

# THE "DESERVING POOR" IN COLONIAL GEORGIA: ELITE AND NON-ELITE DOMESTIC SITES AT FORT FREDERICA, GEORGIA

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Abstract: Social differences at domestic sites in the fortified town of Frederica (1736-1750) are explored through comparisons of architecture type and location, refuse disposal practices, selected artifacts, and dietary data. Based on archival-based Relative Economic Position, three sites representing three social strata at Frederica are used for these comparisons. The results of this analysis serve as a starting point for future testing at British colonial sites possessing similar social and temporal parameters.

## INTRODUCTION

Historical archaeologists working in the British colonial period in the southeastern U.S. have longed for unambiguous (or even mildly convincing) material culture correlates for economic status that coherently link the archaeological and documentary records. Several methods have been used for later periods, such as ceramic price indexing (Miller 1980, 1991), consumer choice profiles (Spencer-Wood 1987) and faunal indexing (Schulz and Gust 1983). Brenner and Monks (2002) have taken a quantitative approach to establishing archival relative economic position, or REP, and then correlating REP with differences in archaeological assemblages. While this shows great promise, it is predicated on a high degree of control of both lines of evidence, which is often hard to come by during the colonial period; the search for the holy grail of one-to-one correlations of artifacts with status has often led down the road to frustration, if not perdition. Following Brenner and Monks' lead but relying more on qualitative than quantitative data, it has been possible to construct REPs for three sites at the town of Frederica using documentary data, and to match them with the sites' archaeological assemblages. By the end of this paper you can decide for yourself if I've done so in an unambiguous or even mildly convincing manner.

## FREDERICA BACKGROUND

The town and fort of Frederica, located on St. Simons Island, Georgia, was established in 1736 as a defensive outpost between Spanish Florida and important British settlements and plantations in Georgia and South Carolina. Consisting of a regiment of soldiers along with several dozen families from which the civilian militia was derived, the fortified settlement was destined to play a critical role in the conflict with Spain over control of North America (Ivers 1974). But the Georgia colony's founder, James Edward Oglethorpe, an English nobleman and military leader, also had social and economic motives in mind when he established the town. Besides its strategic importance, Oglethorpe naively envisioned the settlement as a self sufficient transplanted English village, populated by the Mother Country's "deserving poor," complete with cordwainers, dyers, coopers, candlestick makers, etc., all of whom were expected to moonlight as part-time farmers and thereby feed themselves. Predictably, most of these city slickers promptly absconded to the bright lights of Savannah or Charleston; those who stayed depended largely on governmental handouts for their survival, or else opened up taverns (or worse) for the 630-man regiment stationed there. The death knell for this military-based

economy rang after an amazingly incompetent Spanish invasion of the island was repulsed in 1742. The British regiment was disbanded a few years later, and most of the few residents who remained by that date soon departed. Much of the town's surviving structures burned in 1758 because no one was there to put out the fire.

The site was used mostly for farming and scattered residences before becoming a National Monument in 1945. Archaeological explorations of the largely undisturbed fort and defensive earthworks began in the late 1940s under the supervision of Charles H. Fairbanks, the Monument's first superintendent. His pioneering work aided greatly in the location, interpretation, and restoration of several key military elements, and he was also able to establish the original layout of the civilian sections of the town (Cate 1956; Fairbanks 1953, 1956). Unfortunately, the Fairbanks era was followed by over 40 excavations of uneven quality that were based on excavation of unscreened trenches to locate substantial brick or tabby foundations (Deagan 1975). Compounding the unfortunate field approach were difficulties in archaeological interpretations: archaeological assemblages didn't seem to match the documented inhabitants. It was not until historian J.T. Scott (1985) uncovered a previously unknown map that clarification of the town lots numbering system finally allowed reliable linkages with specific colonial residents.

