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"Jars" – A Selection from Carolina Clay: The Life and Legend of the Slave Potter, Dave

Leonard Todd

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March 2010 Newsletter

“Jars” – A Selection from *Carolina Clay: The Life and Legend of the Slave Potter, Dave*

By Leonard Todd*

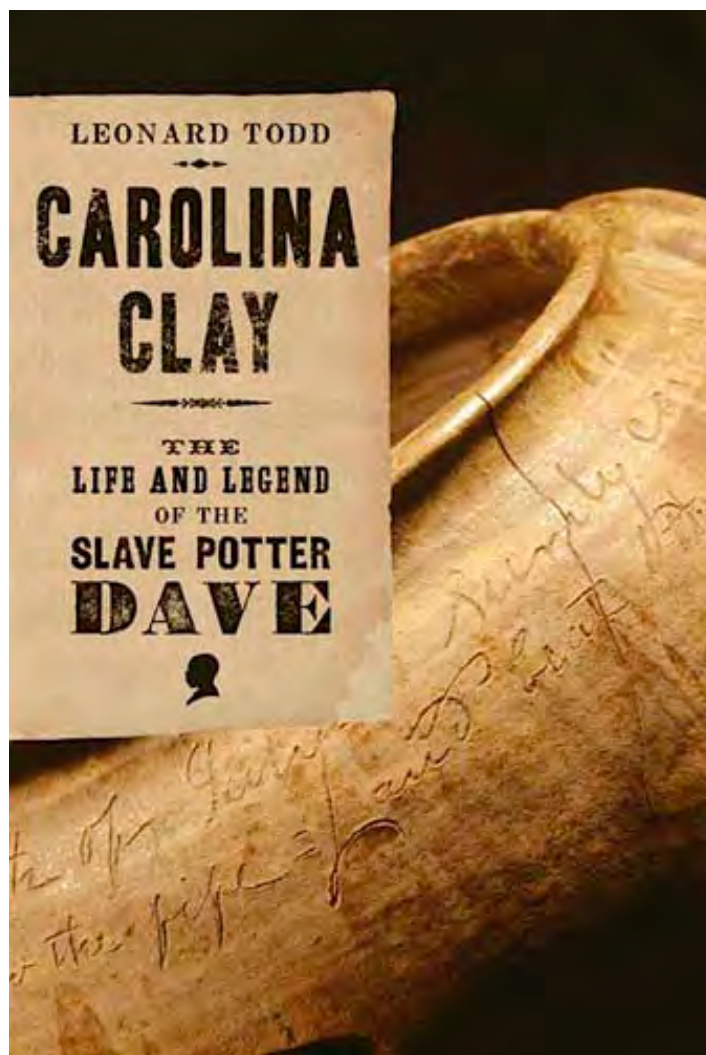
Editor’s Note: Leonard Todd’s *Carolina Clay* (W. W. Norton, 2008) was a finalist for the National Award for Arts Writing and won the South Carolina Center for the Book Award for Writing. W. W. Norton provides a brief overview of Dave and *Carolina Clay* --

“He is known today, as he was then, only as Dave. His jugs and storage jars were everyday items, but because of their beauty and sometimes massive size, they are now highly sought after by collectors. Born into slavery about 1801, Dave was taught to turn pots in Edgefield, South Carolina, the center of alkaline-glazed pottery production. He also learned to read and write, in spite of South Carolina’s long-standing fear of slave literacy. Even when the state made it a crime to teach a slave to write, Dave signed his pots and inscribed many of them with poems. Though his verses spoke simply of his daily experience, they were nevertheless powerful statements. He countered the slavery system not by writing words of protest but by daring to write at all. We know of no other slave artist who put his name on his work.”

“When Leonard Todd discovered that his family had owned Dave, he moved from Manhattan to Edgefield, where his ancestors had established the first potteries in the area. Todd studied each of Dave’s poems for biographical clues, which he pieced together with local records and family letters to create this moving and dramatic chronicle of Dave’s life -- a story of creative triumph in the midst of oppression. Many of Dave’s astounding jars are found now in America’s finest museums, including the Smithsonian Institution, the Charleston Museum, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.”

