

Agency in Archaeology

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15 Craft to wage labor

Agency and resistance in American historical archaeology

Paul A. Shackel

Introduction

Examining the meaning and uses of material culture and recognizing the role of agency is a relatively recent phenomenon in American historical archaeology. This approach has been developed since the 1980s (see, for instance, Leone 1984) and is influenced by several key works including those by Ian Hodder (1982a, 1982b, 1987) and Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1987). While recognizing it as a logical alternative to positivism, many have resisted this change and American historical archaeologists continue to struggle and debate over how to interpret the archeological record. Much of the interpretation in American historical archeology does not go beyond particularistic endeavors and trickle-down theory, and those studying the industrial era often ignore the way people consciously manipulated material expressions to show their dissatisfaction with their new wage labor situation.

Recognizing individuals, households, or other small units of a cultural system as active agents that contribute to the archaeological record is one way to go beyond the particularism and positivism that dominate historical archeology. Under the premise of agency, actors know the way society operates, and individuals act within a pre-existing structure. They make sense of cultural practices that become routine in their daily activities within this structure (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979). Actors think and act in a certain way, they interact with each other, and they may reproduce the existing structure. During this interaction, agents may also express power relations through material consumption and the production of goods. The choices they make are made with reference to others, and their actions, pursued within the parameters of social structures, may lead to tension and conflict. These differences require some sort of resolution, which may mean conformity, or change, depending upon one's position in the social order (see, for instance, Dobres 1999). Observing subtle variations in the archeological record and placing them within a historic and social context is one way to observe and interpret the choices that agents made.

Power, muted groups, and double consciousness

Power facilitates agency and it is essential to my work in the industrial town of Harpers Ferry (Figure 15.1). It is important for analyzing and understanding the archaeology of class relations (see also Foucault 1979; Miller and Tilley 1984; Paynter 1989; Tilley 1982). In the following analysis of industrial-era domestic sites, I examine how workers and their households responded to the new technology of the industrial revolution and resisted the imposed industrial ideology. Domestic consumption became an arena in which agents constructed social identities and in which they could either accept or reject the new industrial ethos.

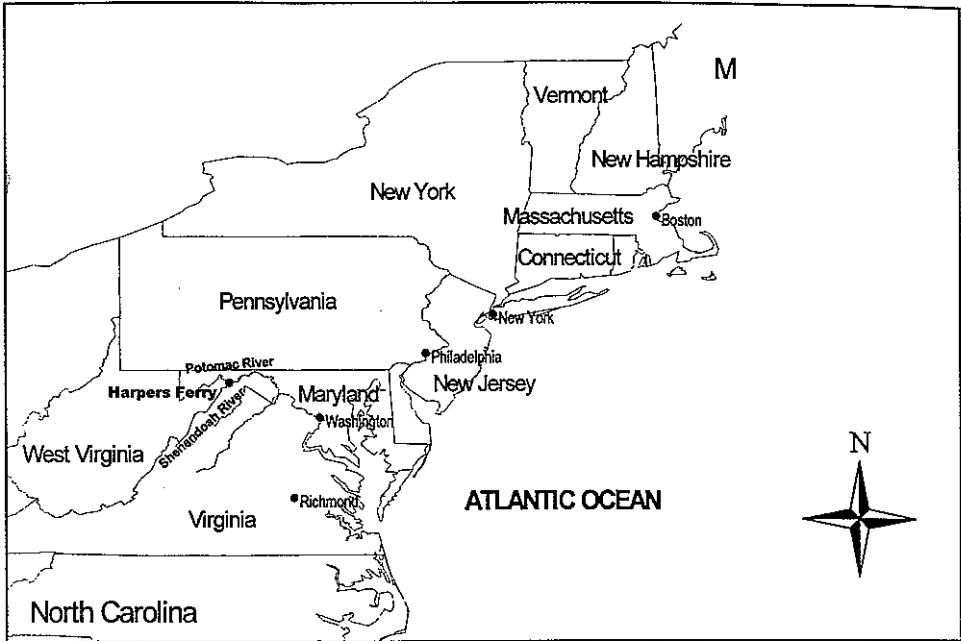


Figure 15.1 Location of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (drawn by Prashant Kaw)

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* is important for this analysis. The everyday mundane acts of production at work and consumption at home codified social categories upon which expressions of people's self interests can be found. Searching for subtleties in the archaeological record allows us to see how people responded to and resisted new or changing power structures, in this case, the imposition of industrial labor. While most groups in industrial society have limited choices (for example, they all buy ceramics to set their tables), it is the choices that they make (the designs, such as feather edged, plain or transfer printed) that shows social agency in action. The kinds of objects chosen, and the way they are used in specific contexts, indicate power relations and the different and changing meanings associated with this material culture.

