

The History of the Mount Shepherd Archaeological Pottery Site

By Bill Johnson and Randle E. Brim

Eight miles west of Asheboro, via US Highway 64, prominently stands Randolph County's highest mountain. Originally it was named "Shepherds Mountain" for the early settler and owner John Shepherd, who was granted the tract in 1771. A few years later, European settlers began calling this unique peak of the Uwharrie Mountains, Mount Shepherd.

Fortunately, there is a written record from three centuries ago describing this area. John Lawson was asked by North Carolina's Lord Proprietors to do a reconnaissance survey of the interiors of the Carolinas. In February 1701, he and a small party spent three days in Keyauwee Town, a village of friendly Indians which was located in the Caraway Creek valley facing Mount Shepherd. His report was published in England and white settlers began immigrating to this state. Among these immigrants settling here sometime between 1775 and 1800 was a pioneer potter who built perhaps the county's first pottery manufacturing site, or one of the earliest.

Numbered among these early settlers and property owners of the Mount Shepherd tract may have been Philip Jacob Meyer, an apprenticed potter from the Salem Community in Forsyth County. This early pioneer potter in the late 1700's established a pottery center and site beside the old "Ridge Road" which connected to the nearby "Great Trading Path" and to the "Road to Cape Fear" (the trail road from Salem to Fayetteville). For almost 200 years, this early historic pottery making site would be lost and would go unnoticed.

For over 200 years, the Mount Shepherd property passed through many property owners. The Great Depression often caused ownership of tracts to be lost in foreclosures, and such was the case with the Mount Shepherd tract. In 1939, Delos Hedgecock, a lumber businessman, bought the tract and harvested the timber. On June 2, 1961, Delose Hedgecock and his wife Mary Lee donated the tract which is now the Mount Shepherd Retreat Center, to the High Point District of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. The generous gift of the Hedgecock's made it possible for the Mount Shepherd tract to be developed as a church retreat center and camp for people of all ages.

A few years after the Mount Shepherd tract became a camp, the historic pottery site would be accidentally discovered. The first camp care-takers, Walter and Evelyn Farlow, moved into the care-taker's house in 1963. In 1969, the Farlow sons Lee and Geoffrey while playing on the grounds near the house found pieces of broken pottery. Realizing that the pottery fragments were not of recent manufacture, the Farlow's brought the site to the attention of the Seagrove potters Dorothy and Walter Auman. It was the Auman's who recognized the importance of this historic pottery site and helped to investigate it.

Following the initial discovery, the Aumans in 1971 formed the North Carolina Historical Potters Exploration, Inc. (NCHPE) to research the site. In October 1971, J.H. Kelly and A.R. Mountford from Stoke-On-Trent Museum in Staffordshire, England, were hired by NCHPE to conduct preliminary archaeological investigations at the Mount Shepherd pottery site. Kelly and Mountford excavated three test trenches that indicated

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the site was well preserved, and they recommended that more intensive investigations be undertaken. Kelly stated, "This is an extremely important ceramic site from which much information about the colonization of North Carolina and the development of American ceramics can be got."

In the spring of 1974, the Aumans contacted archaeologist Alain Outlaw, and he was hired from the Virginia Historic Landmark Commission to conduct additional excavations at the site. He excavated two major areas of the site that summer. The next year a grant from the Bicentennial Commission made it possible to rehire Outlaw to conduct an on-site field school with the students of Dr. David McLean of St. Andrews Presbyterian College, Louisburg, North Carolina.

The Mount Shepherd pottery site has provided a wealth of information about early historic pottery making in North Carolina, especially as it might relate to the Moravian Wachovia Community. Outlaw's excavations revealed the remains of a five-flued circular kiln and several structures associated with the pottery manufacturing operations. A large quantity and wide variety of pottery objects were recovered, including stove tiles, smoking pipes, utilitarian earthenware, and decorated slipware production. Outlaw, using comparative dating from dated similar design and styled pottery, gave an arbitrary time period for the pottery site as between 1773 and 1800. Also, 18th century nails and glass and several dated old coins were found at the site.

