



## “Some Fragments of Blue Dutch Tiling” from Russellborough and Brunswick Town

Thomas Beaman, Jr.

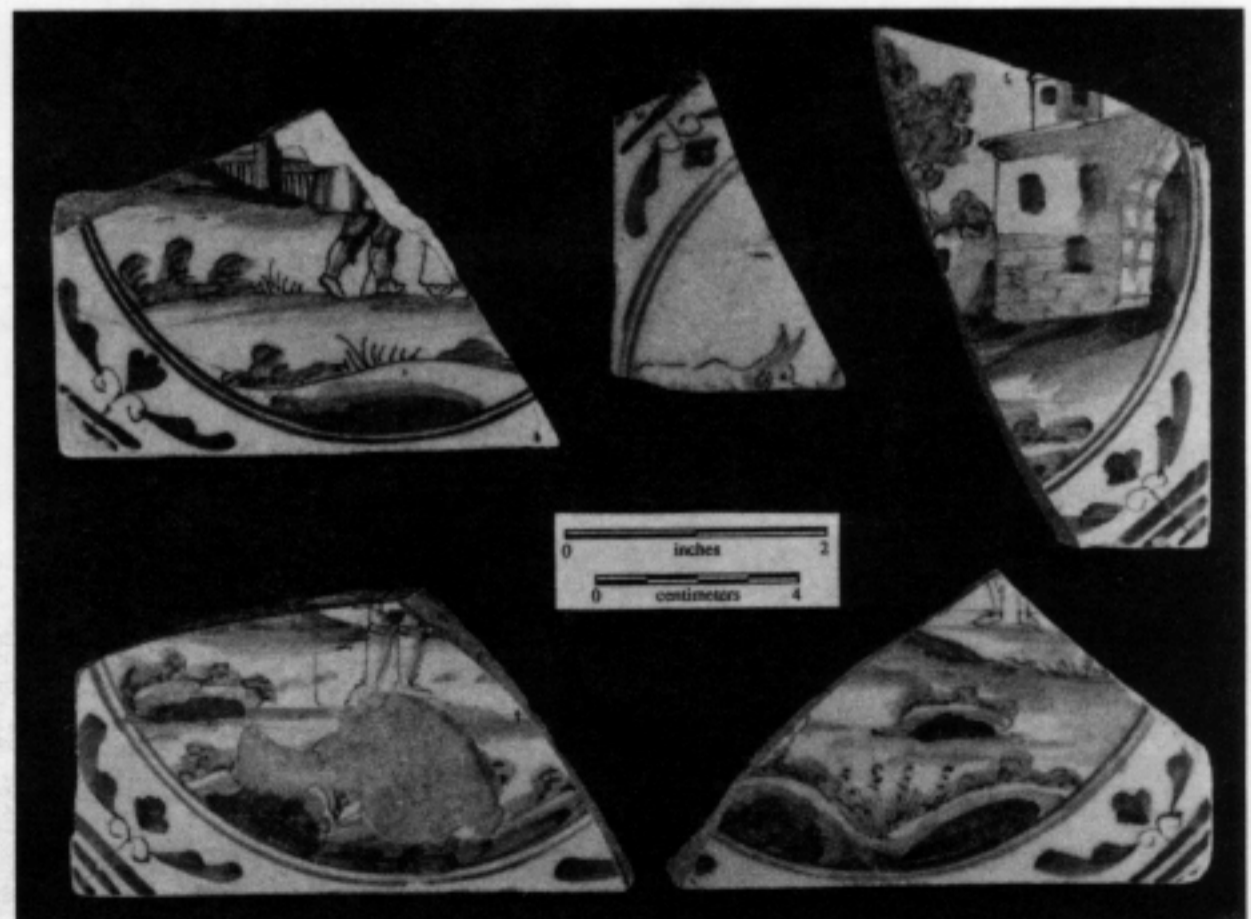
In the late nineteenth century, Orton Plantation resident and Cape Fear Historian James Sprunt set out to locate Russellborough, the former estate of Colonial Governors Arthur Dobbs and William Tryon. An African-American man who had lived at Orton for over 70 years told Sprunt that he remembered hearing of a man named ‘Governor Palace,’ who had once lived in a great house between Orton and Brunswick along the Cape Fear River. The two set off together and, not far from the ruins of the eighteenth-century port of Brunswick, found the stone foundations of the once prominent residence. An examination of the remains prompted Sprunt to write, “A careful excavation of this ruin would doubtless reveal some interesting and possibly valuable relics of Governor Tryon’s household. Near the surface was found, while these lines were being written, some fragments of blue Dutch tiling, doubtless a part of the interior decorations.” Thus began the documentation at Brunswick of a unique and most appealing artifact rarely seen in colonial North Carolina - the decorative delftware (or tin-enameled) tile.

