

**TRADITION AND INNOVATION
AT A NINETEENTH CENTURY
POTTERY**

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**Alexandria Archaeology Publications
Number 5**

Alexandria Archaeology
Office of Historic Alexandria
City of Alexandria, Virginia
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Six pottery sites (of the seven known historically) have been partially excavated in Alexandria, including waster piles and one kiln (that of Tildon Easton, constructed in 1841.) These pottery sites represent an 85 year development sequence for Alexandria earthenware and stoneware. Stoneware, at least in small quantities, has been found at all of these sites. Vessel forms and decoration, production techniques, and business operations of these potteries have long been a subject of interest and study for myself and other local researchers.

Alexandria's pottery tradition began by 1792 and stoneware, first produced in Alexandria by 1799, became a major product of the Alexandria potters in 1813 with the opening of the Wilkes Street Pottery.

The Philadelphia style of slip decorated earthenware introduced by Henry Piercy in 1792 was also produced by other Alexandria potters in the 1790's, as Piercy's techniques and style were passed on through various apprenticeships and short-lived partnerships.

The Alexandria pottery tradition continued to be passed on to the later stoneware potters, as John Swann, first owner of the Wilkes Street Pottery apprenticed with Lewis Plum, the first producer of stoneware in Alexandria. Milburn, the later Wilkes Street owner, apprenticed with Swann. Tildon Easton lived in Alexandria for at least six years prior to the 1841 opening of his pottery, and thus presumably apprenticed with Milburn, whose Pottery was the only one still in operation in the 1830's.

The earliest stoneware wasters were found at the Piercy pottery site, which operated from 1792 until 1809. The Stoneware found at the Piercy pottery site is thought to have been produced there by Lewis Plum, who first worked with Piercy in 1797, and took over his pottery in 1799. It is attributed to Plum, because of the similarity with his later wares and because no stoneware was found at Piercy's house and shop sites, both abandoned by Piercy prior to Plum's arrival in 1797. Plum's later pottery, which dates from 1813-1821, was also partially excavated, showing the development of his wares.

A brief salvage excavation had been conducted at the Wilkes Street Pottery in 1977, recovering portions of waster piles which had been exposed by backhoes and pot-hunters. The 16,000 sherds recovered from this site provides a sequence for the development of Alexandria's stoneware industry, and a basis of comparison with Easton's wares.

Over a two-week period in 1984, the site of Tildon Easton's Pottery, including the kiln and a portion of the surrounding waster pile, was systematically excavated by Alexandria Archaeology prior to development of the property. 5,220 sherds of Easton's pottery were recovered in excavation, and have been compared with the wares of Milburn and other Alexandria potters.

We will examine the place of these potters and their wares in the context of the history of American stoneware manufacture.

At the time of Alexandria's first potter Henry Piercy's arrival in 1792, Alexandria was a busy seaport. In the early years of Alexandria's history, the town was dependent upon imported manufactured goods, but by the 1790's local manufacture was thriving. The town was linked to the hinterlands of the Shenandoah Valley via the Loudon and Little River Turnpikes, and with American and foreign ports via the Potomac River. Alexandria has abundant sources of local clay, suitable for the manufacture of both earthenware and the higher fired stoneware.

Piercy emigrated from Germany to Philadelphia prior to the Revolution, where he and his two brothers operated a pottery. Piercy's first advertisement in the *Alexandria Gazette* stated that his wares were "equal to any work in Philadelphia or elsewhere." The Philadelphia pottery industry was already well established, and was the basis for comparison in advertisements of many potters of the time.

Philadelphia appears to have been the major source of American pottery reaching Alexandria in the 1790's, as seen both in local advertisements and excavated wares. Excavated utilitarian wares from Alexandria dating prior to the 1790's were mostly imported from England, and include Buckley ware, Staffordshire slip-ware, and brown salt-glazed stonewares.

The production of utilitarian wares in America began within a few years of colonization, and stoneware was first produced by 1718. The Germanic stoneware traditions of New York and New Jersey dominated the American stoneware market. By the early 19th century, American stoneware began to show a blending of the Germanic and English traditions. The Germanic wares, including bulbous jars, long-necked jugs and ornate incised and brushed cobalt pottery decoration, are the influence for Alexandria's early stoneware.

During the colonial period, shipping rates were based on the value of the ware, and inexpensive utilitarian stoneware and earthenware was imported in large quantities from Europe.

Following the Revolution, shipping rates were changed so that they were based on weight rather than value, making it costly and impractical to import those wares. Thus, when foreign competition was excluded, many local manufacturers found it profitable to produce stoneware in addition to or in place of earthenware. Once stoneware was produced in an area, earthenware sales went down and other earthenware potters were either forced out of business or began to make stoneware as well.

