

Curator's Choice

December 2025

A Bird on the Bottle is the Start of a Good Mystery

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Archaeologists love a good mystery. In August 2025, a generous donor gifted an interesting piece of pottery to the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab. It had been discovered in a ravine near the park about 25 years ago—on a property that was purchased in 1869 by James Boom, a formerly enslaved man. This early date made it one of the first Black-owned properties in the small rural community of Wallville.

The red-pasted earthenware vessel (which may be a bottle or cruet) would have been about 8" tall if complete. What makes this piece a mystery is that its manufacture origin is unknown. Its vessel form, glazing, and decoration don't conform to those of ceramics imported from England and Europe. Maryland, and particularly Baltimore, had a long tradition of utilitarian earthenware pottery production, so chances are good that this vessel was made locally. John Brown and members of his family were producing earthenware in Baltimore during the second half of the 18th century and into the early 19th century (Kille 2009:17; Zipp 2018).

Before being finished with a dark blue glaze or slip containing cobalt, the bisque fired vessel was dipped in a white clay slip that covered both the inside and outside of the bottle. It was then decorated by using a pointed tool to cut lines that went through the blue coating

down to the white slip. The potter incised the design of a bird (only the feet and tail are still intact), as well as the date 181- (the last number appears to have been a 6 or an 8). Bird decorations similar to this one were common on 19th-century Baltimore-made stoneware, mostly notably those made by Henry Remmey, Morgan and Amoss,

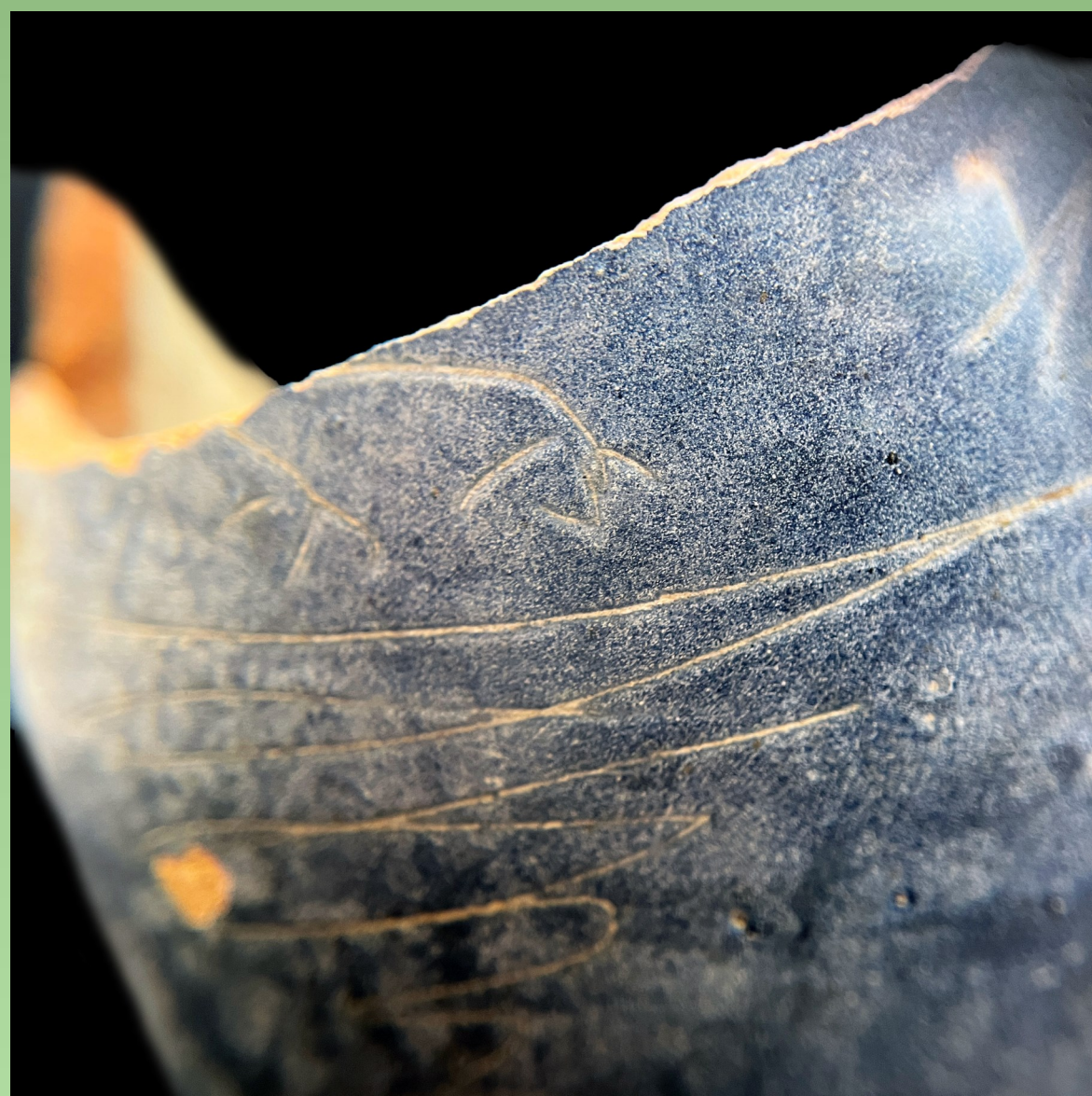


Figure 2: Detail of incised bird feet.



Figure 1: Side view of the bottle showing the incomplete date, which appears to have been 1818 or 1816.

and Morgan Maker (Kille 2005). Baltimore's earthenware industry declined beginning in the early 19th century, as more durable salt glazed stoneware began to be produced in quantity. If this vessel is a Maryland or Baltimore piece, then its glazing and decoration have roots in both earthenware and stoneware potting traditions in Maryland. Potter Henry Remmey arrived in Baltimore around the time of the War of 1812 and brought with him the decorative aesthetic of incising elaborate birds on pottery (Zipp 2018).

The MAC Lab recently conducted elemental analysis on the bottle's clay paste to determine more about the construction of the vessel and potentially where it was made. Testing was done using X-Ray Fluorescence (XRF), a non-destructive testing method that irradiates a sample with X-rays and measures emitted electrons at specific energies, which correspond to different elements. Beginning by testing the outer blue decorated surface, the vessel's clay body was also compared with that of pieces known to have been made in Baltimore, as well as with the paste of bricks made in Calvert County, near to where



Figure 3. A small circular hole in the vessel indicates that it was the victim of target practice by someone using bird shot.

the bottle was found. Elements present in the blue exterior include cobalt, manganese, nickel, and lead. Preliminary results show that the clay paste shares similarities to both local clay bricks and red earthenwares produced in Baltimore when comparing ratios of trace elements of iron, titanium, and potassium. There is currently no known historical or archaeological documentation of Calvert County potters in the 19th century, so attributing this piece to a county potter is not possible currently. Testing on more samples is needed, and thus, research will continue on this intriguing piece.

References

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Zipp, Luke. 2018. Exceptional Baltimore Redware Pottery Jug for Henry Clay, circa 1840's. Video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BYBvSBJt2Q>.



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