Leonard has granted permission for publication of an excerpt from *Carolina Clay* in this issue of the Newsletter. The following selection presents part of his chapter entitled “Jars” (pp. 119-26). In contributing this excerpt, the author observes:

Dave spent the first half of his long life at Pottersville, a small village just outside Edgefield. There, he learned to turn pots and, against all odds, to read and write. He lived much of the second half of his life at Stony Bluff, a pottery on the other side of the district that belonged to my great-great-grandfather, Lewis Miles. Though Dave had endured numerous sorrows by the time he got to Stony Bluff, including the loss of one of his legs in a railway accident, he went on to create his jars and write his poems with renewed intensity. This excerpt describes that period in his life.



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For the people of Edgefield,
black and white,
then and now

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COMING TO STONY BLUFF marked a new beginning for Dave. With Henry, his friend with crippled arms, probably again turning the foot treadle for him, Dave produced work that achieved real success in the marketplace. As Edgefield turner George Fletcher later told researchers, the vessels made at the Lewis Miles factory had the reputation for being the “best ware in [the] country.” They were peddled all over Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. The 1850 industrial census for Edgefield District shows that Lewis Miles had seven male and two female workers and the value of his annual product was \$4,000—almost \$100,000 today. This was well in excess of the figures for his former partner, Franklin Landrum, who had only five male workers and \$1,800 in annual product. Both men, of course, also had income from other activities.⁵

Though Dave had begun signing and dating his vessels again in mid-1849, it was not until October 17, 1850, as far as anyone has been able to discover, that he picked up his pointed stick to make an extended inscription. This was more than ten years after he had written his last known couplet. His fingers must have felt unaccustomed to such writing, for on that day he dug the letters into the clay with uneven pressure. After the pot was glazed and fired, in fact, what he had written was almost illegible. Seen now, his words have the appearance of struggling to

free themselves from the surface: "just a mammoth jar . . . for I not . . ." is all that can be read, not enough even to know whether he intended it as a poem or simply a message. Though shaky, it was an impressive return nevertheless: The inclusion of the personal pronoun "I" and the evocative adjective "mammoth" hint at wonderful things to come. Whatever or whoever forced him to stop writing at Horse Creek had no authority at Stony Bluff.

Once he was fully under way again, Dave seems not to have been able to stop writing. His surviving poems increased from one every few years to three in 1857, eight in 1858, and seven in 1859. He sent his rhyming verses into the world one after the other, in one case writing two in the same day. Of his twenty-nine known poems, all but eight were inscribed at Stony Bluff. This flood of verses would have been hard for the surrounding community to ignore. They apparently caused no negative stir, however, perhaps because the fevered excitement that had helped pass the anti-literacy law of 1834 was subsiding. As early as 1848, the influential John Belton O'Neill had written that such laws made it appear as though South Carolinians were afraid of their slaves. "Such a feeling," he wrote, "is unworthy of a Carolina master." By the time Dave reached the peak of his poetic production, the state had let go, at least temporarily, of much of its fear of slave literacy.⁶

The poems that Dave composed at Stony Bluff grew directly out of his daily life. Although some reflected the dark side of his experience ("I wonder where is all my relation . . ."), others were laced with gentle humor. On November 9, 1860, for example, he wrote,

*A noble Jar . for pork or beef —
then carry it . a round to the indian chief //*

This lightness of tone suggests that life in the Miles factory, although focused on production, was in some ways quite relaxed. Two of Dave's signed pots from Stony Bluff provide further evidence of this. They are casually embellished with drawings lightly incised into their surface.

One of the pots, dated June 1, 1856, bears a primitive image of a horse and rider in strict profile. It reminds me of the work of outsider artist Bill Traylor, who was born a slave in Alabama at just about the time this pot was turned. The horse's legs are narrow, sharply pointed triangles. The rider seems to be wearing a tall military hat, which probably made him immediately identifiable at the time. The other drawing, on a jug dated June 11, 1857, depicts a bird striding purposefully forward, also on pointed legs. It's possible that Dave himself made these drawings; it's equally possible that someone else, perhaps a young helper, scratched them onto the freshly turned containers when no one was looking.

More information about life in the turning house comes from an inscription that was written on June 28, 1854. It describes what must have been an impromptu wager between Dave and Lewis Miles:

*Lm says this handle
will crack*

The wager probably came about when Lewis stopped by Dave's pottery wheel, took a look at the jug he had just created, and declared that its short, arc-like handle was unstable. Dave was no doubt taken aback at having his expertise questioned. Perhaps an argument ensued, pleasurable to both men. Calling his owner's bluff, Dave proposed that posterity be the judge of the matter. Writing straight down the side of the jug, he quickly spelled out Lewis Miles's claim. He brought "will crack" up to a second line to emphasize it. Dave won this contest hands down, for more than 150 years later the handle is perfectly intact.

