

Stoneware from Western NY

A Summary of Research by John O'Brien

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This paper is intended to unravel some of the mystery and questions one might have about the stoneware created in Western NY, specifically the stoneware made in Athens, Lyons, Mt. Morris, and Rochester. My intention is to reveal the close relationships between the various potters, their families, and workers. I also wish to reveal a timeline that will assist in dating pieces of stoneware that are marked with the maker's name, explain some of the earlier uses of these wares, and tell a little about how it was made. I chose certain Potteries because of my interest and proximity to them. This paper is not meant to diminish the importance of other Potteries in the region such as those found in Troy, Fort Edward, Penn Yan, Utica, Geddes, Cortland, and others. For more information regarding how stoneware originated, the various forms, and how it was decorated in general, see my [Supplement](#) associated with this paper.

The largest of all potteries in NYS with the greatest production and employment was the Athens Pottery, in the village of Athens, NY. So it makes sense that I start with this Pottery and the various branches of it that reached into Western NY. Nathan Clark, who began this pottery, had an older sister who married an Englishman named Thomas Howe. It was Howe that purchased the original property site for the Pottery and financed the operation. Nathan, who had just completed his apprenticeship at 18 years of age, was put in charge around 1805. This business, known at the time as "*HOWE & CLARK*" prospered until 1813 when Howe died and Nathan bought out his widowed sister's half of the business. Nathan ran the business under the name of "*N. CLARK*". This business grew quite quickly and it wasn't long before he was shipping his wares as far south as South Carolina and Georgia. Around 1822 Nathan Clark formed a new company called "*N. CLARK & COMPANY*". It was Nathan's intention to expand the Pottery business into other parts of New York State



Figure 1- First Mark of Howe & Clark.

where the pottery business could flourish. As a means to fund this expansion, Nathan sold half the interest in the Athens factory to Ethan Fox in 1829. Fox was related to Nathan's wife. During this period, the Athens pottery was known as "*CLARK & FOX*".

In 1838 Clark sold his remaining half of the Pottery to Fox so he could concentrate on his branch Potteries. However, in 1843, Nathan Clark bought back the Athens' Pottery from Fox and sold it the same day to his son, who operated the factory as "*N CLARK JR*". Nathan Clark Jr. ran the Pottery until 1892 when he sold it to Thomas



Figure 2 - 2 Gal Jug inscribed CLARK & FOX/ATHENS. This jug was made in Athens between 1829 and 1843.

Ryan. At this time, the pottery was identified as “Athens Pottery”. This continued until 1900 when the Pottery was closed for good. The rest of this document deals with the branches that Nathan Clark started. George Williams, who worked for Clark since 1813, was the “*Company*” portion of the business known as “*N. CLARK & COMPANY*”. It was the purpose of this new company to expand and create three new branches of the Athens Pottery in Western NY along the canals where the pottery business could flourish. These new Potteries would be located in Lyons, Mt. Morris, and Rochester.

Lyons: Around 1822, George Williams was to build and operate the Lyons Pottery in a location where the new Erie Canal was to open. The original pottery was situated on a farm east of Phelps St. Later, the Pottery moved to a wide basin on the canal, south of Catherine and Spencer Streets between present day

Canal St and Montezuma St. In the latter days, the Pottery was situated in what is now the Lyon's Town Barn on Montezuma St. George Williams built the Lyons Pottery up to where it flourished. Then in 1835 Williams left to build and manage a new branch in Mt. Morris. It was at this time that Thompson Harrington took over management of the Lyons Pottery but the name remained as "*N. Clark & Company*". Between 1835 and 1852, Harrington would be allowed to occasionally mark a few pieces with his name. In 1852, Thompson Harrington and brother Amos Harrington took control of the Clark Pottery Company in Lyons. A few years later, Amos fell ill and left the business but was replaced by a third brother. During this period, the wares were stamped "*Harrington & Co*", "*Harrington*", or "*T. Harrington*". Thompson Harrington worked and managed both the Lyons and the Rochester Branch until 1872 when Harrington leased the Pottery to Jacob Fisher. Harrington died in 1874 and his widow had sold



