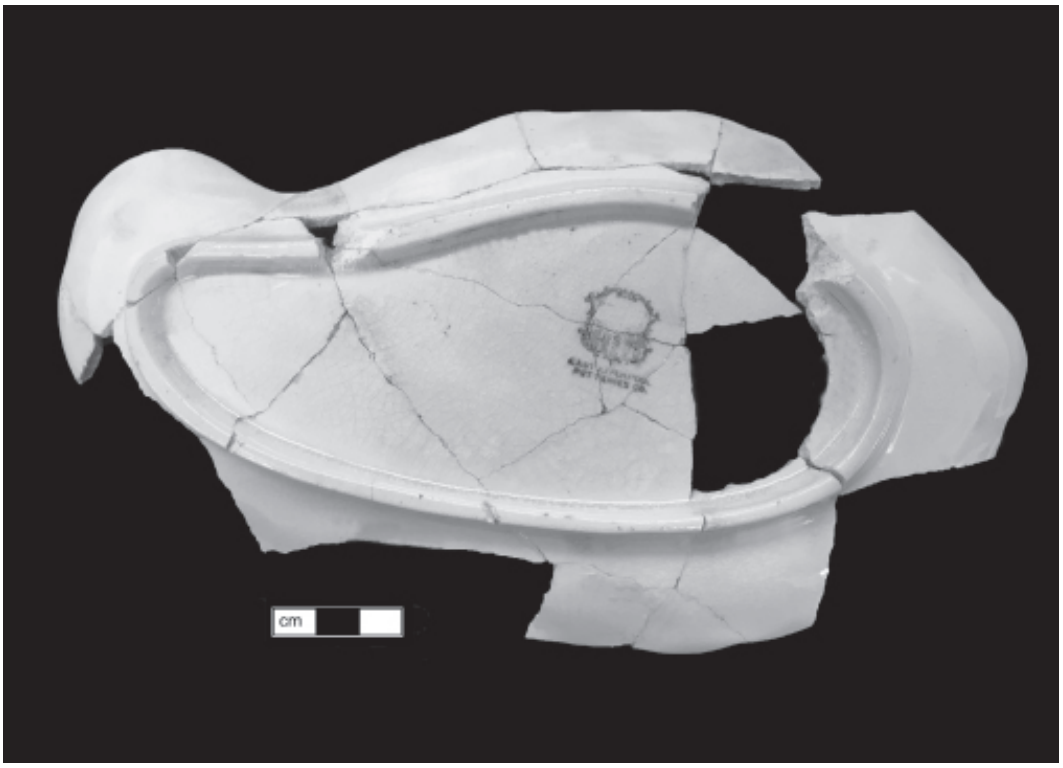

Figure 2. Underside of the vessel, showing the manufacturer's mark of the East Liverpool Potteries Company. (Photo by Patricia Samford, 2017; courtesy of the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory.)

In both the Victorian (1837–1901) and Edwardian (1901–1910) eras, home was considered a private and female-gendered space, differentiated from the public—and, hence, male—spaces of work and capitalism (Davidoff and Hall 1987; Scarpitta 1990). The home was considered a safe haven, insulating residents from the rough-and-tumble world of commerce and sin. The home served as a civilizing influence, where family members learned the rules of polite society. Having the correct possessions and displaying them in proper settings demonstrated one's knowledge of manners and comportment. Victorian and Edwardian dining was governed by formal rules and prescribed behaviors intended to demonstrate one's gentility (Williams 1996). And where better to show off one's elegance and refinement than mealtime entertaining? The etiquette book *Manners and Tone of Good Society: Or, Solecisms to be Avoided*, published in 1879, reminded readers that "there is no better or surer passport to good society than ... having a reputation for giving 'good dinners'" (Frederick Warne & Co. 1879: 78).

