

Staffordshire Pottery on the Gulf Coast:

A Davenport Importer's Mark from Antebellum Mobile

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Prior to the Civil War, Belle Street in Alton, Illinois, some 20 miles up the Mississippi River from St. Louis, was an affluent neighborhood occupied by the families of professionals in the medical and legal fields as well as successful businessmen and merchants. In the back yard of one of the homes on this street, the owner built a large carriage house which included a first floor toilet room. The large size of the rock-lined privy vault under the floor of this room indicates that it may have been for the use of the entire household, including servants. Several years ago, prior to the demolition of the carriage house, the privy vault, measuring 4 feet by 8 feet, and 5 feet in depth, was discovered and excavated by archaeologists. As was common in the

American antebellum era, many broken pieces of pottery tableware, glass bottles, and other items of household trash had been discarded into the privy. The cultural materials from this excavation are curated by the Illinois State Archaeological Survey at the University of Illinois, Champaign. Of the hundreds of fragments of Staffordshire pottery vessels recovered, one group of sherds stands out. These fragments were pieces of a 4" diameter blue on white cup plate. According to the on-line Transferware Collectors Club *Pattern and Source Print Database*, the pattern is # 2236, *Hydrographic*, manufactured by William Davenport & Company, Longport, Staffordshire in the 1830s (Figure 1). But it is the back of this cup plate that is of particular note: the reverse has an impressed "Davenport" above an anchor (with a "3" on the left side – the right side date mark is obscured by glaze) as well as a transfer print "Davenport" mark accompanied by a previously unknown importer's mark (Figures 2-3):

MANUFACTURED / for / W. & E. SMITH / MOBILE

This little plate was broken and discarded a long way from home – likely brought to Alton on a steamboat from

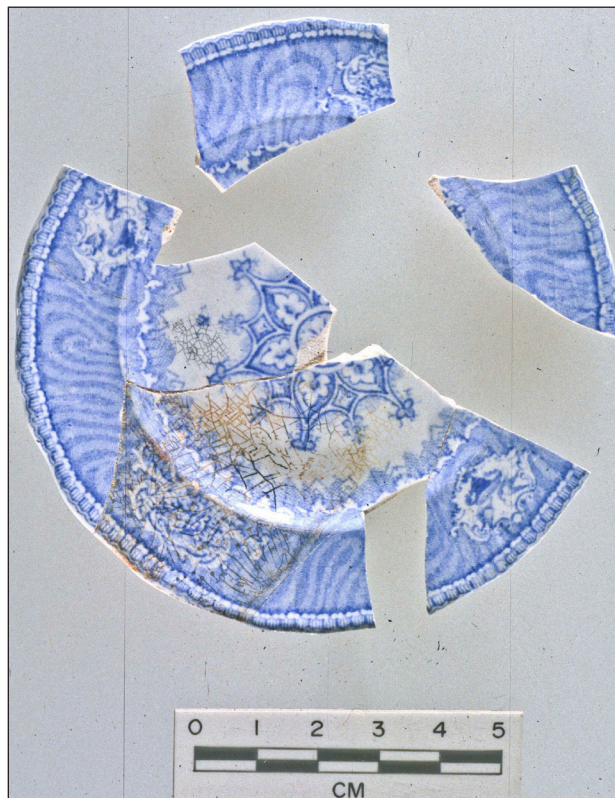


Figure 1.

New Orleans, perhaps in the baggage of a member of the household back from a trip to the Gulf Coast ¹.

The Staffordshire pottery importers, William and Edward Smith, are first listed in the *Mobile City Directory* (Robert R. Dade's Printing Office, Mobile) in 1839 (pg. 93) as dealers in chinaware with a store and warehouse at 32 St. Francis Street. The Smith's partnership was short lived and they appear in the city directory in different trades by 1842, Edward as a partner in a grocery store, and William as a druggist.