### THREE SITES

All the sites compared here were intensively investigated by Fairbanks (1953, 1956) and Honerkamp (1975, 1980) using block excavations and systematic screening. On the basis of archival and architectural information, it is possible to create a REP hierarchy for the three sites. The following four factors were used to establish the REPs: (1) whether or not the residents could afford to pay their own way to the New World (high REP) or were transported at the expense of the Trust (low REP); (2) "desirable" versus "undesirable" locations of the 60 by 90 foot town lots that they lived in (the largest, most elaborate, and expensive houses at colonial Frederica occur in close proximity to the fort, and almost always on the two main streets; see Deagan 1975); (3) descriptions of house construction, with brick being the most expensive, tabby being less expensive, and wood being the least expensive building materials; and (4) other economic information, such as livelihoods and other sources of income.

The Hawkins-Davison Families. This site consisted of a brick duplex house on the main street in the town (Broad Street) with a common wall on the lot line that separated Lots 2 and 3 of the South Ward. This duplex was located as close as possible to the fort, and as would be expected was occupied by relatively high status individuals (Deagan 1972). Thomas Hawkins was the regimental surgeon, and his wife Beatrice and several servants resided in the Lot 2 portion of the duplex, which he described as a two-story, double brick structure with a portico and balcony (Scott 1985:3). Hawkins also received a salary as First Bailiff and was engaged in a variety of business ventures. The Davison family consisted of Samuel and his wife Susannah and their three children, and a servant. He was made a constable of the town and also held other civil servant posts, such as Searcher of Ships. He helped build the fort's magazine and a wooden footbridge, and in the bottom floor of his three-story house he kept an inn. Both families arrived at Frederica in 1736 and were gone by 1743 (Cate 1956; Scott 1985). Reoccupation of such a substantial brick structure was inevitable: 15% of the excavated ceramics from this site were creamware or later types, compared to only 1.0 and 2.3% of such "late" types at the Hird and Forrester sites, respectively.

The Hird Family. Consisting of Thomas Hird and his wife Grace, along with their three children (John, Phoebe, and Frances), this family resided in Lot 13 in the North. This lot was occupied by the Hirds from 1736 until at least 1748, when Thomas died (Scott 1985:32-33). An adult son, Mark, owned the adjacent Lot 12 but apparently stayed in the town for only a brief time; ownership of Mark's lot reverted to the elder Hird in 1739. The family's passage to the New World was paid for by the Trustees, indicating a low economic position upon arrival at the town, and Thomas' messy, smelly trade as a dyer was a low-status livelihood in the 18th century. Reinforcing their modest social status, the location of the family lot was off the beaten path, that is, away from both the main streets of the town and the actual fort, and a contemporary map indicate that the family lived in a "range of small shingle houses" (Scott 1985:32).

Once at Frederica, the elder Hird seems to have been engaged in everything *except* dying: he was the town constable, a lay preacher (one of the few colonists in all of Georgia to listen to, let alone support John Wesley), a successful farmer who established a "plantation" on an island he discovered, a landlord to soldiers who lived on Mark's property, and an astute businessman. He owned a boat and made frequent trips to Savannah and Charleston (Candler 1908:98). Hird distinguished himself quickly: he was singled out by those who knew him as a "very knowing and industrious man" (Candler 1913: 92), and one of the town's "principal Improvers" (Candler 1906: 73). When combined with evidence of his considerable entrepreneurial flexibility and his unusually long occupation at the town, these contemporary descriptions indicate an upward progression in status over time. An unspecified Hird daughter married John Joyner, who in 1759 petitioned for the title to Hird Island and the "many considerable improvements thereon;" Joyner also mentioned that since Thomas' death, the rest of the family had been "dispersed and not known whether living or dead" (Candler 1907:202). The site's mean ceramic date is identical to the documentary midpoint of 1742.

William Forrester, Bachelor. According to Scott, Lot 41 in the South Ward was unclaimed during the early years of Frederica's existence (an indicator of its undesirable status), and Forrester, an unmarried soldier, ranger, and snuff maker, was credited only with building a "hut" there (1985:22). He was also paid to be the postman from Frederica to St. Simons, and he remained in Frederica as late as 1747, and probably some years beyond that. Nothing else about his life is known from documentary sources. He does not appear in Coulter and Saye's "A List of the Early Settlers of Georgia," but it is assumed that as a soldier his journey to the New World was underwritten by the Crown. Reflecting this later start, a mean ceramic date of 1743.8 was calculated for the site.

