Chinese Export Porcelain in the Shenandoah Valley: Anachronism or Not

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"In our whole display of furniture, the delf, china, and silver were unknown. It didn't then, as now, require contributions from four corners of the globe to furnish the breakfast table..."

This quote from Kercheval's *History of the Valley of Virginia* depicts the Scotch-Irish of the 1700's as a brawny frontier people, who would shun any innovations from the outside world. Recently, however, we have been presented with evidence contrary to Kercheval's statement. The Liberty Hall excavation on the property of Washington & Lee University has provided us with artifacts that would make Kercheval's view of the Scotch-Irish totally inaccurate. One such artifact in particular are the unearthed fragments of Chinese export porcelain. Indeed the finding of export ware at the Liberty Hall site confuses the situation. In an effort to clarify the dispute that has risen subsequently to the Hall excavation, this paper will attempt to form a logical explanation of both how and why export ware was brought into the Shenandoah Valley.

Before proceeding with this paper, a brief history of the export trade is in order. It is generally thought that the export trade in china was started by the Portuguese during the 1500's. The Dutch quickly followed by establishing the East India Company in 1602. The British, in 1662, entered the market with the formation of the British East India Company. By the year 1715 they had developed a virtual
monopoly remained in tack until the early 1800's, when the U.S. became the next nation to enter the China Trade. America's domination of this trade lasted until the 1870's, when the demand for Chinese products was almost nonexistent.2

By the year 1757 the Chinese government had limited all trade to one lone port: Canton. This city was completely controlled by the Chinese hierarchy, which placed local authorities in charge of the entire trading system. Subsequently, this control led to a tremendous amount of red tape and many situations in which bribes and gifts became requisites to entering the trading market.

In Canton, Chinese linguist and merchants were needed in making business transactions. And certain Chinese were more highly sought after than others in filling these jobs. One American merchant stated of a particular Chinese merchant Haugua, "...his worth is better than that of any other dealer in Canton, and his prices are in proportion ..." 3 These Canton merchants acted only as middlemen in the China-trade. They were responsible for procuring the needed porcelains and having them enameled in the specified manner. This process was sometimes slow and undependable. But by the later 18th century, the process of ordering porcelain was elaborated in such a way that prints of available patterns were sent to European merchants. This enabled the "Hong" merchants to stock in advance the needed porcelain to fill the incoming orders. The implementation of this method greatly increased the amount of porcelain coming into the West because ships no longer had to remain in Canton for long periods of time.

The porcelain itself was produced up river from Canton in the city of Ching-Te Chen. Here, it is estimated that at least three thousand small factories were involved in the manufacturing of export
wares. With a nearby abundance of Kalen and Petentse - the two clays required in making porcelain - the city of Ching-Te Chen thrived as the major porcelain center. The forming, baking, and processing of the china all took place in this city; only the enameling was done in Canton. From Ching-te Chen the porcelain was transported to Canton by one of two routes: up the Yangtze River to the China Sea, or through the Meiling Pass and finally into Canton.

In referring to the wares of the export trade there are several names and classifications used. "Canton ware" is known for its sloppy design and lack of detail. Its borders are usually wide bands, and its figures are blurred and undefined. "Nanking ware" is somewhat more refined than Canton ware, but it is still in no way comparable to the porcelain made for the Chinese themselves. Several decorative patterns are prevalent among export ware. One such pattern is that of a pink flowery design called the "Famille Rose." This pattern is usually unearthed at archaeological sites in the form of thicker porcelains. Other designs include the pale-green pattern of "Famille Verte" and the black "Famille Noire." Another important pattern is the "Fitzhugh" - thought to be so named for the man who first brought a piece of this pattern to the U.S. in the 1770's. The famous "Willow" pattern was first made in the late 1700's up until 1856 and was reintroduced in 1872.

