

Using Ceramics to Understand MSU's Past

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What is the Campus Archaeology Program? (CAP)

- Mitigates and protects the history and prehistory of MSU.
- Conducts research across campus based on construction and/or research questions.
- Contributes to the public's understanding of MSU's cultural heritage.
- Trains undergraduate and graduate students in research and engagement.
- Conducts excavation projects on campus using a summer archaeology field school model.

Archaeological Field Schools 2010 and 2011

- For the past two years CAP has held summer excavation projects in the area west of Beaumont Tower.
- During these excavations, students uncovered a trash dump that likely was associated with the earliest campus buildings.



My Research Question

- What do the different types of historic ceramics found by CAP tell us about early MSU's campus life?
- Goal: Analyze the ceramics to age the occupation and to develop interpretations about those who once lived here.

Research Stages

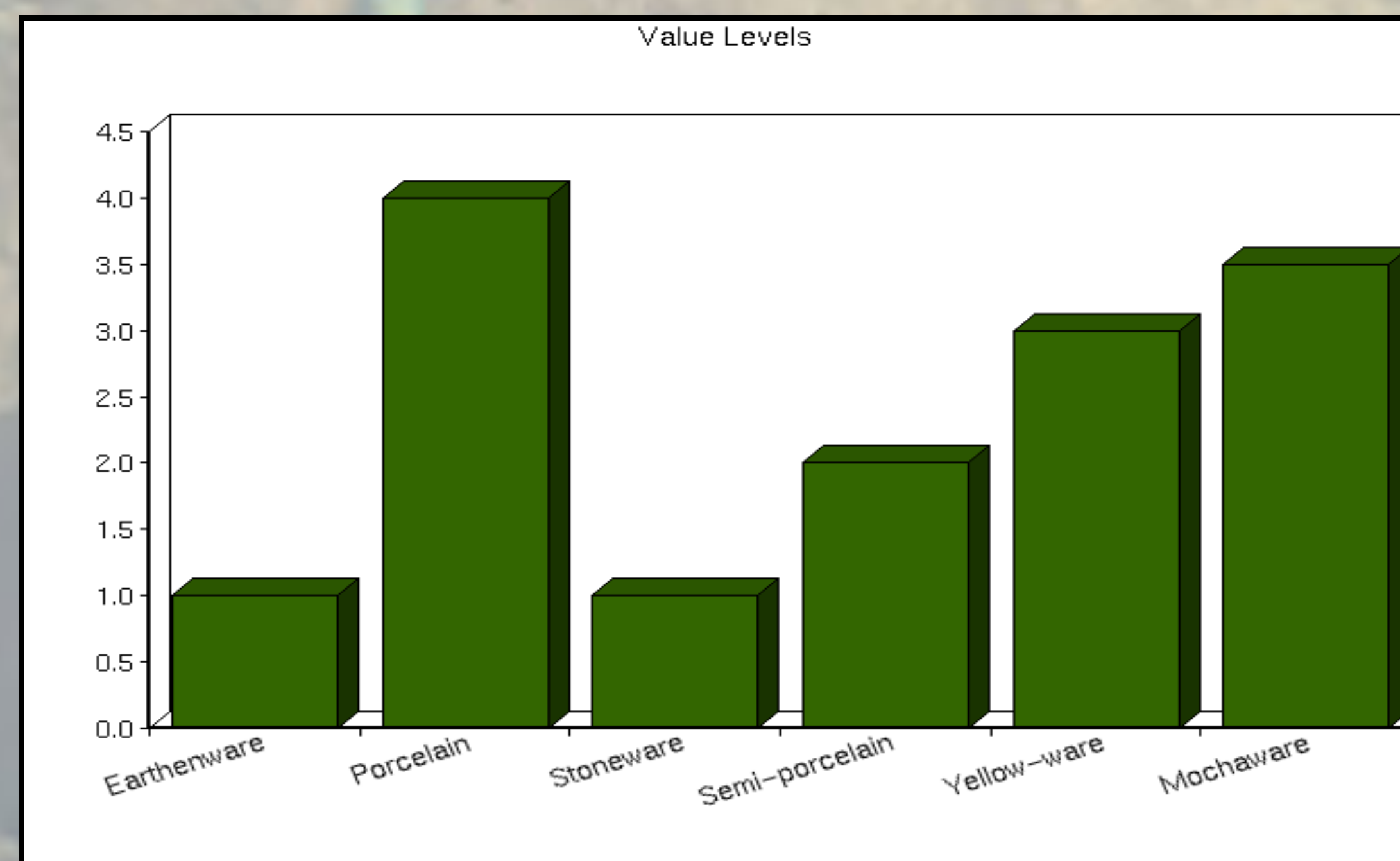
1. Sort ceramics by type, determine minimum number of individual (MNI) ceramics. MNI was determined by refitting the ceramics and examining rims.



