

The Mount Pleasant Classical Institution: A Rarity of American Historical Staffordshire

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One of the great rarities of American Historical Staffordshire—a ca. 1830 plate by Ralph and James Clews of Cobridge with a view of the Mount Pleasant Classical Institution of Amherst, Massachusetts—reappeared this past summer on the auction market and proved, yet again, to be an item of great interest (Fig. 1). A lot of three plates, including one with a view of the Mount Pleasant Classical Institution, sold at a July 2020 Pook and Pook sale for \$18,300 (buyer's premium included).¹ This price is only down slightly from October 2013, when an identical example sold at another Pook and Pook sale for \$21,330 (including buyer's premium).² Though it is unknown whether the two Mount Pleasant plates that sold at Pook and Pook in 2020 and 2013 were the same or different plates, both were in exceptional condition and marked with the impressed stamp of Clews on the reverse. As a curator who works at a museum just several miles north of Amherst, Massachusetts, I quickly became intrigued by this rare piece of Historical Staffordshire—which seems to exist only in the form of dinner-size plates—and sought to learn more about it. Michael Weinberg's 2013 *TCC Bulletin* article on the Mount Pleasant Classical Institution plate was one of the first sources I consulted, and provided an excellent overview of the Mount Pleasant pattern and the history of the institution.³ Building upon Weinberg's research, the focus of the present article, is to trace—where possible—collectors' and dealers' knowledge of the Mount Pleasant plate over time, and to identify the present whereabouts of similar examples.

Despite the publication of numerous books, catalogues,

and magazines on American Historical Staffordshire in the United States during the last decade of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, references to the Mount Pleasant plate seem to be nonexistent in this early literature—a reality, perhaps, explainable by the fact that surviving examples of the Mount Pleasant plate do not include a printed pattern name on the reverse, which likely caused confusion about the plate's printed scene.

A survey of early, seminal literature on American Historical Staffordshire turned up no references. Alice Morse Earle's *China Collecting in America* (1892), R.T. Haines Halsey's *Pictures of Early New York on Dark Blue Staffordshire Pottery* (1899), Edwin Atlee Barber's, *Anglo-American Pottery* (1899), Ada Walker Camehl's *The Blue China Book* (1916), and Ellouise Baker Larsen's *American Historical Views on Staffordshire China* (1939) all provide discussions and lists of American patterns, but none mention the Mount Pleasant Classical Institution. Sam Laidacker's *Standard Catalogue of Anglo-American China from 1810 to 1850* (1938), *Prices for Historical Staffordshire Realized at Auction since the Publication of the Standard Catalogue of Anglo-American China, 1810-1850* (1939), and his individual supplements to the *Standard Catalogue* also seem to make no mention of the plate.⁴ Absent also are references to the plate

in early ceramic periodicals, including *Old China* magazine (published in Syracuse, New York by Ceramic Studio Publishing Company between 1901 and 1904), and early issues of Sam Laidacker's *The American Antiques Collector* from the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁵

