

Stoneware Supplement

Additional Information for the [Original Article](#) and Summary of Research
(Not necessarily associated with Western NY Stoneware)

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1. **Origins** - The origin of 18th and 19th century salt glazed stoneware can be traced to the Rhenish descendents of Germany as far back as the 16th century. Our earliest settlements brought stoneware vessels to this continent from Europe and started manufactured them here in the early 18th century. The earliest shapes, forms, and decorations were done in the same way as was done in Europe but had eventually evolved into what we now see and recognize.

Often molded figures were applied to these vessels as a form of decoration. By the late 18th century, the brown vessels were gradually replaced with the grayish vessels which were salt glazed directly over the clay without the brown slip.

The Classical Revival of the 19th century greatly and design of not only This period brought us the ovoid forms and classical were producing forms with



Figure 1 - Classical Ovoid Form in this 1830's 3 gallon jar

which occurred around the turn influenced the arts, architecture, furniture, but stoneware as well. Mediterranean shapes of strong shapes. The potteries at this time small bases and top heavy

bodies, sometimes in which are very attractive

extreme bulbous ovoid form with their clean flowing curves.

When filled, these forms were top heavy, so utilitarian and productivity demands gave way to more easily produced forms. Around 1820 – 1850 the classical forms slowly were replaced by straight sided vessels, or at the very least, less ovoid in shape. These forms were more stable and easier produced. By 1860, just about all forms produced, including crocks, jugs, jars, and bottles had straight side with heavy rims.



1 gal jug, 1830's



1 gal jug, 1850's



1 gal jug, 1870's

As can be seen by the progression of these 1 gallon jugs above, as time went by, the sides had less curves and eventually went to straight sides.

2. **Forms** - The most common of all the forms made were crocks (pots), jugs, and jars. These were, without stoneware made in 20th century term. all the billboards and Western NY store such items as Many crocks came price of a 3 gallon depending on who these items between 1840's and 1890's. Jars also came with lids but lids were not necessary



Figure 3 - Cake Crock

question, the most abundant form of the 19th century. The term "crock" is a These were actually called "pots" on order forms. As was stated in the Stoneware paper, crocks were used to salt pork, sauerkraut, pickles, etc. with lids but you had to pay extra. The crock was between \$6 and \$10 made it and when. Prices increased for



Figure 2 - Preserve Jar

to seal off the top. Often jars would have been sealed with cheesecloth tied onto the rim. This would keep out flies and ants. If more protection was required, a wax seal was made over top to provide lasting protection through the winter. Jars were made from 1/2 gallon all the way up to 6 gallons however I have never seen anything larger than 3 gallons.

Of course Jugs were probably more abundant than anything else judging by the sheer

numbers that remain today. Jugs stored just about anything liquid. A simple cork in the top would seal the contents. Wax over the cork would be more permanent and would seal the cork in place. Jugs also would be made in a large assortment of sizes from 1/2 gal to 5 gal.

The next group of most common forms used in the 18th century would be Pitchers, Churns, Cream Pots, and Batter Pails. One would be surprised at how many of these early stoneware forms are still easily found all around the state and Northeast for that matter.



Figure 5 - 2 Gallon Jug



Figure 4 - 1 Gal Pitcher

Pitchers were somewhat common because they were used in just about every household to pour everything from milk and cream to moonshine. There simply wasn't a need for many of these in a household, which is why one doesn't come across these quite so often. The same is true for churns. Every farm had to have one or two. But not 20 as is true with crocks or jugs. But every farm, homestead, and many households churned their own butter from their cream so

they required a butter churn. These also came in many sizes depending on the need of the household. A 4 gallon covered churn would run you about \$11. I don't see the dashers

listed on billboards so how the churn's dasher was sold or provided is a mystery to this author. So, assuming one had the appropriate dasher to churn the cream with, butter could be provided for about a week until it turned rancid. Then one simply went back to work churning more butter again. Churns were made in sizes from 2 gallon to 6 gallon. The small tabletop 2 gallon were quite handy and useful. I have seen photos of very small miniature ½ gallon churns but these were not common at all.



Figure 6 - 5 Gal Churn from Lyons

One of the most interesting forms to this author is the batter pail. I started

with this form and found that there were many different nuances to the shapes, sizes, and decoration on these pails. The batter pail was another one of these necessities that every home had to have, but then again, you only needed one as it had a specific purpose. In



Figure 7 - 4 quart Batter Pail - Havana NY

this case, it was used to hold and store biscuit or pancake batter. These were made with tin lids that cover both the mouth of the opening as well as the spout. Hardly ever do you find these with the original tins.

