



Andrew Agha and Nicole M. Isenbarger (2014).
“Recently Discovered Marked Colonoware from Dean
Hall Plantation, Berkeley County, South Carolina,” in
“Crosses to Bear: Cross Marks as African Symbols in
Southern Pottery,” thematic forum of articles edited by
Charles R. Ewen. *Historical Archaeology* 45(2): 184-
187.

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Andrew Agha
Nicole M. Isenbarger

Recently Discovered Marked Colonoware from Dean Hall Plantation, Berkeley County, South Carolina

During the winter of 2007, Brockington and Associates undertook excavations at the slave village (38BK2132) for former Dean Hall Plantation, located at the “T” of the Cooper River in Berkeley County. Dean Hall is roughly 5 mi. west of Middleburg Plantation, located on the east branch of the Cooper River. Originally settled in 1725 by Alexander Nesbitt of Dean, Scotland, the plantation quickly became an inland rice and indigo producer. Nesbitt died in 1753, leaving his widow, Lady Mary Nesbitt, as manager of the 1,300 ac. estate. Alexander Nesbitt’s grandsons, John and Alexander, took over operations sometime after 1790. During the 1790s, the settlement was moved from the southern edge of the plantation to the north so that it was closer to the Cooper River, adjacent to tidal marshes that were converted into rice fields. The final location was recorded on an 1808 plat commissioned by Alexander Nesbitt, who was to be the last Nesbitt resident of Dean Hall until his death in 1813.

The 19th-century Dean Hall settlement was first arranged by Nesbitt into a double row of houses, totaling 21 single-pen cabins. Throughout the 19th century, there were between 190 and 240 enslaved African descendants who lived on the property. In 1821, a merchant turned rice planter named William Carson purchased the property and all the enslaved laborers there—a population undisturbed and unbroken since 1725. Carson modified the slave village by removing the 21 smaller cabins and replacing them with 16 duplexes. Situated to the east of the cabins was a large work yard encircled by support structures possibly related to the labor performed at the plantation. The Nesbitt manor house,

located between the work yard and the Cooper River, served as the overseer’s residence during Carson’s tenure. Roughly 20 years later, Carson added more houses to the village bringing the number to 26 residencies.

Andrew Agha of Brockington and Associates conducted excavations of this settlement following a “house-yard” approach to this site, based on work by Armstrong (1999), Heath and Bennett (2000), and Agha (2004). The investigations in the yards were treated with the same emphasis as the houses. An important set of features was found in the yard of a house, which is among the most interesting of the nearly 800 features identified across the site.

Located southeast of this house beneath a small shed were two narrow drainage ditches, crossing each other in the form of an X. (Small drains were identified under houses across the whole site and none crossed in this way except here.) Underneath and to the east of this shed, 13 small pits were identified that appeared to have been for temporary storage or for other unknown reasons, as the five sampled had few-to-no artifacts in them. One of these pits in particular served as the receptacle for a large colonoware jar broken prior to deposition. Directly west of the pot-burst and the shed was Feature 6654. This feature was roughly 17 ft. long and 3 ft. wide, had slightly pitched walls that terminated at a flat base, and contained an organic, 10YR3/1 loamy fine sand fill. Feature 6654 had no posts associated with it, nor was it a ditch. Interestingly, there were colonoware vessels found within the feature resting on the feature base and on old surfaces (or terraces) created by filling in the feature at different times. Based on these artifacts, the trench in conjunction with the shed and pot-burst suggest a ceremonially oriented activity area.

In all, excavators recovered 2,307 artifacts from Feature 6654, including 2,190 colonoware sherds. The colonoware from this feature, and from all proveniences across the site, appears to be African American in manufacture, vessel form, and decoration. The most common vessel forms are small bowls and globular jars. Foot-ringed vessels, pinch pots, scalloped rims, a teapot,

and two vessel fragments that have traditional X marks on their bases were recovered from Feature 6654. Furthermore, 117 other artifacts were identified from 6654, including European American ceramics, bottle glass, nails, pipe fragments, and a clear-glass jewelry stone. Only one animal bone was recovered, suggesting this feature was not a typical trash pit. The *terminus post quem* for this feature is 1762 (creamware). Among the most interesting and thought-provoking artifacts from the whole feature is a Lesesne lustered (Anthony 1986) jar rim sherd with two stamped designs on it. The rim is 6.3 mm thick, nicely smoothed, and fully oxidized with a fine/medium sand paste. One of the stamped marks is a negative circle with a raised X in the center, measuring 7.9 mm in diameter. The other mark is a larger circular impressed checked or waffle-like design. Both of these marks have irregular edges, suggesting that they were not produced using manufactured objects (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Stamped sherds from Dean Hall Plantation. (Photo by authors, 2010.)

Besides this exceptional sherd, Nicole Isenbarger identified another rim sherd that has the same X mark. This sherd was found in a unit from inside the house closest to Feature 6654. The level this sherd was found in has a TPQ of pearlware (1779), which helps to date both sherds to the ca. 1790–1800 era for deposition. This second rim is from a Lesesne lustered bowl with a scalloped lip. This rim is 5.3 mm thick, nicely smoothed, with an oxidized core and a fine/medium sand paste; refer to Figure 1.