At times, the relaxed give and take at the pottery went even further. An undated pot is stamped "LMILES" and inscribed right after with a short, startling characterization: "A Bum." The handwriting, rather condensed, does not resemble Dave's expansive script. My guess is that one of Lewis's friends, visiting the manufactory one day, carved the words into the clay as a joke guaranteed to disconcert the owner of the place and his star potter.

Dave's pots from this period share certain characteristics. In general, the color of their glaze is olive brown, the result of Lewis Miles's firing style and his individual interpretation of the alkaline glaze formula. The pots are thick walled and sturdy and in some cases give the impression of being almost casually made. The handles of Dave's jugs often bear a deep oval imprint at the point where they join the body of the vessels. This imprint draws attention to the fact that he applied pressure there to strengthen the bond between the two pieces of clay. Collectors speak of it as the imprint of "Dave's thumb," though its size indicates that it is more probably that of his forefinger. Some of Dave's pots are inscribed with a horseshoe shape, which may be Dave's shorthand signature; some jars are inscribed with a series of dots or slashes that are thought to tell (though not always accurately) the number of gallons the container can hold.⁷

Dave's jars could hold a great deal. Whereas other entrepreneurs in Edgefield District produced jars with capacities of up to twenty gallons, already larger than those made elsewhere in the South, Lewis Miles often had Dave make containers that would hold twenty-five, even thirty gallons or more. This was in response to the needs of the cotton planters of the area, who required such jars for storing the great quantities of food that fed their slaves. Historian John Michael Vlach, who has carefully researched this aspect of Edgefield pottery, gives as an example the planter James Henry Hammond, who owned almost three hundred workers. In his manual on the care of slaves, Hammond specified that each of them should receive three pounds of pickled pork per week. Because it took a minimum of four weeks for this type of meat to cure, his need for large jars was considerable.

To produce containers such as these, Dave often used a technique that combined turning and coiling: He turned the lower half of the pot on the wheel, then coiled ropes of clay around the top of its walls to complete the vessel at the unusual diameter and height that was required. Four handles were necessary for these pots, because it could

easily take two men to lift a fully packed jar. Dave spoke with pride of such a vessel in a poem he wrote on April 12, 1858:⁸

*A very large Jar = which has 4 handles =
 pack it full of fresh meats — then light = candles —*

Dave produced the largest of his jars, estimated to have held an astonishing forty gallons, on May 13, 1859. The moving spirit behind it may have been not Lewis Miles but, surprisingly, Dr. Abner Landrum. In about 1837, after the nullification controversy was over, Dr. Landrum had moved with his wife and children to an area outside Columbia known as the sand hills. There, on a site with a lovely vista, he built a modest house and returned to the manufacture of stoneware, which had not lost its appeal for him. His son, Linneaus, joined him at the pottery. Dr. Landrum made an attempt at this time to revive his early dream of manufacturing porcelain, but a request to the state for funds to establish a factory for that purpose was denied. He died on April 3, 1859, at age seventy-four.

Word of his death was sent to Edgefield and on to Stony Bluff, where on April 14 Dave wrote this couplet on a fifteen-gallon storage jar:⁹

*Over noble Dr. Landrum's head
 May guardian angels visit his bed*

He may have borrowed the imagery he used here from John 20:12, in which Mary Magdalene looked into Jesus's tomb and saw "two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain." Writing a few days before Easter, Dave could have found this biblical story of resurrection a suitable context in which to pay homage to his early mentor.

On May 11, the *Advertiser* reprinted a lengthy obituary for Abner Landrum that had appeared in Columbia in the *Carolinian*. It described him as the father of the pottery business in Edgefield. It was his mis-

fortune, it said, "if it be a misfortune, to be poor, and engaged in an humble occupation. But poverty is not a crime. Distinguished for his intelligence, his industry and his integrity, no one was more respected. He was a man of rare virtues. His personal morality was unexceptionable, and he has left to his family a legacy far more valuable than gold or silver." The *Advertiser* placed the tribute at the top of the front page, to give full honor to this man against whom so many Edgefield citizens had once railed.