Based on the above, is it possible to propose archival-based REPs for these three sites: in descending order, Hawkins-Davison, Hird, and Forrester. First, both Hawkins and Davison came to Frederica at their own expense, while the Hirds and Forrester were presumably sent to Georgia at the Trust's or Crown's expense. Second, the Hawkins-Davison duplex was in a prime location compared to the other two sites that were both off the two main roads and much farther away (straight line as well as street routes) from the safety of the fort. Third, the descriptions of the respective houses indicate a 1-2-3 ranking, as they are described as an elaborate multi-story brick duplex; a "range of shingle houses [note the plural];" and a "hut." Finally, both Hawkins and Davison possessed servants, served in bureaucratic positions, and had other business ventures in addition to their "main" livelihoods. The Hirds arrived poor but clearly improved their economic position over time, as Thomas Hird proved to be a vigorous and successful businessman who took advantage of numerous opportunities at Frederica and beyond. Little is

known of William Forrester, but he apparently engaged in much less vigorous economic activity than did Hird. In all four measures, Forrester brings up the rear.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL CORRELATES

Architecture. The most obvious archaeological manifestations for comparison with the archival REP for the three sites is architecture. The brick foundations for the Hawkins-Davison duplex were located adjacent to the fort on Broad Street, as indicated in documents and maps (Figure 1). Fairbanks was able to ground truth the first-person accounts of the structure, and he also discovered some undocumented tabby interior walls in the Davison duplex and a brick-lined well under an added room on the Hawkins side (Figure 2). The only architectural evidence encountered at the Hird Site consisted of remains of a deep cellar of a wood-lined structure that contained some light tabby foundation elements (Figure 3). Note the joist in direct contact with the ground. The reason that I can illustrate an original, 250 year old wooden joist is because it was waterlogged. It probably became that way soon after it was set in place and stayed wet over the next two and one-half centuries. This doubtless represents an initial architectural experiment by Hird, reminiscent of half-basements in a Mother Country that lacked such a high water table. The experiment was probably not repeated. Despite its soggy, ill-fated demise, this cellar represents only one of the structures documented for this lot, and it was at least more substantial than the earth-fast series of postholes that form the small Forrester “shack” (Figure 4). Thus, architectural expressions in the archaeological record mirror the archival REPs for the three sites.

House size would also seem to have an obvious correlation with REP. Although the size of the Hird structure is unknown, the other three structures mirror the housing type data presented above. The multi-story Hawkins house incorporated two stories and had three ground-floor rooms measuring 783.3 square feet, while the three-story Davison structure totaled 531.5 square feet. By contrast, the single-story post structure at the Forrester site encompassed 319.6 square feet, with a possible small detached structure adding another 112.7 square feet; this may have been a temporary “palmetto bower” that many residents initially constructed on their lots (Moore 1992:42). At least the larger Forrester structure was plastered: recovered from the site were large quantities of tabby plaster that bore impressions that were similar to prehistoric wattle and daub construction. This is a building technique that is apparently unique at Frederica and possibly elsewhere at this time period in the Southeast.

Faunal Remains. Where the residents of Frederica obtained their meat from is unclear. While a “meat market” is listed for the town, not a single sawed bone was noted in any of the faunal remains that were studied. Apparently meat was processed with axes and knives, and the existence of a routinized system of meat processing and distribution is simply unknown. Complicating the “meat source issue” is the Trustees’ habit of provisioning an unknown segment of Frederica’s residents with supplies from the Fort’s warehouse. Thus, the approach used by Schulz and Gust (1983) for comparing major meat cuts for assigning relative economic position may not be applicable here. Instead, using faunal information from both British and Spanish colonial sites, Reitz (1979) compared biomass percentages from faunal collections and noted a distinct (and surprising) status correlation: higher-class sites are associated with relatively greater amounts of wild food sources, specifically deer (see also Honerkamp 1979, 1980, 1982; Honerkamp and Reitz 1983; and Reitz and Honerkamp 1983, 1984). At Frederica, cattle, deer, and swine account for between 91% and 93% of the total biomass figures for all three sites. As seen in Figure 5, the deer biomass percentages follow Reitz’s coastal colonial pattern, with the Hawkins-Davison and Hird sites containing nearly three times as much deer as Forrester. There

