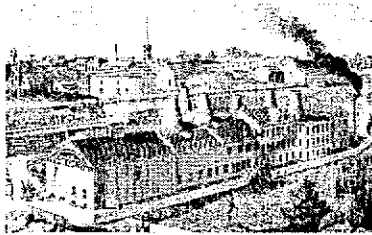


# TRENTON POTTERIES

Newsletter of the  
Potteries of Trenton Society



## *National Ceramic Company, Trenton, New Jersey*

Paul W. Schopp and David L. Weinberg (A.D. Marble & Company, Rosemont, PA)

*A cultural resource investigation was conducted in 2000 to assess the presence and sensitivity of significant above and belowground historic cultural resources. This survey was in response to potential effects associated with the replacement of the Southard Street Bridge within the City of Trenton, New Jersey. The bridge was originally constructed as an iron truss swingspan in 1885 (Trenton Sunday Times Advertiser, April 23, 1922). The Southard Street Bridge is considered not eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places by the NJ Historic Preservation Office and the NJ Department of Transportation.*

*The investigation also consisted of a historic structures survey of all properties within the historic structures investigation area. The survey evaluated the structures' eligibility for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, and assessed the effects of the project on any eligible resources. Of the 79 properties surveyed, six were found to be potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, including the Camden & Amboy Branch Railroad, the Delaware & Raritan Canal, and the National Ceramic Company (also known as the National Porcelain Company prior to 1940-1946). The following article was written through the research conducted for the cultural resource survey along Southard Street.*

The history of the National Ceramics Company records the adaptation to new technologies, diversity in response to economic forces, and product specialization in a competitive modern environment.

According to Trenton pottery historian Marc Stern, the Trenton pottery industry transitioned from general production in the nineteenth century to specialization in the twentieth century. Stern writes: "From the standpoint of industrialization, the history of Trenton's potteries can be divided into two periods, before and after 1896." The earlier period represents general ware production by virtually all potters. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, specialization became a hallmark of Trenton potteries. While many of the potters specialized in sanitary ware, the electric age ushered in a demand for yet another line of porcelain products. With Thomas Edison's creation of an improved and perfected electric light bulb, an entirely new industry sprang up almost overnight. Not only were electric generators and motors required, but switches, light sockets, and a method of insulation was needed. The fledgling electrical industry turned to the established porcelain business for its insulation needs. Porcelain had already proven its excellent electrical insulating qualities when used in telegraph. New designs were prepared for use in the electrical trade, and some Trenton pottery works were gearing up to produce this specialty

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*The Potteries of Trenton Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of Trenton's ceramic past. Officers: President - Patricia Madrigal; Treasurer - Amy Earls; Secretary - Christy Morganstein. Board: Ellen Denker, Barbara Goldberg, David Goldberg, Richard Hunter, William Liebeknecht, Molly Merlino, George Miller, Brenda Springsted. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal*

The National Ceramics Company was representative of those companies who found a niche in the electrical industry in the early twentieth century. Known as the "Staffordshire of America" Trenton gained great prominence for utilitarian hotel china and sanitary wares (Barber n.d. [1909]:211). However, not all of the nearly 50 Trenton pottery manufacturers during the industry's peak, 1880-1920, pursued these wares.

## National Ceramic Company



The National Ceramic Company's tunnel kiln exterior (2000).

(Continued from page 1)

work along with their general ware line (Stern 1994:67, 103-104, 112).

One firm that chose to specialize primarily in electrical insulating products was the National Porcelain Company, formed in 1906 by Bayard Dunkle (NJ Secretary of State 1914:461). The firm constructed a plant at the corner of Old Rose and Feeder streets, and by 1909, the works employed 25 people (Garrison 1909:440). Three years later, production was up as well as employment, with the addition of 20 people (Garrison 1912:475). Evidently, product demand outstripped production capacity. In response to this rapid growth, sometime between 1915 and 1918, the National Porcelain Company relocated to a new building at 500 Southard Street, and employment increased to 75 hands (Bryant 1918:601). The new two-story plant featured an office on the first floor, manufacturing space on both floors, and three kilns. By 1934, the firm was producing "electrical porcelain, pyrometer tubes, radio insulators, [and] insulators" (Toohey 1934:118). The president of the firm remained Bayard L. Dunkle, while the plant

manager was J.A. Schermerhorn. The plant had 28 male employees and 45 female employees.

As possible evidence of plans to diversify their products, the National Porcelain Company contracted for some building demolition at their Southard Street site in April 1937. It is unclear exactly what structure(s) had been razed, but new construction at the plant site began in October 1937. The Trenton engineering and construction firm, Newton A.K. Bugbee Company, Inc., erected a one-story steel and brick building valued at \$5,000. This structure likely houses the existing kilns. In an effort to keep up with kiln technology, the National Porcelain Company had a gas-fired Robertson Junior tunnel kiln (measuring 85'L x 9'W x 7'H) installed at their plant in this new building. The firm of Robertson & Company in Cleveland, Ohio manufactured the new kiln for National (pers. comm. Thomas Colletti 13 February 2001). A 15-meter (50-ft) high brick stack was built at the front of this addition to the plant. Newton A.K. Bugbee Company, Inc. reportedly erected another two-

(Continued on page 3)

NOTE: Prices on application.

