

Curator's Choice

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The ABCs of Alphabet Wares

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*I wished I lived in a caravan,
With a horse to drive like a pedlar-man,
Where he comes from nobody knows,
Or where he goes to, but on he goes!*

*Chairs to mend and delf to sell!
He clashes the basins like a bell;
Tea-trays, baskets ranged in order,
Plates with the alphabet round the border!*

- Excerpt from “The Pedlar’s Caravan” by William Brighty Rands (1823-1882)



Figure 1. This molded rim alphabet plate was recovered from a Baltimore privy associated with the household of Jacob Grafflin and James & Phoebe Taylor, filled around 1840.

William Brighty Rands’ 1868 poem skillfully captured the roving world of English peddlers, travelling the countryside in caravans filled with colorful merchandise. One of the wares sure to capture the eyes of young customers were earthenware plates decorated with child-friendly scenes and alphabets. English potters manufactured these vessels in hundreds of patterns,

exporting them to the United States and British colonies worldwide.

The aptly named alphabet (or ABC) wares include an alphabet as a component of their decoration (Figure 1). First manufactured in England’s Staffordshire district in the late eighteenth century, these wares are still produced today and were created as educational tools, primarily for children. Plates and mugs in white bodied earthenware were the most common vessel forms for alphabet wares, although bowls, cups, and saucers were also made. Since they were intended for children, they are typically small; plates range in diameter from 4 to 8½ inches.

Plates contained the entire alphabet, usually molded or printed clockwise around the rim (Lindsay 1998; Riley 1991). Child-friendly scenes decorated plate centers, which were either printed under the glaze or, beginning in the 1890s, on lithographic decals. These scenes fell into several decorative themes, including household pets, barnyard animals, children’s activities, riddles, Aesop’s Fables, and more (Chalala and Chalala 1980; Shipkowitz and Shipkowitz 2002). Children’s books published in the second half of the nineteenth century appear to have been most often used as source materials for designs.

References Cited

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1980 *A Collector’s Guide to ABC Plates, Mugs and Things*. Pridemark Press, Lancaster, PA.

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1998 *ABC Plates and Mugs; Identification and Value Guide*. Collector Books, Paducah, KY.

Rand, William Brighty. “The Pedlar’s Caravan”, taken from *Lilliput Levee: Poems of Childhood, Child-fancy, and Child-like Moods*, by Wynkoop and Sherwood, New York, 1868.

Riley, Noel

1991 *Gifts for Good Children; The History of Children’s China, Part I 1790-1890*. Richard Dennis, Ilminster, Somerset, England.

Shipkowitz, Davida and Irving Shipkowitz

2002 *The ABC’s of ABC Ware*. Schiffer Books, Atglen, PA.

Printed designs were produced in one color, usually black, and infilled with painted enamels in pink, green, yellow, red, orange, brown and blue (Figure 2). Color choice varied by individual enameller, as did the quality of the painting, which could be very poor. Lithographic decals replaced underglaze printed designs by around 1905. While decals allowed the production of more detailed designs in a greater range of colors, they were prone to cutlery damage.

Alphabet wares were produced in England, the United States, and Germany. Since many alphabet plates were not marked with manufacturers or registry marks, they are difficult to date with certainty. Analysis of marked pieces, however, suggests that British alphabet wares were produced in greater numbers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. British pieces tend to date earlier than American examples, with American wares produced most frequently in the first quarter of the twentieth century.



Figure 3. These sherds from a “Bears with Cubs” plate were discovered at the late 19th-century Sukeek’s Cabin site (18CV426), a Black homestead located in Calvert County, Maryland.



Figure 2. The “Now I’m a Grandmother” plate has nicely painted detailing in green, red and pink.

In Maryland it is common for archaeologists to find alphabet plates on post-Emancipation Black home sites (Figures 3 and 4). While alphabet wares were envisioned as a teaching tool for children, their presence on these sites suggests they were used to teach reading and writing to the formerly enslaved after the end of the Civil War.



Figure 4. Complete example of “Bears with Cubs” plate, part of the Wild Animals Series produced by Brownhills and Company (1872-1896).



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