By the mid-19th century, most middle-class homes owned matched sets of dishes for dining, with a standard array of vessels included with a complete dinner service (Fitts 1999; Williams 1996). The 100-piece dinner services advertised in the 1895 Montgomery Ward and 1902 Sears catalogs included plates, soup plates, twifflers (small plates, about 8 in. in diameter) and muffins (small plates ranging from 4 to 7 in. in diameter), a sauce tureen, a soup tureen, platters in different sizes, covered serving dishes, open serving dishes, bakers, a pitcher, a gravy boat, and a butter dish (Montgomery Ward & Co. 1969: 526–528; Sears, Roebuck & Co. 1969). During the second half of the 19th century, entertaining began to

require a greater range of physical objects, however, as manufacturers of glass, ceramics, and silver expanded production and distribution (Williams 1996: 78–79). The often-confusing array of flatware, dishes, and drinking glasses that accompanied each place setting required specialized knowledge in order for the diner to politely navigate his or her way through a party without embarrassment. An 1890 article in the *Washington Post* instructed diners in "dainty novelties in tableware that sometimes tend to confuse one unused to society," with suggestions on how to prevent social blunders. Included for the edification of the readers—some of whom may have had to attend diplomatic dinners in the nation's capital—were instructions on identifying and using ice-cream spoons, individual salts and their accompanying spoons, bon-bon tongs, oyster forks, paté pannakins, terrapin saucepans, egg spoons, pastry forks, Roman-punch spoons, and orange spoons (*Washington Post* 1890). Other specialized vessels that graced the Victorian dining table included asparagus trays, pudding dishes, chocolate jugs, celery dishes, bon-bon trays, olive dishes, and cracker jars (FIG. 3). At the end of the 19th century, these vessels could be purchased individually at department stores like Woodward & Lothrop or through mail-order catalogs (Montgomery Ward & Co. 1969; Sears, Roebuck & Co.1969: 2015; *Washington Post* 1894).

The vessels found in the Aged Men and Women's Home privy would have fallen into this realm of specialized dining equipment. The odd shape indicated that they were either relish dishes, salad plates, or bone dishes (Mars 1997: 265). These vessel types were smaller, curved dishes that were placed at the upper-left side of the dining plate and designed to segregate certain types of foods (FIG. 4). Mixtures of preserved fruits and vegetables like chowchow and chutney were served on relish dishes. Salad

Figure 3. Page from a Higgins & Seiter catalog believed to date to 1903, showing a sampling of specialized Victorian dishes (Higgins & Seiter [1903].)

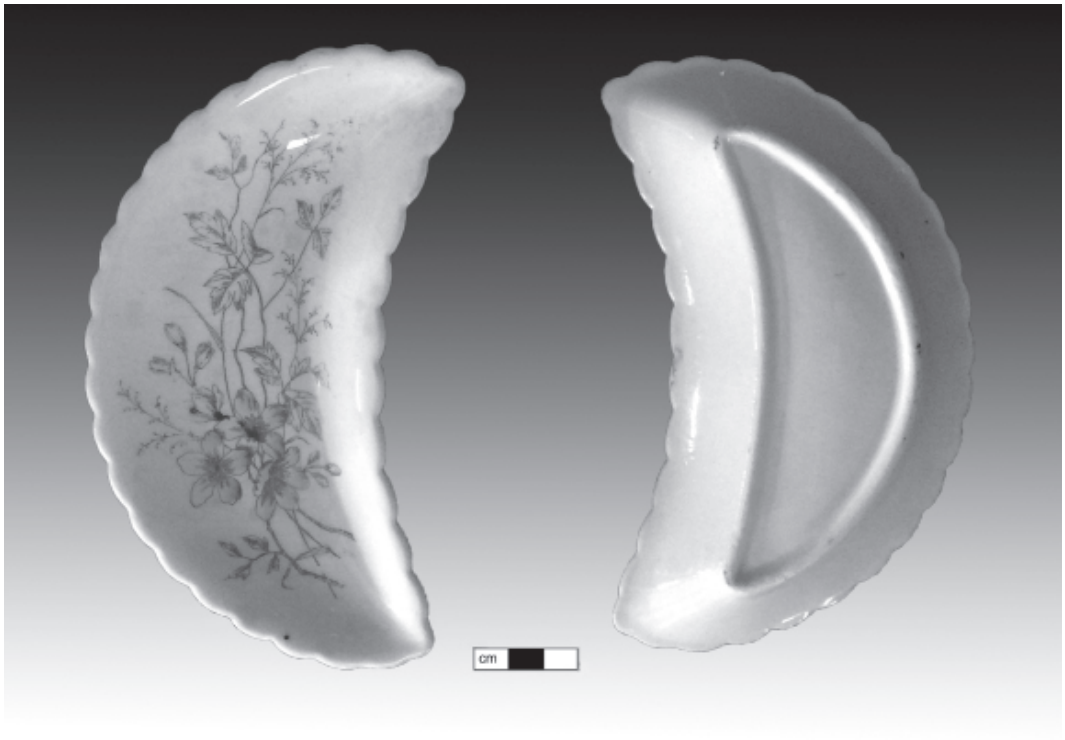

Figure 4. Crescent-shaped bone dish decorated with an overglaze printed and overglaze enameled floral motif, from the author's collection. These two earthenware vessels do not have makers' marks. (Photo by Patricia Samford, 2020.)