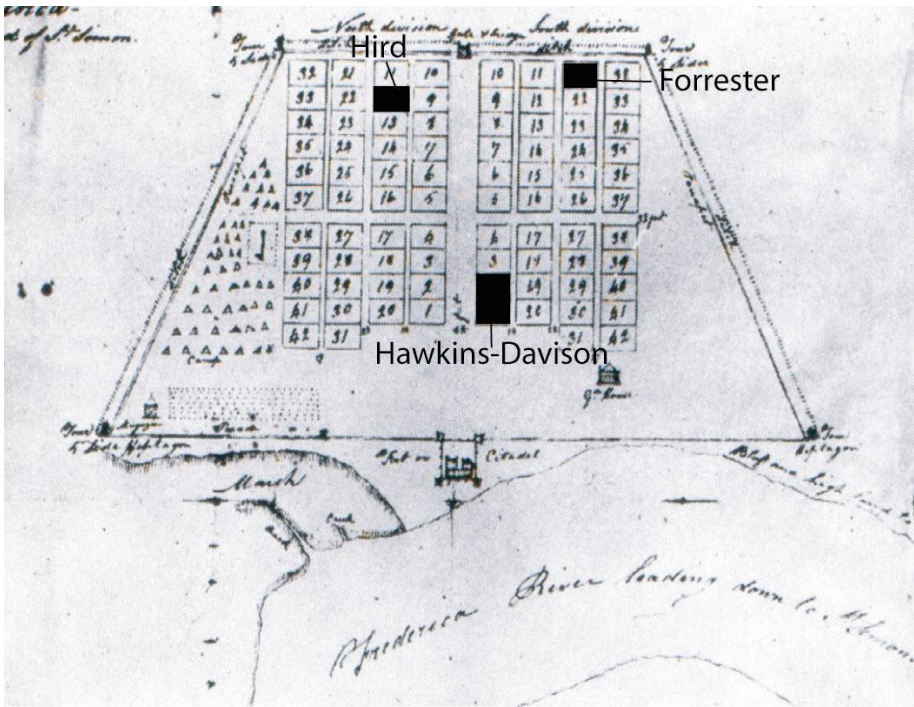


Figure 1 . 1796 Miller Map of Frederica, Showing Site Locations. The lot numbering system used in this map is inaccurate.



Figure 2. Foundations to the Hawkins-Davison Duplex. The Davison structure is in the foreground.



Figure 3. Profile of Hird Site Basement. A water-logged floor joist appears in the floor of the unit.