### Insulators, Brackets, Etc.

 No. 20K5800 Pony Glass Insulator for telephone, telegraph and fire alarm work. Packed 400 in a barrel. Weight, per barrel ready for shipment, 300 pounds. Price, per barrel, 400 insulators. \$6.30  
Price, each, in less than barrel lots. .01 1/2

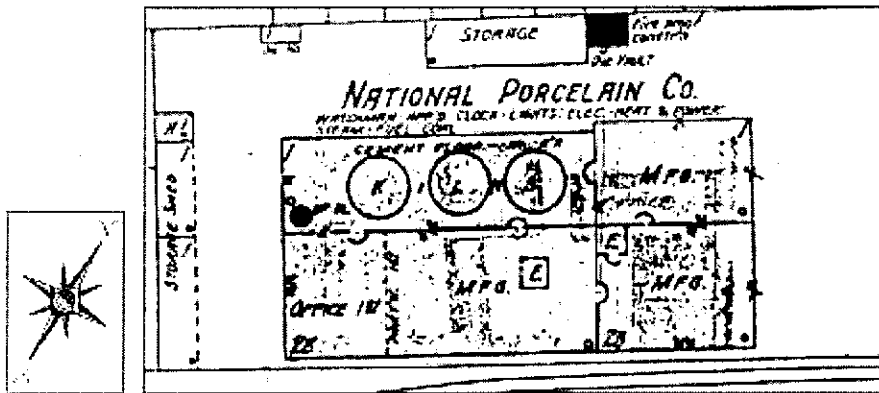
No. 20K5805 Double Groove Pony Glass Insulator for telephone transposition work, packed 400 in a barrel. Weight, per barrel, ready for shipment, 300 pounds. Price, per barrel, 400 insulators. \$6.30  
Price, each, in less than barrel lots. .01 1/2

No. 20K5810 Porcelain Insulator No. 4 1/2, new code; requiring 1 inch space between bottom and groove. Height, 1 1/2 inches; diameter, 1 1/4 inches; hole, 1/4 inch; groove, 1/4 inch.   
Price, per 100. 700  
Price, per standard package of 1,000. \$6.65

No. 20K5815 Porcelain Insulator No. 5 1/2, new code; requiring 1 inch space between bottom and groove. Height, 1 3/4 inches; diameter, 1 inch; hole, 1/4 inch; groove, 1/4 inch. Price, per 100. \$0.49  
Price, per standard package of 1,000. 3.90

Sears, Roebuck & Co. insulator and bracket advertisement (1908).

# National Ceramic Company



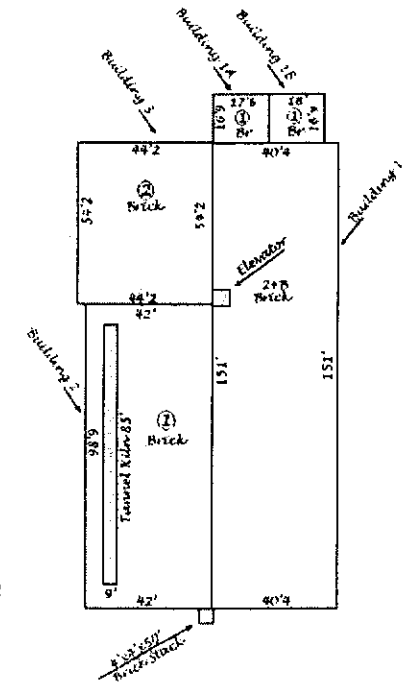
National Porcelain Company (Sanborn Insurance Map, 1927).

story factory building, valued at \$8,000, by December 1937 (City of Trenton 1936-1960s). Since there appears to be no evidence of another major addition to the plant, based on visual observation and historic maps, it is presumed that this work actually represents a complete renovation of the existing two-story factory building. A variety of garages, coal and clay sheds, and product storage buildings were situated along the perimeter of the property (City of Trenton 1936-1960s). Nearly all of these peripheral ancillary structures are now gone.

