

ROULETTED COLONOWARE

AFRICAN-STYLE POTTERY IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

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The recent discovery of 13 colonoware sherds in Charleston, South Carolina, decorated by “folded strip rouletting” marks the first archaeological example of an African potting tradition in the colonial United States (Figure 1). Colonoware is a low-fired coarse earthenware made by enslaved Africans, their descendants, and free and enslaved Native Americans during the colonial period and into the nineteenth century. Its evolution was heavily influenced by the potting traditions of these groups and the Europeans who forced them together during the slave trade. Because this ceramic ware is an amalgam of these cultures and simultaneously produced by two groups, archaeologists have yet to fully define the physical attributes that would identify cultural affiliation.

That said, the identification of a decorative technique with direct ties to West Africa and northern Central Africa provides a unique case in which two colonoware vessels can be attributed to enslaved African potters. A folded strip roulette is made with two or more flexible strips (typically vegetal material) twisted and folded together to create a three-sided tool that results in a repeating pattern when rolled across the unfired surface of a ceramic vessel (Figure 2). While roulettes are commonplace in a diverse number of ceramic-decorating traditions and thus vary significantly in form, the folded strip roulette directly associates with past and present pottery methods in and around the Sahel in Africa.



Figure 1. Colonoware sherds from sites in Charleston: (a) nine folded-strip-rouletted colonoware sherds from Drayton Hall's South Flanker well; (b) folded-strip-rouletted colonoware sherds from the Heyward-Washington House. Photographs courtesy of Corey A. H. Sattes.



Figure 2. Identified repeating patterns on the largest Drayton Hall sherd. These elements repeat every third row and are consistently between 11.5 mm and 12.0 mm apart. Image courtesy of Corey A. H. Sattes.

Ethnographic and archaeological research in Africa has traced the development of rouletted surface treatments and their cultural affiliations (e.g., Connah 1981; Gronenborn and Magnavita 2000; Haour 2011; Haour et al. 2016; Livingstone Smith 2007; Soper 1985). Rouletting began in West and northern Central Africa around 2000 BC, and it is still practiced today (Haour et al. 2016; Livingstone Smith 2007). Specifically, the folded strip roulette first appeared in Mali around 800–400 BC, spreading to the Lake Chad Basin by AD 900, southeastern Mauritania in AD 1200, and further south in the nineteenth century (Gronenborn and Magnavita 2000; Haour et al. 2016). Figure 3 depicts these “style zones,” noting the concentration areas of folded strip roulettes in ethnographic and archaeological contexts.

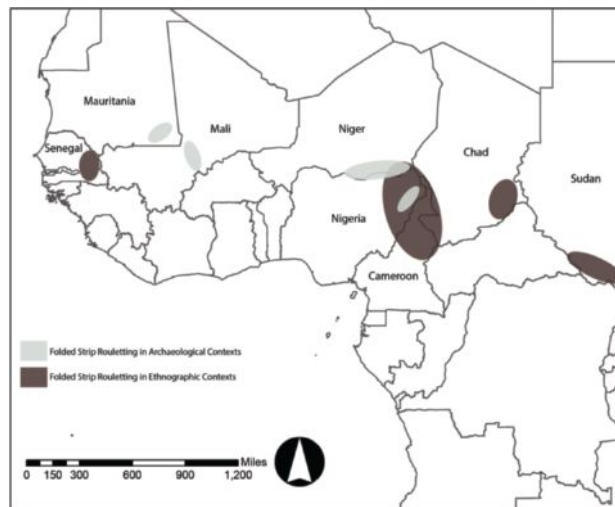


Figure 3. Map depicting the distribution of folded strip rouletting in archaeological and ethnographic contexts in West and northern Central Africa (Haour 2011; Livingstone Smith in Haour et al. 2016). Image courtesy of Jon Bernard Marcoux.

Researchers have also identified two sociopolitical groups that could have been contemporaneous sources for the technique employed on the abovementioned colonoware from Charleston (Gronenborn and Magnavita 2000; Haour 2011). By analyzing the production and decorative types of pottery in the central Sahel region, including that of folded strip rouletting, Gronenborn and Magnavita (2000) trace this particular method to the eighteenth-century communities associated with the Kanem-Borno Empire, a polity controlling much of the area around the Lake Chad Basin around AD 700–1900. Specifically, these researchers identify a group of Kanuri-speaking people under this polity as well as the Hausa-speaking city of Kano, located west of the Kanem-Borno Empire.

Understanding the evolution and geographic range of folded strip rouletting is essential for fully considering the implications of this find in Charleston. The ethnographic and archaeological work provided by the above-listed scholars is vital for positively identifying the colonoware decoration and the technique’s origin. These studies also provide detailed descriptions and images of rouletting, allowing for a visual comparison to the colonoware surface treatment and the near-identical replication of a folded strip roulette using palm fronds and corresponding impression (Figure 4). This experimentation bolsters the evidence found in literature and gives insight into the choices made by the potters at these colonial sites.