While earthenware was good for cooking, because it was able to expand and contract from the heat, it was unsuitable for the storage of acidic foods. The effects of lead poisoning were well known in the eighteenth century. Lead glazed earthenware was used throughout the nineteenth century for cooking, preparation and storage of non-acidic foods, while stoneware was used for storage of acidic foods, and was cleaner and more durable for the storage of all foods. (Greer 1981)

The trade secrets of stoneware production, a more complicated and specialized skill than earthenware manufacture, were often closely guarded, but were passed on through apprenticeships. In Alexandria the skill appears to have been passed on from Plum to Swann to Milburn to Easton, but its origin is not known.

Potter John Swann began his apprenticeship with Lewis Plum in 1803, and remained with him for seven years. Three years later, Swann advertised his own pottery manufactory on Wiles Street. Stoneware was, for the first time in Alexandria, the main product of a pottery, although plain glazed earthenware pans and pots, unglazed flowerpots, and later, earthen furnaces and chimney pots, were also produced at the Wilkes Street Pottery.

The Wiles Street Pottery, with its 64 years of operation, was the most successful and long lived of all pottery ventures in Alexandria.

John Swann's earliest pottery produced at Wilkes Street includes brown glazed stoneware and grey stoneware with the upper portion dipped in brown-colored iron wash. His jugs, with reeded necks, resemble those from the Plum site, and the bulbous shape is typical of Germanic and 18th century American wares. By 1830 Swann's stoneware vessel forms had evolved from ovoid to cylindrical. This change from ovoid to cylindrical shapes took place in America, England and Germany as fuel became more expensive. The cylindrical forms could be stacked

more closely in larger kilns, so that they could be sold at competitive prices with industrialized wares. (Greer 1981.)

An 1819 advertisement announced “a great improvement is made in his ware at considerable expense and labor” (Palladium of Liberty, 9/3/1819). The change seen in his wares is to a lighter grey stoneware body. (Myers 1983). Swann’s grey salt-glaze stoneware had a simple cobalt decoration, consisting of scalloped or wavy lines, or plain vines. He may have been influenced by the Baltimore potteries of Thomas and Joel Morgan (established 1794) and of Henry C. Remmey (1817) which was advertised in the Alexandria Gazette in 1820. Indeed Baltimore, 50 miles away, was Swann’s main competition, and he advertised his stoneware (8/5/1819 Alexandria Gazette) at prices 20 to 30% below Baltimore’s. Note that his advertising comparisons are in terms of price, while Piercy’s were in terms of quality.

Swann had worsening financial problems and in 1821 mortgaged his property to a prominent Alexandria china merchant H. Smith & Co., and in 1825 his property was sold at auction and purchased by Smith. Swann remained an employee at the pottery until around 1831 when his former apprentice and future owner of the pottery, Benedict C. Milburn, took charge of operations.

The pottery from the Smith period was more exuberantly decorated than Swann’s earlier work, exhibiting more fully developed floral designs. The tulip pattern was a popular motif in American stoneware. In reference to pottery from Greensboro Pennsylvania, Evelyn Abrams in 1831 wrote that “the best of the grey stoneware is decorated with blue – usually festoons in the well-known tulip pattern of Teutonic antecedents.” (Schaltenbrand 1977). Thus the pottery’s Germanic origins were recognized in the early 19th century. Similar motifs to these Alexandria pieces were produced by Richard C. Remmy of Philadelphia (seen here).

A particular floral motif, with a central stylized flower on a leafy stem and additional foliage branching out on either side of the flower, is developed during this period. The earliest examples were produced during the period of Swann’s operation of the pottery, but they also appear on pieces marked B.C. Milburn, dating after 1841. A similar design was adapted by R. Butt of nearby Washington, D.C. by 1835, ten years after it was first used in Alexandria, and by Solomon Bell of Strasburg, VA by 1838.

After operating the Wilkes Street Pottery for 10 years, Milburn purchased the well-established and successful manufactory in 1841. Milburn's wares were extensively advertised by Alexandria's two leading china merchants, Hugh Smith (previous owner of the factory) and Robert H. Miller. A protective tariff in 1846 benefited American manufacturers, and the Alexandria Canal, opened in 1843, provided a better transportation network to the west. Milburn's major competition continued to come from Baltimore, and also from Washington potter Enoch Burnett who operated the former pottery of R. Butt from 1843-1860. By the 1840's the Baltimore potteries had mostly moved away from the production of wheel thrown stoneware, in favor of industrial wares such as fire bricks, chemical stoneware, stove tiles and flower pots. By 1847, Edwin Bennet had introduced Rockingham and "cane ware", or yellowware, made in molds in larger industrialized potteries. Bennet's wares are found on Alexandria sites in substantial quantities, but these kitchenwares, pitchers and teapots were not direct competition for Milburn's jars, jugs and milkpans.

Many of the Milburn pieces are distinguishable by their slip-trailed decoration, and vines and flowers are again dominant motifs. Pottery styles indicate the work of at least two decorators, incorporating a few standard designs.

