

Very Rough Draft

A TALE OF TWO PRIVIES:

SOURCES OF VARIABILITY IN WORKINGCLASS ASSEMBLAGES

Cara L. Wise

Delaware Division of Parks and Recreation

Current approaches to the study of urban groups depend to a large extent on the analysis of particular categories of artifacts, each of which is treated more or less in isolation. Furthermore, the emphasis has been on examining variability between broad social groups (Otto 1977; Baker 1980; Bridges and Salwen 1980; Miller 1980; Cressey, Stephens, Shephard, and Magic 1982). This has led to an approach which stresses homogeneity within groups, rather than variability, and frequently produces research that is based on simplistic assumptions and results in self-evident answers.

I have suggested elsewhere (Wise 1983a) that historical archaeologists in general, and urban archaeologists in

particular, need to address themselves to questions which can be answered more effectively through archaeological research techniques than through historical research techniques. I have also suggested that questions which focus on consumer behavior are particularly appropriate for archaeological research. However, the nature of archaeological assemblages presents certain very real limitations. To begin with, these assemblages represent merely "a distorted reflection" of a behavioral system (Schiffer 1976:11-12), rather than the system itself. Furthermore, a review of standard of living studies conducted in the first decade of the twentieth century (More 1907; Chapin 1909; Byington 1910; and Streightoff 1911) indicates that ceramics, the artifacts that archaeologists rely on most heavily for socio-economic data (largely because they are the most abundant), account for only a very small proportion of the household expenditure. Finally, archaeological assemblages, even within a single social or economic group, display a wide range of variability that is difficult to deal with when examined in detail. Quantitative techniques such as those developed by South (1977) are, in fact, most useful for uncovering the similarities between apparently disparate groups or for grouping them into broad categories. Nonetheless, by combining archaeological and historical research techniques with the insights of modern material culture studies, it is truly, not merely theoretically, possible to achieve a better

understanding of the relationship between material assemblages and the behavioral system.

Although only a preliminary analysis of the archaeological collection has been completed, the artifact assemblages recovered from two privies in a workingclass neighborhood of Wilmington, Delaware, provide an opportunity to explore this approach. At first glance, these assemblages present certain inconsistencies which are not readily explainable. For instance, although the two privies were clearly filled at about the same time, probably after 1910, one privy contains many items dating from about 1850, while the other contains many items which clearly date after 1890, and others which probably date after 1910. There are also significant differences in the purchase cost of the ceramics in these assemblages, as well as in the range of ceramic and glass items recovered. However, by considering information from standard of living studies conducted at the turn of the century and from modern material culture studies conducted within the last decade, and by considering the effect of specific discard activities on the archaeological record, it is possible to begin to understand how these assemblages relate to the inventory of material items in use by the household at the time they were discarded or at some point prior to their discard, as well as the manner in which these items were used. This is a first essential step in

reconstructing the kinds of purchasing decisions made by these households.

Five privies associated with the four properties on the south side of Lafayette Street and with one property at the corner of Lafayette and Justison Streets were excavated in 1979 by Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Research, Inc. as part of a location/identification study conducted for the Delaware Department of Transportation. All five privies had been looted by bottle collectors, but the archaeological contractor felt that useful information could be obtained by re-excavating the looted privies, and that the experience gained here would help to prevent errors in the excavation of intact features elsewhere in the project area (Richard L. Regensburg: personal communication 1984, Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Research n.d.).

This judgement was based to a large degree on an understanding of the way in which these particular bottle collectors operated. Once a privy was located by probing and uncovered, one of the bottle collectors would stand in the privy and dig through the fill, pushing the loosened dirt to one side and putting bottles or other objects of interest into a bucket, which would then be hauled up to the surface by the other members of the team. When the pile of loosened fill was too large to uncover any more artifacts, the fill

was also hauled to the surface and dumped next to the open privy. When the bottle collectors had finished digging through the fill, they would leave the last pile of loosened fill in the privy. They would then backfill the privy, shoving in the backdirt pile next to the privy, and throwing in any large objects, such as cinder blocks and old refrigerators, that might be lying around nearby. These bottle collectors were generally conscientious about backfilling in order to avoid antagonizing property owners, particularly the City of Wilmington, from whom they had obtained permission to dig. This means that most, if not all, of the artifacts recovered from a re-excavated privy were originally deposited in that privy, although some more modern artifacts may have been included during backfilling, and stratigraphic relationships had been destroyed.