plates kept cold salads away from hot fare as well as prevented salad dressing from spreading to other foods. Prior to the late 19th century, only the wealthy included dressed green salads as a part of their regular fare (Williams 1996: 113). Bone dishes, described in the 1895 Montgomery Ward catalog as a "convenient individual side dish for table use, in which to deposit game or fish bones, parings of fruits, etc." (Montgomery Ward & Co. 1969: 533), were more common in the United States than the slightly larger salad plates (W. L. Schollander and W. Schollander 2002: 105). Fish was usually served as a second course in Victorian dining, between the soup and entrée courses (W. L. Schollander and W. Schollander 2002). Small, sharp fish bones are a choking hazard, and keeping them off the dinner plate, where they could be easily overlooked and mistakenly swallowed, was a safety precaution.

A plethora of household-management books and domestic periodicals published during the Victorian period provided homemakers with guidance on running a proper home. Examination of a number of these sources failed to find guidance about bone dishes, relish dishes, and salad plates, i.e., their use and their placement in a table setting. *The Successful Housekeeper* (1884) did discuss the fish course at dinner parties, but no mention was made of bone dishes, despite mentioning fish trowels, used for dividing and serving fish at the table (Ellsworth and Janvin 1884). Martha Jane Loftie, in her publication *The Dining-Room* (1878), does not mention these vessel forms, although she does have a full-page illustration of some forms of tablewares. *The Home Manual* (1889), which focused in particular on life as a congressman's wife in Washington, D.C., had no mention of these vessels or polite behavior for their use (Logan 1889).

In the Victorian era, bone dishes could be purchased individually or in sets; the 1895

Montgomery Ward catalog advertised plain bone dishes at $1.30/dozen or 12¢ each (FIG. 5) (Montgomery Ward & Co. 1969: 532). In the same catalog, fancier dishes with floral decoration and gilt edging went for $2.70/dozen or 25¢ each. Department stores like Woodward & Lothrop in Washington, D.C., and the Crescent in Baltimore sold bone dishes individually (*Sun* 1893; *Washington Post* 1899). Most bone dishes, however, probably made their way into consumer's homes as part of larger sets of tableware. China-and-glass catalogs dating from the 1880s through the first decade of the 20th century indicate that some china patterns included bone dishes as open stock for separate purchase in sets of a dozen, but they do not appear to have been included as part of 100- or 127-piece sets of matching china (Higgins & Seiter [1903]: 240, 1907).

Examination of price lists and merchant's catalogs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals that bone dishes were available in a variety of ceramic types, including semi-porcelain, English and European porcelain, refined white earthenware, bone china, and white granite (George L. Miller 2020, pers. comm.). They were decorated with molded designs, often combined with underglaze printing or decals, most often in floral motifs.

There was not universal agreement in polite society about the use of bone dishes. An 1891 article in the *New York Times* cautioned readers:

> As you value your reputation do not put butter plates or bone plates on your table. ... Surely one's plate is large enough to hold a wing or leg bone of a large fowl, or the few little ones that are found in the spring chicken or bird. If the debris is excessive it is best to send away your plate and ask for a fresh and empty one. A bone plate is a precedence for the potato-peeling plate, a corn-cob plate, and there will be no limit to the crockery your guests will have to the right and left of them. (*New York Times* 1891: 6)

The curved dishes (be they bone dishes, salad plates, or relish dishes) recovered from the Aged Men and Women's Home almost certainly came to the facility as a donation. These dishes do not match the assemblage's collection of undecorated, utilitarian plates and bowls made by the Edwin Bennett Pottery Company of Baltimore. Church records, newspaper notifications of food drives, and appeals by the home for state and local funding reveal that the Aged Men and Women's Home often suffered from insufficient income (*Afro-American* 1897; DuBois 1909; Methodist Episcopal Church, Washington Conference 1904). The home regularly held food drives and special events designed to acquire needed items, such as candles and linens, and the purchase of specialized vessels like bone dishes or salad plates would have been beyond the financial means of this institution. It is likely that a Baltimore homemaker simply found that she had no use for these vessels, which may have been part of larger set or an unwanted gift.