From the 1830s into the Civil War era, the Davenport firm appears to have particularly marketed pottery along the American Gulf Coast and up the adjoining Mississippi Valley ². Davenport transferware plates and platters back-marked with the names of

New Orleans importers such as Henderson & Gaines ³ are widely known from coastal Texas northward to Arkansas and southern Illinois⁴. While Staffordshire manufacturers are rarely mentioned by name in pre-Civil War newspapers, a notable exception is an advertisement placed in the *Peoria Democratic Press* in March of 1854 by Queensware merchant William A. Gray in anticipation of the spring thaw of the Illinois River and the annual renewal of steamboat shipping:

**IMPORTANT NEWS!
LATEST ARRIVAL FROM EUROPE
72 CRATES OF EARTHENWARE FOR
CHINA HALL**

No. 32 Main Street, Peoria

On the opening of navigation, the subscriber will receive the largest stock of Crockery Ware ever offered for sale in this city (being now in St. Louis) direct from the manufactory of Wm. Davenport & Co., Staffordshire, England...Country merchants will be supplied at a liberal discount.

William Gray's shipment soon arrived safely to the Peoria docks. He placed the following advertisement the next month (*Peoria Democratic Press*, April, 1854):

COUNTRY MERCHANTS

Come and see the goods in China Hall,
No. 32 Main Street,

Peoria, for there's the place to buy cheap for cash.
74 Crates of Earthenware have arrived direct from
Staffordshire, England.

Having purchased my goods entirely from the
manufactories, and for cash, and my arrangements
being such that I will constantly be filling up my
stock, I am prepared to hold out inducements to
dealers to make purchases from me.

The recovery of the Belle Street cup plate casts light on several aspects of the antebellum Staffordshire trade with the Gulf Coast and riverine interior. Its recovery hundreds of miles from the store owned by the importers whose mark appears on its reverse testifies to the efficiency of steamboat transportation during this era. Gray's Peoria advertisements announcing the arrival of thousands of pieces of fragile earthenware by steamboat indicates that this commodity could be transported cheaply and sold in large volume to a wide range of retailers and consumers. This helps explain the ubiquity of Staffordshire pottery made half-way around the world at antebellum Southern and Midwestern rural and urban sites investigated archaeologically.

Placing the name of American importers underglaze on Staffordshire earthenware demonstrated to the buying public that these local merchants had special ties to the English manufacturers which, it was thought, would enhance the chances of the importers not only obtaining the latest fashions promptly but also comparatively cheaply. This strategy was successful decade after decade, until new technology and inexpensive rail transportation in the late 19th century allowed industrial potteries in Ohio and elsewhere in the United States to capture the ceramic tableware market from their British rivals.

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Endnotes:

¹ Historical and archaeological evidence supports the idea that this cup plate was brought to the area by an individual and not purchased locally. The Alton Staffordshire pottery dealers appear to have obtained much of their stock from large, nearby St. Louis wholesalers. Small importers like the Smiths in Mobile likely only sold locally. Also, despite the fact that we have hundreds of Staffordshire vessel fragments from the Alton area this cup plate is the only Smith importer's mark known.

² The deep association of Davenport with Southern ceramic importers, going back to the 1820s, may have contributed to Davenport's manufacturing special transfer-printed tableware for the Confederate navy during the Civil War (see *Frank Davenport's Ceramics from CSS Alabama*, *TCC Bulletin XII*, No. 3 and *Confederate Navy Ironstone*, *TCC Bulletin XIII*, No. 2).

³The best study of Henderson and Gaines (1836-1866), and their predecessors, is: *Henderson & Gaines, New Orleans Ceramics Importers* by Art Black and Cynthia Brandimarte, *Research Notes, Historic Sites and Materials*, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Austin, 1987.

⁴Quantities of Davenport transferware with Henderson & Gaines backmarks have been reported from the Texas coast. See: *Nineteenth-Century Transfer-Printed Ceramics from the Townsite of Old Valasco (41BO125)*, Brazoria County, Texas: *An Illustrated Catalogue* by Sandra D. Pollan, et. al., U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Galveston, and *Nineteenth-Century Transfer-Printed Ceramics from the Texas Coast: The Quintana Collection*, by Marie E. Blake and Martha Doty Freeman, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Galveston. Henderson & Gaines backmarked pottery has also been reported up the Mississippi Valley in Arkansas and Illinois. See: *An Inquiry into the Location and Characteristics of Jacob Bright's Trading House and William Montgomery's Tavern*, by Patrick E. Martin, Research Series 11, Arkansas Archaeological Survey, Fayetteville, 1977, and *The Davis, Baldrige, and Huggins Sites: Three Nineteenth Century Upland South Farmsteads in Perry County, Illinois*, by Mary R. McCorvie, Preservation Series 4, American Resources Group, Carbondale, IL, 1987.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.