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## Archaeological Evidence for Trade in Harz Roller Canaries

Scott D. Stull

*A previously unidentified redware vessel has been determined to be a watering pot for a canary cage. This artifact represents an archaeologically recoverable element of the international trade in songbirds, with the birds shipped from Germany to the United States and elsewhere around the world.*

*Un contenant en terre cuite rouge dont la fonction n'était pas connue jusqu'à récemment a été identifié comme étant un arrosoir spécifiquement conçu pour les cages à canari. Cet artefact représente un élément archéologique lié au commerce international d'oiseaux chanteurs. Les oiseaux étaient expédiés depuis l'Allemagne vers les Etats-Unis ou d'autres destinations à travers le monde.*

### Introduction

In June 2000, Hartgen Archaeological Associates, Inc. conducted a Phase III data recovery excavation at the site of the Frederick Douglass Housing Towers in Buffalo, New York. For a full report on the excavations, see Stull and Krievs (2002). The majority of the features investigated were privies dated to the mid- to late 19th century. One privy, behind 519 Eagle Street, contained a small redware vessel (Feature 3, Context 47, Object 13) that was intact except for a small chip missing from the rim (FIG. 1). The artifact is now in the collections of the New York State Museum. At the time of excavation, it was interpreted as a measuring cup used in a kitchen setting. The vessel held 1 oz. (30 g) of dry sand and had a liquid capacity of 22 ml. No comparable objects could be found in the archaeological literature to provide an alternate interpretation.

Recent research has revealed the redware vessel to be the watering pot for a bird cage (FIG. 2) used in the German export and sale of canaries, known as Harz rollers or Harz Mountain rollers. This ceramic vessel is all that survived from the relatively fragile wooden export cage used to transport the birds. The trade in song birds, and particularly canaries, was vast, with birds raised in Germany sold throughout the world, particularly in England, the United States, and Australia (Holden 1888: 10, 247).

### The Residents of 519 Eagle Street

The privies excavated were from a residential neighborhood of working-class families with mainly English and German heritage. The occupations of the residents of the investigated houses were boilermaker,

milliner, distiller, carpenter, and mariner, among others. From 1863 to 1883, the Heichberger family lived at 519 Eagle Street. In 1870, the household was made up of Jacob, age 43; his wife Lena, age 41; their daughter Lena, 18; her husband Frederick Reinhardt, 24; and the younger children of Jacob and Lena: Lizzy, 16; Jacob, 13; William, 12; Louis, 10; and Frederick, 4. Jacob's occupation is listed in the Buffalo City Directories as laborer, Frederick Reinhardt's as shoemaker, and Lizzy's as dressmaker. In 1875, William Heichberger, Jacob's brother, joined the household. In 1876, 1877, 1878, and 1880, Louis Heichberger (between the ages of 16 and 20) is listed in the Buffalo City Directories as a "cagemaker" residing at 519 Eagle Street (Stull and Krievs 2002: appendix 5). The leading German cage-bird merchants, the Reiche brothers of New York City, recruited fellow German immigrants to create cages for their birds as early as the 1840s (Grier 2006: 295). Louis Heichberger had no known connections to the Reiche brothers, but the association between German immigrants and cage making probably had some influence on Louis's adoption of this trade.

### The Archaeological Context

The redware vessel was found in a privy that contained redware flower-pot fragments, whiteware, yellow ware, buff-bodied stoneware, one fragment of gilded porcelain, a bone button, a porcelain button, an enamel-twist glass marble, some window glass, and some iron nails. A section of privy fill containing numerous dietary seeds, mainly grape (Stull and Krievs 2002; appendix 4), was preserved under a broken section of drain pipe. The remainder of the privy fill was mainly silty