This last grouping of stoneware forms is the most uncommon. There wasn't a lot of these made as compared to the other forms just discussed. In addition, there just wasn't as much demand either. Others, like bottles, you come across now and then but even though they are somewhat rare they still are not worth that much unless

they are very decorated. In this grouping I would include such forms as spittoons, coolers, chamber pots, urns, flower pots, ink wells, bottles, flasks, figurines, mugs, cups, banks, and miniatures. Some of these rare and unusual items were made by the Potters for themselves, or as a gift for someone else. Sometimes an apprentice would make something unusual as a testament to demonstrate his skills. These rare one of a kind items as you might guess, are very expensive.

Stoneware bottles filled a niche in the market that glass bottles of the time could not match. A stoneware bottle has unique insulating properties plus it is re-useable. Because of these qualities, bottles were often used to store beer and soft drinks. The majority of bottles were made for Brewers, Taverns, and Store Keepers. It is quite rare to see any decoration on a bottle but occasionally you will see one with the makers



Figure 8- Stoneware Beer Bottle

mark, some blue on the spout or rim, or a splash of blue on the side. Like all of the stoneware forms, after about 1850, these were being produced with straight sides and conical necks. To find a stoneware bottle or flask that is well decorated is indeed very rare.

3. Decoration - Most of the stoneware produced in the 19th century was not decorated.

Decorating was not productive and was time consuming, so for the most part it was performed only on a small percentage of the pieces being turned out. The decorating process produced a bottleneck in the flow of developing these vessels so naturally only a very few made it to the kiln each week. For those that did get decorated, the majority of these bear simple and basic designs as well as the maker's marks. The most sought after, most uncommon, and most interesting are the elaborate and unusual illustrations on these vessels. The remaining portion of this chapter is dedicated to the methods of decorating stoneware.

3.1. Overview - The earliest decorations were European in nature but it wasn't long before the American stoneware decorators became influenced by the plants and animals around them and broke the long European decorating tradition. The earliest American stoneware decorations in the late 18th and early 19th century were incised (scratched into the green clay) most likely by the potter who turned the vessel. It is no wonder that the early decorations were very simple, sometimes primitive and child-like. In small, one man operations, the potter did it all from preparing the clay, turning the vessel, decorating, and stacking the kiln. This process was not conducive to productivity so for a potter to remain competitive, they had to adopt. As the potteries evolved over time, many of the larger potteries had specialized tradesman including throwers, turners, finishers, decorators, glazers, and kilnsman. Nathan Clark of Athens even developed a stoneware making process that was to be followed at all of his subsidiaries and each of the tradesmen had their own documented process to follow. All of these skills were taught as an apprentice except for the decorating. There is no documentation on stoneware decorators, only folk-lore. It seems that these decorators were always mature people with patience, dexterity, and artistic flare. This is probably why young apprentices didn't take to this trade. A most interesting tidbit is that it is believed that many of these decorators may have been woman, who could easily execute this intricate work. The decorating may even have been done by the wives of the potters and other tradesmen. In the first half of the 19th century, some potters incised intricate decorative designs on their stoneware including flowers, animals, birds, fish, and full pictorial scenes. This early era of incising was replaced by a more efficient and productive form of decorating known as glaze painting. It did not take long to discover that it only took a little bit more time to paint an elaborate design than a simple one, so by around 1860 some of the finest and extravagant designs were produced.

The blue decoration is a diluted solution of clay and cobalt blue coloring. It was applied

either with a brush, quill, or by “squeezing” it on. This blue addition to the wares was a means to identify the maker, identify the vessel’s capacity, and to add decoration. When the Harrington brothers ran the Burger pottery, they created the most elaborate and beautiful decorations of all. The best color was created by the hickory-fired kilns that darkened the cobalt blue. When the wood fired kilns were replaced with coal, the richness and darkness of the cobalt was gone, replaced by a lighter more subtle tone of blue.

Three techniques were used to decorate during the late 18th century through the late 19th century. These were Incising, Impressing, and Surface Glazing.

3.2. Incising - Incising is the process of scribing or cutting the outlines of a design directly



Figure 10 - Rare late 18th C. jug with incised flower. Attributed to Jonathan Fenton of Boston.

into the soft clay of the vessel. This was a very time consuming process. Once the ware was incised, it would be set outside to dry. After a few days, the piece



Figure 9 - Close-up of the incised flower.

may have been further decorated by brushing a dry blue powder into the incised lines and then wiped clean. It would then be fired and the incised lines would have a sharper contrast. Because of the vast amount of work required, most of the designs were small and simple. It is extremely rare to find a piece of stoneware with a large intricate incised decoration.

