

The Identity of the Mount Shepherd Potter and His Work
Summarized and Critiqued by Randle E. Brim

Based On and Taken From the Following Journal Article

“The Mount Shepherd Pottery: Correlating Archaeology and History”
Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts, May 1980, Pages 21-57
Published by The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA)
by L. McKay Whatley

In an extensive 36 page journal analysis of primary historical and archaeological sources, of both Moravian and Randolph County documents, and of ceramic comparisons between Mount Shepherd pottery and Moravian Forsyth pottery, Whatley makes a compelling case for both the origin of the pottery and the identity of the unknown master potter at the historic Mount. Shepherd Archeological Pottery Site. In his article entitled, “The Mount Shepherd Pottery: Correlating Archaeology and History” published in the Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts in May, 1980, Whatley uses extensive research of primary sources to establish the strong possibility that the pottery was of a Moravian variety and style and that a Philip Jacob Meyer was the Master Potter at the Mount Shepherd Site between 1793 and 1799.

Whatley contends that with the initial discovery of the Mount Shepherd pottery site, a strong historical authoritative context was not established employing comparative archaeological analysis of pottery ceramics and primary documentary materials. Too much reliance was made on local and oral traditional history suggesting “that English potters from the Staffordshire district had settled in Randolph in the mid-18th century Because of strong local tradition, it was naturally assumed that the pottery site was linked with English ceramic tradition.” Initially, the Mount Shepherd ceramic finds were divorced from any authoritative comparisons.

Whatley points to the significant excavation in the 1960’s and finds of the mid-18th century Moravian settlement of Bethabara in Forsyth County, especially as it related to the two pottery sites of the potter Gottfried Aust (first established in 1756) and Aust’s former apprentice, Rudolf Christ (operated in the 1780’s). Both potters later worked in the town of Salem, established in 1766, six miles from Bethabara. A thorough analysis of these potters and their style of ceramics provided an authoritative basis of comparison with the Mount Shepherd pottery.

Whatley contends that as the excavation of the Mount Shepherd pottery site proceeded and as more ceramic pieces were discovered, “it became increasingly evident that some relationship existed between the potter working at Mount Shepherd and the various Moravian potters working at Salem and Bethabara. Whatley cited various examples of similar comparisons between the Mount Shepherd and the Forsyth Moravian ceramics. “The reed-stem tobacco pipes found at Mt Shepherd are very similar to one type found in the kiln waster dump at Aust’s first pottery site in Bethabara. ... The decorated ware at Mount Shepherd is also extremely similar to Moravian examples. The ‘combed’ and checkered bowls have similar counterparts in Salem production. ... the slip decoration of the plates is very closely related to Moravian examples”

Page 2 of 2; The Identity of the Mount Shepherd Potter and His Work

The existence of the stove tiles found at the Mount Shepherd site, “the Minuteman” and “the Dragoon,” bears a striking connection with Moravian communities. Although the subject matter of the tiles from the two locations are different, Whatley contends that the use and the existence of these stove tiles “was almost completely limited to Moravian settlements in 18th century America.”

Other ceramic finds suggested both a connection to Moravian pottery and to the Moravian master potter Gottfried Aust. Aust established a standard pricing code for pottery pieces that he scratched on the bottoms with a Roman numeral code. The potter at Mount Shepherd used a similar pricing code on the pottery bottoms. Whatley contends that this similarity strongly suggests a working relationship between Aust and the Mount Shepherd potter.

Who was this mystery potter? Whatley goes to great length with research and documentation to establish the identity of the Mount Shepherd potter. He employs an extensive deed search to establish the identity of the property owner of this site during the 1790’s. Initial attempts and inquiries were directed at this question by several individuals without success. Plotting the 1790’s properties, and locating land grant records, Whatley identifies the pottery site almost in the center of a 100 acre tract and identifies its owner. This same tract was granted by the State of North Carolina in 1793 to a “Jacob Myers.” Though he may have been at Mount Shepherd before 1793, Randolph County records confirm his presence in the county from October 1793 to November 1799.

Whatley then identifies a Moravian apprentice named “Philip Jacob Meyer” who worked in the pottery shop of Gottfried Aust. Philip Jacob Meyer, also called Jacob Meyer, Jr., was born October 25, 1771, in Bethabara. His family soon moved to the Salem community. In January, 1786, Jacob, Jr. was apprenticed to Gottfried Aust to learn the ‘pottery trade.’ After Aust left for Philadelphia in 1788, his pottery shop was to be run by Jacob Meyer and another apprentice. Due to unacceptable behavior, Meyer was banished from the Salem community in 1789. He later joined his brother-in-law, Gottlob Krause, and worked in his pottery shop in Bethabara. In 1791, he marries. In 1792, his only child was born in Bethania. Jacob Meyer does not appear in the Moravian records again until his death at Bethabara, September 22, 1801.

Whatley strongly concludes that the “Jacob Meyer” apprenticed to Gottfried Aust in 1786 at the Moravian Salem pottery shop was the same “Jacob Myers” who owned the Mount Shepherd pottery site and was its potter from about 1793 to about 1799. Whatley states “Though we cannot state unequivocally that the Mount Shepherd potter was the former Aust apprentice, Jacob Meyer, there is an extremely high probability that this is the case, when the documentary records of Randolph County and the Moravian Archives are compared, the two are found to be complementary, not contradictory.” Whatley also concludes that Jacob Meyer’s work, his practices, and his ceramic productions as discovered at the Mount Shepherd archeological pottery site closely resemble that of Gottfried Aust and Gottlob Krause, his brother-in-law, of the Bethabara and Salem Moravian communities in Forsyth County.