The privies of this tale are located in the rear yards of 406 and 404 Lafayette Street, a one-block alley on the western edge of the urban core of Wilmington, Delaware. These two properties were part of four-residence row constructed after 1845 as speculative housing, and were owned as a single block until about 1880, when Bridget Feeney began selling off one lot at a time after the death of her husband. Dennis and Julia Curran purchased 406 Lafayette in 1892, and John Curran purchased 404 Lafayette in 1886 (Wilmington City Registry). John Curran, laborer, lived on this property with

his wife Annie until 1906, but Annie returned in 1908, apparently after John's death. She appears to have lived there until her own death about ten years later. Dennis and Julia Curran, on the other hand, never lived at 406 Lafayette. The heads of the households occupying this property were most frequently listed as laborers in the city directories, and rarely lived there for more than a few years. In 1911, a sewer was installed in Lafayette Street, and all the properties along the street were connected within a year (City of Wilmington Sewer Department Work Orders). Annie Curran sold her property to Catherine Curran, probably to defray the cost of sewer installation, although she continued to live there.

The Front Street block between Justison and Washington, including the Lafayette Street properties, was purchased by the Wilmington Housing Authority in the late 1960's for urban renewal. The existing structures were demolished and the remaining demolition rubble covered by select fill, a coarse sand and gravel with a high compaction rating. The entire block was then left to be overgrown with grass and a variety of weeds. All five of these re-excavated were barrel-lined, and all but one were three or four barrels deep. Feature 6, one of the features to be considered here, consisted of only one slightly truncated barrel. Although all five privies had been disturbed by the bottle collectors, it was found that

Feature 5, the other feature considered in this paper, had been only partially disturbed and that more than half of the original contents was undisturbed. The inferences and conclusions which I draw here are largely possible because of the presence of these undisturbed deposits.

It is likely that the privies associated with all of these properties were abandoned shortly after the installation of sewers. Techniques for disposing of human wastes which did not require the use of either a subsurface privy or a sewer, such as dry privy arrangements, were available and in use in many urban areas during this time period, but I have not as yet found any evidence that these techniques were in use in Wilmington. Meanceramic dates are not appropriate for this period, but Feature 5 contained several pressed glass patterns which were first manufactured in the 1890's as well as bottles which date from the beginning of the twentieth century. Regardless of when the privies were actually abandoned, the archaeological evidence indicates that the two privies being considered here (Features 5 and 6) were filled at about the same time. The undisturbed levels of Feature 5 contained crossmends with at least 37 vessels recovered from Feature 6, and Feature 6 contained a smaller number of crossmends with vessels in Feature 5. It is important to understand that these crossmends did not result from the accidental inclusion of

sherds which had been kicking around on the surface for long periods of time. None of these crossmends (in fact, none of the sherds from either privy) displayed frost-spalling, a common source of damage to sherds in surface deposits. We can, therefore, conclude that the two privies were filled at about the same time, probably within the same year. As I have indicated, however, the material assemblages are very different.

To begin with, the assemblages in these privies appear to be the result of different disposal processes. The occupants of 406 Lafayette (Feature 6) disposed of a vast quantity of glass and ceramic objects (215 ceramic vessels and 96 glass vessels) in a short space of time. This is unlikely to have occurred through normal breakage. Mrs. Curran, on the other hand, disposed of only 37 ceramic vessels in a similar period of time. Furthermore, although 123 glass vessels were recovered from Feature 5, 30% of these vessels were pharmaceutical, condiment, and household chemical bottles which were probably discarded soon after the contents had been used, while in Feature 6 less than 9% of the glass vessels were from this group. This suggests that the assemblage from Feature 5 was primarily a result of daily disposal activities, in which a variety of items are discarded in a discrete series of events because they are broken or used up, while the assemblage from Feature 6 was

the result of "housecleaning" activities, in which old, obsolete, and/or no longer wanted items are discarded in a single event.