3.3. Impressing & Banding - This is a simple mechanical method to decorate a soft clay

vessel. Stamps with small designs were simply pressed into the wet clay leaving an impression that appears somewhat like incising. The most productive and fastest way to decorate was to stamp a design into the clay while it was still



Figure 11 - Stamp used by Nathan Clark at his Rochester Pottery.

wet. This was done with carved wooden blocks and coggle wheels. Although the results were simple, they were more than adequate for the pieces being turned out in the first half of the 19th century. Often this stamp would be dipped in a blue glaze solution and

this glaze would be transferred to the stoneware. Sometimes the stamps would be used in conjunction with some simple incising to complete the designs. In the 2nd half of the 19th century, it became a standard practice for many of the potteries to stamp their name into their wares. These stamps were simply a block of wood with the name carved into it. Banding involved using a mechanical device such as a piece of metal or wood carved with a simple curve design that would be used to press against the wet turning vessel to produce a design. Most often you would see this design on the neck of early vessels and sometimes across the body.

3.4. **Surface Glazing** - By 1850, the Victorian Age with all its emphasis on decoration made essential a new, more productive technique for decorating. Surface glazing had been done to contrast stamp marks and incised marks. It was soon discovered that by laying down this blue medium on the clay itself would provide a canvas for the inspiring artist inside them. As the method of laying down the blue evolved, so did the designs. The deep blue which had eventually become the standard is a cobalt oxide mixture. Depending on the percentage (1-2%) of cobalt oxide, it produces a fine royal blue to a deep blue, almost black color. This cobalt was expensive, and was imported from Europe. Fortunately, only a small amount is required for decorations. Once mixed with other ingredients, the glaze could be painted on by either a stiff brush or a slip cup. A slip cup is a funnel shaped cup with a quill inserted in the bottom. The cobalt mixture is poured into the cup and the decorator then holds the slip cup in his/her hand and basically paints or draws with it. Most of the slip cups were made with a single quill however it is evident from many designs that some slip cups were made with multiple quills producing parallel lines when drawing. These simple slip cups were made by the decorator and each decorator has their own arsenal of slip cups. When using a slip cup in conjunction with the brush, very intricate and beautiful designs could be produced.



Figure 12 - A Stetzenmeyer Flower. This is easily recognized as the work that came from the Stetzenmeyer Pottery by the intricate work done on the petals and leaves. Notice the obvious work of a slip cup and repeated lines of the quill.

3.5. **The Designs** - Floral designs of leaves and flowers were by far the most abundant because they were easy to make and could be done quickly. Because of this, this pieces were very “sellable”. Birds were the most prevalent form of animal life to adorn stoneware. Birds adorn at least a few piece of nearly every 19th C. stoneware pottery. It is curious that large potteries such as those of Nathan Clark were not as fond of birds as other potters. Perhaps he just didn’t like birds. Very few birds appeared on the works that came out of any of the Clark subsidiaries such as Mt. Morris, Lyons, and Rochester. My guess is that Clark was fixated on productivity and to spend time on an intricate decoration of birds went against his every philosophy. Perhaps the birds and any other intricate designs that did come out of his potteries were done so behind his back, but that is just speculation.

The most appealing of all the designs on stoneware are pictures of animals. 19th century America depended on the animals around them for their subsistence, so it only comes naturally that these same animals would become the basis for artistic designs. Some of the animals that decorated the stoneware were not even of this continent. It is thought that a large influence on the decorators was made by the travelling circus of the day and all of their colorful literature. The circus animals became the basis of many designs. This, along with a humorous imagination is what may have been the basis behind the decorations of deer with tiger stripes, fish with smiles, lions with spots, flying frogs, lions with goat heads, and so much more. These strange but exotic designs were very rare but very appealing, both influencing the high demand for such a piece. From the 1850’s thru the 1870’s the decorations flourished and produced some of the most appealing we know of. The decorator that Thompson Harrington used during this time period is probably one of the best. Those designs along with the striking cobalt blue are the most sought after pieces around.



Figure 14 - A very famous "Starface" design by Thompson Harrington. Photo courtesy of the archives of Crocker Farms.



Figure 13 - A rare and striking Phoenix developed at the Rochester Pottery of N. Clark in 1845. Both Harrington and Burger were owners of this Pottery at the time along with Nathan Clark. Although just as striking, it is clearly not done in the same manner as the Starface. Photo courtesy of "Fine Arts and Antiques Magazine"

References:

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“Decorated Stoneware Pottery of North America”, Donald Blake Webster, 1971

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Photos of Stoneware is from the collection of the Author unless otherwise noted