

Enslaved poet Dave the Potter's works sell for \$1M; descendants get nothing

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Retropolis

Their enslaved ancestor's pottery sells for over \$1 million. They get nothing.



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Four great-great-great-great-grandchildren of David Drake, known as Dave the Potter, are pictured in a family home in Upper Marlboro, Md., on March 25. Clockwise from bottom are Priscilla Carolina, 85, Pauline Baker, 75, Daisy Whitner, 84, and John N. Williams Sr., 81. Carolina is holding a replica of a vase by their ancestor that was given to the family. (Sarah L. Voisin/The Washington Post)

By Dave Kindy

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"I wonder where is all my relation/Friendship to all — and every nation."

In a message that eclipsed time and space, Daisy Whitner could hear "Grandpa Dave" speaking to her. As she read the rhyming couplet inscribed in a large clay jar made before the Civil War, the 84-year-old Northeast D.C. resident could feel pain and loneliness in the anguished voice of her enslaved ancestor. He is remembered today as Dave the Potter, who risked severe punishment for signing his stoneware works that can sell today in excess of a million dollars.

"It really saddened me," said Whitner in a Zoom interview as she sat with her sisters and brother in her daughter's house in Upper Marlboro, Md. "I wondered how much blood and sweat he put into making these pieces. He had to shed tears as he was wondering where his relations were, who had been torn away from him."

For Whitner and her siblings, their family connection to Dave the Potter came as a complete surprise when a genealogist contacted them with the news in 2016. Now, they are watching with mixed emotions as his clay masterpieces have taken center stage in the art world as part of the major traveling exhibit "Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina." The show opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City last year and is now in Boston at the Museum of Fine Arts.

All of which has Dave the Potter's descendants — a family of modest means who do not own any of the valuable clay jugs he made while in forced labor more than 150 years ago — wondering who is profiting from their sale and why his family isn't entitled to any of the proceeds from these items, which are now in private and museum collections.



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“Why do some feel African Americans do not deserve restitution?” asked Whitner's sister, Pauline Baker, 75, who also lives in Northeast D.C. “We basically built this economy as enslaved people.”

Like many African Americans today, the siblings suspected slavery was in their past, but they were deeply moved to learn of their great-great-great-grandfather's travails as an enslaved man living in the pottery production enclave of antebellum Edgefield, S.C.

“We had no idea,” said the brother, John N. Williams, 81, of White Plains, Md. “We knew about slavery because we read it in the history books. But to know your ancestor was part of that opened a flood of emotions. One was joy that you know who they are and the other was sorrow for what they went through.”

Genealogist April Hynes broke the news to Whitner, Baker, Williams and their sister Priscilla Ann Carolina, 85, of Northeast D.C. She had been researching Dave the Potter — who took the name David Drake upon emancipation after the Civil War — when she realized he had living relatives.

“Through old obituaries and census records, I found Daisy,” Hynes recalled in a telephone interview. “I picked up the phone and called on a long shot. I could hear her husband in the background saying, ‘It's a scam!’ Thankfully, Daisy stayed on the phone with me and I let her know about her famous ancestor.”

Until that moment, the family had never heard of Dave the Potter or the stoneware he had made. Today, antique dealers praise the quality of his alkaline-glazed jugs, many of which feature his signature — which he included at great risk of personal harm — while a few include short poems that provide insight into his past.

Dave the Potter was born around 1800. His inscriptions have been interpreted as acts of defiance by some historians, given that enslaved people faced whippings and amputation of limbs for knowing how to read and write. In fact, he was missing a foot, though one account says he lost it in an accident.

To others, the rhymes are furtive expressions of the emotional pain Dave the Potter — who died around the 1870s — experienced in slavery, including the loss of family members when they were sold to other enslavers.

“It was so inhumane,” Baker said. “He was treated like he didn’t have feelings. I know he must have cried, grieving for his wife and children. Grandpa Dave was a brilliant man.”

With his private anguish as a creative force, Dave the Potter produced an estimated 40,000 pieces during his lifetime, for most of which he received no compensation. Many were large jars designed to hold 25 to 40 gallons of food or liquid. Today his surviving pottery can sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars or more — especially if the works include his cryptic couplets. One inscribed jar sold at auction in 2021 for \$1.56 million.

While many of the rhymes are fanciful or utilitarian, others provide insight into a life of bondage and suffering:

“Making this jar: I had all thoughts / Lads & gentlemen: never out walks.”

“I – made this Jar all of cross / If you don’t repent, you will be lost.”

One in particular strikes a chord for Whitner: “Horses, mules and hogs / all our cows is in the bogs / there they shall ever stay / till the buzzards take them away.”

“He’s not talking about farm animals,” she said. “He is talking in code about how the slave people lay there until the buzzards picked the meat from their bones. That’s what he was talking about. His message was, ‘Treat us like people. We are human beings.’”

While the family is proud his work is so valued today, they are bothered by the amount of money changing hands for clay jugs produced by an enslaved person. They would like to own one of his pieces and hope a scholarship fund can be established in his memory to help young African American students.

“There is always a need for supporting education in our community,” Baker said. “If we cannot benefit, I think they should create something like that.”

There is a growing national push to repatriate art and artifacts stolen from abroad and from Native Americans. But even as more U.S. jurisdictions consider reparations for Black residents, there is little agreement on how to address the fruits of enslaved labor and the profits it has generated. The result is that families like Dave the Potter’s descendants have few options for sharing in the wealth connected to their ancestor’s creations.

Still, the siblings are all proud of what Dave the Potter accomplished under difficult conditions. In turn, they hope he would be proud of them.

“His descendants have master’s degrees,” said Williams, referring to the siblings’ children and grandchildren. “They are lawyers, engineers, teachers and more. One is going to be a medical doctor. His legacy is continuing to expand.”

The siblings are all retired, but Baker worked as a speech pathologist in D.C. schools, Williams drove Metro trains and buses, Carolina was a seamstress, and Whitner worked as an account manager for The Washington Post.

“Hear Me Now: The Black Potters of Old Edgefield, South Carolina” seeks to give a voice to those — including Dave the Potter — who were forced into silence during the era of slavery. After Boston, the exhibition will open at the University of Michigan Museum of Art in Ann Arbor in August and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta next year.

“I hope the people who view our ancestor’s work see that he was resilient, creative, brave and tenacious,” Baker said. “Most of all, I hope they see he was human.”

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