

Nineteenth Century Ceramics at Whitten House

Becoming a Collector of Transferware

By Scott Hanson



Figure 1, Whitten House today.



Figure 2, Whitten House c. 1938.

Whitten House [Figures 1 & 2] was built in the coastal town of Topsham, Maine in 1827-28. Newlyweds William and Myra Whitten [Image 2A] moved into the house in 1830 and lived there the rest of their lives. He owned a woolen mill on the nearby Androscoggin River. Two of their four children, Emily and Sarah, lived in the house their entire lives. Emily, the oldest, was born in 1832. Sarah, the youngest, was born in 1845. Emily died in 1919; Sarah remained in the house until her own death in 1941. She willed the house to the town for “use as a Public library, and for what might be termed a Treasure House as well, for the deposit and safe keeping of articles and mementoes of public interest.”

The “Whitten Memorial Library” opened in 1942 and occupied the house until 2002, when the town sold the house to help pay for a new library. I bought it. As an architectural historian, I was attracted by how much of the house was largely intact, including the floor plan, 1830’s wallpaper on the parlor walls, and an 1850’s French-made Gothic Revival paper in the front hall. It was in a National Register historic district and was the type of house I had dreamed of owning and restoring since childhood.

I was not a transferware collector when I moved into Whitten House. I had a few pieces among my various Victorian antiques, primarily Aesthetic Movement or botanical patterns. As I researched the history of the house and the Whitten family (as an architectural historian, that is just what I do), I came across probate inventories of the con-



Figure 2A, William and Myra Whitten.

tents of the house upon Mrs. Whitten’s death in 1887 and Sarah’s death in 1941, public records related to the settling of an estate. The inventories listed transferware in several rooms. I did not pay much attention to the inventories at first, being focused on major concerns like installing a bathroom and kitchen.

To deal with structural issues resulting from 20,000 books residing in the house for 60 years, I excavated 18 cubic yards of dirt from the crawlspace under the main house. Someone had once removed the floor of the original china closet to access the crawl space, perhaps when the house was electrified in the 1890’s, and some dishes fell into the opening and smashed against the stone chimney base. These included green and blue feather- (shell)

edge ware, redware, and pieces from several transferware patterns. I sifted these out of the dirt as I excavated and later washed them and put them in a box. Work outside the kitchen ell turned up more pottery shards. These tended to be smaller, having been walked on in the door yard. Discarding broken pottery on paths was common in the 19th century. These were also stored away. [Figure 3]

A major restoration project involved reconstructing the brick cooking hearth and oven in the historic kitchen. As happened in many houses, the original kitchen became the dining room when a “modern” kitchen was built in the adjoining wood shed after the introduction of cast iron cooking stoves. The massive original chimney was removed, replaced by a single-flue chimney for a stove. The brick arch that had supported the cooking hearth and oven remained in the cellar, providing the footprint for recreating it. Investigation behind finishes from 1960’s renovations disclosed more evidence of the historic configuration. Once I determined there was enough evidence for an accurate recreation, I engaged a mason who specializes in restoring and rebuilding historic brick ovens and fireplaces.

With the chimney rebuilt, [Figure 4] I started thinking about how the kitchen would have functioned and what would have been in it historically... leading me back to the pottery shards and inventory references. With all the effort expended to recreate the functional aspects of



Figure 4, Restored kitchen of the Whitten House, now the dining room



Figure 3, Shards found in and around Whitten House



Figure 5, Shards of English City Series.

the 1827 kitchen, it only made sense (to me anyway) that I should bring back the Whitten’s china. This would require identifying the patterns from the shards, as the inventories didn’t include pattern names or descriptions beyond several identified makers.