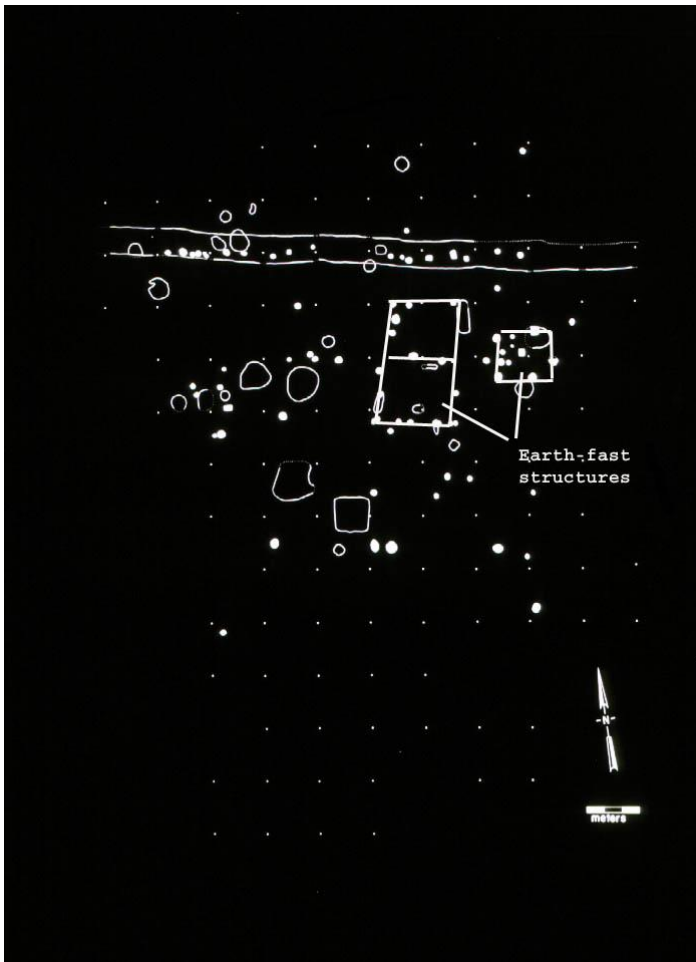


Figure 4. Plan View of Forrester Site Features. Two possible structures are extrapolated from posthole alignments.



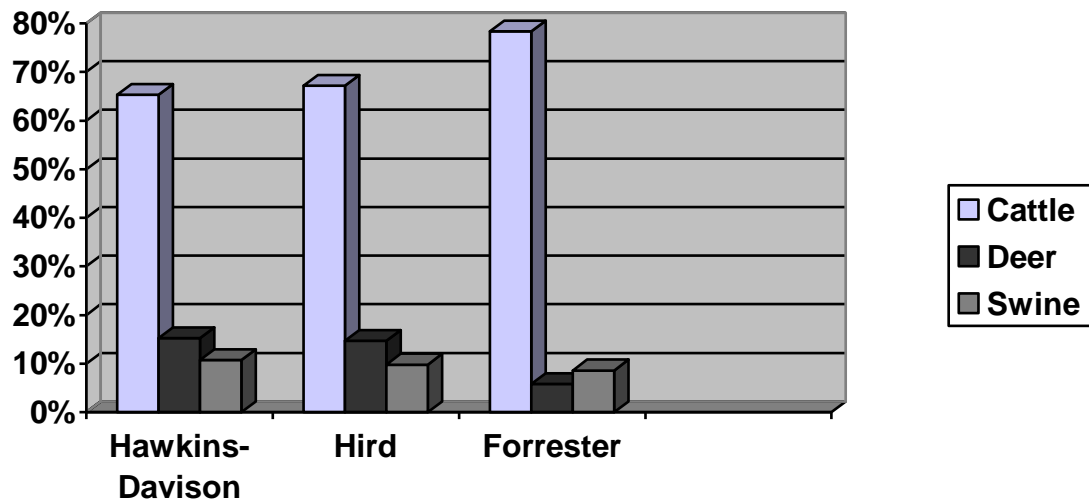


Figure 5. Biomass Percentages for Cattle Deer, and Swine.

is also an inverse relationship between deer and cattle, while swine is the most evenly distributed of the three species. The association between high REP and the presence of more deer in the faunal assemblages can probably be attributed to the practical difficulties in acquiring this type of resource in a colonial context. Deer are difficult to bring down using smooth-bore muskets, and this source of meat was therefore more costly to acquire (from professional hunters?) than was meat from domestic animals. With this in mind, William Forrester, who is assumed to have been more dependent on warehouse provisions, would be expected to rely more on hand-out beef than hard-to-come-by venison. Individual colonists generally raised pigs, with pork rarely mentioned as a provision from the Trust. Typically, pigs were free to roam and fend for themselves, to be harvested as needed through hunting; feral pigs were still being “raised” in this manner on St. Simons Island as late as the 1970s. Since it is known that the Forrester Site was occupied in the late 1740s and possibly later, the similarity in the swine percentages at the three sites suggests that the availability of this resource remained constant over time and was not linked to REP, at least during the colonial period.

Artifact Classes. Historical archaeologists instinctively seek to define social status differences on the basis of ceramic comparisons. Ceramic artifacts from Frederica were not analyzed by vessel type in any systematic manner, so it was not possible to apply Miller’s ceramic price indexing to the assemblages. Instead, an attempt was made to delineate REP correlates from ceramic type percentages. Using only “colonial period ceramics” (types with pre-Creamware beginning manufacturing dates), the sites were compared by refined wares as a percentage of total ceramics. As defined here, refined types incorporate such earthenwares as delftware, Astbury, agateware, Jackfield, and “clouded wares; refined stonewares include assorted white salt glazed and Nottingham wares; and Oriental porcelain. As seen in Figure 6, only refined earthenwares adhere to the expected REPs for the three sites. Perhaps most surprising of all is the high percentage of porcelain exhibited by the Forrester Site (10.5%) compared to the smaller percentage (5.5%) from the Hird Site. Several factors may account for this ceramic type “inversion.” First, as a soldier, Forrester may have had a stronger preference for the tea ceremony than did the civilian Hirds. Second, family composition may play a critical role in ceramic use and therefore choice: the Hird family consisted of a husband, wife, and three