The relative frequency of certain ceramic vessels forms also suggests that the two assemblages are the result of different disposal processes. Miller has suggested (1980:13) that cups are more likely to break during normal usage than saucers because they are handled more and are subjected to extremes of temperature. This means that a ceramic collection which accumulates from refuse discarded during daily activities is likely to contain a higher frequency of cups in comparison with saucers. And, in fact, 26 cups were represented in the Feature 5 assemblage, but only 10 saucers. The Feature 6 assemblage, on the other hand, produced equal numbers of cups and saucers.

A closer look at the Feature 6 assemblage provides further confirmation of this interpretation. To begin with, the actual manufacture period of many of the artifacts in this collection appear to date about fifty years earlier than the closing of the feature. Among other items, there are the bases of two burning fluid lamps of a type dating from the 1850's (Spillman 1980:316) and a nearly complete burning fluid hand lamp from the same period. The use of these types of lamps had, however, been superseded almost universally by

kerosene lamps by the turn of the century (Spillman 198 : ). Approximately 16% of the ceramic vessels from this feature are transfer printed wares typical of the mid-nineteenth century. One pattern, "Carrara", made by J. Holland, has a date mark, Nov. 4, 1852. Other artifacts from this time period include fragments of at least four Washington/Taylor historic flasks, as well as other decorated flasks. Feature 5, on the other hand, shows no such evidence of reuse.

The evidence of reuse in Feature 6 is of particular interest because of parallels with certain modern material culture studies conducted at the University of Arizona. Based on a study of reuse patterns for furniture and appliances conducted in Tucson in 1976, Schiffer, Downing, and McCarthy concluded (1981:84) that the major factors promoting household acquisition through reuse were:

1. Early stages of the household developmental cycle.
2. Low status or income.
3. High residential mobility.

Many of the households which occupied 406 Lafayette Street fit this profile. Certainly the presence of glass and

ceramic vessels from the 1850's suggests that reuse was one mechanism used by the household which produced the assemblage in Feature 6 to acquire materials items. Schiffer and his colleagues (1981:84) also suggest that the disposal of items in the household inventory, whether by discard or through reuse mechanisms, can be related to changes in the social status of either individuals or households. Moving a household from one residence to another is one kind of change which frequently results in the disposal of material culture (Downing, personal communication). If this move is accompanied by a rise in economic status, the conditions may be ideal for disposing of secondhand items for which new replacements can be purchased for a small fraction of the household's annual income. This may be the situation which produced the assemblage in Feature 6.

Recognizing how items in an assemblage have been acquired is only one step in understanding the relationship between the archaeological assemblage and the inventory of material items in use by a household. While many reused items are laterally cycled, that is to say, they are transferred from one owner to another, but continue to serve the same purpose (Schiffer et al. 1981:68). Others may be changed either in form (recycling) or in function (secondary reuse). None of the reused items from Feature 6 shows evidence of recycling, but at least some may have been used

for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended. This is particularly true of the historic flasks, which were originally made to contain whiskey. It is, however, unlikely that they continued to be used for this purpose for forty or fifty years. Instead, their function changed from "container" to "decoration". Household descriptions and photographs in standard of living studies from the first decade of the century (More 1907, Byington 1910) suggest that bric-a-brac was a common feature of workingclass households occupying residences of the same size as the Lafayette Street properties. The transfer printed ceramics may also have served decorative purposes rather than the more utilitarian functions for which they were originally intended.

The fact that these two assemblages were the result of different disposal practices affects the degree to which they reflect other aspects of the behavioral system. The artifacts recovered from Feature 5 are likely to provide information on a variety of activities which occurred on a regular basis during the period in which the privy was filled. The artifacts recovered from Feature 6, on the other hand, reflect a specific group of items, many of which appear to have been secondhand, and which were being replaced. Thus, the ceramic assemblage from Feature 6 appears to be fairly complete. It includes everything from flower pots to

teaware, and from it we should be able to develop a fairly complete description of the role of ceramics in the household, even though a wide variety of styles are represented. Teawares, for instance, are divided between the more delicate handpainted vessels which include teapot fragments as well as flaring sided cups with matching saucers in a number of different patterns, and the CC, ironstone, and stamp decorated vessels, which include straight-sided cups, mostly plain saucers, and no teapots. Plates are either shell-edged or transfer-printed, and may mark a distinction between everyday dishes and "good" dishes. I should note here that these shell-edged plates are not those typical of the first half of the nineteenth century, but rather appear to be very late examples on a white ironstone body with a bluish glaze. A variety of locally made redwares and stonewares, including pie pans, pitchers, and jars, were used in the kitchen for both storage and cooking.

