

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- We're at
Middleton Place
outside of
Charleston with
Jeff Neal. Jeff is
the interpretive
potter.

Jeff, tell me the history of pottery making here at Middleton as it would actually have occurred.

JEFF NEAL: Well here at Middleton Place-- well, first and foremost, the Middletons did not have a potter like myself here. And the main reason being that is they happened to live about 20 miles north of one of the largest shopping centers on the east coast at the time. And that's the city of Charleston. There's tons of pottery comes in, so there's no need to have a potter out here, not when you can buy something let's say, 10 times better than what he could produce.

INTERVIEWER: Well, who was making pottery?

JEFF NEAL: Ah, the slaves though, here on the property, especially in the 18th century, they were making tons of pottery out here. Now the important thing to remember though, more than anything else, is that the pottery they're making, it's got nothing to do with the Middletons.

INTERVIEWER: Oh.

JEFF NEAL: They're making it solely for their own use. And they're doing what archaeologists refer to today as colonoware. And colonoware has three traits to it. One, it's a very low fire clay. It's very impure clay. And here at Middleton Place, the slaves would have gotten the clay either from the riverbank or from the marshes here on the property.

Secondly, the pottery-- colonoware is not made on a wheel, it is all done by hand. And they're doing what are called pinch pots and coil pots. If you ever did pottery in school, that's probably what you made, more than likely.

INTERVIEWER: Very simple.

JEFF NEAL: A very simple form, but it's a good form.

And then lastly, they are not and glazing their pots, nor are they firing them in a kiln like I would do. They're putting these in fire pits, which are basically just holes in the ground that they've dug. They're placing the pottery in, they're putting some combustibles and they're building the fire on top of it.

INTERVIEWER: You've got all these broken up pieces of stuff here that look kind of fancy, are those your mistakes, or where did they come from?

JEFF NEAL: No, those are pieces that have actually-- they've all been found here on the plantation. Matter of fact, some of the pieces we're looking at here have been found within the past three or four days. I usually find this stuff after it rains.

When it rains out here I'm probably the happiest boy in the plantation because I get to go play in the mud and see what we can find. And basically what we're looking at, well, we're looking at trash here. These are things that probably got broke or discarded and--

Well, you and I have this wonderful man called the garbage man. He comes and he picks up our stuff, he takes it away, we don't worry about it. The Middletons-- and I should also say the slaves, they don't have this. They're using what are called [INAUDIBLE], or trash pits, which are basically just holes in the ground that they're throwing this in. When it gets done they fill it up. Or the other big place they're throwing this in-- the privy.

I have a friend of mine who is an archaeologist, and I know when he finds a privy hole, he's like a kid at Christmas. He gets all excited, as he's told me, he's like, the privy is where you find all the good stuff. I'm not sure why that is.

But the pieces we're finding, I would say 75% to 80% of them are imports, they're coming from overseas. A lot of European, lot of English, like you would expect. There is also, especially in the 18th century, we have a lot of stuff made in China.

INTERVIEWER: You're demonstrating not the colonoware, but a pot that would have been made for the family by the slave potter. Take us to that process.

JEFF NEAL: Well first thing we do is, I cut the clay. And then we actually do what is called wedging. And this is basically me rolling out the clay. It's kind of like if you've ever made bread and you have to

knead the dough to get rid of the air bubbles, make it a little more elastic. I've got to do the same thing with the clay.

Once that's done, we'll beat it into a ball. And the one we're using here today is probably about two pounds. And then I put on the wheel. And the wheel that we're using is actually a replica of an 1850s wheel. It's basically me sitting up there and I'm kicking the stone. And the stone 80 to 90 pounds. And that's what turns everything for you.

The first thing we do on the wheel is we have to get the clay centered. And basically what that means is that we need to get it in the middle with the wheel so it turns nice and smooth so when I'm making the pot, it'll stay nice and straight instead of going lopsided on me.

INTERVIEWER: So the forces are equal.

JEFF NEAL: Exactly, yes.

So we'll get it centered on the the wheel, and as soon as I get it centered, I just take my thumbs and we open up the pot. And as I opened it up, I'll start smoothing out the sides. And then we do what is called pulling, which is basically me, myself pinching the clay, and then we start bringing up the height.

INTERVIEWER: Ah.

JEFF NEAL: Uh, we get it to about six to seven inches, then I get to do what I say is the fun part and also the scary part. This is where I put my hand on the inside and we just start pulling it out so we can make that bowl shape. And once I get it to the right size that I want, we'll take my fingers, we'll go on the top, we'll press down, we'll make a little lip, and then I'll just take a little sponge and will kind of clean out, smooth out the outside, get rid of the water, and there's our bowl.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

And from there you dry it and finish it in a kiln.

JEFF NEAL: Yes, we have to get every bit of water out of that clay first. Because if there's any water in there when it hits the heat of the kiln, she'll blow up, exactly.

Right now it takes me about four to five days, and then we'll fire it. And it'll take me about a day, day and a half to fire.

INTERVIEWER: Would the summertime have been a hard time to get things to dry out?

JEFF NEAL: In the summertime, with our humidity, my four to five days of drying right now, turns into about eight to ten days of drying out.

INTERVIEWER: That sounds like this was a remarkable part of the life. And again, just to show the connections that-- I mean here the African people brought their own way of doing things and then they evolved over time and were an integral part of the plantation life of South Carolina's settlers.

Thank you so much for sharing--

JEFF NEAL: You're welcome.

[MUSIC PLAYING]