Figure 4 - Lyons 2 gal Jar inscribed "N. CLARK & CO. / LYONS". This jar was made in the Lyons pottery between 1822 and 1852

the Pottery to Fisher four years later. Jacob Fisher emigrated from Germany in 1853 and married the daughter, Josephine, of John Burger Sr. who was operating the Rochester branch at the time. Fisher had also worked for Burger at the Rochester branch since 1863. Fisher teamed up with George Lang to manage the Lyons Pottery business. George Lang was also a son-in-law of John Burger and was one of Burger's partners in Rochester from 1871 to 1876. Even though George Lang was Fisher's partner in the Lyons Pottery, Lang continued to reside in Rochester. The wares produced during these years were stamped "*J. FISHER & CO.*", whereby Lang represented the "company" part of the business relationship. During these years at the Lyons and Rochester Potteries, it was evident there were close family and employee relations. In 1878, Jacob Fisher bought the Lyons Pottery outright from Lang. Fisher's daughter (Louise) and son assisted with the business affairs. It was during this time period that the business flourished like never before. Jacob Fisher owned two canal boats used to bring in clay from New Jersey, Long Island, and Albany. These boats also delivered finished wares all along the canal. Wares were also distributed all over the northern counties of New York State bordering

Lake Ontario from Syracuse to Buffalo by horse drawn wagons. The pottery grew in size and production during this time. Hundreds of pieces of stoneware could be seen stacked on the docks of the canal awaiting shipment. It was

at this time that approximately 18 potters were spinning their wares. By 1896 the Fisher Pottery was the largest in the state. During these later years a skilled finisher and decorator named Frederick Ohmann

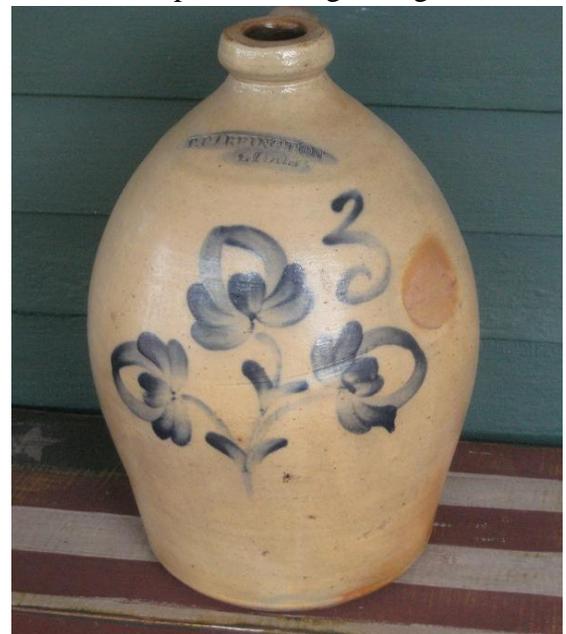


Figure 3 - 2 Gallon Jug marked "T. HARRINGTON / LYONS". This would have been made between 1852 and 1872. because of the semi-ovoid shape, it would probably be closer to the 1850's.

worked for Fisher. Occasionally he would be allowed to mark his own name on some of the wares. Ohmann, an enterprising man, decided to give this pottery business a try for himself. So in 1897 he set up shop just up the road from the spongeware at this facility operation at which time he Around 1902, Jacob Fisher pottery because of increased vessels being manufactured crocks and jugs being mass attractive, cheaper, and faster than the hand made the downfall of all the Jacob Fisher closed the worked there, including to give it one last attempt. few hundred yards down the Town Barn, and started to business was called the also have a piece that is STONEWARE CO. / believe was the mark that noble effort didn't last very long. A few years later after a fire destroyed a portion of the Pottery the company closed its doors forever.



