

# Donation of the Month

**Object: John Edwards china, 1890s**  
**Catalog #: 2001.10.16-31**  
**Donor: Friends of the Museum purchase**



Museum director Gaye Bland made a great find seven years ago when she spotted a number of plates, three coffee cups, and one lone saucer for sale at a local flea market. The green-and-gold "Holland" pattern china was made by John Edwards of England. Research didn't turn up much on Edwards or his company. He might be the same John Edwards who operated in Longton, Staffordshire, 1847-1855. But the china looks more like the type found at the turn of the 20th century. A John Edwards & Co. operated out of nearby Fenton, 1873-1900. The fact that the china is marked "England" helps in dating it. The McKinley Tariff Act of 1890, which taxed imported goods as a way to protect American companies from foreign competitors, required imported objects to be marked with their country of origin.

The 1890s china was a perfect match for the new green-and-gold dining room in our 1895 Hawkins House, which was then undergoing a major restoration. And at \$23, it was a steal. But if you're trying to tell the story of a real family living in a real house, a little bit of china won't do. The Victorians loved their dinnerware -- lots of it.

The 19th century was a time of increasing industrialism, rapid technological advances, and a growing immigrant workforce. With the advent of cheap, widely available products, a materialistic culture began to form. People wanted stuff. In 1800 the average family might have sat down to dinner with shallow wood trenchers or pewter plates. Everyone had a knife and spoon, but individual forks didn't become popular until the middle of the century. But by 1900 all that had changed. A dizzying array of serving pieces were available and desired; each dish and utensil designed for a specific food. Serving strawberries? A proper household had a fancy berry bowl to hold them, an elaborate berry spoon to ladle them into individual berry bowls, and delicate, three-pronged strawberry forks with which to consume them.

The sheer number and formality of serving pieces reflected a middle-class family's desire to be seen as sophisticated and prosperous. After all, the well-to-do could order their silverware from Tiffany's where a place setting for just one person might include a terrapin (turtle) fork, an ice cream spoon, a fish knife, a sardine fork, asparagus tongs, a fruit knife, a cream soup spoon (as opposed to a clear soup spoon), an oyster fork, a marrow spoon, and so on; well over 100 pieces in all.

How could a middle-class family afford to "keep up with the Joneses?" A peek at the 1897 Sears,

Roebuck & Co. Catalog (the "Cheapest Supply House on Earth") shows an attractive dinner service for 12 100 pieces total, which cost all of \$11.50. With an average income of \$75-\$100 a month this one-time purchase was an affordable luxury for a family.

But back to the saga of the Hawkins House china. It wasn't until Fall 2001 that the hunt for "Holland" paid off when a large collection finally came up for sale at a china matching service. Butter pats, bone dishes, covered bowls, serving platters, even coffee cups and saucers. But they couldn't be had for \$11.50 or \$23. No, these items were collectibles and were priced accordingly. Since this was an unbudgeted expense for the Museum, the Friends of the Museum board came to the rescue and authorized the purchase. Thanks to the Friends the Hawkins family can sit down to dinner and have their cake (and coffee) too. Now if we could only find the matching sugar bowl, cream pitcher, pickle dish, sauce plates, slop bowl.