In the nineteenth-century arms manufacturing town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), workers operated in a rigid class structure based on power differences. Conflict between labor and capital often arose as workers (craftsmen, pieceworkers, and wage laborers) resisted managers. When the United States government imposed a wage labor system upon the armory craftsmen and pieceworkers, they reacted to this changing power structure in various ways. Individuals searched for, resisted, and negotiated power within the manufacturing system and on the domestic front.

In one case, the resistance was extremely obvious when, in 1830, an armory worker murdered a superintendent who tried to enforce time discipline in the factory. After this incident the armorers were allowed to maintain their craft ethos for over a decade. In other cases, the resistance was much more subtle and these reactions can be seen in the archaeological record. Some workers and their households had the power to resist change by manipulating and transforming the cultural rules of the new industrial order. Their everyday material culture played an active role by shaping their social relations with fellow agents within the workforce and in the community (Shackel 1996).

As I show in the case study to follow, material culture became the medium and the outcome of specific power relations (see also Johnson 1989: 189–93; Kirk 1991: 108–11). While some managers and unskilled workers accepted the new industrial order and the wage labor system as they became major players in its implementation, craftsmen and piece-workers resisted both at work and at home. Although there seem to be only slight differences between the domestic archaeological assemblages of workers' families who resisted the new order, and those of managers who accepted it, a closer, contextual examination of the local history and of specific social interactions shows that they reflect disparate attitudes by families toward a new wage labor system.

When searching for variability in the archaeological record, archaeologists must learn to interpret these artifact assemblages that do not "fit" expectations as something meaningful rather than just "noise" (Dobres 1995). The recognition of competition between groups and individuals amplifies the need to consider the composition, strategies, and constraints of subgroups. Some complexities of material culture expression and the role of agency are noticeable when I turn to questions related to class. Placing the material record in the framework of historical context helps show that the variability in the archaeological record is a product of agency, and peoples' reactions to power relations.

Barbara Little (1994, 1997) uses the concept of muted groups as a way to look at expressions of non-dominant groups in the archaeological record that may otherwise be seen as "noise" (see, for instance, Ardener 1975a, 1975b). For instance, dominant groups create and control the meanings and uses of material culture. If other groups wish to be understood by the dominant group, they must express themselves through the goods controlled by the dominant group. "Muted groups remain so because their models of reality and world view cannot be expressed adequately through the modes and ideologies accepted by dominant groups" (Little 1997: 227). The dominant group has power over social settings and structural power over social labor (Wolf 1990). Those that are muted have powers limited to interpersonal situations and to actions of resistance.

Also important in understanding the struggle for controlling the meaning and uses of material goods among members of a subordinate group is W. E. B. Du Bois' (1994: 5) concept of double-consciousness. Paul Mullins (1996) finds this notion useful to understand the idea of muted groups from the viewpoint of the subculture. Writing in the Jim Crow era, a time when laws increasingly segregated African-Americans from white America, Du Bois noted that African-Americans saw themselves through the eyes of Others, or the dominant white society. "One even feels his two-ness – an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1994: 5). The history of the African-American, according to Du Bois, is this conflict of operating in two worlds. The concept of double consciousness allows for a complex understanding of material culture within the context of a muted group (see also Mullins 1996). It creates a framework to understand how a subordinate group may use and read material culture.

Searching for and understanding variability in the archaeological record from the beginning of the industrial revolution creates a challenge to understanding subordinate group behavior. While alternative views can be expressed in a mass-produced culture, the types of goods found often impose an appearance of consistency and sameness. They often hide the inequality and alternate expressions of subaltern groups. It becomes the challenge of historical archaeologists examining a group in a mass consumer society to decipher the complexities of alternative expressions and the role of agency (see Little 1997).

An archaeology of the industrial era

As more historical archaeologists turn their attention to industrial era sites, the interpretation of workers' domestic households will be recognized as contributing to understanding the development of a working-class society (see, for instance, Hardesty 1988; Shackel 1996). Recognizing the relationship between domestic and industrial sites is important for understanding the development of capitalism and the impact of industry on our daily lives. Examining the archaeology of the early industrial era is an exciting task since it provides insights into the roots of our mass consumer and mass producer society. Some scholars see the eighteenth century, and even earlier, as an era in which to trace the development of capitalism (Johnson 1996; Leone 1988, 1995; Shackel 1993a). I feel that examining the early industrial era in nineteenth-century America provides a more in-depth picture and can show how capitalism was implemented, operated, and/or resisted by different interest groups and individuals (see Shackel 1996). Recognizing the role of agency becomes a valuable tool for understanding any variability in the archaeological record.