Measuring approximately  $5\frac{1}{4}$  inches (13 centimeters) square and  $\frac{1}{4}$

inch (0.7 centimeters) in thickness, delftware tiles were mortared onto the jambs of fireplaces for decoration. These tiles have been found on archaeological sites in the southern colonies dating from the mid seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, including Jamestown, Williamsburg, Edenton, and Charleston. Traditionally, the

presence of decorative tin-enameled tiles correlates to homes whose owners held a high status, both socially and materially, within a community.

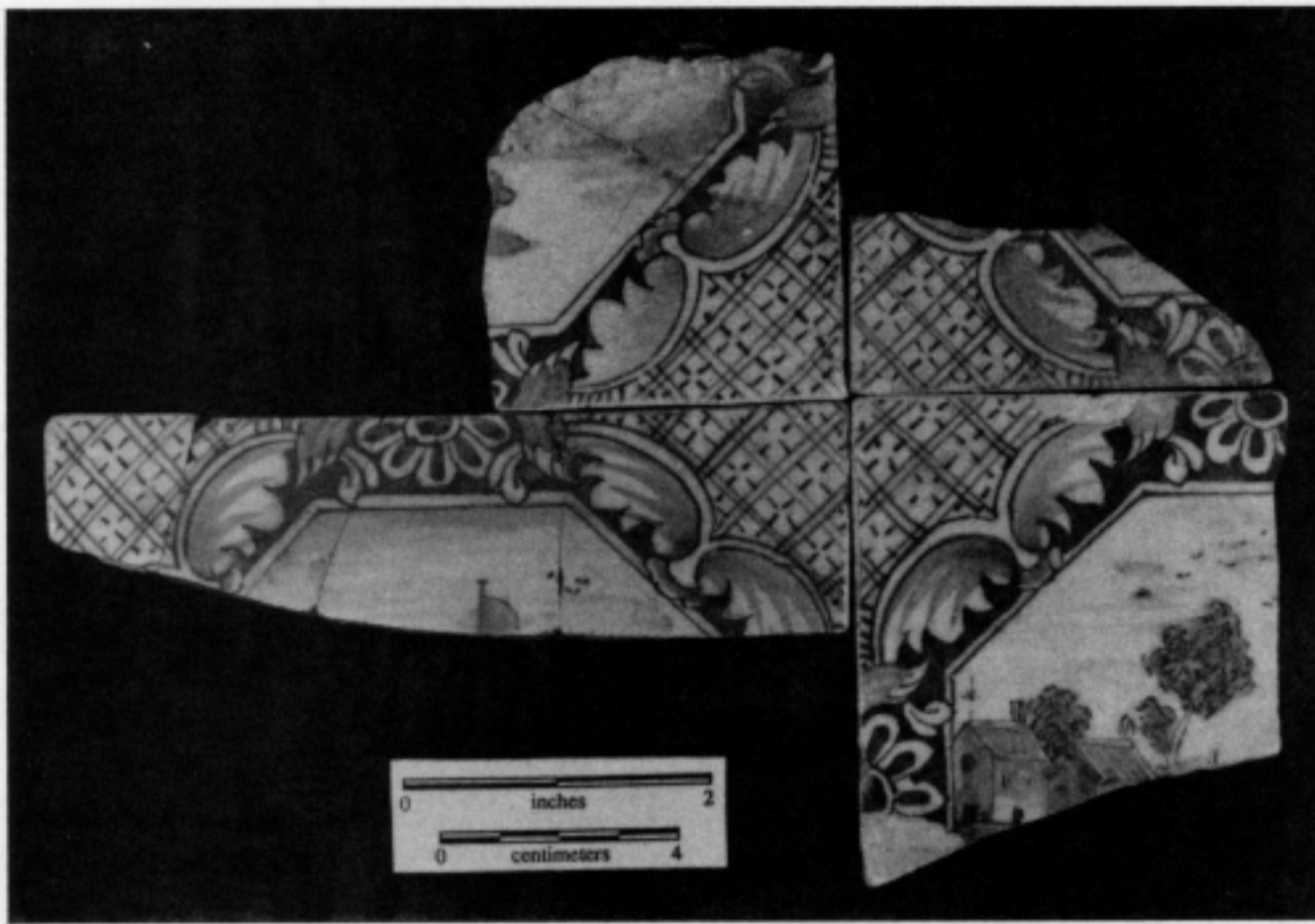
After about 1700, it is difficult to identify the specific manufacturer of a tile set for two reasons. First, tiles were not marked by the factory that manufactured them or by the artisan



Fragments of delftware tile recovered from Russellborough with pastoral decorative motifs. The corners design is referred to as a barred ox-head.

