Pottery shards provide insight into the lives and trade networks of enslaved people in the Cayman Islands

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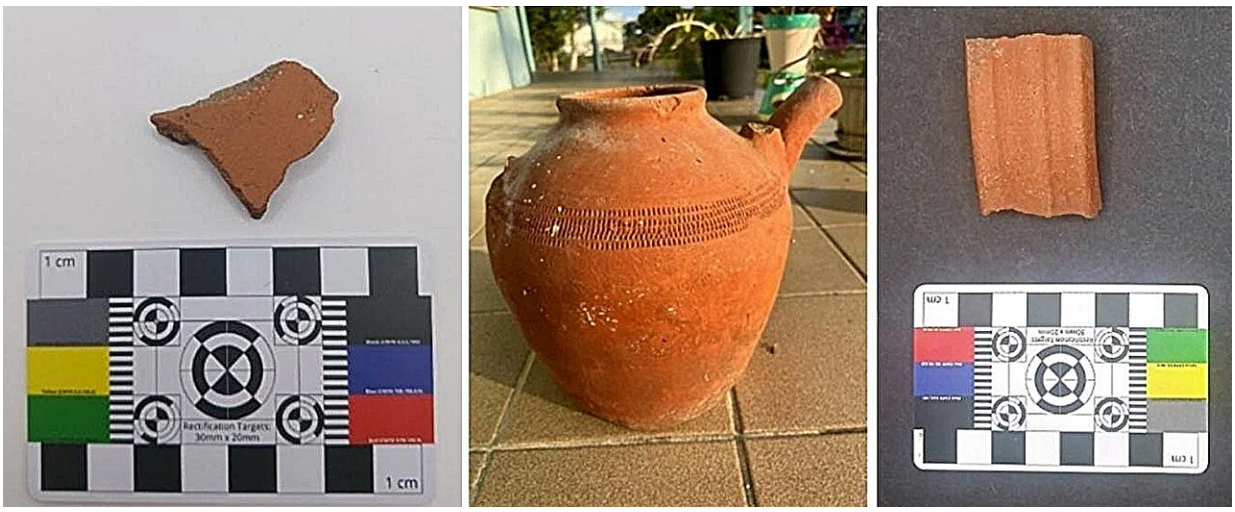

A pottery sherd from Jackson Wall Manor (left), an image of Betty R. Ebanks's Monkey Jar-style pot (center), and a piece of a handle found during excavation at Jackson Wall Manor (right). Credit: Petras and MacDonald 2024; and Betty R. Ebanks

Ph.D. candidate Elysia Petras and archaeologist Dr. Brandi MacDonald recently discovered 15 shards of Afro-Caribbean pottery ware at Jackson Wall Manor on the Cayman Islands. Through their analysis, they discovered that the pottery was not locally produced but originated in Jamaica, suggesting that local slaves likely participated in inter-island

trade between the Caymans and Jamaica.

Afro-Caribbean ware is a type of Caribbean-made pottery manufactured by enslaved and free potters of African descent. Usually made from local clays, it was produced for both household use and market sale.

The discovery was made while excavating a historic property, Jackson Wall Manor. Today, it is owned by the National Trust for the Cayman Islands in the Newlands District of Grand Cayman. Initially built in 1828, today only a ruined staircase remains. The work is published in the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*.

The current Historic Programs Manager for the Cayman National Trust, Stuart Wilson, felt the manor had the potential for archaeological investigations into the lives of the enslaved people of the Cayman Islands and thus supported archaeological excavations.

The history of the Cayman Islands has generally focused on its role in the seafaring industry, particularly its role in turtling and shipwreck salvaging. However, its role in the cotton and timber economy, in which slaves played a large part, tends to be neglected.

According to Wilson, the history of slavery is rarely discussed in the Cayman Islands, but this has not prevented locals who wish to know more about Jackson Wall Manor from being fascinated by archaeological investigations and what it reveals about the daily lives of the enslaved.

