

Images: Ceramic Milk Pan

What Was Found in the Cellar

Several pieces of a milk pan were found in the cellar. A large piece was found buried with the body. It was placed directly on top of the chest and rib cage (Figure 1).

Other pieces were recovered from the trash fill of the cellar. These were rearticulated (re-assembled) with the piece found with the body (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Large piece of milk pan from buried with the body.
(Source: Smithsonian Institution)



Figure 2. Pieces of milk pan from the site that have been rearticulated.
(Source: Smithsonian Institution)

Background

Milk pans are among the most common ceramic forms from colonial sites. Where found, they suggest the former presence of both dairy cows and women, as women performed the duties of processing dairy products. Made in many different places during the colonial period, they were manufactured of low-fired, lead-glazed earthenware, and their use contributed to the high levels of lead in the bones of some individuals of the 17th and 18th centuries.



Figure 3. Milk pan (ca.1618-1635) made by Thomas Ward, potter at the Virginia settlement of Martin's Hundred.
(Source: Colonial Williamsburg)

How Milk Pans Were Used

Fresh milk was poured into the earthenware milk pan, and the pan was placed in a cool area, such as a buttery or dairy, until the cream rose. With an implement such as a copper skimmer, the cream was removed and used to make butter. Finally, the remaining milk was poured off and used for other dairy or cooking purposes.

Source:

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This page is part of the [Smithsonian's The Secret in the Cellar Webcomic](#), an educational resource from the [Written in Bone](#) exhibition, February 2009 - 2014.