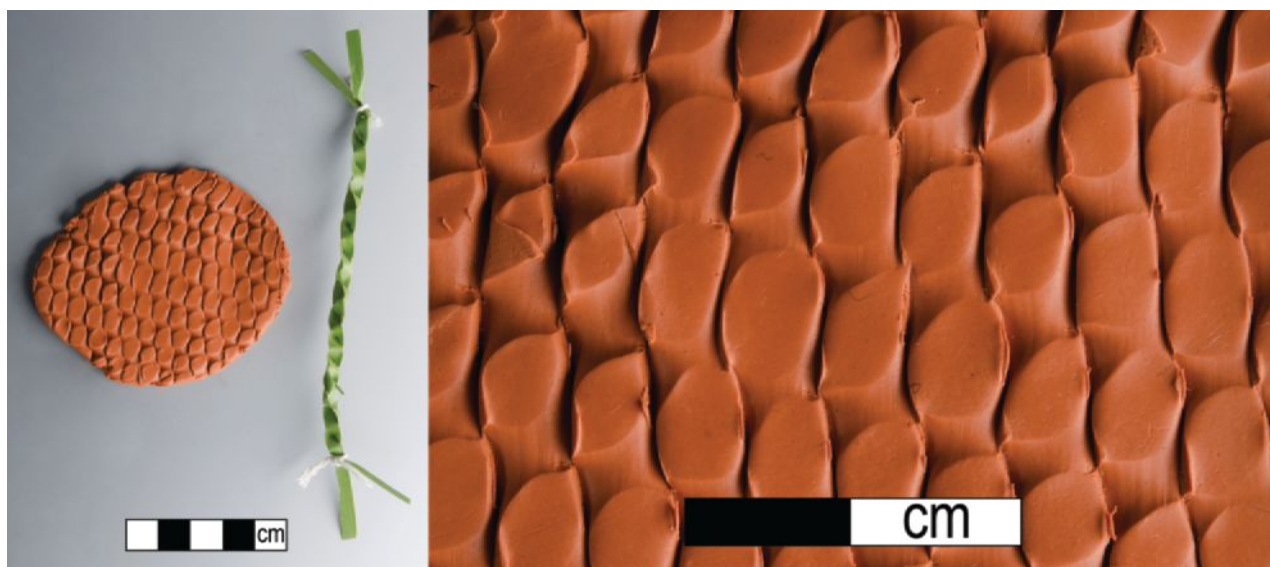


Figure 4. Experimental roulette (left) made with fresh palm fronds picked and entwined into the roulette on the same day. This creates a neat and tight pattern without any fiber striations (right). Photographs courtesy of Corey A. H. Sattes.

Both assemblages were recovered from domestic sites in Charleston: Drayton Hall and the Heyward-Washington House. The former, built along the Ashley River northwest of downtown around 1750, served as the Drayton family's country estate and hub of their plantation properties. The Drayton rouletted sherds were recovered from a well context associated with the house's southernmost flanker building, the recovered artifacts ranging from the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries (Figure 1a). The Heyward-Washington House is located within the heart of the original walled city, built on a property likely granted after the 1690s. The rouletted sherds from this site were recovered from a feature associated with John Milner Jr., who occupied the property in 1749–1768, before the Heywards (Figure 1b). One of the sherds from the Heyward-Washington House (the largest in Figure 1b) was examined by Brian Crane (1993) using neutron activation analysis, and he determined that its clay was most likely locally sourced.

The Drayton Hall and Heyward-Washington House sherds exemplify the characteristic traits of a folded strip roulette pattern: a series of asymmetric diamond-like or quadrilateral shapes in relief that repeat every third element. Paste analysis indicates that the colonoware sherds from each site likely mend together, suggesting that this study only consists of two vessels. The primary differences between each site's rouletted colonoware include the size of the

impression and presence of fibrous striations. The pattern size directly relates to the size of the roulette itself, suggesting that the Heyward-Washington roulette was significantly thicker than the Drayton Hall roulette. The concave impressions on the Heyward-Washington colonoware also portray striations from the roulette's vegetal material, indicating that the material had dried before use. The implications of these physical attributes were corroborated by the experimental manufacturing and use of a roulette, and they reveal different choices made by potters on each of these vessels.

Given the ethnographic and archaeological work done in West Africa and northern Central Africa on rouletting and the confirmation of this surface treatment from two sites in the American South, there is clear evidence for the retention of this decorative knowledge across the Middle Passage and its use on colonoware. That said, it is crucial to examine the full contexts in which these sherds were recovered in order to avoid the problems associated with the search for "Africanisms." The focus on physical objects of direct African heritage sometimes ignores the social complexity and dynamic nature of these cultural markers and associated ethnic groups (Crane 1993; Herskovits 1958; Singleton 1999). Therefore, the broader context of the Lowcountry is examined to support the possibility of seeing retentions of a traditional West and Central African surface treatment on eighteenth-century Charleston

colonoware. The beginnings of the Carolina rice industry in the early 1700s marked an exponential influx of enslaved West Africans, targeted by white plantation owners for their perceived knowledge of rice cultivation. This process thus established direct ties between particular areas of the West African coast and the Lowcountry.

Furthermore, unlike contested interpretations of the West African BaKongo cosmogram and its possible use on colonoware vessels in the Lowcountry (see assorted papers in Ewen [2011] for a synthesis of this debate), the rouletted surface treatment and its presence in the Lowcountry is supported by ethnographic, archaeological, and historical evidence from the Sahel region in Africa. Additionally, the experimental replication of rouletting provides insight into the chain of operations involved in the manufacture of this tool and the required skillset and mental template so far unseen among Native American communities in the U.S. Southeast but that, again, has direct ties to West African ethnic groups.

Colonoware is a crucial artifact type in historical archaeology and sites of slavery in the Southeast because it is the only ceramic ware that can be exclusively attributed to marginalized groups during early America. Given the paucity of information on Africans and Native Americans from colonial historical documents, direct evidence of ethnic affiliation—such as the African-style rouletting—is even more important to colonoware research. Although this sample size is small, it does provoke questions regarding the possible repression of culturally identifying markers or the homogenization of craft due to increased interactions of multiple groups during the colonial period. Further identification of rouletted sherds beyond these two sites would help explore these questions and others surrounding the mechanisms of its survival, who was using it, and what this indicates about identity formation in colonial America.

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