The ceramic assemblage from Feature 5, on the other hand, is considerably less varied. This may be because Mrs. Curran owned fewer ceramic items, but it is more likely that she simply didn't break enough pieces during the time that her privy was being filled to provide a more complete picture. Nonetheless, some information can be obtained. The matching decal decorated plate and cup probably represent her "best" dishes. Both CC and ironstone cups and saucers are

present, and they are nearly identical in form, suggesting that these two wares served essentially the same function in this household, despite differences in the purchase price. There is no evidence of sets of dishes in either ware.

Although Feature 5 provides little information on Mrs. Curran's ceramic inventory, there is a variety of information on her daily life because the artifacts discarded were primarily those items (mostly bottles) which broke or were used up while in current use, rather than those items which were no longer in current use or which were being replaced. Some of the same kinds of artifacts are found in Feature 6, but the picture is obscured by the "housecleaning" character of the overall assemblage. The artifacts indicative of daily activities found in Feature 5 can be divided into the following major groups: household chemicals, pickles and condiments, food preparation, and recreational activities (including smoking, drinking, and children's games). Three bottles marked "Myer's Sprinkling Washing Blue" and two others of the same size and shape which were unmarked but which had a blue stain on the inside may reflect the fact that Mrs. Curran took in laundry. Two smaller bottles with black and purple stains may have contained dyes. Fragments of two Mason jars indicate that Mrs. Curran canned fruits or vegetables for use during the winter. Although the small rear yard was large enough for a small garden, it is also

possible that such foods were purchased from vendors. Mrs. Curran also did at least some baking, indicated by the presence of Rumford baking powder bottles. The range of pickle and condiment bottles is probably a reflection of workingclass eating habits as described by a number of researchers at the turn of the century who were appalled by the reliance on pickles, preserves, and condiments for providing variety in the diet. Some 20 pharmaceutical bottles were recovered from Mrs. Curran's property, and at least some of the flasks recovered are of types which were used for either liquor or medicines (Spillman 198 : ). Very few appear to represent patent medicines, although one is labelled "Ague Conqueror". A number of different pharmacies are, however, represented. Approximately 15 flasks, the majority of which are likely to have been used for liquor, were also found in this privy, along with less than a dozen beer or soda bottles. Staski (1984:45) has suggested, based on results from the Tucson garbage project, that the association of high frequencies of alcoholic beverage containers with high frequencies of medicine containers may be of significance. Some caution should, however, be used in attributing evidence of heavy drinking to Mrs. Curran. The presence of a number of well-used pipes suggests the presence of a male boarder. Other evidence suggests that Mrs. Curran herself was a competent and thrifty housekeeper.

What we have, then, are two assemblages on adjoining properties. One property was occupied by a series of households which appear to have been fairly young, and which were also fairly transient. The other property was occupied by a household which was very stable and also quite old. The archaeological assemblage from the property occupied by the transient households appears to represent the discard of a large number of obsolete and no longer needed items, while the assemblage from the property occupied by the more stable household appears to represent the discard of broken and used up items. The material assemblage recovered from the property occupied by the younger households is generally older than that recovered from the older household, indicating that many items had been acquired through reuse. Using conventional measures, the ceramic assemblage from the younger household appears to have a higher value than that recovered from the older household, but this is a reflection of differences in both the acquisition processes and the disposal processes in operation in these two households. The assemblage resulting from discard in the course of daily activities provides much information about the way in which the occupants of the property lived on a day-to-day basis, information which will be particularly useful in understanding consumer behavior.

The assemblages from the privies at 406 and 404 Lafayette Street present an unusual opportunity to look at variability in the archaeological record during a short period of time while limiting the range of variability in the human population which produced this record. The addition of data from the privy at 106 Justison Street, which also appears to have been filled at the same time as the Lafayette Street features, will expand this potential. The variability in these archaeological assemblages is a reflection of differences in the acquisition, use, and discard of the material inventory of these households. Once we understand these relationships, we can begin to talk about the behavior, not only of individual households, but also of social groups as consumers. When we can talk about consumer behavior, we can begin to address a variety of other questions about how individuals and groups adapt to life in the urban environment.