



## Collector profiles: Dr. Jimmy and Mary Smith, Augusta, Georgia: Preserving a slave potter's legacy.

by Bill Baab

Shortly after the birth of their first child, Dave came to live with Dr. Jimmy Smith and his wife, Mary, and life hasn't been the same for the Augusta, Georgia couple.

Mary remembers just how it happened: "We'd just married and had a house, but little furniture, so we went to a furniture auction in Ohio," she said during an interview. "There was a man from Sea Island, Ga., there, bidding on some glass at the auction, and he had brought a van and a U-Haul trailer. We'd driven up in a station wagon and wondered how we were going to get some furniture we'd bought back to Georgia.

"The auctioneer hooked us up with the man and he agreed to haul our furniture back to Georgia. We visited him in Sea Island and admired his collection of art glass. He pointed to a stoneware jug and told me we needed to collect pieces from our own back yard.

"He really put a bee in my bonnet, because that jug was from Edgefield, South Carolina."

After that, "we made it our business to see everything we could along those lines. We didn't have any idea what we were buying and were surprised to see a broken (Collin) Rhodes pitcher from Edgefield sell for \$3,700.

We bought a couple of repaired (Thomas) Chandlers, but didn't know (then) that they were repaired. My 'thing' became face jugs and Dave (the slave) pots. Jimmy likes two-color Rhodes and Phoenix Factory pieces."

The family's first encounter with Dave occurred in 1989 when a man traveling along Interstate 20 called them. "He got our number somewhere, said we knew his brother or something," Mary said. "He had a piece of pottery, knew we were collectors, and we were interested."

They met, cash was exchanged and the Smiths returned home with their first Dave piece. It was an ovoid jug signed L. Miles, Dave, and dated July 14th, 1841. The next piece they purchased was a "Halloween" pot signed LM (for Lewis Miles) on one

side and Oct. 31, 1849, Dave on the other. Those were followed by a pot signed Mr. Miles Dave, Oct. 15, 1849 and another inscribed LM, Aug. 30, 1851.

The Smiths' favorite Dave piece is a huge pot with an original Dave couplet: "Give me silver or either gold though they are dangerous to our soul." It's also signed in small handwriting, "Mr. L. Miles, Dave, 27th June 1840."

The Smiths now own a substantial collection of between 20 and 25 Edgefield pieces, including six Dave-made examples. They are generous about sharing parts of their collection, with the Dave couplet piece appearing in *"I made this jar . . . The Life and Works of the Enslaved African-American Potter, Dave,"* published in 1998 by the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina.

Their oldest daughter, Lauren, 14, a student at Davidson Magnet High School in Augusta, is on her way to becoming an accomplished violinist. Lauren and her 6-year-old sister, Caroline, have other claims to fame, although the latter has gone 1-up because of her diminutive size.

Each was photographed standing inside a massive Dave pot. In Caroline's case, she is flanked by her parents in the photo accompanying a 1999 story about Dave's works in *The Augusta Chronicle*.

She was photographed again this year standing in the same pot, flanked by her sister and parents, to accompany this story.

The saga of Dave the slave is an inspirational one, although his abilities to turn super-sized pots and to write in no way improved his status as a slave, albeit one invaluable to his masters.

He was born in the Edgefield District about 1800, eventually making his way into the household of Abner Landrum and later the Rev. John Landrum before being either sold or given to Lewis Miles. The latter was related to the Landrums by marriage, according to historians.

It also is believed that Dave was taught to read and write by Abner Landrum so the slave could set type for the *Edgefield*

*Hive*, a newspaper owned by Landrum. Literacy among slaves was a rarity since it was against the law to teach slaves to read and write in most Southern states, including South Carolina, historians said.

So Dave, who historians believe to have died during the 1870s, left a legacy that's now being enjoyed by pottery and stoneware collectors nationwide.

Investing in pottery, particularly Edgefield pieces in general and Dave pieces in particular, can reap financial rewards down the road. The pottery market isn't quite as volatile as the stock market, if one invests in "the right stuff."