"The people of the Cayman Islands are fascinated by the fact that so much history occurred at the Jackson Wall site that was previously unknown. The site is one of the National Trust's more obscure properties, and the period of slavery was not always discussed openly or readily. However, the time seems to have come when this part of our

journey and its significance to who we are as a people cannot be ignored. We in the Cayman Islands have often seen ourselves as different or somehow separate from the rest of the Caribbean story, but this site has connected us to that past in new and revealing ways."

Today, many Caymanians of both African and European descent trace their ancestry back to Jackson Wall Manor, making its history a fascinating topic for many.

The land on which the Manor would one day be built was first surveyed back in 1741 in the name of Mary Bodden. In 1774, Elizabeth Bodden and her husband, John Shearer Jackson, came to Grand Cayman; they had a son, James Shearer Jackson. In 1828, James Shearer Jackson started the construction of the Jackson Wall Manor after having completed a prison sentence for the murder of a man he had killed, for shooting his mare.

James Shearer Jackson owned slaves while at the manor. The slave records from 2 April 1834 reveal he had at least six: Chattam, James Carlow, Elizabeth Sophia, Catherine Rachel, Collins, and Paul Jones.

No slave records existed prior to this, so it is unknown how many other slaves James Shearer Jackson may have owned.

It may have been one of these enslaved individuals who brought the Afro-Caribbean pottery to Jackson Wall Manor. Similar Afro-Caribbean pottery can be found across the Caribbean; some are locally made, such as those from Jamaica, St. Croix, and Martinique, and others are traded for from the surrounding islands.

Such pots were often made in the houseyard, the skill likely originating in Africa and being passed down through the generations from mother to daughter. Many pots were used for household consumption, while others

ended up in an extensive trade network.

At present, there is no indication that the Cayman Islands produced any pottery. Instead, all the pottery was likely traded from Jamaica. But why? It is possible that the local clay on Cayman was unsuitable for pottery making or that the enslaved were prevented from accessing good clay. However, further research is required to prove or refute this.

However, Elysia Petras has some theories as to why the Caymanians chose to trade for pottery instead of producing it themselves, "This is a question that I have put a lot of thought into, and there is one factor that I find very compelling. Historian Julius Scott found that in the Caribbean, sailors often purchased produce and likely other goods from enslaved peoples that they could store in a ship's cargo for their own personal trading activities.

"From these mobile sailors, enslaved peoples were able to receive news from other islands. He writes about this in his book 'The Common Wind.' By purchasing wares from Jamaica, enslaved Caymanians may have been able to send news to and maintain connections with the communities they were violently ripped away from, as many enslaved Caymanians had come to Grand Cayman from Jamaican slave markets."

This theory proposes that the active trade in pottery was maintained, perhaps despite local pottery-making skills, in order to maintain and foster community connections. If true, it speaks to the agency of the enslaved individuals, who, despite their circumstances, found ingenious ways to maintain strong ties even over large distances.

Enslaved Caymanians may have traded these pots for things they managed to produce themselves, such as excess food or perhaps their own local craft, Silver thatch weaving.

Elysia Petras says, "Other factors I have considered come from ethnographic sources (silver thatch weaving). Silver thatch weaving is a traditional industry on Grand Cayman. It is a craft that has been passed down through generations since the 1700s.

"It is possible that enslaved Caymanians focused on basket making for market sale, which they may have exchanged for pots produced on Jamaica where there was a strong established pot-making tradition."

Once acquired, these pots may be used for water storage. This is based on a photograph provided by a local Caymanian, Betty R. Banks, of her family heirloom, a Monkey Jar-style pot, brought over from Jamaica in 1913. In terms of color and consistency, the pot is similar to the excavated shards.

In 1774, Edward Long described how the enslaved people of Jamaica produced such pots to store and easily transport water into the fields. The pottery kept the water clean and cool, ideal for long days in the field.

Considering four of James Shearer Jackson's slaves, Chattam, James Carlow, Elizabeth Sophia, and Catherine Rachel, were field laborers, it is possible they used a similar pot when they went out to work in the surrounding fields.

More information: Elysia M. Petras et al, Neutron Activation Analysis Reveals Jamaican Origin of Afro-Caribbean Ware Excavated from the Cayman Islands, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (2024). DOI: 10.1007/s10761-024-00752-8