Figure 5 - Rare size in a 10 gallon crock made by Jacob Fisher between 1878 and 1898

Lyons kiln. He produced blue until fire consumed his went back to work for Fisher. retired and decided to close the competition from molded clay and distributed from Ohio. The produced in Ohio were could be produced 10 times potters could produce. This was Potteries in Western NY. Once factory, some of the men who Ohmann's son Amos, decided They re-opened the factory a road in what is now the Lyons turn out stoneware. This "COOPERATIVE POTTERY CO." I marked "LYONS ESTABLISHED 1825" that I came from this company. This

Mt. Morris – In 1835, George Williams left the Lyons branch to build and manage the Mt. Morris Pottery. This operation was substantially smaller than the Lyons operation. However, in keeping with the Clark tradition, this Pottery also employed its own boats to move the Pottery throughout the state. This Pottery did not flourish like the Lyons and Rochester branches, and around 1848 had closed up. Folk-lore has it that local landowners did not get along with Williams and would not permit him to cut firewood for his kilns and that this may be one of the reasons that forced this pottery to close up.



Figure 6 - 2 gal ovoid jug from the Mount Morris pottery inscribed "N. CLARK & CO. / MOUNT MORRIS." This rare jug was made around 1840.

Rochester – There were 2 early potteries known to exist in Rochester prior to the Clark acquisition. Micah Porter and his son William operated a pottery from 1820 (or perhaps earlier) until 1830 when they moved their operation to Western PA. Very few pots remain today but those that do are marked "M. PORTER / ROCHESTER". Charles Skinner owned a

second pottery in what is now called East Rochester. This pottery was known as D. Dubois and Company and was still in business as late as 1823

however no wares

have been found that can be traced to this pottery.

On July 15, 1839, three potters from the Lyons Pottery purchased the old abandoned Porter Pottery on Main Street in Rochester. These were John Burger, Albert Risely, and Eleazer Zinger. Risely and Zinger were bought out in



Figure 8 - 2 Gal Ovoid Jar marked "CLARK & CO. / ROCHESTER." This jar was made around 1840



Figure 7 - 1 Gallon Pitcher marked "BURGER & LANG / ROCHESTER NY." This wonderful form was made between around 1875.

December of that year by the enterprising Nathan Clark & Company. This company was comprised of Nathan Clark of Athens, Thompson Harrington of Lyons, and George G Williams of Mount Morris. John Burger had retained his one-third stake in the business and started managing the pottery, although the wares were marked at that time with “N. CLARK & Co / ROCHESTER as well as CLARK & CO. / ROCHESTER.

In 1846 George Williams left the business leaving the company now owned by Clark, Harrington, and Burger. On July 18, 1851 Nathan Clark sold his shares of the Rochester Kiln to Burger and Harrington. These two marked their wares for the next 3 years as “HARRINGTON & BURGER / ROCHESTER. Exactly 3 years later in July of 1854, Thompson Harrington sold his shares of the business to John Burger. At this time, John Burger is now sole owner and manager of the pottery and marked his wares as “John Burger”



Figure 9 - John Burger Sr.
Photo courtesy of Burger Family Archives

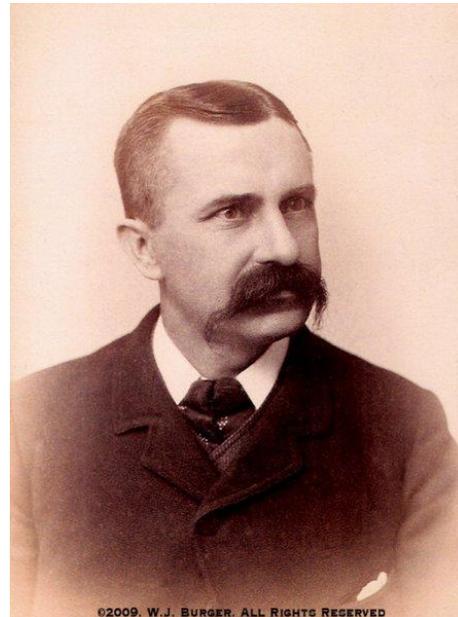


Figure 10 - John Burger Jr.
Photo courtesy of Burger Family Archives



Figure 12 - George Burger,
son of John Sr. and brother to John Jr.
Photo courtesy of Burger Family Archives