Robert Paynter's (1989) synthesis on the archaeology of inequality is important when looking at the development of ideologies related to modernizing industrial conditions and the formation of a working-class society (also see McGuire and Paynter 1991). A new factory discipline was imposed by owners and managers and it was sometimes resisted by workers. Tensions that developed "between cores and peripheries, civil and kin groups, rulers and ruled, merchants and lords, men and women, and producers and extractors evoke an unwieldy tangle of processes" (Paynter 1989: 558).

The introduction of industrial capitalism meant a new work discipline, abandonment of craft work relations, and adherence to a new factory discipline. As Paynter (1989: 386) has shown, resistance by workers in a capitalist world could take on several forms, including malingering, sabotage, and even murder (see also, for instance, Juravich 1985; Scott 1985, Shackel 1996; Smith 1977). Sometimes these acts of resistance are visible in the archaeological record, although the extent of their defiance varies from place to place. Workers' acceptance of the new factory discipline varied between different workers and factories. Michael Nassaney's and Marjorie Abel's (1993: 251) analysis of the material remains at the John Russell Cutlery Company in the Connecticut River Valley describes discontent over the new factory system. Following James Scott's (1990) analysis, they recognize that discontented workers can challenge the existing power structure through a "hidden transcript." Nassaney and Abel (1993: 263–74) found a large quantity of artifacts related to interchangeable manufacturing along the riverbank near the former cutting room and trip hammer shop. These discarded materials consisted of inferior or imperfect manufactured parts. While these workers labored in a modern factory, Nassaney and Abel suggest that the discarded materials might be a form of defiance against the implementation of the new system.

The Harpers Ferry Brewery serves as another example of resistance in the work place. The brewery workers in late nineteenth- and very early twentieth-century Harpers Ferry subscribed to the national average of fourteen to eighteen hour workdays, six days per week and six to eight hours on Sunday (Schulter 1910: 92–3). Between 1890 and 1910, unions gradually decreased the work day to ten hours. Brewery workers, including those at Harpers Ferry, were constantly exposed to radical temperature changes and breathed contaminated air (Hull-Walski and Walski 1993: 17.34–5, 1994). In the first decade of the twentieth century, brewery-related accidents were almost 30 percent higher than those of other trades. This rate increased over the decade, probably due to the "higher speeding of machinery." The excessive use of alcohol by workers under the "free beer system" aided this high casualty rate (Schulter 1910: 259–63).

Some form of the free beer system existed in the Harpers Ferry Brewery, although it was probably a form of covert action. Workers drank the owner's profits while they operated machinery. For instance, more than a hundred beer bottles were found between walls of the bottling works and more than a thousand were found down the building's elevator shafts during the renovation of the beer bottling works in 1995/96. All of the bottles date to between 1893 and 1909, when beer bottling occurred in the building (Shackel 1993b).

These data, empirical and contextual, suggest that workers probably drank the owners' profits and concealed their subversive behavior by disposing of the bottles out of the view of supervisors. The conflagrations in the brewery in 1897 and 1909 may have been a coincidence, or may also be related to some general discontent among the workers (Shackel 1993b).

Changing republican ideologies during the industrial era

Understanding the historical context and the changing republican ideologies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is one way of understanding the changing material culture found among workers' households during the industrial era. The classical republicanism of mid-eighteenth-century America condemned the spread of consumerism (Gilje 1996: 172). In the later eighteenth century, this criticism became popular among many colonial Americans as they resisted British imperial regulations and the many forms of consumerism that developed in England. However, the conditions of the American Revolution, based on Renaissance ideals, fostered the development of liberal republicanism ideals and the growth of capitalism among many Americans (ibid.: 173). Liberal republicanism encouraged the individual to act as an independent citizen. The change in ideologies, from resisting to embracing consumerism, did not proceed without contest, and the debate between the ideals of classical and liberal republicanism continued into the early nineteenth century among Americans. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin proposed a new republican technology sensitive to human perfection and classical republican ideals; others like Alexander Hamilton and Tench Coxe supported liberal republican ideals and argued that industrialization would strengthen America (Shackel 1998).

Early-nineteenth-century American craftsmen, including those at Harpers Ferry, subscribed to classical republicanism. They believed that government would act as an arbitrator if any inequities existed between labor and capital. Their beliefs encouraged craft consciousness and inhibited the growth and implementation of industrial discipline. In the 1830s and 1840s, manufacturers consciously deskilled artisans throughout America, including those at the Harpers Ferry Armory. The factory system contradicted classical republican ideology, since the wage laborer was at the mercy of the capitalist. Workers lost their ability to be truly independent citizens (Ross 1985: 13). The US federal government and managers transformed the Harpers Ferry Armory from a system based on equality between labor and capital (known as craft-based production) to a factory system that depended not on skilled and independent citizen-workers, but unskilled laborers and "machine tenders" (Shackel 1998).