The shape and method of marking these Xs appears to be the same as those found in Edgefield and identified as the Landrum cross (Joseph, this volume). The mark from Feature 6654 is 7.9 mm in diameter, which matches the 7–9 mm diameter marks already identified on Edgefield stonewares. It also appears to have been marked by a carved wooden dowel, similar to the methods used for the Landrum cross. The mark on the smaller sherd is 6.3 mm in diameter and was clearly marked with a different dowel. There is almost no question that the marks on the colonoware are similar, if not identical, to the Landrum cross. Why, then, was a mark like this put on colonoware vessels, many miles away from Edgefield? What connection does this similarity connote?

The most identified mark on colonoware documented by archaeologists is the X, or the mark typically interpreted as the BaKongo cosmogram (Ferguson 1992). At Dean Hall, however, there is a high frequency of incised, punctated, rouletted, and drag-and-jab-marked sherds, along with traditional X-marked sherds. The carved dowel-stamped sherds stand out from the overall decorated assemblage because they are the only sherds that were stamped. One stamped vessel is also a jar, and the most common vessel forms in South Carolina with marks are bowls. The other vessel is a bowl; however, many incised Xs are oriented to the center of bowl bases, either exterior or interior, while this stamp is near the rim. Research has suggested that X-marked bowls had a medicinal/spiritual function (Ferguson 1992, 1999). The authors are not suggesting that these stamped vessels served medicinal purposes because they have an X. In fact, the authors could argue against this interpretation because of the way the marks are oriented to the rims.

Since the stamped mark is an X and not a +, it appears not to mirror the BaKongo cosmogram,

in that the cosmogram should be a +, as the horizontal axis represents the “boundary between the world of the living and the dead,” with a “*vertical* path across the boundary [emphasis added]” (Ferguson 1992:110). These sherds defy this notion, as the marks are oriented at a near 45° angle intentionally, and the lines of these Xs are neither horizontal nor vertical. Several X-marked vessels were recovered from Dean Hall and these are somewhat unique to the Carolina low country (i.e., punctated Xs, X marks on the inside and outside, marks made with double incised lines). The authors also recovered artifacts in other media that were marked with an X by hand (i.e., a brass finial), or have a manufactured X on the object (i.e., a token).

The X mark on the jar rim sherd has another mark next to it (Figure 1). This is also a stamped mark that appears to be related to the meaning of the X adjacent. The object was round, and at first glance looks like the waffle-grid pattern seen on a modern framing hammer. Our analysis indicates that this mark was applied by an object handmade on-site, such as a carved dowel, as the internal square marks of the pattern are individual, irregular, and are not in a pattern indicative of machine manufacture. What is most interesting about this waffle mark is that it is oriented to the rim so that the waffle design appears to be a series of overlapping Xs. If it were oriented differently, the waffle grid would not appear to be Xs. So here, both objects were turned purposefully so that the ensuing marks would be Xs, and not +s.

What is the significance of these sherds? Why were colonoware vessels subject to these kinds of marks? Given that the colonoware assemblage at Dean Hall has a high variety of decoration types and styles, these sherds are not unique simply by virtue that they are decorated. What does make them unique is they are the only two sherds that have this specific decoration on them. This decoration looks remarkably similar to the Landrum cross found on Edgefield pottery, and therefore it is hard to not make a connection between the two locales (Figure 2). On the other hand, these sherds are problematic, in that their context at Dean Hall predates the Edgefield kilns by about 20 years. Does this mark suggest that colonoware potters were brought to Edgefield from low country



FIGURE 2. Examples of Edgefield stoneware vessels with the Landrum-cross mark. (Photo by Carl Steen, 2010.)

plantations, or that African American potters in the Edgefield District were familiar with this mark and incorporated it onto stoneware vessels? The mark’s appearance on colonowares supports Joseph’s contention, herein, that these marks were African, and not European American in origin. It also introduces new dimensions to the interpretation of the meaning of these marks.

On the marked Edgefield vessels, the Landrum cross was oriented both to appear as an X on some vessels, and as a + on others; see, for example, Figure 2. Is this difference meaningful? Does the orientation change the meaning of the mark? What was the potter’s intention for rotating the mark? Was the intention or symbolism of casting the mark more important than the mark itself? Because the authors found the Landrum mark oriented to be an X on two different sherds, what does this mean in relation to the BaKongo cosmogram? Reconsiderations of marked colonowares from the low country of South Carolina, and of the X, are clearly needed, as is further research on the use of these marks at Southern stoneware potteries.

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- ANDREW AGHA
660 PEACEFUL VALLEY DRIVE
LA SELVA BEACH, CA 95076
- NICOLE ISENBARGER
660 PEACEFUL VALLEY DRIVE
LA SELVA BEACH, CA 95076