



# Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA)

Diane L. Richard examines a fascinating resource covering a wide range of professions relating to the the arts



**I**F YOU HAVEN'T EXPLORED MESDA, <https://mesda.org>, don't let the name fool you. Just because it is a museum does not mean that it doesn't have some neat resources of interest to genealogists. And, just because it says "Southern" does not mean it is ONLY southern – it includes many entries from New England, the Mid-Atlantic, etc. And, last and not least, just because it says "Decorative Arts" does not mean that you won't find potters and other craftsmen mentioned whose goods were used daily – in our modern-day lives of mass-produced kitchen goods, handmade utilitarian objects are a rarity – this wasn't true in the 1800s and earlier.

So, let's start with what is MESDA? Per the mission page on the website ...

*"The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) is the preeminent center for the research and study of Southern decorative arts and material culture. MESDA is home to the most comprehensive collection of southern decorative arts and related research resources in the country ...*

*MESDA is part of Old Salem Museums & Gardens, a unique living history site that shares the rich, authentic, and diverse cultural history of the early South—with special emphasis on the Moravians in North Carolina, enslaved and free people of African descent, and indigenous peoples of the Southern Woodlands—through the preservation and interpretation of material culture, architecture, and cultural landscapes."*

That means that if ancestors were potters, woodworkers, furniture makers, silversmiths, basket makers, monument makers, and more, their craft is represented here. Now, odds of finding your ancestor listed aren't necessarily great unless you know they were craftsmen. That said, the real power of MESDA to genealogists is learning about the practicing artisans in a community and determine if there are records left by them identifying customers (more likely to be your ancestors)! Even artisans sometimes left business ledgers, or we learn of their existence through the business ledgers of others, often a general merchandise store that may have procured and sold their items. Or maybe we are pursuing an ancestor who apprenticed in a "trade" which happened to be with someone recorded in the MESDA archives.

Let's review the many resources on this website that you will want to check out. They are presented in no particular order (though I do leave my favorite resource until the end).

**1 Program Videos**, <https://mesda.org/programs/program-videos>, includes an archive of videos created in 2017 and earlier. The 2017 MESDA Furniture Seminar was titled "Friendly Furniture: Identifying the Quaker Cabinetmakers of Early America," while the 2016 MESDA Conference was titled "Celebrating

Fifty Years of Southern Ceramic Studies." The list goes on, and these provide both excellent context about crafts and artisans and details about select individual ones – maybe one of your family members. It appears that MESDA (via the Old Salem Museums & Gardens YouTube channel) has posted its