

Curator's Choice

Whale Oil Lamp

By: Patricia Samford,
MAC Lab Director

This diminutive oil lamp (Figure 1), standing at six inches tall, was recovered in fragments from a privy in Baltimore that was filled with household garbage in the second quarter of the 19th century. Pains-takingly mended, this whale oil lamp is one of a matching pair from the Shot Tower Metro site (18BC66). Although originally colorless like the lamp shown in Figure 2, the dark patina on the lamp is a result of the glass degrading in the organic fill of the privy.

The lamp had a ball-shaped oil reservoir, set atop a press molded and stepped base. Like the similarly-dated example shown in Figure 2, the Baltimore lamp would have been fitted with a drop-in tube burner, whose wick extended into the whale oil contained in the reservoir.

Although more expensive than oils rendered from sheep or beef tallow, whale oil was a popular fuel for lamps among the wealthy because it burned brightly, without odor. Because whale oil is actually wax that thickened when cool, the heated pewter tube burners extending down into the oil font would warm and liquefy the whale oil.

Whale oil lamps remained popular until around the time of the Civil War, when they began to be replaced by lamps using the more affordable kerosene.

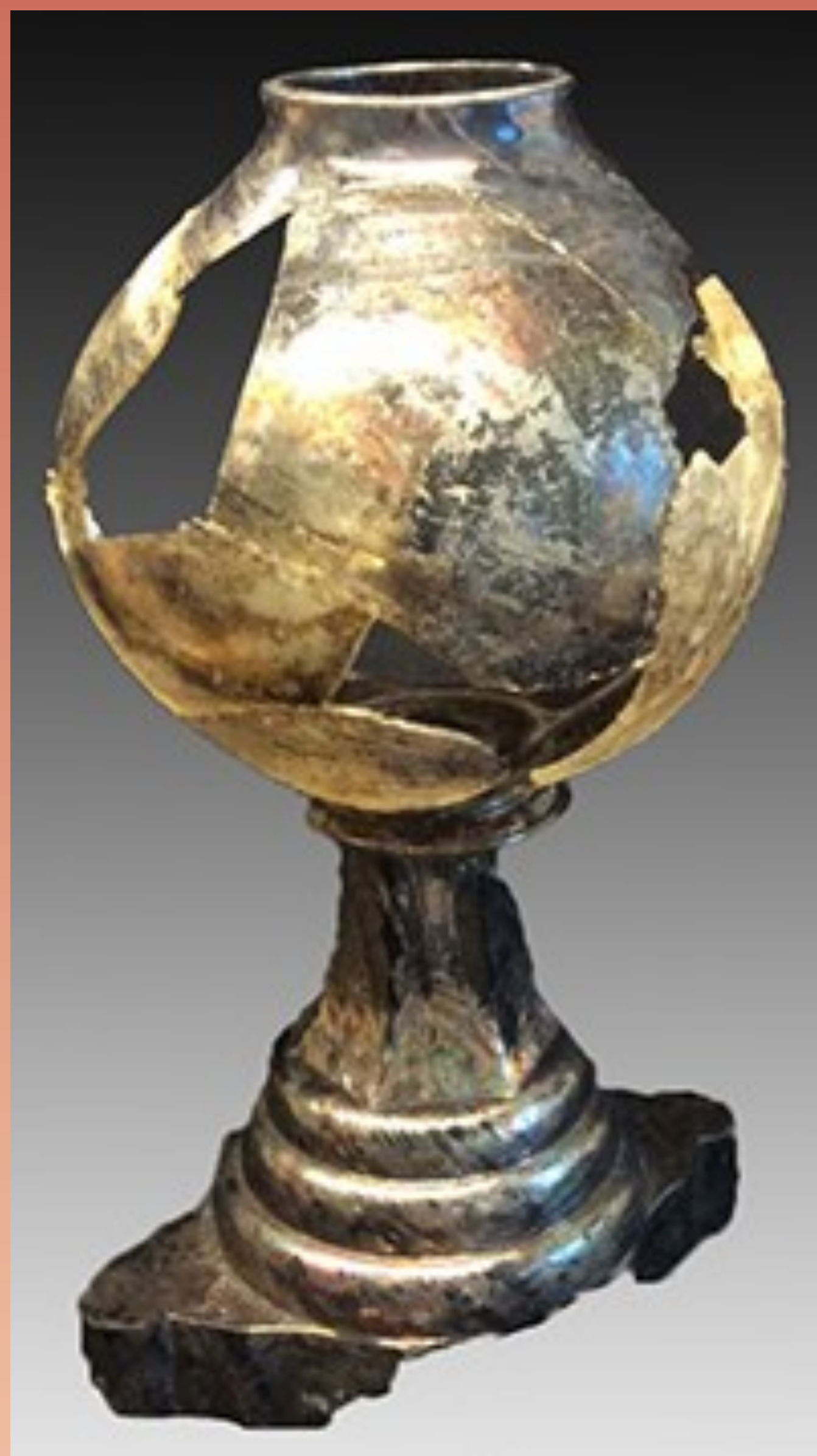


Figure 1. Whale oil lamp from 18BC66.



Figure 2. Lamp from private collection showing wick apparatus.



10515 Mackall Road
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685

Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

