

# English Anti-Slavery Ceramics at Historic Deerfield\*

Dan Sousa, Assistant Curator

Amanda Lange, Curatorial Department Director and Curator of Historic Interiors

Barbara Mathews, Public Historian and Director of Academic Programs



In 18th and 19th-century Britain, locally-produced ceramics became an important medium for both celebrating the economic benefits of slavery and denouncing its horrors. Port cities such as Liverpool reaped great wealth throughout the 18th century as a result of the slave trade. Ship captains and local businesses, for example, profited by purchasing and selling commodities such as sugar, tobacco, cotton, and human cargo acquired during these voyages. By the late 18th century, however, critics of slavery grew louder. Founded in 1787, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in England began a movement that led to the prohibition of the trade within the British Empire in 1807. This milestone was followed by a second in 1834 when Parliament abolished the practice of slavery (with some exceptions) throughout the British Empire. These changing attitudes towards slavery are poignantly reflected in a group of British ceramics at Historic Deerfield, many of which are recent additions to the collection. These same objects also reveal their problematic nature in their decoration, as both abolitionists and proponents of slavery defaulted to employing stereotypical depictions of African people in the 18th and 19th centuries.

To locate the ceramics discussed in this handout, please refer to the item's "*Location*" (listed in red type with each object description), and the attached map of the Museum's Attic. For each glass case, the top shelf is shelf 1, the shelf below it is shelf 2, etc.



**Punch bowl, probably made in Staffordshire, England, and decorated in Liverpool, England, 1760. White salt-glazed stoneware with overglaze polychrome enamels. 67.189.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 38, Shelf 3*

A rare white salt-glazed stoneware punch bowl commemorates the 1760 voyage of the Liverpool slave ship *Friendship*. The bowl provides a type of metaphorical representation of the whole voyage, and appears to include scenes from West Africa, the West Indies, and the return home painted on the sides of the bowl. Turreted structures possibly depict slave castles on Africa's west coast—fortresses constructed by the British and Dutch for holding captured men and women before shipment overseas—or other fortifications in the West Indies. A rare image of several black figures may depict enslaved laborers harvesting tobacco in the West Indies. A third scene, a gentleman presenting a seated lady with a pouch, is possibly a rendition of the popular 18th-century print, "The Sailor's Return"—a celebratory scene in which a sailor presents his lover with a purse full of riches earned from a successful voyage. This imagery, combined with the bowl's inscription "Success to the Friendship [sic]," highlights the routine nature of the trade in the 18th century and the profitability such a voyage afforded the ship's captain and investors.



**Jug, Staffordshire, England, 1820-1840. Lead-glazed, refined white earthenware, pink luster, overglaze black enamel, transfer print. Museum Collections Fund, 2019.45.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 49, Shelf 5*

By the early 19th century, imagery on British ceramics related to slavery and the slave trade had changed drastically. Rather than celebrating the profits earned from the trade, designs condemned slavery. This luster-decorated jug with a scene of a seated enslaved man partly bound in chains is accompanied by the phrase "Am not I a Man and a Brother"—a design likely inspired by a jasperware medallion produced by Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) in 1787. This scene, along with a lengthy verse from William Cowper's (1731-1800) poem "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) printed on the reverse, highlights the plight of the enslaved while appealing to a sense of common humanity. The jug's small size suggests it served as a display piece in the home and was not actually used. Booths at anti-slavery fairs sold similar jugs and other objects to support the cause. Such fairs were especially popular in the northeastern United States beginning in the 1830s and continuing up until the Civil War.



**Plate, England, 1830-1850. Bone china, black enamel. Museum purchase with funds provided by Anne K. Groves, 2019.54.1.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 50, Shelf 3*

Antislavery activists commonly evoked religious sentiments to denounce the practice of slavery. This porcelain plate, featuring a scene of a seated enslaved woman cradling her sick or possibly deceased child in her arms, includes two verses from the Old Testament: "I am oppressed undertake for me [Isaiah 38:14]" and "I labour and have no rest [Lamentations 5:5]." The image, taken from the "Third Report of the Female Society for Birmingham, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Walsall, and their Respective Neighbourhoods, for the Relief of British Negro Slaves" (1828), prompted empathy from its white viewers by depicting the enslaved woman as a caring, maternal figure. Antislavery activists reminded viewers, especially women, that slavery struck at the heart of the sacred bond between mother and child. Slavery's desecration of this most fundamental of all human relationships was often cast in religious terms.