Editor Arthur Simkins added a companion piece inside the issue in which he said, "No . . . we would not have old Pottersville omitted when our history comes to be written out, nor Dr. Landrum, nor the *Hive*, nor anything good or clever that ever adorned that once prominent locality." Then, in a passage that I mentioned earlier, he spoke of Dave, telling how boys and girls used to come to the village to watch him work his "magic." When Dave found his name in the paper, he must have been moved at having a part in the mourning of Dr. Landrum. Too, after so long away from public notice, now nearing sixty, he must have been gratified to find himself once more in the limelight. All of this seems to have fired his ambition: Just two days later, he set out to create his greatest jar.

When Dave put his crutch aside and took his stand at the wheel on that day, May 13, 1859, a fellow slave named Baddler was there as his helper. He was probably a replacement for Henry, whose crippled arms would not have been up to the rigors of such a task. The clay for the initial turning alone probably weighed about thirty pounds. Baddler would have carried it to Dave in one piece and placed it heavily on the wheel. He would have then begun pumping the treadle with his foot, setting the wheel in motion. Dave would have centered the mound, then opened it up and slowly begun to lift the walls of the vessel out of it, as he had many times before. This time, however, instead of drawing the walls together to form a mouth for the jar, he would have continued to open them outward to an almost unheard of diameter before finally stepping away to let this first stage begin to dry. Drying, though not too

much of it, was an important part of the process of making a jar in this fashion: It gave the lower portion of the vessel the stiffness required to support the considerable weight of the upper walls that were still to come. If the May air were warm and breezy enough that day, the drying might have been accomplished within a few hours.¹⁰

Dave probably took advantage of this interval to roll out the clay coils with which he would continue his work. Baddler would have helped him at the wooden counter: Each coil had to be about one and a half inches in diameter and at least six feet in length, long enough to go one full time around the jar. When the lower part of the jar had set up enough to proceed, Baddler would have carefully scooped up one of the long rolls of clay from the counter, perhaps draping the slick middle of it around the back of his neck, and carried it to the wheel. Taking the end of it, Dave would have begun laying it along the top of the jar's wall as Baddler fed it to him. Dave would have smoothed the new clay into the wall by moving his thumbs and palms along in repetitive, almost machine-like motions. This probably pushed the pot away from him, so it gradually turned on the wheel by itself. When the coil was used up, Baddler would have come back with a second one and then a third.

Toward the end of this building-up process, the top of the vessel probably became too elevated for Dave to reach inside. Baddler would have brought over a sturdy wooden crate and helped him up onto it. Standing high above everything else in the shop, perhaps looking as though this was where he had been meant to be all his life, Dave would have laid coils around the huge mouth to form a rim. He would then have called for handles. Quickly, Baddler would have cut off four short lengths of moist coil and handed them up to him. Dave would have placed each one high on the shoulders of the jar, as if they were at the four points of a compass, and pressed them into the damp clay. He would have fashioned them into perfect grips so later hands could lift this work of his.

Perhaps this was the moment when Dave took his pointed stick and, not even hesitating, wrote "Great & Noble Jar" across the clay. Entirely up to the importance of the occasion, it was one of his most evocative opening lines. Just below that, he described the uses of the jar—"hold Sheep goat or bear"—in his mind pronouncing the final word "bar" to rhyme with "jar." Dave would have rotated the vessel then so that the opposite side was facing him. He wrote "Lm," for Lewis Miles, just above the edge of the left handle, as he often did, and just under that the date. He signed the four letters of his name, but this time he added an ampersand and "Baddler" beneath it. Even after firing, during which a vessel can shrink from 10 to 15 percent, the jar would be an astonishing 81 inches in circumference at its widest point and 25¾ inches tall.

On that same workday, Dave would *double his achievement*. With Baddler again at his side, he would create a second jar taller than the first, 28¾ inches in height. Perhaps he even turned the base for it while he was waiting for the base of the first one to dry. Each of the two jars would hold approximately forty gallons. Today, historians call these almost twin pots, which are exhibited together at the Charleston Museum, "the largest and most spectacular slave-made vessels known," "a ceramic monument." Potters look at them in wonder.¹¹

* Leonard Todd, author of three previous books and a former Fulbright Scholar to France, is a graduate of Yale College and the Yale School of Art and Architecture. He was for many years a resident of New York City, where he was a writer and graphic designer, and now lives in Edgefield, South Carolina. More about Dave and Edgefield pottery is available on the author's web site, <http://www.leonardtodd.com>.

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