In 1975, Outlaw stated that the Mount Shepherd site is "extremely important since no substantial eighteenth century kiln remains have been unearthed at either nearby Bethabara or Salem, both Moravian pottery manufacturing centers in the second half of the 1700's." Outlaw concluded that when the site is further fully explored, the site would be of "added significance in gaining a better understanding of the regional folk pottery tradition in the North Carolina Piedmont."

Other conclusions drawn by Outlaw, as he completed his second summer of work, were stated in a Randolph Guide article in 1975. The unknown potter was a master potter who may have had apprentices assisting him. This master potter, if not German, had "Germanic tendencies" or influences by the Moravian potters of Old Salem and Bethabara.

Due to the lack of funds, the site was never fully excavated and examined. After the summer work of 1975, the excavated areas were covered and filled with sand, and natural growth cover was allowed to return over the site. A temporary security fence was also installed to help protect the examined areas.

For several years, the identity of the potter at the historic Mount Shepherd site remained a complete mystery. Then in May, 1980, L. McKay Whatley, in an extensive detailed research article, entitled "The Mount Shepherd Pottery: Correlating Archaeology and History" published in the Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts, made a compelling case that a Philip Jacob Meyer, apprenticed by the Salem Potter Gottfried Aust, was the master potter at the Mount Shepherd site between 1793 and 1799.

The significance of the Mount Shepherd pottery site was further recognized in 1980 when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Archaeologist Alain C. Outlaw wrote the National Register Nomination in 1975.

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In 2007, a small grant from the North Carolina Archaeological Society allowed the consolidation and curation of the artifact collection housed at the Mount Shepherd Retreat Center. This led to new studies of the material that was sponsored by the Wheatland Foundation, Inc., Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

In the 2009 published book, *Ceramics In America 2009*, Alain C. Outlaw wrote a full chapter entitled “The Mount Shepherd Pottery Site, Randolph County, North Carolina.” In his latest written comments on the Mount Shepherd site, Outlaw highlights the continued significance of the 1974-75 Mount Shepherd excavation. He states, “The excavation of the Mount Shepherd site represents the most comprehensive documentation of a late-eighteenth-century earthenware pottery in the piedmont region of North Carolina.” Outlaw also recognizes the identity of Jacob Meyer as the Mount Shepherd potter and his relationship and his ceramics to the Wachovia potters and styles. “The pottery recovered there offers insights into Jacob Meyer’s work and provides clear evidence of his training with Gottfried Aust, Gottlob Krause, and other Wachovia potters.”

When recently contacted in 2010, Outlaw stated that although more areas could be excavated at the Mount Shepherd location, a higher priority should be given to protecting the 1974 and 1975 excavated areas. The previous excavation areas should be stabilized against natural erosion and the security fence repaired. The interpretive signage should be upgraded as well. All these measures should be accomplished under the supervision of a professional archaeologist.

Today, 2010, the Mount Shepherd property of 542 acres not only houses the county’s first excavated and earliest pottery manufacturing site, it also houses the Mount Shepherd Retreat Center and Camp. The largest use of this camp is for summer youth and children’s camping and ministry activities. Facilities are used year round for youth and adults and special programs. Facilities and programs are also available for environmental workshops, and other educational activities. Hiking trails, quiet inspirational gatherings, high ropes course and special water related activities are provided.

Bill Johnson, the past chairman and a current member of the board of directors for the Mount Shepherd Camp in 2010 gives the following assessment of the relationship of the historic pottery site with the camp’s present and future plans: “Pottery is now part of the summer program at Mount Shepherd’s youth camps. We feel that having pottery heritage and research gives us a unique program that can give our campers experience that can’t be found elsewhere. In our long range plan we hope to develop a pottery museum that can be available to our educational programs and even for public display. As resources become available, we hope that further excavation can also be done on this site, possibly even using the process for educational purposes as we do it. Additional security must be developed to protect the area and we hope to provide the resources to preserve this rich historical site.”

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Randolph Guide Articles