In explaining the existence of Chinese export porcelain in the Shenandoah Valley, certain questions must be attended to. First we must find an adequate reason for the so-called rugged pioneers having desired export ware. Secondly, we must find substantial evidence of American involvement in the export trade. Thirdly, there would have to have been an adequate mercantile and transportation system operating in the valley capable of handling this export ware. If information is
found supporting these hypotheses then the export ware unearthed at the
Liberty Hall site would no longer seen quite so out of place.

In the past historians claimed several reasons for why there
was a demand for porcelain in America. They pointed to the fact that
intellectuals of the period were supportive of the China-trade because
of the possibility of its helping develop America's own in-fant cotton,
tea, and porcelain industries. Another reason for this demand they
said was the fascination Americans had for the exotic. It was porcelain,
they claimed, that was the "presence" of China in Early American homes.
In this porcelain Americans could see exotic flora and fauna as well as
other mystical scenes. Upper class Americans were the first to be taken
in by this fascination, and by so doing they adopted the custom of tea
drinking. Shortly after the upper class took up this pastime, the middle
and lower classes follower. All of this, these historians claimed was a
spin-off of the enlightenment movement. To these Americans the drinking
of tea was now more a necessity than a luxury. As one China-trade
captain stated, "Who could count the number of Americans who while drinking
morning coffee or afternoon tea, gazed on the familiar motifs of islands,
privilions, trees, sometimes peopled, sometimes not."

But perhaps the more logical reason for why Americans desired
export was that they had an opportunity to procure goods of unusual quality
and practicality at a lower production cost than for the same product
from European manufacturers. Many of the custom-made pieces were bought
from China solely because of the high cost or unavailable decorative
techniques of the West. A typical example of this was the manufacturing
of the Pennsylvania Hospital Bowl. This piece of porcelain was origin-
al planned to have been made by Staffordshire in England. Difficulties
ever price and design, however, were responsible for its eventual
Records show that the American ports involved in the export trade were in New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. It is generally thought that up until the 1730's most export was brought to New England. After this date, however, the other ports began to import just as much porcelain, if not more than New England did. But it wasn't until 1783, when America's first ship reached China (the Empress of China) - That the export wares became in great demand. With this shipment almost all other ports sent ships to Canton. New York ships were the first to arrive in China, but Portsmouth and Salem quickly followed suit. Boston merchants, with their ability to handle and distribute the china efficiently, aided the export market in growing by leaps and bounds. But perhaps it was Philadelphia that led all other ports in total tonnage of export ware.

Philadelphia was one of the richest ports in America, and it is only logical that it came to dominate the China-trade. It was Philadelphia's Robert Morris, who was responsible for financing the Empress of China. And its native son Samuel Shaw became the U.S. 's first consul to Canton in 1786. In December of 1787, 17 Philadelphia merchants and investors come together to underwrite the voyage of the 292-ton Asia. This arrangement would become the standard method for financing voyages to China. By 1800 American ships in Canton were no longer naval, but rather routine occurrences.

The trade in Philadelphia greatly expanded due to rising demands for export ware and the merchants' ability to depress porcelain prices through distributing the china to regional centers. With this increase in trade, Americans imported 1/7 of their total imports from China, even though porcelain averaged only 1% of the total dollar value
of commerce. Consequently by 1791, the U.S. government began taking measures to protect and encourage trade with China. The government did this through tariffs on English imports (East India Company goods), and lenient duties on American cargoes from Canton.

Even though the U.S. lacked a national monetary system, its ability to trade was not greatly affected. This export commerce was a branch of the U.S. trade in which English competition offered no effective threat to American activities. The mere number of ships involved in this trade substantiates this point.

During the period from October 1, 1798, to June, 1799, Robert Walen recorded the return of five American ships and their chinaware cargoes. The ship Neptune, New York, which sailed out by way of the Falkland Islands, sold its 53,000 sealskins, and bought tea, nankeens, and 150 boxes of china to be sold in Boston. From Boston, the Thomas Russell exchanged specie for tea, nankeens and 400 boxes of china. The ship Jean, Philadelphia, sailed by way of Java with ginseng and specie and brought back 100 boxes of porcelain. The Pallas of Portsmouth brought 177 boxes of porcelain. The Hope of Boston trading specie for 350 boxes of chinaware.