Resistance to the new industrial order in the domestic sphere: on ceramics, gender, and agency

A comparison of tablewares found in workers' (pieceworkers and wage laborers) and in managers' households shows how they responded differently to the change from classical to

liberal republican ideology. While both increasingly participated in a consumer society, the different types of ceramics that they bought and used were subtly, but meaningfully, different. The variability I describe below provides empirical clues about how these differently situated households were active social agents in their response to industrialization. Since I examine reactions to the new industrial order in a domestic context, it is important to recognize the central role women played in reacting to the new social order.

In the early nineteenth century, women increasingly purchased and displayed domestic material culture. They were in charge of refinement within the home and they became responsible for promoting their home among friends and acquaintances (Wall 1994: 147–58). Promoting the home included ritualizing family meals. Creating specific times for meals changed middle-class home life (*ibid.*: 111). As Foucault (1979) argues, when the meal was held on a regular and timely basis, and when all family members participated, meal rituals taught and reaffirmed the values and body discipline of “punctuality, order, neatness, temperance, self-denial, kindness, generosity, and hospitality” (Sedgwick, quoted in Wall 1994: 112).

Ceramics became more elaborately designed and the types of dishes became more varied and played an important role in the new ritualization process. By the 1820s, the number of separate courses increased as did the ceramics on which to serve them. Serving more specialized foods became part of this elaboration and ritualization within the home (Wall 1994). De Cunzo (1995: 140–1) notes the importance of the various uses for different sets of dinner wares. An 1828 etiquette book, for instance, noted that proper households need to have three sets of dinner services: one for company, one for ordinary use, and the third for servants (Wall 1994: 147–58).

A review of the existing store ledgers from Harpers Ferry shows that women from working-class households became participants in the new consumer society by the 1830s, if not earlier. They increasingly purchased the finer earthenware tablewares for their households (see Lucas 1993: 8.33–8.35). They became active agents who expressed their anxieties about the new industrial technology within the world that they controlled: the domestic sphere. A fine-grained analysis of the specific sorts of domestic material culture under their control, tablewares, provides insights into not only their material choices and strategies, but the agential intentions motivating them. The tableware assemblages of the master armorers’ (managers) households, and the armory workers’ (pieceworkers and wage laborers) households provide an example of subtle differences in material culture of two types of households with varying views on industrialization.

For the purpose of comparison, I look at two master armorer refuse assemblages, one early (1821–30) and one later (1830–50), then compare these with a representative sample from pieceworkers’ (ca. 1821–41) and wage laborers’ (1841–52) households (Figure 15.2). Examining these assemblages within the local context of industrial development shows how they all participated in the new consumer ethic, but the variation in the assemblages shows agency at work.

The managerial class

One site examined belonged to the master armorer’s household. The master armorer was responsible for the daily operations of the gun factory. While the earliest master armorer, Armistead Beckham, subscribed to a craft ethos, by 1830 a new master armorer, Benjamin Moor, became committed to industrializing the enterprise, despite protests from the armory workers. Moor became dedicated to new time-saving machinery, the division of labor, and the wage labor system (Smith 1977).