It seems that it was not until the second half of the

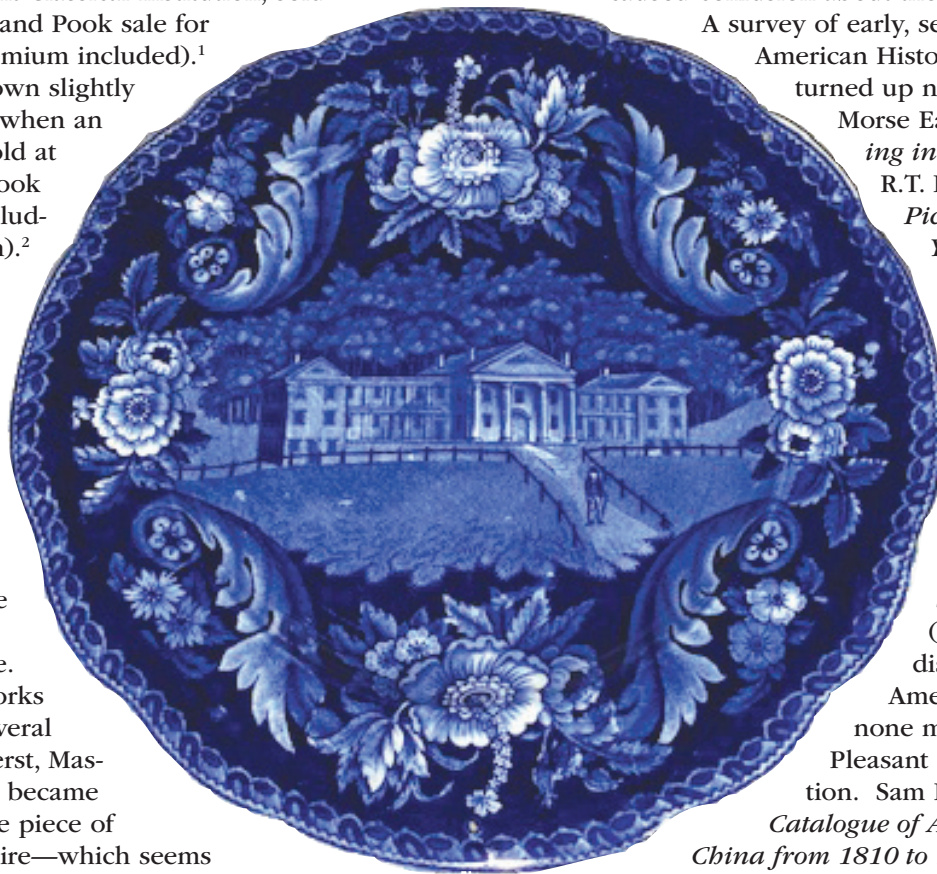


Fig. 1: Plate by Clews showing the Mount Pleasant Classical Institution of Amherst, Massachusetts. Photo courtesy, Transferware Collectors Club Database of Patterns & Sources.



THE MOUNT PLEASANT CLASSICAL INSTITUTION.
AMHERST, MASS.

Fig. 2: The design source for the Mount Pleasant Classical Institution plate: an engraving from the *New York Mirror and Ladies' Literary Gazette*, vol. 4, 1827. Photo courtesy, Transferware Collectors Club Database of Patterns & Sources.

20th century that the plate appeared in a publication. Sam Laidacker's *Anglo-American China Part II*, published in 1951, includes perhaps the earliest reference and depiction of the Mount Pleasant plate, and labeled the view as "unidentified."⁶ Laidacker, however, included the following note in his 1951 volume, which suggested the plate was known to collectors as early as 1948: "It is a rare plate and the one illustrated was sold several years ago for \$15.00."⁷ Unfortunately, Laidacker's compilation of *Historical Staffordshire* sold at auction during the years 1944 to 1949, listed no items that match the Mount Pleasant plate.⁸ The plate was published again in 1954 in Laidacker's *Anglo-American China Part I*, where it was identified as the "Mount Pleasant Classical Institution, Amherst, Mass."⁹ Between 1951 and 1954, Laidacker was likely able to identify the design source—an engraving, probably by Vistus Balch (1799-1884), in the *New York Mirror and Ladies' Literary Gazette*, vol. 4, 1827—and therefore also identify the view (Fig. 2).¹⁰ In 1954, Laidacker reported with enthusiasm and confidence, "now that this view is known to exist, and the information is in general circulation, more people will be hunting for it and very likely additional examples will be discovered."¹¹

Despite Laidacker's optimism, very few examples seem

to have surfaced in the years and decades that followed. The great collector and scholar of American Historical Staffordshire, Ellouise Baker Larsen (1877-1967), managed to acquire an example for her personal collection from an unknown source sometime between May 1, 1952 and October 23, 1953, which now resides in the collection of the Smithsonian.¹² The accession file for the Larsen collection at the Smithsonian includes a list compiled by Larsen containing ceramics in her collection titled "Cumulative List as of May 1, 1952," but that list does not include the Mount Pleasant plate. However, four years later, in a second list titled "Cumulative List as of November 12, 1956," the Mount Pleasant plate is listed along with the following date and price: 10/23/53, \$300. The latter likely signifies an appraisal date and appraisal value. Larsen may not have been aware of the building's identity when she acquired the plate, but by 1956 she was clearly aware of the plate's pattern as it was specifically listed as "Mt. Pleasant Classical Institution" in the 1956 Cumulative List. The Mount Pleasant plate, along with the rest of Larsen's collection, was eventually given to the Smithsonian in 1962, where it remains to this day.¹³

Unfortunately, the author was unable to locate additional references to the sale or whereabouts of similar

Mount Pleasant plates throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Authors David and Linda Arman, however, did include the Mount Pleasant pattern in their published check-list of Historical Staffordshire in 1974, revealing that collectors and dealers were cognizant of the view, and were still searching for additional examples.¹⁴ Over the course of these three decades, any surviving examples likely remained in private collections, passed informally among individuals unaware of the plate's printed scene, or were privately traded. Again, the lack of a printed pattern name on the plate's reverse might explain why the plate went undetected for such a long period of time. In fact, the lack of a pattern name on the plate's reverse may have led some to conclude that the view was English or European, rather than American, or to dismiss it altogether as a generic landscape scene. Adding to the confusion, the Mount Pleasant plate's border pattern—comprised of large flowers set between prominent, foliate scrolls—seems unique, and differs from the border patterns used by Clews on his other wares featuring American views.¹⁵