This ferment of the China-trade seems to offer us a particularly good idea as to the amount of porcelain coming into the U.S. But there are several reasons why we cannot blindly accept these figures as being representative of total export trade.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain an accurate estimate of just how much export ware came in the United States. Smuggling and unclear records are chiefly responsible for this problem. For example, Salem is held by many as the symbol of the American involvement in the export trade. But they do this only because Salem merchants kept and preserved their records of commerce so carefully. The records of other ports often leave no clear reference to the type of porcelain in discussion - whether it be Delf, Bow, or Worcester. "Benjamin Franklin
in a letter in 1758 specified that he was sending to his wife some chinaware made at Bow, and one old true china basin to show the difference in workmanship." Yet another aspect which makes it difficult to judge the quantity of export ware that made its way to American is the fact that porcelain was being made in the U.S., and good porcelain at that. It appears that colonial Americans by the late 1700's had a fairly good selection of porcelain to choose from, placing Chinese export ware in great competition.

Historians in the past have thought that the flow of porcelain and other export items into the U.S. was a very gradual process. And perhaps their logic would seem correct when considering the length of time required in importing items from Canton. But they have forgotten an extremely important aspect of this trade: the profit motive. To the sailors and merchants of Philadelphia and New York, the trade with China wasn't an exercise in diplomatic and cultural exchange. Indeed profit was the incentive for sending the many ships to Canton. The wages of a typical crew were extremely high, the captain averaging $199/13/5 for a journey and his cabin bou approximately $34 /14. Adding to this was the fact that crew members brought back their own goods to sell, which boosted their income even higher. But to the merchant the income from a Canton trip was considerably greater. He could expect a clear profit of at least $999/4/16 - a return of better than 72 % of his original investment.

An example of the profit to be had can be seen in the records of the Grand Turk, which sailed form Salem in November 1785. It contained a cargo worth $7183/5/7 and a total investment of up to $9200. After reaching Canton in September, it exchanged its products and returned with a cargo valued at $23,218, including 75 boxes of china.
These and other records support the idea that there was a substantial amount of porcelain entering America during the period 1782-1802. We have also seen that there was an adequate reason for the demand that existed for this export ware as well. But to state that export ware found its way into the Virginia Valley must clarify several aspects of the commerce in the Shenandoah. The cities that participated in this trade must be enumerated. And an explanation of how these goods were transported into the valley must be formulated.

Most historians agree that the early settlers of the Shenandoah were unable to bring many material goods into the valley. But the consensus among these men stops here. Most people have considered the Scotch-Irish to have been a rugged, self-supporting group of people. But in so thinking, they have neglected to consider the background of the people themselves. The Scotch-Irish were not living in a harsh wilderness in their native Ireland. Furthermore, they were upwardly mobile persons, and as such they never would have resided themselves to a wilderness environment without trying to reduce the burden that this existence placed on them. These settlers had a basic need for trade and commerce. And it is only logical that they would wish to obtain both the necessities and luxuries that they were perhaps used to having in Ireland. The need and desire of the Scotch-Irish for goods from the outside world can be substantiated. But were they successful in their endeavor?

To answer this question, one must first look at the transportation system in use during that time. Contrary to popular belief there were valley roads in existence at an early date. The "backbone" of this system was the Great Wagon Road, which was built as early as 1745. This road, however, was little more than a horse trail at best. Wagons weren't able to use the road efficiently until the 1760's. But
by the year 1765 the road network was fairly substantial, and as such commerce was greatly increased. Transportation of goods by water was almost nonexistent, even though there were efforts to widen the North River as far as the town of Lexington in the 1790’s. In short, except for settlers at the extreme ends of the valley, the region was without cheap water transportation throughout the entire eighteenth century, and the functioning of its towns was entirely dependent upon the maintenance of its highway network.

