

Commemorating the B&O Railroad in Baltimore

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In the early nineteenth century, the area several blocks west of Baltimore's Harbor was a thriving working class neighborhood, filled with row houses of the type still standing in many parts of the city. The uniform street-side appearance of these row houses belied the busy yards behind them. These enclosed yards, used as extensions of home living spaces, were crowded with work yards, privies, henhouses and other small buildings.

A good look at some of these urban back lots was gained in 1980 during archaeological excavations conducted by Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Research, Inc. prior to the construction of the Federal Reserve Bank (18BC27). Excavations revealed a number of wells and privy pits dating to the first half of the nineteenth century. Abandoned wells and privies often became handy dumping areas for all manner of household garbage. One privy, Feature 30, was no exception. In addition to the food bones, broken medicine bottles, buttons, tobacco pipes, peach pits and other debris, the feature yielded an artifact relevant to the history of the city and the state.

Approximately one third of a plate printed with a dark blue design was removed from the privy (Figure 1). The central design, encircled by a border of seashells, was of an early steam locomotive. A little library research revealed that this pattern was entitled "The Baltimore & Ohio Rail Road" and was manufactured in the late 1820s or early 1830s by the English pottery firm of Enoch Wood & Sons (Figure 2).



This sherd of the B&O Railroad plate was taken from a privy in Baltimore during archeological excavations in 1980. Figure 1.



The "Baltimore and Ohio Railroad on the Level" plate by Enoch Wood & Sons, c. 1830. Figure 2.

In the 1820s, Baltimore was the nation's third largest city, competing with New York and Philadelphia for trade to the Midwest. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, one of the oldest railroads in the country, was established to facilitate the movement of trade goods over the Allegheny Mountains to the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The first thirteen mile stretch of railroad opened in May of 1830. While the first train cars were pulled by horses, steam locomotives were in use by 1831.

Between 1815 and 1840, many Staffordshire potters appealed specifically to the American market by producing wares depicting American landmarks, such as churches, hotels and resorts, homes, city vistas, and natural wonders. The railroad—a new and exciting development both in England and the United States—would have been considered a subject worthy of commemorating in this fashion. The pattern was probably produced to commemorate the laying of the first rails in 1828 or the actual opening of the railroad itself. The actual image on the plate was based on an engraving of the British Hetton Railroad first published in *The American Traveller Broadside* in 1826. Thus, one of the first depictions of the railway system in the United States was actually not even based on the B&O.

What makes this find particularly poignant is that the row houses whose residents purchased and used the B&O plate were destroyed in the early twentieth century by the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company in order to expand its passenger and freight stations at Camden Yard.