(continued on next page)





Tin-enameled tile fragments from Russellborough with a Louis XV border and decorative diaper corners.

who painted them. Second, the continual movement of craftsmen and artisans around different factories in England and the Netherlands also makes identification difficult. Sometimes decorative borders and corner designs can be used to provide an approximate date for tile and, in rare occasions, to identify the location of a tile set's production. An example of a decorative border and corner design is shown above. This is a Louis XV border design with decorative diaper pattern corners, similar to the molded diaper pattern on white salt-glazed stoneware. Similar sets of tiles with this border and corner pattern are known to have been manufactured in several locations in England from about 1750 until 1780, which in most cases is as close to locating a tile's origin as is possible. This design was found on tile sets recovered from Brunswick.

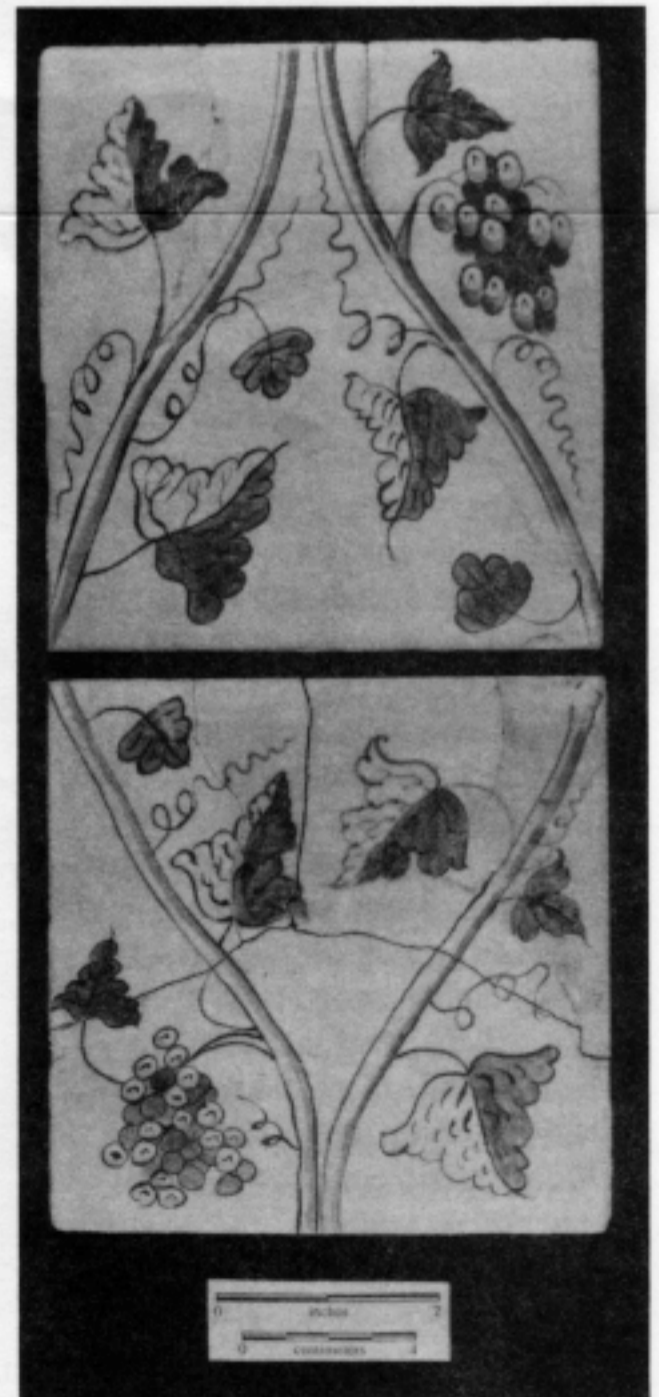
Stanley South's 1950s and 1960s excavations at Brunswick revealed fragments of English and Dutch decorative tin-enameled tiles in three ruins: Russellborough, Prospect Hall, and the Public House and Tailor Shop. The largest collection is from Russellborough. The land where the house was later built was originally sold to sea captain James Russell in 1751. After the abrupt natural death of Russell, the incomplete structure

appears to have stood vacant until Colonial Governor Arthur Dobbs moved to Brunswick in 1758, into what he referred to as "the shell of a very good house." William Tryon occupied the house from Dobbs' death in 1765 until 1770, when he moved into his new 'Palace' in New Bern. William Dry III, Brunswick's Customs Collector, then bought and lived in the residence until its reported destruction by fire in 1776. Under Dry's ownership, visitor Josiah Quincy deemed Russellborough "the house of universal hospitality."