One might have thought that regional cities would have grown in order to support the commerce going on in the valley. But this was not the case up until the 1770’s. One explanation for this failing to occur was the "persistence of decentralized" trading going on in the valley. Largely responsible for this were peddlers, the pack horse trade, and most importantly the country stores operated by "farmer-retailers." Typical of the farmers involved in the trade was Andrew Reid of Rockbridge County, who conducted his business during the last quarter of the 18th century from a 180-acre farm. Farmers like Reid were continually supplied with goods by itinerant peddlers who were based out of southeastern Pennsylvania. Despite this decentralization of trade, the cities of Winchester and Staunton did become "focal points" of trade by 1775. These cities were responsible for supplying merchants and settlers with only the basic necessities. For scarce items such as rum, wine, and china, Virginians had to look elsewhere.

Ironically it was Philadelphia that acted as the valley’s chief supplier of scarce goods. The leading reason why Stanton and Winchester were unable to support this trade was credit. The settlers of the valley were paying for goods through their surplus crops, which by the mid 1760’s were 25% of the average farmer’s output. Merchants
in these cities would have to offer large amounts of credit to the farmers. What this required was a city that had a tremendous volume of trade. Philadelphia merchants could offer this to the settlers as well as the newest items from the export trade. Other cities such as Alexandria, Baltimore, and Falmouth did support some of the valley's trade. But this was in no way near the amount that Philadelphia handled. At these eastern ports valley residents found direct access to contacts in Glasgow, Bristol, and London. And as such by 1760 the Shenandoah Valley was intimately affected by the activities of the Atlantic trading world.

The role of Philadelphia in the trade with the Scotch-Irish can and has been in the past somewhat overemphasized. Philadelphia was the valley's primary supplier of goods in the middle to late 1700's. But merchants gradually started to reach out toward other towns as competition increased and the road system expanded. Typical of this growing diversity was the branching out of the valley merchant Horatio Gates. He began trading with Nicholas, Harrison and Company in Williamsburg, but later started commerce with James F. Roense in Annapolis. After a period of time he began trading with Corey and Kelgrman in Baltimore, and with two Philadelphia connections, Mordicae Lewis and William Morris. "Most of these accounts were from $10 to $30 for luxury items such as wine, citrus fruit, and china." What this shows to us is that the trading situation of the valley was not at all isolated as many people previously had thought. Merchants and settlers had a wide range of opportunities to sell their surplus crops and possibly buy such luxuries as Chinese export china.

This evidence would lead one to support the idea that porcelain did have a market and a mercantile system capable of bringing china
into the valley and specifically Rockbridge County. But to state this accurately we must look for specific evidence of the porcelain's existence in this area. Was the porcelain unearthed at the Liberty Hall site the exception to the rule, or was it indicative of the ware used by the other Scotch-Irish in the valley?

In making such an analysis, we must look for records showing the existence of export ware in the Shenandoah. The records available to us unfortunately relate to those persons who were successful rather than unsuccessful. We must be aware of their drawbacks when using record such as probate inventories, family histories, and newspaper advertisements. Such questions as to what percentage of persons that left wills and to what class they belonged should be kept in mind. These records, however, are all we have to base our analysis on, and we must, therefore, make use of them baring in mind their faults as research sources.