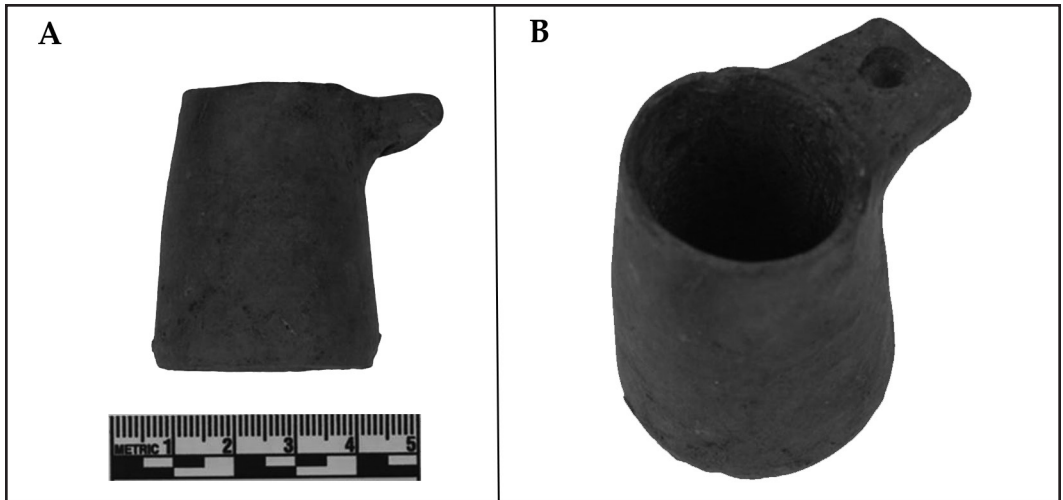


Figure 1. Excavated canary-watering pot from Buffalo, New York: (a) side view with scale, *left*; and (b) oblique view, *right*. (Courtesy of the New York State Museum, Artifact 1062:42:13; photo by Molly Schofield, 2015.)



Figure 2. Bird cage used to transport a Harz roller canary. (Photo by author, 2015.)

clay and coal ash with almost no dietary refuse. Some metal fragments and hardware were found in the privy fill, but there was no evidence to indicate it was part of the cage-making activities. A penny on the top of the privy fill had a date of 1870. In 1893, local sanitary regulations required privies to be made of brick, but this privy structure was made of wood planks, indicating that the privy was constructed before 1893. Most of the ceramics date broadly to the 19th century, but with little precision beyond that, though they are uncommon after 1900. The “bright gold” gilded porcelain was first produced in 1870 (Miller 2000: 13), providing a date after 1870. Overall, the deposits appear to date to the fourth quarter of the 19th century, after 1870

but before 1893. The best estimate is probably the 1870s and 1880s (Stull and Krieves 2002: appendix 3). This date range coincides with the time that Louis Heichberger was listed as living in the house and working as a cage maker (1876–1880).

### Pets and the Harz Roller Trade

Americans had been keeping birds as pets since the early period of colonization, and during the 19th century kindness toward animals was considered a mark of respectability (Grier 2006: 14, 20). Pets served as a means of social display, an expressive form of material culture (Grier 1997), and birds and bird cages were part of that display. Pets also were one of many mechanisms used to shape symbolic aspects of



Figure 3. Canaries being tended on the transatlantic voyage (Holden 1888: 254).



