20. HARDWARE OF DAILY LIFE

Cast iron pots were essential to everyday life on a Delaware farmstead, but they were not as expensive as folklore has suggested

Bloomsbury yielded parts of three cast iron pots, many of them in the plowzone.

Cast iron pots were considered essential in a society where most foods, and many non-food items, were cooked over an open fire. A three-legged pot with a bale handle could be hung over a fire or stood on the hearth. In estate inventories, cast-iron pots are recorded with hooks and sometimes with trammels. Tripod skillets frequently are found in the same inventory entries, and a few households had iron spits in their cooking equipment.

Pots and kettles came in all sizes and price ranges, as the inventory summary indicates. Most every household had one pot, and wealthier citizens could afford a range. Important as they were, iron pots did not represent a major investment.

Iron pots may be a useful way to measure a household's wealth during the Revolutionary period, when the nominal value of money fluctuated wildly and the nation adapted to a decimel system. To test this proposition, and to place iron pots in economic context, a sample of Kent County probate files containing inventories was selected from the project area neighborhood. A conscious effort was made to represent all economic and social strata, but the selection was by no means random.

The table reveals several facts about iron pots. The first, and most remarkable, fact is the relative cheapness of iron pots. For most people, iron pots represented less than one percent of the household's value. Even a poor family could afford a pot; this is borne out by the fact that pots are found in all strata of society.

Some well-off people owned several pots, notably Jonathan Raymond. He owned seven pots distributed among his properties. Some of his wealthy neighbors, however, owned fewer pots.

If pots were so cheap, the folklore surrounding them is misleading. Iron pots appear to have been a precious commodity, frequently a special bequest in a colonial will. In 1703, Anne Starkey came into the Kent County court and attested to a deed of gift in which she granted each of her four daughters an iron pot from the estate of her deceased husband (deValinger 1959:265). William Handsor's will in 1769 endowed his son Jonathan with "his grandmother's iron pot" as his entire legacy (Heite and Heite 1985:19).
The legend of the precious status of iron hollow ware persists, and must have some basis in fact. One author, for example, stated, "It has been said that hollow ware was so scarce that a queue of buyers often stood outside a furnace to buy badly needed pots and pans as soon as they were produced. These objects were highly prized by the owners and were passed from one generation to another before they were discarded or 'worn out' " (Kauffman 1995:29).

Scarcity may have been a factor in this legend. Although there were a few earlier manufacturers of hollow ware, the American cast-iron utensil industry began around 1730. The air furnace or foundry at Massaponax, Virginia, was the first American facility exclusively for making such cast iron products.

Delicate castings, such as hollow wares, normally were cast at foundries, called cupolas or air furnaces, where pig iron was remelted.

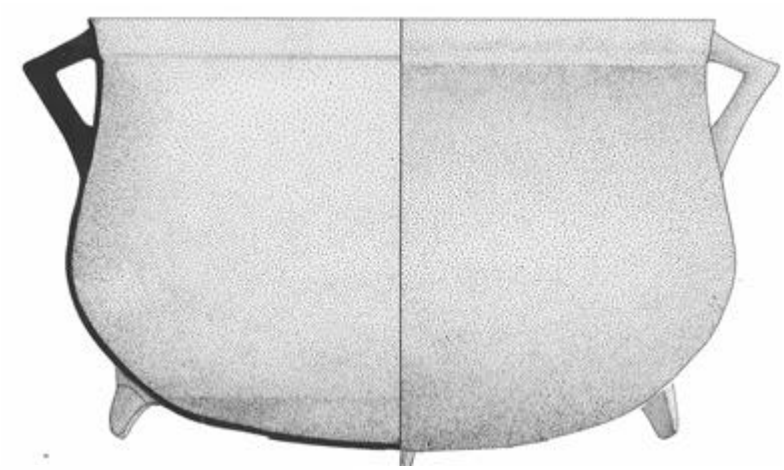
Most ironmaking blast furnaces, which refined cast iron from ore, also manufactured a few cast iron products, but most of their output was pig iron that would be converted into ductile wrought iron.

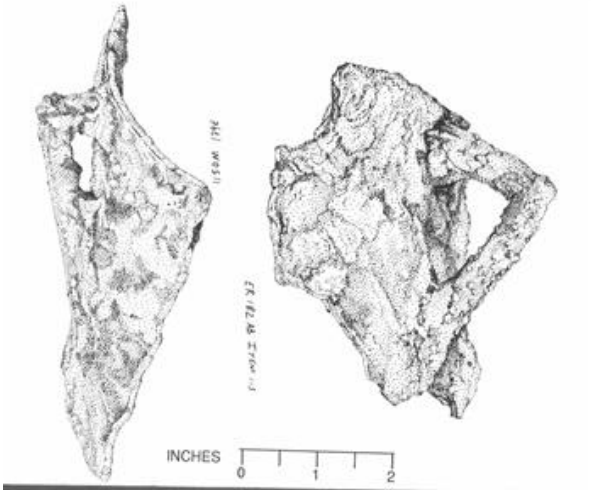
Local iron furnaces confined their efforts to the relatively coarse castings, such as firebacks and stove plates. Pig or cast iron scrap was therefore of little cash value to a farmer who lived far from a furnace.

Iron pots (and hooks) in the inventory

This is an unsystematic survey of the Kent County probate inventories, in an attempt to identify the place of iron pots in the relative wealth. Tinware, if mentioned in the inventory, is noted. Note the relative scarcity of tin.