Figure 11 - George Lang (sitting), marries John Burger Sr.'s Daughter Mary. George worked at the Lyons and Burger Potteries.
Photo courtesy of Burger Family Archives

It was in 1861 that Burger's son, John Burger Jr. joined the business as a potter. In 1867, the business was re-organized as "*Burger Bros. & Co.*" which included John Sr., John Jr. and John Jr.'s brother George Burger). This lasted 4 years when George Lang (from the Lyons factory) entered the Rochester business. So in 1871 the factory started marking their wares as "*Burger & Lang*" as well as "*Burger & Co.*". In 1878 Lang went to Lyons to join with Jacob Fisher who has been his partner since 1872 and John Burger Jr. assumed full control and stamped his wares as "*J. Burger Jr.*". This Pottery operated under this name until 1890 when John Burger Jr. retired and closed the factory. A few years later in 1904 John Jr. passed away.

In the 1850's era, the Burger Family had some serious competition from another Rochester Pottery that sprung up in the city. A German potter named Frederick Stetzenmeyer had opened a pottery on what is now called Plymouth Ave. In the early 1850's, Stetzenmeyer's pottery had burned causing a minor setback in his production. However by 1853 he was back in business again. Around that time a local grocer named Gottlieb Goetzman joined forces with Stetzenmeyer, most likely from a finance standpoint. This partnership lasted until about 1860 when they were forced out of the stoneware business by the fierce competition from the Burgers. By 1861 both Stetzenmeyer and Goetzman were back in the grocery business.

The cobalt decorations on their vessels are unmatched. Some think that one or more persons are responsible for the blue decorating of all the vessels that came out of the Rochester potteries. It is still unknown to this day who was responsible for this artwork but quality, boldness, and artistic flare was unmatched in North America.

Several other less known potters made their living in Rochester making earthenware pots, Redware, tiles, and other wares however like so many other potteries, by 1890 this trade all but disappeared in Rochester.



Figure 13 - 2 Gal Jug marked "F. STETZENMEYER & G. GOETZMAN"

Making the Stoneware:

The raw clay, after arriving by boat or wagon, had to be prepared and worked prior to turning. This was typically the job of an apprentice. The dry clay was mixed with water, purified and screened to remove pebbles and small lumps. Appropriate additives were then added. The larger potteries would perform all of this work in what is called a pug-mill. This mill would be turned by water power or horses and would act like a huge mixer. At the bottom, the moist or “plastic” clay would emerge ready for use. The clay then would be handed over to the “thrower”. This was the master craftsman that threw the clay onto his potter’s wheel and would turn his wheel by foot power. As the wet clay turned, the thrower would form the appropriate vessels. This process of rough-shaping only took a few minutes. The thrower would then move on to another wheel where the apprentice would have the clay waiting for him. In the mean time, at the station where he just left his rough shaped vessel, a “finisher” would smooth the inside and out with wet hands and complete the forming process. He would then perform any banding or coggling (more on decorating in the Addendum), add handles if that was called for, and hand stamp with the maker’s mark in the still wet clay. At this point the vessel would be taken outside on a board to dry for several days. At this point the vessel was hard enough to handle but still somewhat soft. The next step would be to line the inside of the vessel with a very wet solution of Albany Slip. This is very fine clay from Albany, NY, that was basically used to line all stoneware vessels made in the area. Once it was lined with this clay, it would then go to the decorator who would incise, impress, stamp, or glaze the surface. More on this in the Addendum. The stoneware vessels at this point would be stacked in the kiln. Several hundred, even up to a thousand vessels needed to be carefully stacked on top of each other in this kiln. This was yet another job for a skilled craftsman in the Pottery. Once the kiln was full, it would be closed up and the fire would be started. It was essential to keep the temperature within a certain range, and this was the job of the kilnsman.

