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The Burrell Pharmacy, A Turn-of-the-Century Black-Owned Drugstore

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The Burrell Pharmacy Site represents a window on the day to day activities and lifestyle of the black community in Roanoke at the turn of the century. The excavations sampled a city block of the historic Gainsboro Community on which the Davis Hotel was situated. A number of businesses shared the building throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including groceries, restaurants, and the Burrell Pharmacy. The cultural remains consisted of the pharmacy foundations and a sample of an extensive trash midden deposit. Over 27,000 artifacts were recovered with a large number relating to the drugstore era. The material culture was investigated with an eye toward community, regional, and national implications. Social and economic patterns were discovered in the personal items and the commercial products available to the Gainsboro community.

The midden deposit reflects the isolation and cohesion of the black community during this period in many ways. This is seen in the personal and domestic items recovered. Personal items were relatively low in number, and limited to small, relatively inconsequential items such as marbles, and a porcelain doll. Although the generally low income of the black population during this period provides some cause for this, personal items may be limited by other factors as well. Items of personal adornment may have been inappropriate for public display due to social pressures. Whites may have deemed access to certain wealth items as mirroring aspects of white culture which were inappropriate.

This is not to say that wealth items were not available. One example would be porcelain, a well made and relatively expensive ceramic type. The porcelain subassemblage recovered from the midden was comprised primarily of demitasse, cup and saucer fragments for use in the American "Tea ceremony." This would indicate a certain ability to demonstrate some indications of wealth within one's home which may be interpreted as inappropriate in a more public setting.

The exchange of products exhibits differential patterns at the pharmacy and neighborhood levels. Commercial goods such as medicines, ceramics, and perfumes were shipped from other states, while consumables such as soda and beer were bottled and distributed locally. Dr. Burrell obtained medicines from the Northeast and Midwest. Some of the cures were mixed and formulated in the pharmacy, while others came prepackaged. A dual pattern becomes evident based on market size, product type, and investment in mechanization.

The excavations at the Dr. Isaac David Burrell Pharmacy site provided much information concerning the pharmacy, the Gainsboro neighborhood of which it was a part, social and ethnic patterns and processes, and local and national marketing patterns of the turn of the century South. The importance of individuals such as Dr. Burrell and communities such as the Gainsboro neighborhood in the history of the Roanoke Valley cannot be over emphasized.