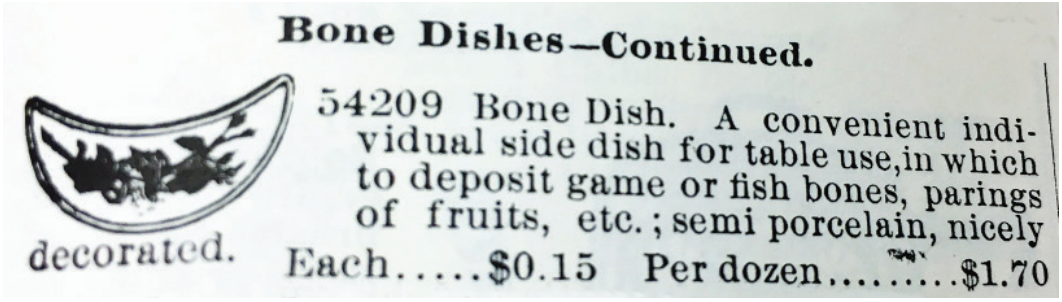

Figure 5. Illustration of a bone dish from the 1895 Montgomery Ward catalog (Montgomery Ward & Co. 1969: 533.)

Within the context of the Aged Men and Women's Home, these plates could have served both as bone dishes and as salad plates. Census records for the years 1880 and 1900 reveal that a number of the home's residents were blind, and lenses from seven pairs of eyeglasses found in the privy fill indicate failing eyesight among other residents. Over half the faunal remains recovered from the privy feature were bones from local fish, suggesting that fish made up a significant portion of the residents' diets. With Baltimore's location on the Patapsco River and its proximity to the Chesapeake Bay and its abundant seafood resources, fish would have been plentiful and inexpensive. The assemblage also contained numerous bones from muskrat, chicken, and other poultry, species for which the small size of some of the bones might make one want to segregate them from one's main plate of food. While it is possible that kitchen staff at the home were careful to avoid serving visually impaired individuals portions of fish or poultry with bones, it is also likely that the care and feeding of upwards of 20 residents with a small staff would have precluded such special treatment. Providing bone plates to residents with vision impairment would have been important to help prevent choking hazards. The residents could deposit their discarded bones on the bone plate and not risk getting them mixed up with other foods on their plates.

As a vessel type, bone dishes endured for at least 100 years, but were most common at the end of the 19th century. The earliest document listing them appears to be an 1870 W. T. Adams price list (Adams 1870: 6), and, a hundred years later, an advertisement in the *New York Times* offered crescent-shaped bone plates as part of its "Gourmet Parisienne" oven-to-table ware set (*New York Times* 1970). Bone dishes are not a common vessel form today and, indeed, appear to have largely fallen out of favor in the early 20th century, not appearing in catalogs and price lists after the end of World War I. Bone plates are listed in the 1907 Higgins and Seiter catalog, but have disappeared by the time their ca. 1913–1914 catalog was printed, with none of the 26 dinnerware patterns showing bone dishes or individual salad plates in the vessel-form lists (Higgins & Seiter 1907, [1913]).

There is ample documentary evidence that bone dishes were used for other purposes; the 1909 Butler Brothers catalog included the following description: "Imported China Bone Dishes. Called bone dishes, but appropriate and very much used for other purposes" (Butler Brothers 1909: 197). In 1945, a multipart discussion in the *Baltimore Sun* entitled: "The Bone Plate Chronicles" recounted how one woman repurposed her bone dishes: "When our family added extra leaves, but the table did not, I began using the bone plates for salad dishes. A tomato or tuna-fish salad in its bed of delicate green lettuce lying on the thin white 'new moons' makes an attractive table" (McDonald 1945). Today, bone dishes are a common find in antique shops, their survival an indication that many homemakers did not find much use for them. Whatever use they served at the table, these oddly shaped vessels do stand out in archaeological assemblages and should be easy for archaeologists to identify.

Acknowledgments

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