Inventories found at the Rockbridge County Court House aren't all that clear as to the specific types of ceramics owned by the area residents. The appraisal of the William Lyle estate, May 16th, 1778 reads: 1 china mug, 1 china dish valued at 2 pounds 18 shillings. The appraisal of Gas Love's estate, Sept. 1st., 1792 reads: tea ware 2 shillings. The David Wilson estate inventory of 1795 also includes tea ware: One set and half set of tea cups and sausers, a tea pot and cream cup 8 shillings. Isabella McClures does the same: tea ware and two plates, 4 shillings. The estate of Robert McCorkle 1799 states 5 cups and 6 sausers of common "Chine" 6 shillings. The mention of tea ware probably refers to porcelain rather than silver tea ware since metal tea ware was fairly rare in Europe and the U.S. The word china is also quite unclear, and there is unfortunately no way of accurately stating whether it was Queen's Ware or export ware in discussion.
Another source mentioning the use of china is presented by Oren Morton. He gives us a price list of goods found in Rockbridge County during the period 1745-1775 and 1775-1825. In the first period he states that pewter plates cost 20 cents, and china plates brought 4.50 dollars per dozen. The second period gives no mention of pewter, but a china bowl cost 33 cents. Morton gives us no reference as to where his sources were derived from, and we therefore can not rely heavily on this information. But this list does tell us that china was definitely being used in the valley, and as such it is of some value to us.

This evidence, little that it may be, does give us ground to repudiate Kercheval's concept of the Scotch-Irish. The artifacts found at Liberty Hall along with a logical formulation of how and why Chinese export china appears at this site enables us to form a totally different view of the valley settlers. We have seen that the export trade was not solely for the well to do, and as such it grew by leaps and bounds. Evidence also shows us that East Coast merchants were involved in extensive commerce with the China-trade. The existence of a merchant system in the Shenandoah Valley capable of handling export ware has also been substantiated. Additionally, local inventories tell us that porcelain was in fact used by valley residents. From these findings we can conclude that the Scotch-Irish were in no way completely isolated from the outside world. They were not the rugged pioneer type that many people in the past have thought. Rather, the Scotch-Irish were indeed active in obtaining luxury items. Through the finding of porcelain fragments at the Hall site, we have been able to take a different look at a subject of importance not only to Washington and Lee University, but to the descendents of the Scotch-Irish now living in the Shenandoah valley.
NOTES


3. Ibid., p. 35.


5. Mudge, p. 45.


9 Ibid. p. 39.

10 Mudge, p. 15.


12 Goldstein, p. 28.

13 Mudge, pp. 13-16.

14 Ibid. p. 71.

15 Goldstein, p. unknown.


17 Ibid. p. 42.

18 Ibid. p. 45.


20 Ibid. p. 195.
21 Ibid. pp. 153-156.

22 Mudge, pp. 141-157.


25 Ibid. p. 111.

26 Records of Wills and Inventories Vol. I, Lexinton: Rockbridge County Court House.


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APPENDIX

1. Canton - Macao - Harbor area; Photocopied from Philadelphia and the China Trade.

2. Map showing two major routes from Ching-te Chen to Canton; Photocopied from Chinese Export Porcelain, Mudge. p. 51.


5. Canton plate showing poorly detailed decoration, Artifacts of Colonial America, p. 262.


10. Inventory of Robert McCorkle, Rockbridge County Court House Will records Vol. II p. 140.
Sloop Experiment first Cost & outfit £2200
10 Shares 1000 Dollars 8000
3000 lbs Ginsang 5/- 7500
Madeira Wine & other Goods 2300

Premium on Dollars 6 pr Ct £480
ditto of Insurance on £2200 a 10 p Ct 2200
Interest for 2 Years on £2200
7 pr Ct per Annum 3175.4 5985.4

Sales etc in Canton £12000
30000 lbs Ginsang a 4/ 8000
20000 Dollars a 4/ 8000
Madeira Wine & other Goods 3400

Off Expenses in Canton 2400
to be laid out in Canton 21000.4

Purchase of Cargo in Canton
600 Chests of best Hyson Tea a £16 9600
10000 ps Nankeens 4/6 6750
Taffarries & other Fine Goods 4000
China 650
£21000

Sales in N Y York
600 Chest Hyson Tea at 30 £18000
10000 ps Nankeens 9/ 13000
Taffarries & other Fine Goods 6000
China 1300
£38300

Deduct first Cost Vessel & Cargo £14855.5
do Agents Gains 5 pr Ct 1915.
Vessel to pay Portage Bill 27770.4
Profits & to pay Interest for 2 Years near 40 pr Ct. 10529.16
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