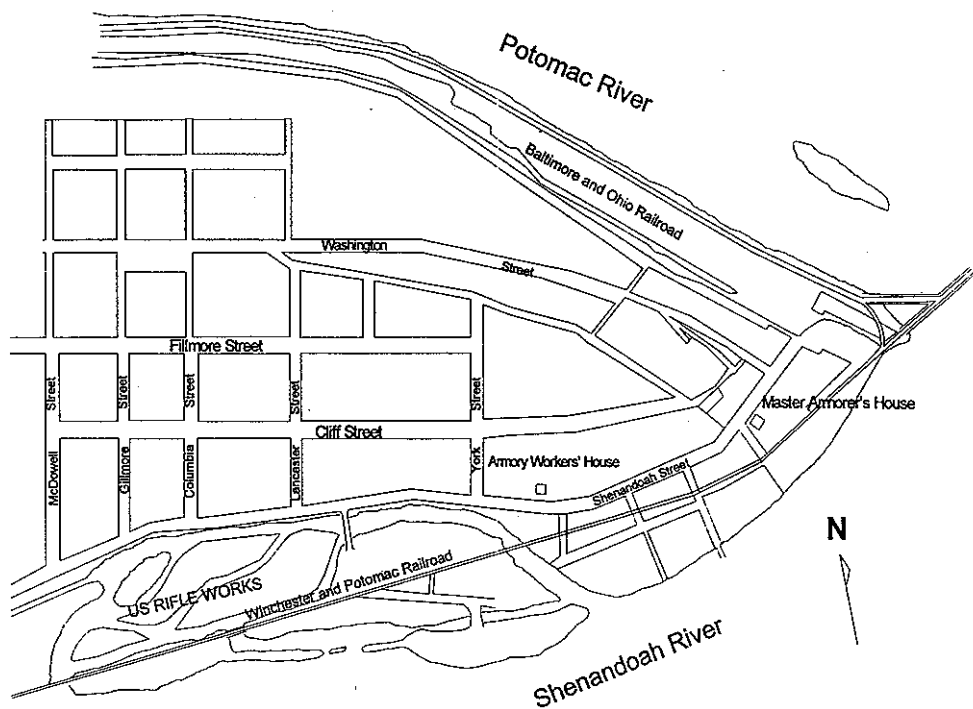


Figure 15.2 Location of the master armorer's house and the armory worker's house within Harpers Ferry (drawn by Prashant Kaw)

A random excavation strategy retrieved a representative sample of the master armorer's backyard area. Using the information gathered from this initial testing, additional excavation units were placed in areas that could retrieve the greatest amount of information related to the daily life of the master armorer's household. A larger concentration of excavation units was placed near the rear of the house and next to the kitchen, creating a large block excavation (Figure 15.3). This area contains continuously undisturbed deposits from the earliest armory occupation around 1821, through the twentieth century. The stratigraphy consists of distinct occupational layers interspersed with layers of flood silt. Since the town floods on average every thirteen years, and all of the floods in town are well recorded in armory correspondences, documenting the diachronic change in material culture and attributing the archaeological record to specific households is straightforward (Shackel 1996: 117–18, 1998: 11–13).

Armistead Beckham's household assemblage dates from 1821 through 1830. This is a period when the town, 60 miles from the nearest port towns of Alexandria and Georgetown (just outside Washington, D.C.), received consumer goods at a relatively slow rate. 86 percent of the Beckham household tablewares consist of creamwares and pearlwares (Table 15.1). The creamwares tend to be undecorated, while the pearlwares are relatively more expensive and contain some type of design or pattern such as shell edged, painted, and undecorated ceramics (85.7 percent) (Table 15.2). Both pearlware and creamware were fashionable for the time, although pearlwares dominated the market by the 1820s (Miller 1980; Shackel 1996: 118).

The later master armorer's tableware assemblage (1830–50) belonged to Benjamin Moor's household, and it consists almost exclusively of pearlwares and whitewares (98 percent). Creamwares were no longer fashionable and their use disappears from most

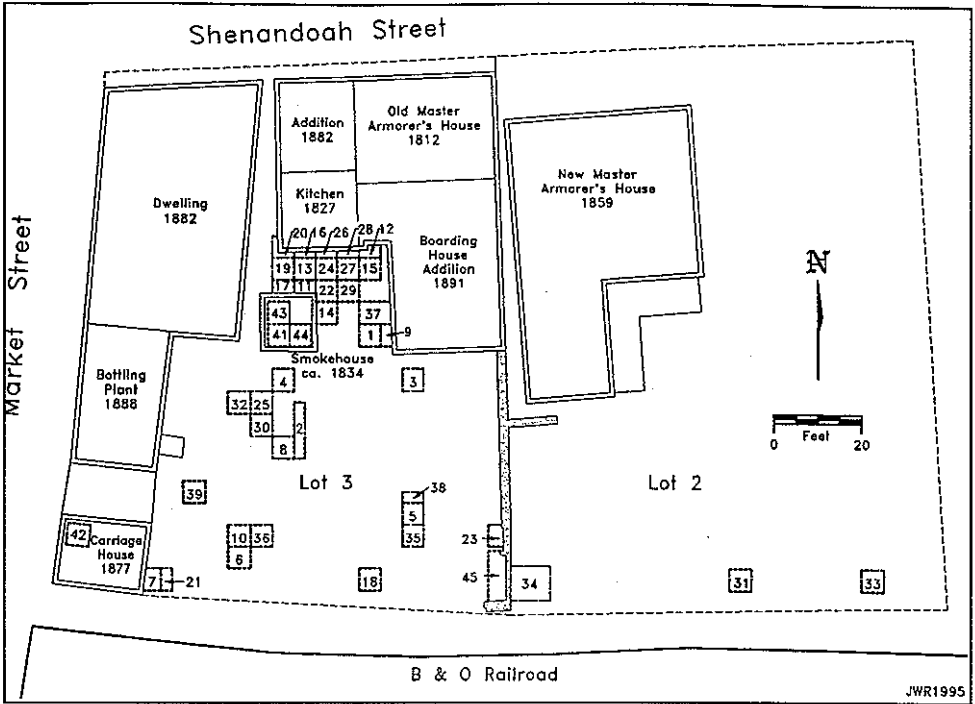


Figure 15.3 Excavation plan for the master armorer's house (drawn by John Ravenhorst)