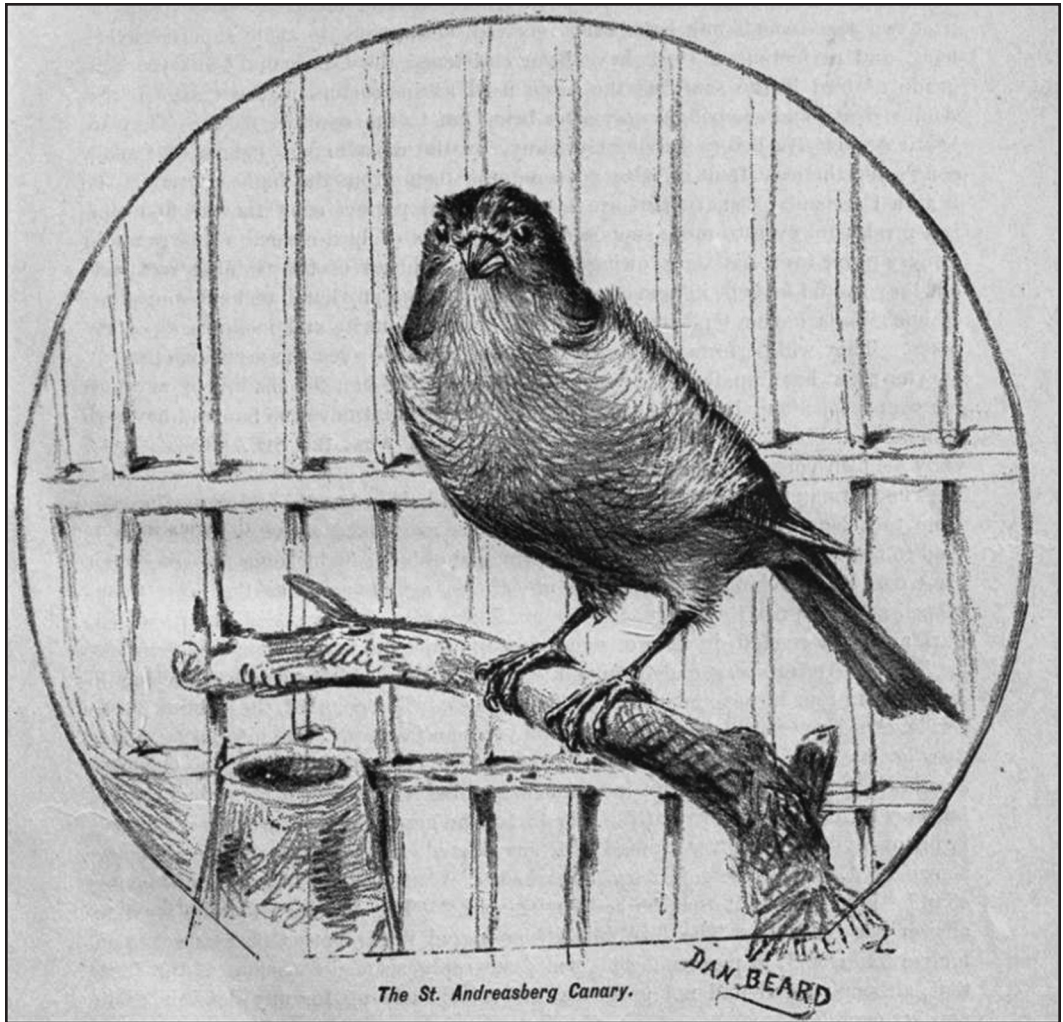


Figure 4. One type of Harz roller in its cage; note the watering container in the background (Holden 1888: 13).

life during the 19th century when households became centers for creating middle-class lifestyles. Having children care for pets was a way to cultivate properly socialized members of the “Victorian” world, and domestic tranquility, including benevolent relations with animals, helped counter the increasingly competitive nature of the public economic world (Grier 1999).

The increased presence of pets in American households coincided with a rise in the commercial trade in pets as companion animals or for aesthetic display. Bird stores were found in cities across America by the 1840s, and captured native birds, such as mockingbirds,

cardinals, and goldfinches, were replaced by commercially raised birds, including specially bred songbirds, like canaries (Grier 2006: 20, 66, 240). In 1906, the U.S. Department of Agriculture recorded that 322,000 cage birds were imported into the U.S., and 275,000 of these were European canaries. Most European canaries were produced in the Harz Mountains of Germany (Grier 2006: 244).

The production of song canaries was a major industry of the Harz Mountain region in the 19th century. The birds were bred in households throughout the region and then gathered for export by large distribution houses. The wooden cages used to hold the



Figure 5. Watering pot showing attachment to a bird cage. (Photo by author, 2016.)

birds for export were also made locally, mainly by miners and woodcutters to supplement their incomes. The cages were bundled into blocks seven cages long by five by six cages, for a total of 210 cages in a case. The cages would then be shipped by boat to England, the United States, or as far as Australia (FIG. 3). The German canaries were bred mainly for song, rather than appearance, and the name “roller” comes from a particular aspect of their song, during which they would roll their notes (Holden 1888: 14; Wallace 1892: 354–355; Parson 1987). The standard German canary was sold in 1888 for \$2.50 to \$3.00, although the more expensive birds could be sold for \$25 to \$50 (Holden 1888: 283).

The cages (FIGS. 2 and 4) used in the German canary-export trade were made mainly of fir, a soft, straight-grained wood, easy to split. Within the export cage was a small box, used to hold birdseed, and a watering pot (Holden 1888: 16–17); see Grier (2006: 245) for a comparative example, but without a watering pot. This cage was also the cage in which the bird was sold to its private owner, who would then transfer the bird into a larger, more decorative cage (Holden 1888: 293–308; Wallace 1892: 2; Grier 2006: 295). Archaeologically, the only part of the export cage that would be preserved is the watering pot, which was ceramic. The form of the pot is a truncated cone with a flat, pierced handle attached at the rim. The hole in the handle was used to hold the watering pot in place in the export cage (FIG. 5). While other songbirds could have been shipped in a similar transport cage, this cage type was distinctive to the German trade, which, during the last quarter of the 19th century, dealt almost entirely in roller canaries. Other transportation cages could have been made of basketry or cornstalks, but the German ones were generally made of wood (Grier 2006: 295) with a ceramic watering pot of this design. The redware vessel from the late 19th-century privy was not a kitchen object, but a watering pot from a bird-transport cage that probably held a German canary.

## Conclusion

The presence of a German canary in a German immigrant household of the late 19th century is not unusual (Parson 1987), except for the rarity of such archaeological discoveries. However, between 1876 and 1880, Louis

Hirchberger was listed as a “cagemaker.” It is likely that Louis was the reason the canary was purchased for this household, perhaps as a bird to display in one of the cages he made or to sell with one of his cages.

Thousands of German canaries were sold in the United States in the late 19th-century, and the number of export cages shipped to the U.S. means that the possibility of recovering other canary-watering pots is not insignificant. Unless they are recognized as part of this international trade, however, these objects can be easily misidentified as kitchen utensils or vessels for some other use. It is hoped this evidence will allow other archaeologists to identify the material signature of this otherwise hard-to-recognize 19th-century trade in birds.

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