Once the temperature reached the operating range, the pottery was ready for salt glazing. It was discovered that while the clay vessels were being fired, that if salt is thrown into the fire, the salt would chemically bond with the silica in the clay to form a glaze on the outside of the clay. This process produced stoneware that is impervious to liquids, acids, and alkalis. The top of the kiln was opened and the “glazers” would throw in pure rock salt. When the salt hit the 2300 degree heat, it would vaporize and when combined with the oxygen, a glaze would form coating all the wares on the outside and inside. Sometimes, when the salt was thrown into a hickory wood fired kiln, it would stir up the ashes and some of the ash would get applied to the glaze. This would result in what appears as “specks”. The earlier hickory fired kilns were replaced with coal-fired kilns that resulted in a smoother more even finish. Often times, if there were tiny pebbles in the clay, they would heat up in the kiln and pop out. This was somewhat common and is known as a “stone ping”. This is not a defect when seen on stoneware, just a circumstance that occurs during the making.

Once the glazing process was complete the top would be closed up and the kiln would continue to burn for 3 or 4 more days. The fire would then have to gradually cool down. This whole heating up and cooling down process would take from 6 to 8 days at which time the kiln could be opened and the stoneware could be examined. Depending on how well this process went, the complete load could be either a success or a total loss.

For large operations, there were jobs for several skilled tradesmen. However for the small, single owner potter, all of these functions would be performed by just one person.

The Everyday Uses of Stoneware:

Stoneware vessels slowly replaced the wooden barrels and firkins for storing salted meats, pickled vegetables, butter, and every conceivable liquid of the period. As more clay deposits were discovered and more and more potteries went into production along the seaway channels of canals and rivers, stoneware became so popular that they were a staple of every home, shop, and farm in the 19th century. It is no wonder that there is still plenty of stoneware to be found even today. Before canning and refrigeration, stoneware vessels were ideal for storage, salting, and pickling. Every household had crocks filled with salt pork or lard, pickled vegetables, pickled meat, and butter.. Crocks were used for storage. An average farm would typically have 15 to 20 different sized crocks around. They would be used to put up butter, lard, pickles, and preserved eggs. They would also store bread, donuts, and cookies in them. The 2 gallon and larger crocks with lids (that we currently call preserve jars)

were called cookie jars. The smaller preserve jars were used to preserve jams and fruits. It was not uncommon for a home to have a dozen or two of these jars. Every home had its vinegar jug, yeast jug, syrup jug, and molasses jug. It was a matter of fact that the molasses jug was always the darkest jug of all, most likely for identification purposes. There was a jug for water, cider, and of course, whiskey. Batter pails were quite common and every home had one. Pancake batter was made and kept in them near the fire to rise. The batter then could easily be poured directly on the skillet. Typically these batter jugs would have tin lids over the spout and mouth. Every table had a stoneware pitcher for milk, cream, water or other essential liquids. (see *Figure 7 - 1 Gallon Pitcher marked "BURGER & LANG / ROCHESTER NY. This wonderful form was made between around 1875.*)

Larger 20 gallon crocks were used to keep salt pork, corned beef, pickles, and kraut. These vessels were too large to spin in one piece, so they were made in sections and later put together. "Crocks" is a modern day term used to describe what they referred to in the day as pots, cream pots, butter pots, or cake pots. They were also sometimes made with covers to fit from ¼ gallon to 8 gallons. The very largest, from 30 to 50 gallons were not made in NYS but were brought in from out of the area. By the late 1860's safe and reliable vacuum canning came and then a little later so did refrigeration. Households had less of a necessity to "put up" and store everything the family needed, so there was less of a demand for stoneware. By the 1890's the character of stoneware had changed completely to a non-decorated, mass produced product lacking appeal. In 1910, the salt glazed stoneware industry was gone.