American households by this era, including Master Armorer Moor's household. The most common design in the assemblage was transfer-printed patterns (41.9 percent), a very popular tableware design from the late 1820s through the 1850s (Shackel 1996: 119) (Table 15.2). These data show that between 1830 and 1850, Master Armorer Moor's household acquired the most fashionable consumer goods available on the market: transfer printed patterns as well as painted and edged designed tablewares.

Pieceworkers and laborers

Comparing the master armorer's assemblages with a pieceworker's and a wage laborer's assemblages shows some similarities and some slight differences in the patterning of

Table 15.1 Ceramic vessels by refined ware for two master armorer households, ca. 1821–30 and 1830–50 (from Lucas 1993: 8.15)

Ware type	ca. 1821–30		1830–50	
	no.	%	no.	%
Whiteware	—	—	—	—
Pearlware	14	—	36	35
Creamware	10	50	66	63
Porcelain	3	36	—	—
Unid. refined	—	—	—	—
Earthenware	1	3	2	2
Total	28	100	104	100

Table 15.2 Refined ware vessels by decoration from two master armorer households, ca. 1821–30 and 1830–50 (from Lucas 1993: 8.16; Shackel 1997: 120, 135, 1998)

Decoration	(ca. 1821–30)		(1830–50)	
	no.	%	no.	%
Dipped	2	7.1	5	4.8
Shell edged	6	21.4	34	32.4
Transfer print	1	3.6	44	41.9
Painted	7	25.0	14	13.3
Enameled	3	10.7	2	1.9
Undecorated	9	32.1	4	3.8
Other	0	0	2	1.9
Total	28	100	105	100

material culture (Figure 15.4). Excavation of an armory worker's domestic site provides some clues about how pieceworkers' and wage laborers' families reacted to the new industrial order, the imposition of wage labor, and the deterioration of classical republican ideology. Excavations yielded a plethora of information from the household occupations. Flood deposits were not as clearly marked in the stratigraphy as in the master armorer's backyard, but clear distinctive occupational zones are still visible. We can discern the archaeological materials before and after 1841. An 1841 construction phase of a house addition left shale spalls throughout the entire site. There is thus tight chronological control of the archaeological record that allows us to compare two different eras in the armory, dating before and after 1841. The year 1841 is significant at the Harpers Ferry Armory, since that is when the military took control of the armory and forced all workers to follow a wage labor system. Therefore, the pre-1841 context, when armorers living in the excavated structure tended to be pieceworkers and had some control over their labor, can be compared to the post-1841 context, when they became wage laborers (Shackel 1996: 132–3, 1998: 13–14).

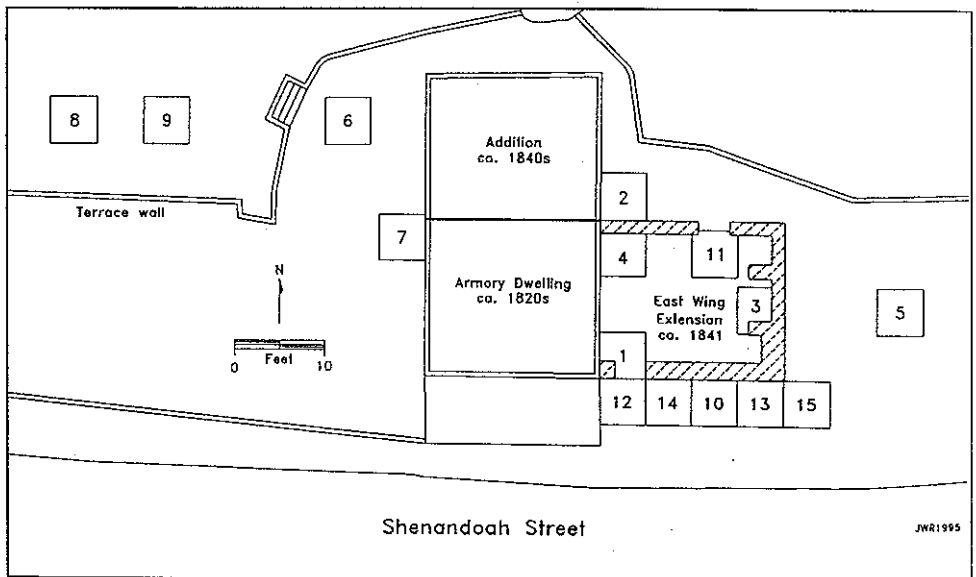


Figure 15.4 Excavation plan for the armory worker's house (drawn by John Ravenhorst)