Name of the deceased	*year*	*total value of inventory*	*number & value of iron pots*		*avg.value of each iron pot*	*pots as a percentage of inventory*	*Presence of tin on the inventory*
Abraham Allee	1766	£268/2/0	2	£1/10/0	15/0	0.56%	
Abraham Allee	1770	£1,103/15/10	1	15/0 "large"	15/0	0.06%	
Abraham Allee	1778	£4,079/1/3	3	£8/10/0	£2/16/4	0.21%	
John Allee	1769	£884/13/10	3	£2/2/6	14/4.8	0.24%	1 colander 1/6
John Allee	1771	£1,026/0/5	3	£1/7/6	6/6	0.19%	
			3	£0/12/0			
John Allee	1787	£1,087/9/7	2	7/6 cracked iron	3/9	0.03%	
Jacob Allee	1766	£1,037/4/4	5	70/0	14/0	0.33%	12/0
Samuel Axell	1783	£14/2/9	2	£1/2/6	11/3	8.16%	
Abraham Barber	1766	£634/16/6	3	£0/12/6 old	4/2	0.09%	
Abraham Barber	1775	£145/9/5	4	£1/13/0	8/3	1.14%	1/6
Benjamin Brown	1769	£631/16/3	3	20/0	6/8	0.16%	
Benjamin Brown	1770	£157/13/0	1	10/0 pot & bale	10/0	0.45%	
			1	4/0 pot &skillet	4/0		
Benjamin Brown	1778	£2,468/4/9	2	6/10 & old chest			
			2	£4	£2	0.08%	
Elijah Conselor	1801	£501/17/4	2	£1/10/0 & frying pan		0.30%	
William Conselor	1780	£65/4/0	1	7/0	7/0	0.53%	
Evan Denney	1803	£168/5/6	3	£1/2/6	7/8	0.65%	
Francis Denney	1812	$3,644.365	2	$1.50 small	75¢	0.12%	
			1	$3 & soap			lot of tin $2.50
Benjamin Durham	1810	$250.39	2	$1.50	75¢	0.29%	tin 15¢
Daniel Durham	1801	£156/15/0	3	7/6 & a keg	2/6	0.24%	
Alex.Humphreys	1745	£42/16/1	1	6/0	5/6	1.976%	
			1	5/0			
			1	5/6 with skillet			
Alex. Humphreys	1773	18/19/6	1	1/6 old pot	1/6	0.41%	old tinware 1/6
Vincent Loockerman	1785	£2,237/16/0	3	8/4	5/7	0.10%	
			1	5/0			
			1	4/0			
			1	10/0			
			1	10/0			
			1	7/6			
Alexander McFarland	1761	£170/14/4	1	3/0	3/0	0.08%	tinware 3/0
John MacFarland	1769	£34/4/0	1	3/0	3/0	0.44%	
Killen Miller	1775	£59/-/-	3	25/0	8/4	2.12%	
Abraham Moore	1764	£141/18/3	3	£2	13/4	1.42%	
Levi Muncey	1776	£445/10/7	1	15/0	15/0	0.31%	
			2	12/6	6/3		
Thomas Murphey	1771	£151/13/0	3	2 shillings	/8	0.06%	
John Palmatory	1772	£232/19/6	1	in a lot, no price			funnel & 2 cups 1/0
John Raymond	1771	£1,042/19/8	1	12/0	12/0		
			4	£1/10/0	7/6	0.2%	
Jonathan Raymond	1746	£1,068/9/8	7	£4/11/8	13/1	0.42%	tin is mentioned
Jonathan Raymond	1771	£456/16/1	2	10 shillings ea	10/0	0.21	
Nicholas Ridgely	1755	£648/15/7	1	5/0 "old"			
			1	"small"			
Silas Snow	1793	£656/1/1.5	1	15/0	10/0	1.52%	4/0
			3	22/6			
			1	12/6			
Samuel Whitman	1783	£204/3/3	2	10/0	5 /0	0.2%	





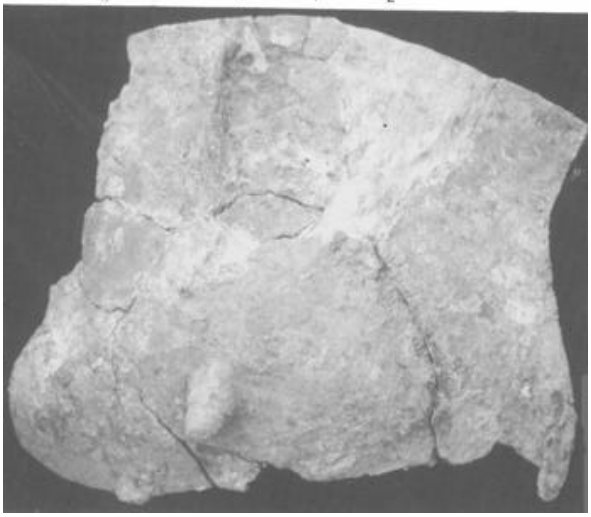


Figure 112

Iron Pots

The largest fragment of an iron pot at Bloomsbury was preserved by being buried in a well, but most of the sherds were found in the plowzone. Two different styles of lug were present. The fragment at left is from a larger straight-sided pot. The other two pots had everted lips.