The 1966 excavation of Russellborough's foundation unearthed over 2,700 fragments of decorative tin-enameled tiles. This calculates by weight into an approximate minimum of 164 tiles. Since the structure was destroyed by fire, over 2,000 of the tile fragments were unidentifiable, but six decorative sets were identified among the remaining 701 sherds. Three of the six sets have pastoral decorative motifs. Figures in rural settings with fences, animals, and small structures commonly occur within these sets. Scenes of urban areas with ports are the focus of two more sets, with designs of tall well-painted buildings, waterfront brick walls, and occasionally ships and wooden

pilings to suggest a dock or pier. The final set of decorative tiles identified from Russellborough is of a grapevine, which when added to other tiles with the same pattern, form an infinitely weaving vine.

The grapevine pattern, which was manufactured after 1770 in Liverpool, England, was purchased by William Dry, the only owner of Russellborough after 1770. This pattern was a fitting choice for the owner of "the house of universal hospitality" for two reasons. First, wild grapes grew naturally in the area. Janet Schaw, a traveler to Brunswick and the Lower Cape Fear region in 1775, remarked that, "Finer grapes cannot be



Partially restored tiles with the grapevine decorative motif. This design was known to have been made in Liverpool between 1770 and 1790.



met with than are to be found everywhere wild." It is also fitting since archaeologists recovered over 300 wine bottle fragments from William Dry's residence. This is the only tile pattern from Russellborough that can be attributed to a specific owner.

Prospect Hall is the other private home in Brunswick where decorative delftware tiles have been unearthed. Lot 337, where Prospect Hall is located, was owned by a number of people in the eighteenth century, including noted merchants like Thomas Mulford. South placed a single test unit in Prospect Hall, from which 19 fragments of tile were recovered. These represent five different decorative motifs, four of which are pastoral designs. One tile fragment exhibits a pastoral scene and a Chinese figure. This is reflective of a widespread Oriental influence common to many aspects of decorative arts in the eighteenth century. The fifth decorative tile set identified at Prospect Hall shows scenes of a port city. Further excavations at Prospect Hall may

yield more tile fragments and decorative motifs.

Tiles were also recovered from the site identified as the Public House and Tailor Shop and the surrounding yard area known as the Public Yard. There is not much historic data pertaining to the Public House ruin, although it may have been an inn run by Cornelius Harnett. The abundance of sewing materials recovered also suggests that the structure could have served as a tailor shop. A total of 243 fragments of delftware tiles, representing seven decorative motifs, were recovered from this structure and its surrounding yard. Four of these sets have pastoral motifs. Fragments of three other sets were also recovered; two of these show port scenes, and one has the same grapevine pattern that was identified in the Russellborough collection.

Considering three basic elements in the acquisition of material culture - availability, affordability, and desirability - the various owners of Russellborough, Prospect Hall, and the Public House and Tailor Shop all

had the logistical and financial resources to obtain decorative tin-enameled tiles, as well as the desire to display material items fitting of their social status. It is most interesting how the decorative motifs on the tiles appear to reflect the attributes and feelings of Brunswick. Of all the decorative motifs available on delftware tiles of the period, from sea monsters to soldiers to biblical scenes, the owners of the three structures chose tiles which primarily display pastoral scenes, presumably meaning to reflect the idyllic nature of life (real or perceived) at Brunswick and the surrounding area. The selection of other tile sets with urban and port scenes for houses owned by the Customs Collector and a prosperous merchant also seem to reflect the town's position and responsibilities of being a major British colonial seaport.

For a more detailed copy of this study, please contact Thomas Beaman at 126 Canterbury Road, Wilson, NC 27896, or by email at TBeamanJr@aol.com.

## Fluted Point Survey

Dr. Randy Daniel is updating the North Carolina Fluted Point Survey began by Phil Perkinson over 20 years ago. This study includes recording information about fluted points such as point shape, size, flaking characteristics, and raw material type. He is particularly interested in examining those points which might be in private collections. All those individuals or institutions who would like to participate in this study are encouraged to contact Dr. Daniel at the following address:

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## Board Members

Board member elections were held at the Fall Meeting of September 28, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. New board members include Thomas Beaman (Wilson) and Danny Bell (Chapel Hill), replacing Anne Poole and Larry Rose. Vin Steponaitis resigned as Secretary with Linda Carnes-McNaughton replacing him. Thank you Anne, Larry, and Vin for a job well done.

## 1996 NC State Fair

The archaeology exhibit at the 1996 North Carolina State Fair, featuring the USS *Huron* Historic Shipwreck Preserve in Nags Head, was a tremendous success.

Cooperative, work-intensive efforts like the Fair exhibit benefit our group through new memberships and enhanced public identities. We attract people's attention by showing them artifacts and photographs. We then pass along the real message about the need for protecting and interpreting North Carolina's archaeological resources. This is public education at its best.



## NCAS Newsletter Publication Schedule

All NCAS members are encouraged to submit articles and news items to Dee Nelms, Associate Editor, for inclusion in the *Newsletter*. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

Spring Issue      March 31  
Summer Issue    June 30

Fall Issue        September 30  
Winter Issue    December 31

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