The pieceworker (ca. 1821–41) and wage worker (1841–52) households from the two eras participated in consumerism in very different ways (Table 15.3, Table 15.4). The pre-1841 pieceworker's assemblage has a small percentage of creamwares (7 percent) and the largest group of wares consists of transfer printed pearlwares (38.8 percent). There is also a large representation of shell-edged (14 percent) and painted tablewares (23.1 percent). In contrast, there is an unexpected pattern in the post-1841 wage laborer household assemblage. First, the proportion of creamwares, which are no longer fashionable by the 1830s, doubles (14 percent). Second, though transfer printed wares were popular from the late 1820s through the 1850s, their proportion decreases substantially (from 38.8 percent to 27.5 percent). Third, though the popularity of shell edged wares decreases, their representation in the later assemblage increases from 14.0 percent to 21.1 percent (Lucas 1994).

Between 1820 and the late 1850s, armory workers' wages declined some 20 percent (Barbour 1851; Lucas and Shackel 1994; Stubbelfield 1821; Symington 1846). This reduction coincided with a decrease in prices of consumer goods attributed to the growing transportation infrastructure and the mass manufacture of products. For example, in a study of English pottery prices, George Miller (1980) shows that the cost of the production of ceramics decreased by 25 to 50 percent during this era, and he assumes that the cost savings were passed along to the consumer. I think it is all too easy to settle for an economic explanation when interpreting the changing material culture patterns at the wage laborer's

Table 15.3 Ceramic vessels by ware for the pieceworker's household (1821–41) and the wage-laborer's household (1841–52) (from Lucas 1994: 5.11)

Ware	Pieceworker's household (ca. 1821–41)		Wage-laborer's household (1841–52)	
	no.	%	no.	%
Pearlware	92	76	83	76
Creamware	9	7	15	14
Whiteware	1	1	2	2
Porcelain	19	16	9	8
Total	21	100	109	100

Table 15.4 Refined ceramic vessels by decoration for the pieceworker's household (1821–41) and the wage laborer's household (1841–52) (from Lucas 1993: 8.16; Shackel 1997: 120, 135; 1998)

Decoration	Pieceworker's household (ca. 1821–41)		Wage-laborer's household (1841–52)	
	no.	%	no.	%
Shell edged	17	14.0	23	21.1
Transfer print	47	38.8	30	27.5
Painted	28	23.1	29	26.6
Enameled	14	11.6	5	4.6
Dipped	7	5.8	5	4.6
Sponged	0	0.0	1	0.9
Moulded	1	0.8	2	1.8
Undecorated	7	5.8	14	12.8
Total	121	100	109	100

house. Why did they purchase ceramics that were cheaper and no longer in fashion? It is easy to think that since their wages had decreased, wage laborers had to acquire cheaper material goods. This type of economic explanation buys into the mechanistic ecosystemic framework and ignores the agency of each household. We need to look at other explanations when describing anomalies in the archaeological record, including the role of the active agent.

Explaining variability

In Harpers Ferry both men and women had their arenas of protest. Men rebelled in the work place, women protested on the domestic front. The differences of material culture patterning may be attributed to the very different outlooks on labor and the industrialization process at the armory. For instance, craftsmen resisted the implementation of time discipline that managers imposed upon them. In one case, a superintendent tried to enforce industrial discipline and was assassinated by a worker whom he had fired for not obeying the manufacturing regulations. In another case, in 1842, pieceworkers protested that they had to work ten-hour days like wage laborers. The armorers left their jobs, rented a canal boat, and marched to President Tyler's office in Washington, D.C. The armorers, still holding on to their belief in classical republicanism, hoped that the government would act as an arbitrator between capital and labor. Much to their chagrin, Tyler suggested they go back to Harpers Ferry and "hammer out their own salvation" (Barry 1988: 32). Throughout the next decade, workers continually protested by slowing production and destroying products and machinery (Shackel 1996: 169-70; Smith 1977; see also Scott 1985, 1990).