Thanks, however, to the work of the late transferware dealer and collector William R. Kurau of Lampeter, Pennsylvania, an additional example of the Mount Pleasant plate surfaced in the 1990s. Transferware dealer Dave Kurau, son of William R. Kurau, shared that his father discovered a Mount Pleasant plate at a flea market sale in the early 1990s in Adamstown, Pennsylvania. This very special occasion was marked by a photograph in which a young Dave Kurau sat proudly holding the Mount Pleasant plate (**Fig. 3**). During the course of his career, Dave has only known of 3-4 examples of the Mount Pleasant plate.¹⁶ Of the 3-4 examples known, Dave and his parents have been fortunate to handle and sell 2 examples of the plate.¹⁷ With the exception of the plate currently at the Smithsonian, the remaining examples likely reside in private collections.

Though it seems unlikely that many additional examples of the Mount Pleasant plate will surface in



Fig. 3: A young Dave Kurau holds the Mount Pleasant plate discovered by his father, William R. Kurau, in the early 1990s in Adamstown, PA. Photo courtesy, the Collection of William R. and Teresa F. Kurau.

the future, one can certainly hope! The recent appearance of two Mount Pleasant plates on the auction market (described above), combined with the high prices brought by each plate, may result in additional examples surfacing in the future. As we wait for more examples to appear at auction, the author encourages readers to search (and re-search!) their china cupboards, and to keep an eye out for this great rarity of American Historical Staffordshire at antique shops, yard sales, and estate sales. Happy hunting!

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(Endnotes)

1. Pook & Pook, Inc., Downingtown, PA, The Collection of Linda and Dennis Moyer: Session II, July 11, 2020, lot 523. The other two plates in the lot, both by Clews, were listed as "Winter View of Pittsfield, Massachusetts" and "Peace and Plenty."
2. Pook & Pook, Inc., Downingtown, PA, The Goldberg and Brown Collection of Historical Blue Staffordshire, October 10, 2013, lot 6.
3. Michael Weinberg, "The Mount Pleasant Classical Academy," *Transferware Collectors Club Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (2013): 9.
4. For the additional supplements, see Sam Laidacker, Auction Supplement to the Standard Catalogue of Anglo-American China from 1810 to 1850 during the Period from May, 1938 to June, 1944 (Scranton, PA: Sam Laidacker, 1944), and Sam Laidacker, Auction Supplement to the Standard Catalogue of Anglo-American China from 1810 to 1850 during the Period from June, 1944 to February, 1949 (Bristol, PA: Sam Laidacker, 1949).
5. The author's search of *The American Antiques Collector* for February 1939 through Summer 1942 did not produce any references to the Mount Pleasant plate.
6. Sam Laidacker, *Anglo-American China Part II* (Bristol, PA: Sam Laidacker, 1951), 37.
7. *Ibid.*, 36.
8. Sam Laidacker, Auction Supplement to the Standard Catalogue of Anglo-American China from 1810 to 1850 during the Period from June, 1944 to February, 1949 (Bristol, PA: Sam Laidacker, 1949).
9. Sam Laidacker, *Anglo-American China Part I* (Bristol, PA: Sam Laidacker, 1954), 10.
10. Sources generally attribute this image of the institution to Abel Bowen, but the *New York Mirror and Ladies' Literary Gazette* states the engraving is by "Mr. Balch"—a likely reference to American engraver Vistus Balch (1799-1884). See "The Mount Pleasant Classical Institution, Amherst, Mass.," *New York Mirror and Ladies' Literary Gazette* 4, no. 38 (1827): 297.
11. Laidacker, *Anglo-American China Part I*, 10.
12. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Ellouise Baker Larsen Collection of American Historical Staffordshire China, ID Number: CE.62.900.
13. Bonnie Campbell Lilienfeld, email message to author, October 18, 2020. The author thanks Ms. Lilienfeld for her generous help in supplying the information from the accession file of the Larsen Collection.
14. David and Linda Arman, *Historical Staffordshire: An Illustrated Check List* (Danville, VA: Arman Enterprises, Inc., 1974), p. 56, no. 123.
15. *Ibid.*, 9-56.
16. Dave Kurau, email message to author, October 5, 2020.
17. Dave Kurau, email message to author, January 4, 2021.