children. Possibly practical lead glazed earthenware crocks, creampans, and coarse salt glazed mugs were more useful than Astbury bowls and porcelain tea sets. In particular, utilitarian salt glazed wares were relatively more numerous at the Hird than the Forrester lot (14.1% versus 4.1%). The fact that the Hirds were clearly documented as the higher REP household argues against the simple one-to-one mantra of “more porcelain equals a higher status.” Perhaps there was a steep learning curve in the children-laden household regarding appropriate serving wares, so that the sturdy types became the service of choice for all ceramic needs (Honerkamp 2000). This question is one that can best be addressed through analysis of vessel shape/form and minimum number of vessels, an approach that unfortunately I did not attempt when I had the Frederica artifacts within my grasp.

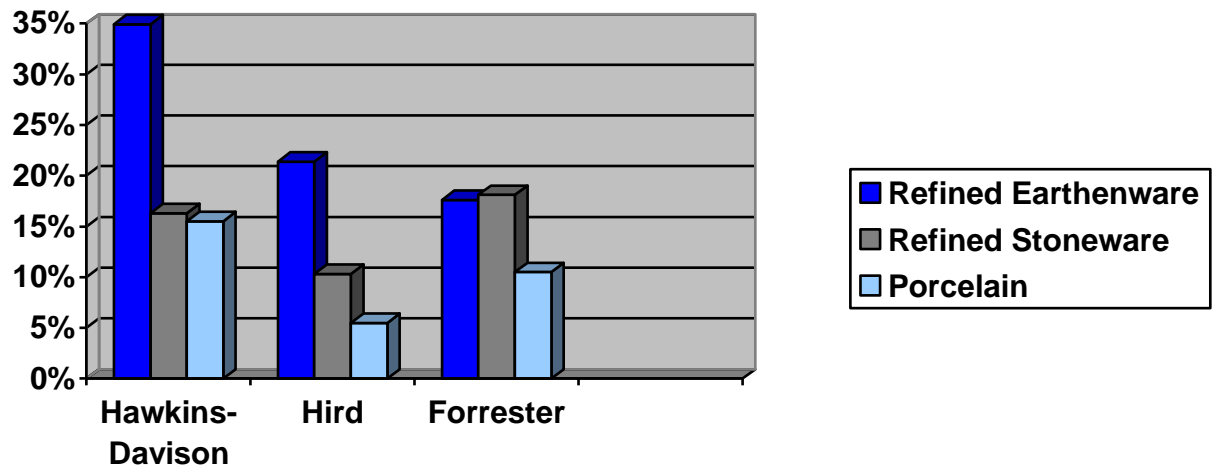


Figure 6. Comparisons of Refined Ceramics as a Percentage of Total Ceramics.

Since ceramics do not consistently correlate positively with the documented REP of the Hird family, as noted above, what does? Qualitative factors can be cited, such as the presence of a mother-of-pearl snuff box lid, numerous glass-inset sleeve links, a fancy brass candlestick holder, and rare and unusual clear glass decanter bottles--none of which appear in the Forrester assemblage. A quantitative indication is also seen in the glass category (excluding window glass). Fragments from clear glass tumblers, goblets, and decanters make up just 6.5% of all glass artifacts at the Hird site, but that is double the Forrester site percentage; the 2-to-1 ratio also obtained when measured as artifacts per square meter excavated. Whatever sophisticated adult beverages might have been consumed in these elegant vessels, the Hirds served them in a more refined manner than did Forrester.

