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Artifacts and Commingled Skeletal Remains from a Well on the Medical College of Virginia Campus: Artifact Collection from Archaeological Site 44HE814

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Archaeological and Cultural Solutions

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Artifact Collection from Archaeological Site 44HE814

Merry Outlaw

This section describes the artifacts recovered from the nineteenth century well (44HE814) at the VCU Medical College of Virginia campus. Artifacts and faunal remains saved from the shaft and the environs total 423 fragments. They predominately date to the first half of the nineteenth century. Some are complete, but most are fragmented. In the artifact catalog, remnants of the same object are cataloged together. The catalog records each object by name, material, and count or number of fragments, and it usually includes a brief description (Appendix I: Artifact Catalog). For ease of retrieval, each catalog entry has its own sequential catalog number beginning with 44HE814/001 and ending with 44HE814/102. The artifacts are sealed in zip-lock-type polyethylene bags that are marked with the catalog number in permanent ink on the exterior. These bags contain an acid-free tag with the artifact catalog number written in permanent ink. They are stored within one of three acid-free record storage boxes that hold the collection. The boxes are labeled on one end with the site and provenience information in permanent ink on an acid-free tag placed in a polyethylene label holder.

Two ca. 1780-1810 Chinese porcelain teaware sherds (Figure 1) are the earliest datable objects saved from the deposit, however the *terminus post quem* (date after which) the deposit was made must be based on a whiteware platter sherd with a blue shell-edge decoration (Figure 2).¹ As the most recently manufactured and tightly datable piece retrieved, it places the assemblage within a ca. 1840 to 1850 time frame. With longer date ranges, one intact ca. 1820 to 1850 spirits bottle (Figure 3) and fragments of another are among the glass artifacts recovered.² Oyster shells and at least some of the numerous faunal bones, including fowl and

¹ Thomas B. Litzenburg, Jr., with Ann T. Bailey, *Chinese Export Porcelain in the Reeves Center Collection at Washington and Lee University* (London: Third Millennium Publishing, 2003) p. 234. Ivor Noel Hume, *A Guide to Artifacts of Colonial America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 1969), p. 261. Robert Hunter and George L. Miller, "Suitable for Framing: Decorated Shell-Edge Earthenware," *Early American Life* 40, no. 4 (August 2009): 13.

² Olive R. Jones, *Cylindrical English Wine and Beer Bottles 1735-1850*, (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1986), pp. 60, 69.

cow, are likely meal scraps (Figure 4). The remains of at least three dogs and one cat were also retrieved, representing either pets, or discarded remains of strays that had been used for instruction in comparative anatomy.



Figure 1. Chinese porcelain teaware sherds, ca. 1790-1810. These small sherds are the earliest datable ceramics from the well.



Figure 2. English whiteware platter rim with blue shell-edge, post 1840. Unscalloped shell-edge dishes such as this date to the fourth decade of the 19th century.



Figure 3. Glass spirits bottle, ca. 1820-1850. H: 7 ½".



Figure 4. A selection of food remains including butchered cow, chicken, and oyster shells.

Several ca. 1790 to 1850 cut iron nails are among numerous architectural items from the well. Other architectural-related artifacts include: milled wood remains; window glass; a copper alloy door knob from a rim lock; brick rubble; mortar; plaster; slate; and one handmade coping brick (Figure 5). These items probably represent the demolition and/or construction of a structure on or near the Richmond city block of College and Marshall Streets. A barrel, represented by fragments, was probably discarded at the time of the well's abandonment as a water source.



Figure 5. Selected architectural remains recovered from the well: top, coping brick; bottom, left to right, copper alloy door knob, cut iron nails, and mortar.

Near the well, on the northeast corner of College and Marshall Streets, the Egyptian Building was built to house the Medical Department of Hampden-Sydney College established in 1838.³ One of the oldest medical education edifices in the South, the Egyptian Building was completed in 1845. It housed a dissecting room, lecture rooms, an infirmary, and patient beds. The well became a repository for medical waste from the medical college around this time based on dateable artifacts. This episode is marked by an abundance of human bone (Owsley and Bruwelheide, this report), as well as numerous artifacts associated with the medical profession.

³ Virginia Department of Historic Resources Reconnaissance Level Survey DHR ID#: 127-0087, p. 2 (see Appendix I: VDHR Records).

The medical assemblage includes fragments of two mouth-blown glass apothecary jars and stoppers that date from the first half of the nineteenth century. Other medical glass consists of sections of a test tube, a thermometer, and a mold-blown pharmaceutical bottle with stopper (Figure 6). Bone handles from two surgical scalpels and a fragmentary creamware ointment pot comprise additional medical equipment (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Medical glassware consisting of, from left, a test tube, pharmaceutical bottle, and a thermometer.



Figure 7. Bone scalpel handles flank an English creamware ointment pot, ca. 1820-1840.

Discarded clothing makes up one of the largest groups in the artifact assemblage and it may relate to the recovered human remains. In addition to fragments of cotton, felt, and linen/linsey-woolsey, a single earthenware Prosser button post dating 1840 was recovered.⁴ Also, a remarkable collection of leather shoe fragments, all from the first half of the nineteenth

⁴ Roderick Sprague "Prosser button China or Prosser Button Identification and Dating," *Historical Archaeology* 36, no. 2 (Society for Historical Archaeology 2002): 111-127.

century, was retrieved. Several shoes display excessive wear under the toes and extreme supination or pronation, indicative of possible abnormalities of the foot. The details of manufacture of one sole are of a superior quality shoe, signifying that it once belonged to a high status individual. This is also the case for the sole of a genteel boot in the style of a Viennese fancy boot. Possible zinc oxide pegs at the toe of the outsole of a man's shoe may indicate that it is a machine pegged sole of the 1850s.

Comprised of three cross-mended pieces, another is a cheaply made man's shoe with three lace holes on both sides, and a vamp that was slit, possibly to extricate the wearer's foot (Figure 8). According to Colonial Williamsburg's Master Cordwainer D. A. Saguto, of Williamsburg, Virginia, this shoe was probably made by a Richmond shoemaker of Bavarian descent and worn by a slave.⁵



Figure 8. Leather shoe, first half of the 19th century. This shoe was likely made by a Richmond shoemaker of Bavarian descent for an enslaved African-American.

In sum, the artifact collection from 44HE814, salvaged as a single unit, was likely deposited during several episodes of well fill. Significantly, however, the majority of the finds

⁵ D. A. Saguto, personal communication, 2011.

dates to and consists of fill generated during the first few years of operation of the nearby Egyptian Building, which was completed in 1845. For a time, the recently abandoned domestic well became a convenient receptacle for refuse in the restrictive space of urban occupation.