The references to ceramics in Myra Whitten’s 1887 probate inventory

(with values) were:

1 “sett” china in Dining Room Cupboard	\$1.00
Contents of Dining Room closet (table dishes, etc)	\$3.00

Sarah’s 1941 inventory was far more detailed and included “Staffordshire” in several rooms:



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

English City Series views in the Hanson Collection: “Durham” (Platter); “Salisbury” (Undertray); “Worcester” (Plate – the most common piece found).

Parlor:

1 Staffordshire deer-soft paste	.75
Blue Staffordshire cup plates, 1 nicked,	
1 perfect, 1 Hall maker on back	3.00
2 Cups and 3 saucers	2.00

Sitting room closet:

2 Staffordshire plates	2.00
Staffordshire pitcher (Wood)	1.50

Dining room closet:

12 white plates	1.00
6 fancy plates	.50
10 plates	.50
11 china sauce dishes	.50
Miscellaneous china cups and saucers	.50
6 fancy china dishes	.50
Miscellaneous china	.50

Kitchen:

1 Staffordshire mug	1.00
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South attic chamber:

1 early Staffordshire child's tea set, tea pot, sugar bowl, cream pitcher, 2 cups & saucers	5.00
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I had seen plenty of transferware in shops, flea markets and historic house museums, but I knew little about it. I had no idea where to start on identifying patterns until a helpful antique shop owner recommended Petra Williams' *Romantic Staffordshire* books, which I ordered and read with interest. Then I got out my shards to look more closely at what I had unearthed. In a stroke of luck, one shard had a back stamp on it, reading "English Cities, Worcester, EW&S, ... Itic China" [Figure 5]. Williams' books told me the piece was from Enoch Wood & Sons *English Cities* series and was one of many views of English cities with matching borders. With the photos in Williams' book, I was able to identify some gadrooned edge shards in my hoard as being from the same pattern. Given the production dates of the pattern, it was most likely Mrs. Whitten's "sett" of china in 1887 and the 1941 inventory's "fancy" dishes. Those were listed in the china cupboard just above where the shards were found. The shaped and gadrooned edge, and dramatic use of dark and medium blue in the printing, was "fancier" than any other shards I found.

Pattern identified, I began searching for pieces of it. In a decade of collecting, I have acquired 46 pieces, all but two found online. [select Figures 6, 7, 8] The "Worcester" dinner plate I first identified is clearly the



Figure 9.



Figure 10.

Nest of 3 "Venus" platters; "Venus" shards were also found at Whitten House.

most common piece. I have more of them than any other. Serving pieces have been more challenging to find and afford. I still regret not spending more than I wanted to for a 21" tree and well platter. In 2016, I was able to supply Dick Henrywood with images of my *English Cities* pieces for his *Transferware Recorder III*. Thanks to Dick's research and publication of this volume, I now know what pieces remain to be found for my collection.

Because of the relative rarity of the *English Cities* pattern, I purchased stained and dirty pieces. This led to several years of research and experimentation on cleaning methods. Eventually I worked out an approach that consistently produced good results. To pass along this method to my mom and my partner's mom (both are transferware collectors), I photographed the process and assembled the photos with descriptive captions. This document, with some additions, became the basis of my book *Cleaning Historic Staffordshire Transferware* after it became apparent there



Figure 11, Hoard of "Venus" in the Hansom cupboard and on the mantle (Figure 12, below).



was demand for such a publication.

Realizing the *English Cities Series* was not common, I decided to find a more available examples to use when cooking on the hearth. Browsing through a shop, I found a cup and saucer in a pretty pattern that was reasonably priced. I bought it, thinking “maybe this is a more common pattern.” It was marked P.W. & Co. “Venus” [Figures 9 & 10]. With some research, I learned it was produced by Podmore, Walker & Co. Then I found two shards of the “Venus” border in blue in my hoard. [Figures 11 & 12] The Whittens owned “Venus” My hunch about the availability and affordability of the pattern proved correct and serious collecting of “Venus” began.