For example, a pot inscribed "February 7th 1840" and "L. Miles" on one side and "Mr. Miles Dave" on the other sold for \$28,500 during a Southern Folk Pottery Collectors Society 2002 auction. During a 2001 SFPC auction, a pot inscribed "LM June 18 1861 Dave" brought \$19,500.

The topper came during a 2000 SFPC auction when a pot signed "L M Jan. 30, 1858, Dave" on one side and the couplet: "Making This Jar I Had All Thoughts, Lads & Gentlemen Never Out Walks," won a \$76,000 bid. The same pot sold for \$23,500 during a society auction in November of 1993.

"Bibliography: Life, art of man named Dave," by Robert Pavey in *The Augusta Chronicle*, May 2, 1999.

*I made this jar . . . The Life and Works of the Enslaved African-American Potter, Dave*, edited by Jill Beute Koverman. Catalogue of April 19-December 19, 1968 exhibition at the McKissick Museum, University of South Carolina. (catalogue out of print).

### Photos:

**Top:** Lauren, Jimmy and Mary Smith surround Caroline, who is standing in one of the family's pots made and signed by Dave in 1851.

**Middle:** Mary Smith of Augusta, Georgia shows off the family's first Edgefield District piece, an alkaline-glazed jug signed L. Miles Dave, July 14, 1841.

**Bottom:** Mary Smith and her husband, Jimmy, pose behind their six Dave-signed pieces of Edgefield District pottery.



Bill Baab, 2352 Devere Street, Augusta, GA 30904; Phone: (706) 736-8097; E-mail: riverswamper@comcast.net



Steve Ferrell and Terry Ferrell with "Dave" brick.

By Bill Baab

EDGEFIELD, S.C. — During the early 19th century and before the use of notebooks, children used pieces of slate to practice their penmanship on, but what if slate wasn't available? Would a pre-fired brick do?

Master potter Steve Ferrell was aboard his tractor pulling a harrow to disc a field and sometime later, his father, Terry, followed the furrows to pick up rocks and trash on their property in what was the thriving community of Pottersville some 200 years ago.

The elder Ferrell spotted a huge, handmade brick covered with red mud that had been pushed up by the discs and without a second thought, heaved it to one side. Some weeks later, after a rain shower, Steve Ferrell was spraying Roundup to keep the weeds down and spotted the brick again. The rain had washed off the mud and revealed what appeared to be writing on one side.

He showed it to his father and closer examination resulted in mental pandemonium and verbal jubilation for the Ferrells, who had seen examples of such handwriting many times during their long association with pottery forms from the old Edgefield District of South Carolina.

"There was no doubt in our minds that the April 18 date spelled out on the brick was written by Dave the slave," said Steve Ferrell, a master potter at the Old Edgefield Pottery. "We think he may have used the brick as a slate on which to practice his penmanship."

Terry Ferrell thinks the brick may have been one of four handmade in a wooden four-brick mold similar to one in the Ferrells' collection now being used to display a series of mini jugs.

"If we let our imaginations run on," Steve Ferrell said, "wouldn't it be neat to find three other bricks — one dated 1829, one signed "Landrum" (for pioneer potter Abner Landrum, an early Dave master) and the last signed "Dave"?"

If Dave-signed pots sell for many thousands of dollars to collectors, "this may be just the most valuable brick in the USA!"

Dave was born about 1800 and eventually made his way into the household of Abner Landrum and later the Rev. John Landrum before being either sold or given to potter Lewis Miles, who was related to the Landrums by marriage, according to historians.

Historians also believe Dave was taught to read and write by Abner Landrum, owner and publisher of a newspaper called the Edgefield Hive, so the slave could set type.

"The Hive had existed earlier as the South Carolina Republican weekly established in 1824 and it became The Hive in March of 1827, co-edited by Abner Landrum and William Brazier," Steve Ferrell explained. "Abner took over the newspaper by himself