2. Record details of ceramics, then organize data into a database. A total of five ceramic types were recovered.

3. Interpret data using *Miller's price-scaling index method*. This is a classification system that identifies the type of ware and decorative technique, then cross-references data with a variety of pricing guides by maker and merchants. Index scale ranges from 1.0 - 4.0

- 1.0 The **least** expensive, such as *undecorated ware*.
- 2.0 The second least expensive, such as *decorated ware*.
- 3.0 The second most expensive, such as *transfer print*.
- 4.0 The **most** expensive, such as *porcelain*.



Conclusions

Ceramic types are all consistent with a mid to late 19th century date, and include:

- *Earthenware* was popular during the 18th and 19th centuries. Undecorated earthenware is the most commonly occurring ceramic type. This category includes whiteware, pearlware, and terracotta. The majority are undecorated; however there are a few printed earthenware sherds in this category (Score 1.0).
- *Porcelain* is the second most found ceramic type. Porcelain is thin and translucent and is often considered a luxury item. The majority were undecorated, but one had a blue transfer print of the maker's mark. There were also a few transfer blue floral designs which appear to be from the same vessel (Score 4.0).
- *Stoneware* is the third most common ceramic type recovered. The stoneware pieces include undecorated industrial pottery, possible kitchenware and unidentified pieces of vessels. Stoneware is denser than earthenware, it is chip resistant, water tight, and can withstand high and low temperatures (Score 1.0).
- *Semi-porcelain* with and without a print. Semi-porcelain looks like porcelain except it has little to no translucency. Production of semi-porcelain ware began in the 19th century. We only found a few pieces of this type of ceramic (Score 2.0).
- *Yellow-ware* (earthenware) with Rockinghamware design was popular in the 19th century. We found two pieces of this category (Score 3.0).
- *Mochaware* (stoneware) is worth more because of its decoration. Used from the late 18th century through the early 20th century. We found only one piece (Score 3.5).

The ceramics found during the CAP 2011 field school were from a trash dump from the 19th century, and could be associated with College Hall or some of the early dormitories. College Hall housed classrooms, offices, laboratories, etc. The majority of the ceramics pieces most likely represent dishes, and possibly laboratory items.

Most of the ceramic pieces were undecorated earthenware, which according to Miller's index has a rating of 1.0 or least expensive. Even though a few sherds represent more expensive ceramics, the total assemblage is consistent with what we might find from a dormitory dining hall and possibly some faculty housing. The porcelain was the second most commonly found ceramic, which is rated a 4.0 on Miller's scale or worth the most. These ceramic pieces could have been from the dining hall, but could also have belonged to professors.

It is interesting to find so many sherds that together support the date of the trash area as well as the origin of the trash. Campus Archaeology dares us to question "what is beneath our feet?" Items as simple as ceramics can teach us a lot about our past, and through research we are able to preserve our cultural heritage as well as educate others.

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