Women's roles changed in the industrial era as they were charged with purchasing consumer goods for their household. In the case of Harpers Ferry, some armory households, like the managers and the early pieceworkers, increasingly participated in the consumer culture that became synonymous with industrialization. Others households, like the wage laborers, became reluctant to adopt the newly fashionable mass-produced goods. In the above case; the tablewares found in the domestic sphere of an armory wage laborer's household did not change as expected when compared with a manager's household assemblage. It is likely that the wage laborer workers' wives were active agents who showed discontent with the new industrial era. While they were probably not protesting the wage labor system, they did protest their role in changing domestic production and their decreasing relations with markets. In this new relationship they were relegated less control and power overall. Therefore, they registered their protest through the use of a material culture whose meaning and use they could control, one that had been fashionable generations earlier, when they had some control over their everyday lives beyond the domestic sphere. They used these unfashionable goods even though the new consumer material culture was easily accessible and affordable through town merchants. These women did not purchase the same goods as those conforming to liberal republicanism and the ideology of mass production and mass consumption. They actively made choices about what types of goods they should purchase. In a mass-production industrial culture, the choices may be very subtle because they are limited. Every armory household placed ceramics on the table, but it was the types of ceramics acquired that allowed women from the wage laborers' households to protest their new roles in industrial society. The armory households examined used tableware to show their obligation, or conversely their lack of commitment, to the new consumer culture of the industrial era.

The concept of agency in historical archaeology

Under the premise of the New Archaeology, which pays considerable attention to function and systems, data that do not fit into predetermined patterns are seen as anomalies. In this view, humans play a limited role in determining culture change. The system is the focus, not the "social actor" (see Dobres and Robb, this volume; see also Brumfiel 1992: 551–2). In particular, elites are the only active components of ecosystem models. They have the power to impose their decisions upon subordinate groups who are usually seen as invisible and incoherent. Managerial theories do not allow subordinate classes the power to influence the system (Brumfiel 1992: 555–6).

Brumfiel (1992: 559) also notes that we should not look at cultural systems as homeostatic, but rather as something that is contingent and negotiated, a product of human action. Human actors are the agents of culture change, and agency theory allows us to explain material culture differences in terms of tensions and social conflict within a society. It allows us to see the role of agents in creating their material world and expressing their discontent or resistance to the dominant culture.

Barbara Little (1988, 1997) has also suggested that traditional economic and systemic "rational man" models of culture change are overly simplified because they ignore those segments of a society that are outside the "mainstream" of the male, white, urban middle or upper class. The questions asked of the archaeological record are becoming much more complex, especially in historical archaeology where documentary material adds rich context. By looking at muted groups and examining the concept of double consciousness, historical archaeology is well-equipped to address the relationships between culture change and agency.

In the case of the armory households and their archaeological assemblages, they all had tablewares, but the type of tablewares they chose and what these choices meant can be seen as an expression of resistance to the new industrial culture and social position. Consumers, and in this case women, were making choices about what types of goods they should purchase (see also McCracken 1988; Miller 1987, 1995). In an industrial culture, the different choices one makes may be very subtle because the consumer is limited to culturally acceptable, manufactured forms. In this case study of domestic choices at the Harpers Ferry Armory, the choices that the households made conformed to mass manufactured products, but there are some noticeable subtleties regarding the choices they made in relationship to changing political ideologies.

The use of out-of-date materials that were fashionable generations earlier when classical republicanism dominated the work place shows the consumers' discontent with the new modern culture. It was not merely an economic decision. The armory wage laborers' households may have longed for the good old days, when craftsmen still had some control over their means of production and their daily lives and women may have also shown their discontent of their decreasing power in the market system (Lucas and Shackel 1994; Shackel 1996).

What happens when new technologies confront traditional values and norms? Historian Sean Wilentz (1984) observes that resistance can take on very conservative forms. For instance, in New York City's pre-Civil War era, craft workers struggled to maintain their craft traditions by referring to republican rhetoric. Historian David Montgomery (1979) suggests that other workers struggled to preserve their identity by fighting in political arenas. The family is "seen as a bulwark of resistance and change" (Kessler-Harris 1990: 175). As suggested in the forgoing analysis at Harpers Ferry, some craftsmen became

contented laborers and their families willingly subscribed to the new consumer culture. Other workers' families found subversive ways to express discontent, albeit through the medium of mainstream products, both at work and at home. At times, the entire family unit expressed their anxieties over the changing power structure introduced with the implementation of industrial capitalism. The family became the "bulwark of resistance and change."

This examination of how different households reacted to the imposition of industrial capitalism does not pretend to decode the complexities of nineteenth-century domestic consumption. It should raise some questions about how a muted group, such as wage laborers' households, could – and can – reject specific tenets of the dominant ideology. They can actively express their identities and attitudes through the things they choose to buy and use.

Although the expressions of material culture were muted through the medium of mass manufactured household items, subtle variations expressed people's concerns about the new industrial era. In spite of the sameness of mass manufactured household items imposing a conformity of sorts on all consumers, these subtle variations (in context, presence/absence, and the like) provide a means of identifying their "ruled" practices of dissatisfaction and resistance. One of the challenges of archaeology is to search for the range of such expressions.

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