In 1841, the Wilkes Street pottery had its first local competition in nearly twenty years. On June 10, 1841 Tildon Easton advertised the opening of his "New stoneware and Earthen Ware Manufactory. . ." (Alexandria Gazette). This advertisement was all that was known of the pottery until 1983, when Easton's kiln was discovered in the side of a construction trench. The full extent of our knowledge of Easton's wares comes from this archaeological excavation, and only a few details of Easton's life, from 1835 to 1846, have been gleaned from historical records despite an extensive archival search. It would appear the Pottery operated from 1841 until no later than 1844, and perhaps for a much shorter period of time.

More than one-half of the sherds recovered from the Easton water piles were stoneware. The earthenware forms were very similar to undecorated wares made elsewhere in Alexandria, apart from some unusual flowerpots reminiscent of much earlier English forms and glazes.

The closest parallel for Easton's cobalt decorated stoneware is that produced by Milburn for H. Smith and Co. in the 1830's – the period when Easton may have worked with Milburn.

All of Easton's milk pans and jars are decorated with brushed cobalt vines and flowers, arranged in a wavy horizontal band around the upper portion of the vessel. All of the vessels have a similar arrangement of decorative elements, although the execution varied from careful brush strokes to quick slashes and appears to have been applied by more than one person. Easton's stoneware decoration usually appears the same from all sides. These later wares, ca. 1880, from New York and the Ohio/Pennsylvania region show decoration similar to Easton's stoneware. In contrast, the Wilkes Street potters, Swann and Milburn, generally utilized central floral motifs with vines radiating out from either side, with sparse decoration on the back of the vessel.

Easton also produced small straight sided bottles with may have held ink. These are the only stoneware vessels produced in Alexandria with an interior slip or glaze: an innovation that Easton did not learn at the Wilkes Street pottery. The interior surface treatment is probably slip clay from Seneca Falls, NY which was mixed with the more common brown Albany slip to brighten the color and give a greenish tint. This mixture covered more evenly than the Albany slip, and enjoyed widespread use in other parts of the country. (Smith and Rogers 1979). At least five of these bottles have been identified, including two grey and two orange salt-glazed jars and one buff-colored waster in a bisque state.

A number of orange and brown glazed bottles and pocket flasks are lighter in color and finer in texture than clays used for most of the Easton wares and those of other Alexandria potters. A recent study by Allison Stenger of Portland State University's Ceramics Analysis Laboratory compared Easton's with other local sherds using spectrographic analysis. While we were hoping to confirm the use of bone ash to whiten the clay, or the use of imported clay, in fact the composition of the buff colored sample was nearly identical in its elemental components to Easton's grey stoneware and to Piercy earthenware. The buff color and orange surface color may be the result of deliberately firing at high temperature in an oxidizing atmosphere, rather than the reducing atmosphere used to produce grey stoneware.

These lighter colored wares, the bottles with the interior glaze, and the production of stoneware flowerpots and pocket flask, are innovations of Easton's; an indication that he was attempting to vary his production from that of his competitor, to find his own niche in the local

market. However, his enterprise was short-lived, probably due to the intense competition from Milburn who had an established market for his wares.

While Easton's pottery survived for no more than three years, Milburn's was a profitable success up until the Civil War. Following Milburn's death in 1867 his sons continued the business with a considerably pared down operation, making undecorated stoneware. By 1874 the pottery was operating at a loss, and in 1876 it closed and was sold to a neighboring tannery.

By the mid-19th century, mass-produced ceramics such as hard-bodied yellowwares, including that made in Baltimore, and other materials such as tin and glass had become cheaper and replaced much of the wheel-thrown stoneware for household use. (Guillard 1971.) By the 1860's, most American towns, like Alexandria, had only one traditional potter left, who like Milburn, supplemented his income with drain pipes, furnaces or tiles. By the 1870's industrial potteries making yellowware, Rockingham and white ironstone had cornered the market, supplying a wide area of the country through the extensive network of railroads. (Guillard 1971.)

Alexandria's last pottery closed in 1877, and the town's stoneware needs were then filled by James Hamilton of Greensboro, Pennsylvania, who provided storage jars with stenciled advertising for china and glass merchant E.J. Miller. The height of Hamilton's operations was from the 1860's to the 1880's. In 1880 he employed 35 adults, plus children, and produced 200,000 gallons of stoneware pots using three kilns. In comparison, the Milburn pottery, in Alexandria, employed only four men and one kiln in 1870. Despite its large size, the Hamilton pottery and others in the Greensboro/New Geneva region used traditional methods, producing wheel thrown pots. By the end of the 19th century, the American pottery industry was centered in East Liverpool, Ohio and Trenton, NJ, where whitewares and yellowwares were produced in industrial potteries, using lower cost techniques such as slip casting, jiggering and press forming which could use unskilled labor. Some small traditional potteries continued, particularly in the South, supplying small distilleries and, later, moonshiners. Traditional methods have been revived in various parts of the country, but these potters supply an artistic rather than a practical need.

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