Figure 14 - Four quart batter pail with original tin caps. Marked "HAVANNA NY"



Figure 15 - 4 Gal Crock marked T. HARRINGTON / LYONS. This wonderfully decorated crock was made around 1860

TIMELINE:

Exact dates are found to be somewhat conflicting however the following timeline is generally correct.
Anything following a “/” indicates it will be underneath the previous inscription.

LOCATION:	POTTER:	PERIOD:	MARK(S):
Athens	Thomas Howe & Nathan Clark	1805-1813	HOWE & CLARK/ATHENS
“	Nathan Clark	1813-1825	N. CLARK
“”	Nathan Clark	1825-1829	N. CLARK & COMPANY
“”	N. Clark & Fox	1829-1838	CLARK & FOX/ATHENS
“”	Fox	1838-1843	E. S. FOX
“”	Nathan Clark Jr.	1843-1892	N. CLARK JR.
“”	Thomas Ryan	1892-1900	ATHENS POTTERY
Lyons	Nathan Clark & George Williams	1822-1852	CLARK & CO/LYONS N. CLARK & CO/LYONS
“”	“”	“”	G.G. WILLIAMS/LYONS, N.Y.
“”	Thompson Harrington	1852-1872	HARRINGTON/LYONS
“”	“”	“”	T. HARRINGTON/LYONS
“”	“”	“”	HARRINGTON/LYONS N.Y.
“”	“”	“”	HARRINGTON & CO./LYONS
“”	“”	“”	T. HARRINGTON & CO./LYONS
“”	Jacob Fisher & George Lang	1872-1878	J. FISHER & CO/LYONS, N.Y.
“”	Jacob Fisher	1878-1902	J. FISHER/LYONS, N.Y.
“”	Lyons Cooperative Pottery Company	1902-1905	CO-OPERATIVE POTTERY CO./ LYONS, N.Y. LYONS STONEWARE CO.
“”	“”	“”	LYONS CO-OPERATIVE/POTTERY CO. LIMITED
Mount Morris	George Williams	1835-1850	N. CLARK & CO / MT. MORRIS, N.Y.
Rochester	Micah Porter	1820-1830	M PORTER / ROCHESTER
	Charles Skinner	1820-1823	D.DUBOIS & CO / ROCHESTER
	Nathan Clark & George Williams, Thompson Harrington, John Burger	1839-1846	CLARK & CO./ ROCHESTER
“”	Nathan Clark & John Burger	1846-1851	N. CLARK & CO / ROCHESTER NY
“”	Thompson Harrington		
“”	Frederick Stetzenmeyer	1849-1857	STETZENMEYER / ROCHESTER
	Frederick Stetzenmeyer	1857-1859	F. STETZENMEYER - G. GOETZMAN
	Gottlieb Goetzman		
	John Burger & Thompson Harrington	1851-1854	HARRINGTON & BURGER / ROCHESTER
“”	John Burger	1854-1867	JOHN BURGER
“”	John Burger, John Burger Jr., George Burger	1867-1870	BURGER BROS & CO.
“”	John Burger, John Burger Jr., George Burger, George Lang	1870-1876	BURGER & LANG
	John Burger, John Burger Jr., George Burger,	1877-1880	BURGER & CO.
“”	John Burger Jr.	1880-1890	J. BURGER JR.

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“Stoneware Addendum, Additional Information for the Original Article and Summary of Research”,
Drafted May 7th, 2012

Photos of John, John Jr., and George Burger as well as the George Lang family photo is supplied by the Burger Family

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

Revisions:

“D” - 6/21/13 - Added 1st mark of the Athens Pottery photo and to timeline.