“Venus” was apparently produced over a long period of time by P.W. & Co. and their successor firm Wedgwood & Co. Numerous variations can be found in the shapes of pieces and in the transfer prints – both in their



Figure 13, Hanson table set with “Venus” plates

design and in their placement. I find the differences interesting. I hope to eventually document them and try to make some sense of their production history. I currently have 200+ pieces of dinner, tea, and toilet wares and now look for less common pieces.

I only recently found the creamer to complete the tea set. The cover story in the November 2017 issue of *Down East* magazine will be on a hearth-cooked Thanksgiving dinner at Whitten House, served on “Venus” transferware. (Figure 13)

Shards from the Whitten House: A Photo Essay

Other patterns I have identified and collect are shown in the following photos. Researching the patterns has been enormously educational and led me to discover the *TCC Pattern and Source Print Database* online. I joined the club primarily to access the database, but could not resist the 2015 TCC annual meeting and tour in England. My mom joined me and neither of us knew a single TCC member when we arrived in London. The warm welcome of the club members made as much an impression as the wonderful tours and lectures we enjoyed. I left England with much more information on the history and production of transferware, and with new friends.

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Other Whitten patterns I have identified include “Milk Maid,” by Thomas Rathbone & Sons, in operation 1810–1845, in Portobello, Scotland. The shards I have appear to come from a waste bowl, suggesting a tea set. Since the *English Cities Series* was not produced on tea wares, this may have been William and Myra Whitten’s tea set from early in their married life. The only other documented tea set owned by the Whittens was a “gold band tea set” mentioned in a 1939 newspaper article on the house and in Sarah Whitten’s will. I have interpreted this to be white ironstone with gold banding, a popular style from the 1850’s period. Collecting a full “Milk Maid” tea set is my current focus.



This same 1941 inventory lists, “Blue Staffordshire cup plates...Hall maker on back,” and “2 Cups and 3 saucers.” Because J. Hall produced views of India and that is an area of interest for me, I’ve interpreted these pieces to be Indian views and have several pieces produced by Hall.

Shards from the Whitten House: A Photo Essay



These two shards from a flow blue chinoiserie pattern may be E. Chalinor's "Kin Shan." They show a particular flag on a tower that I haven't found on any other pattern. There are many towers with flags, but this flag is unique to "Kin Shan," so far.



Only one pattern printed in black shows up in the shards. The tiny shards show a castle tower above trees, a small walking man, and a vermicelli pattern border on the other side. It has not been identified yet.

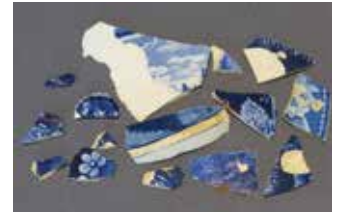


The range of 19th century pottery shards found in, under, and around Whitten House includes redware, stoneware, yellow ware, Leeds feather edge wares, English hand-painted wares, and transferware in a variety of patterns.



The stepback cupboard in the original kitchen of Whitten House contains ceramic pieces that match documented items owned by the Whitten family between 1830 and 1941. These include dinnerware in Enoch Wood & Sons *English Cities Series*, tea wares in Rathbone's "Milk Maid" pattern, Enoch Wood children's plates in red, a children's tea set in light blue, a gold band ironstone tea set, and a soft paste deer ornament. The inventory includes an early child's tea set with no information as to maker or pattern. My mom gave me this 1840's set that would be the right time frame to have been Sarah Whitten's as a child. The pieces are in the "Medici" pattern made by Mellor, Venables & Co., which was registered July 5, 1847 according to the *TCC Database*.

The 1941 inventory lists red children's plates marked "Wood" in the parlor. I have only found one type of early iron oxide red transferware on children's plates marked Wood. The likely date of this early red corresponds with the childhoods of the older Whitten daughters. I have five of these plates in three prints, one with a red border and the print in black. There exists a fourth print, which I continue to hunt.



Shards from patterns that remain to be identified.