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**Jug, Ridgway & Abington (1845–1860), Hanley, Staffordshire, England, ca. 1855. Green-colored, smear-glazed stoneware, pewter. Museum Collections Fund, 2019.58.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 50, Shelf 2*

Often, popular literature of the day played an important role in fueling abolitionist fervor. Most famous was Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1811–1896) anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). It received wide acclaim after its publication, encouraging entrepreneurial potters to include scenes from the novel on their ceramics. A green stoneware jug features relief-molded decoration of two scenes from Beecher's novel: a slave auction and the escape of the enslaved woman Eliza carrying her child across the Ohio River. The depiction of Eliza's race to freedom over the frozen river—a perilous flight precipitated by fears that her child would be taken from her and sold to another master—effectively captures the intensity of the scene recorded in Beecher's book, and would have likely been easily recognizable to readers of the novel.



**Child's cup, Staffordshire, England, 1852–1855. Lead-glazed bone china, overglaze black enamel, transfer print. Gift from the collection of William C. Wock, Fonda, New York, 2016.15.1.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 27, Shelf 3*

Scenes from Beecher's novel were often copied directly from illustrations printed in the various editions. The scene on this cup, "Uncle Tom teaching the two Negro women the Bible," is believed to have been taken from the pirated British edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, printed in London by George Routledge and Co. in 1852. The appearance of these scenes on an object made for a child's use highlights how adults sought to educate their children in antislavery principles within a Christian context.



**Cup, England, ca. 1830. Bone china, black enamel. Museum Purchase with Funds Provided by Anne K. Groves, 2019.54.2.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 50, Shelf 3*

In contrast to the other anti-slavery ceramics highlighted in this handout, which largely recognized the plight of the enslaved, this example depicts two men being granted freedom from their slaveholder. The scene on the cup, titled "Liberty given to the Slaves," depicts the delivery of manumission papers—legal documents releasing the enslaved from a lifetime of servitude. The cup's small size indicates that it may have been made for children, though it is possible that potteries produced these smaller-sized ceramics for a wider age range.



**Miniature mug, England, 1820–1830. Bone china, black enamel, gilding. Museum purchase with funds provided by Anne K. Groves, 2019.54.3.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 50, Shelf 3*

The survival of a number of anti-slavery ceramics for children may reveal abolitionists' hopes and intentions to educate a younger generation of activists. Miniature cups, including this example with a scene of a kneeling enslaved man in chains, may have been part of a child's toy tea set.



**Plate, Staffordshire, England, ca. 1850. Lead-glazed, white earthenware, black enamel. Museum Collections Fund, 2020.3.1.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 27, Shelf 3*

Anti-slavery ceramics educated the young about the hardships and injustices of slavery. This small plate, for instance, illustrated not only a step in the process of making sugar but also the hard labor and hazards enslaved laborers endured from a young age. At the center of the scene, a child inserts stalks of sugar cane into a three-roller grinding mill with his hands precariously close to the rollers, which included sharp blades to shred the cane.



**Plate, Staffordshire, England, ca. 1820. Lead-glazed, white earthenware (pearlware), overglaze polychrome enamels. Museum Collections Fund, 2020.3.2.**

*Location: Museum's Attic, Case 27, Shelf 3*

Other examples of anti-slavery ceramics were more explicit in exposing the harsh realities of the enslaved experience. This small plate illustrates the very first step in the process of enslavement: the capture of Africans in their native homeland before shipment overseas. In this scene, two Africans are detained by two British sailors brandishing a pistol and a whip. Verses from Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" encircle the scene. The bright colors and relief molded floral decoration on the rim of the plate stand in stark contrast to the plate's violent image.