Refuse Disposal. I have saved the most problematic archaeological variable for last. Only the Hird and Forrester sites provide comparable data for this discussion. Due to the fact that all the Frederica colonists lived in 60 by 90 foot town lots, trash disposal was necessarily confined to these lots, using a "bimodal" method of sheet deposits, corresponding to the Brunswick Pattern (South 1977), and/or subsurface features deposition. As shown in Figure 5, some differences are apparent when faunal and nonfaunal artifact groups are evaluated by context: compared to Forrester, the Hirds deposited more of their refuse in subsurface features such as abandoned wells and a series



of mid-lot trash pits. This is especially apparent with faunal remains. A proclivity to deposit odoriferous bone in subsurface features is seen in the 57% Hird versus 51% Forrester figures. This is a greater percentage difference than for the nonfaunal remains.

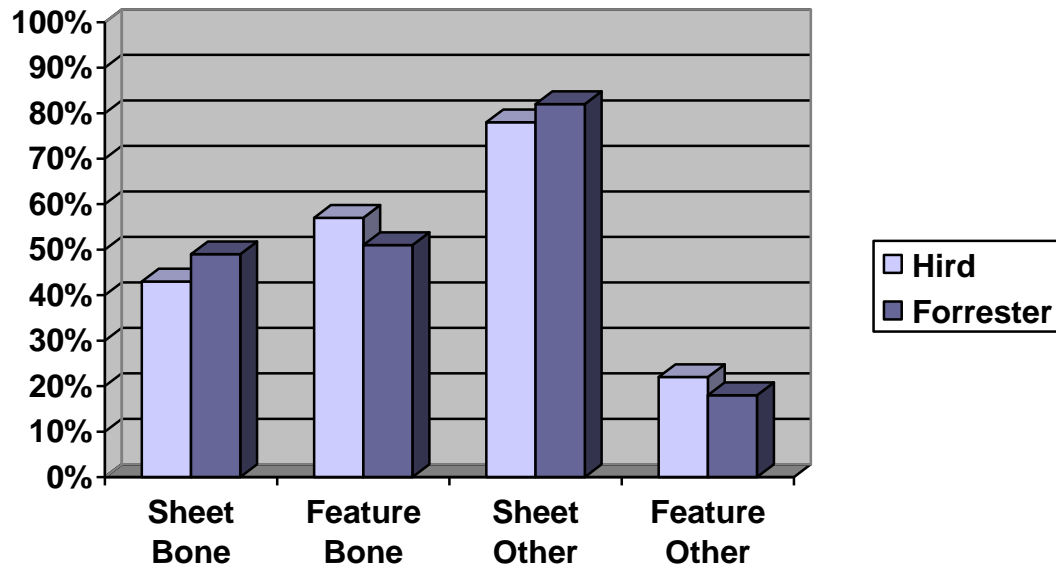


Figure 7. Depositional Context for Faunal and Nonfaunal Artifacts.

While these percentages may be a function of differential class behavior, a simpler explanation is that they result from the high volume of butchered remains that were generated by the Hird family over the years, combined with a finite amount of space in which to get rid of it. Bachelor William Forrester, however, with considerably less volume to contend with, was pleased to dump roughly equal amounts of bone in features (51%) and the yard (49%). As with the Hirds, most of Forrester's nonfaunal artifacts were associated with sheet deposits, but compared to the Hirds he threw relatively more trash into the yard than he buried underground. A gender-based explanation is also possible for the sheet-versus-subsurface deposits of bone by Forrester: namely, that he was a typical bachelor slob. However, this brutal stereotype will not be explored further in this paper. Suffice it to say that refuse disposal patterns *may* have a status dimension, but variables like family composition and length of occupation make such a connection tenuous.

## SUMMARY

Based on this brief comparison, both the problems and promises of delineating status in an 18<sup>th</sup> century British colonial site are illustrated. Architectural information and diet appear to provide the most unambiguous archaeological status markers. Ceramic type correlations with REP met with mixed results, and this finding serves as a caveat to intuitively obvious statements about status and ceramic possessions; in fact, glassware may be a more sensitive indicator of status. Finally, refuse disposal behavior may have a class dimension, but other variables such as family composition and length of occupation preclude direct connections. Clearly, excavation of contemporaneous sites with well-established REPs can help to confirm, revise or reject the correlations presented here.

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