Constructing tunnel kilns was a great economy measure for the pottery industry; these savings included fuel, firing and production time, and, most importantly, labor costs. However, this technology also required some concessions, such as continuous production approaching the nature of an assembly line, often forcing individual pottery firms to overproduce their wares. Shutting down a tunnel kiln for any reason required a total of 22 days: eleven days for cooling the unit and eleven days for bringing the kiln back up to full heat (Stern 1994:166-167). This may explain why there is such a production line disparity be-

tween 1934 and 1940, with the latter year representing a veritable explosion of product types. On the eve of World War II, the National Porcelain Company had truly diversified their product line. They were now producing "electrical porcelain, bathroom fixtures, vases and miniature novelties and china" (Toohey 1940:254). The firm held several patents for their creations, including at least two for novelty ashtrays, among them the "Snuf A Rette," patent no. 2,100,078, issued during 1937, apparently soon after National installed their tunnel kiln. A second ashtray, the "Safety Ash Tray," patent no. 2,184,994, issued during 1938, was yet another example of product diversification (<http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/ac/ido/oeip/taf/issuyear.htm> accessed 13 February 2001). These ashtrays could be printed with advertising text and images in order to personalize the product for the client or prospective audience. One such advertising tray reads: "United Clay Mines Corporation Trenton New Jersey / For Fine Ceramics Hillman Clay Samson Clay / For Fine Paper Dawson Clay Franklin Clay."

(Continued on page 4)



City Tax Assessment Map showing tunnel kiln (1960).

## National Ceramic Company

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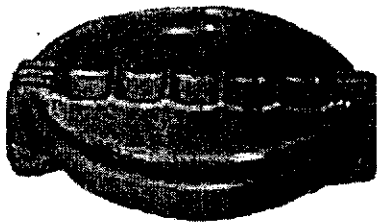
The creation of these ashtrays strengthens the argument that the 1937 tunnel kiln installation forced the company to broaden its product line to maximize cost effectiveness and fuel efficiency.

During the war years of the 1940s, much of National's production capacity was given over to national defense as the company manufactured insulators for shipboard installation (pers. comm. Thomas Colletti 13 February 2001). Some stories about the plant in the World War II era indicate that a fence surrounded the works and armed guards patrolled the perimeter. Sometime between 1940 and 1946, the company restyled itself as the National Ceramic Company and, again, modified its product line to include electrical porcelain, bathroom fixtures, and steatite (soapstone or talc) insulators (Hudson Dispatch 1946:226). The 1950s ushered in further changes in management and products. The 1956-57 New Jersey Industrial Directory (315) indicates that the plant was manufacturing porcelain electrical supplies and vitreous and semi-vitreous plumbing fixtures. J.A. Schermerhorn, formerly the plant manager, was now president of the company. The plant contained 2,787 square meters (30,000 sq. ft.) of production space and provided employment for 32 males and 63 females producing steatite porcelain insulators and ceramic insulation by the 1960s (New Jersey Industrial Directory 1966:319).

At some point during the 1960s, the company became employee-owned. However, by the mid-1970s, the Massachusetts partnership of Lun-

dey-Pylon, two electrical component suppliers to National Ceramic, acquired the Trenton firm to assure the continuance of a downstream component user. In 1976, the new owners retained Vincent Colletti to manage the works. In the mid-1980s, the partnership dissolved, thereupon Colletti purchased National. Upon Vincent's death in the mid-1990s, the company's ownership passed to his son, Thomas Colletti. The tunnel kiln was still in use during the late 1980s, although idled three or four days per week. During idling, the kiln's temperature was maintained at approximately 1500° and the kiln's waste heat employed to keep the plant warm. But economics dictated that the kiln be discontinued by the early 1990s and the firm acquired periodic kilns, featuring a total of 16 cubic feet of production chambering, as a replacement for the larger unit, which was retained *in situ*. (pers. comm. Thomas Colletti 13 February 2001). The tunnel kiln was photographed and the image submitted as part of the historic structures survey report.

As of 1998, Rick Miller managed the plant and employment had dropped substantially to just 20. Estimated sales for that year were \$1 million to \$4.9 million. The products for that year were listed as "ceramic insulators" (Harris Infosource, Inc. 1998:391). The plant retains its overall circa 1937 configuration, and the company continues to manufacture its products at 500 Southard Street. Out of ten specialty electrical porcelain manufacturers located in Trenton, as late as the 1950s, National Ceramic Company remains as one of only three survivors. The other two re-



Snuffa Rette Ashtray (ca. 1937)

## National Ceramic Company

maining companies of a once-dynamic industry are Star Porcelain and New Jersey Porcelain (Shuman 1958:192).

National Ceramic's modern product line includes ceramic insulators and specialties, Steatite, Cordierite and Alumina, coil forms, feed-throughs, stand-offs, tubes, and precision parts. Insulators for heating applications, metallized parts, assembled components, and wear components are also among the items produced at National. The services offered by the company include prototype production, extrusion of shapes up to five inches in diameter, pressing and grinding to tight tolerances, machining, assembly, ceramic machining, pressing and extruding, assembly, prototype production, glazing, and other specialized finishes. The firm offers both long and short production runs based on the customer's specifications and standards ([www5.thomasregister.com/olc/natlceramics/](http://www5.thomasregister.com/olc/natlceramics/) accessed 13 February 2001).

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### Personal Communication

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- [www5.thomasregister.com/olc/natlceramics/](http://www5.thomasregister.com/olc/natlceramics/) accessed 13 February 2001.



Contemporary  
National Porcelain Company electrical insulator.

## *New Lenox White House China Departs from Tradition*

*Ellen Denker*

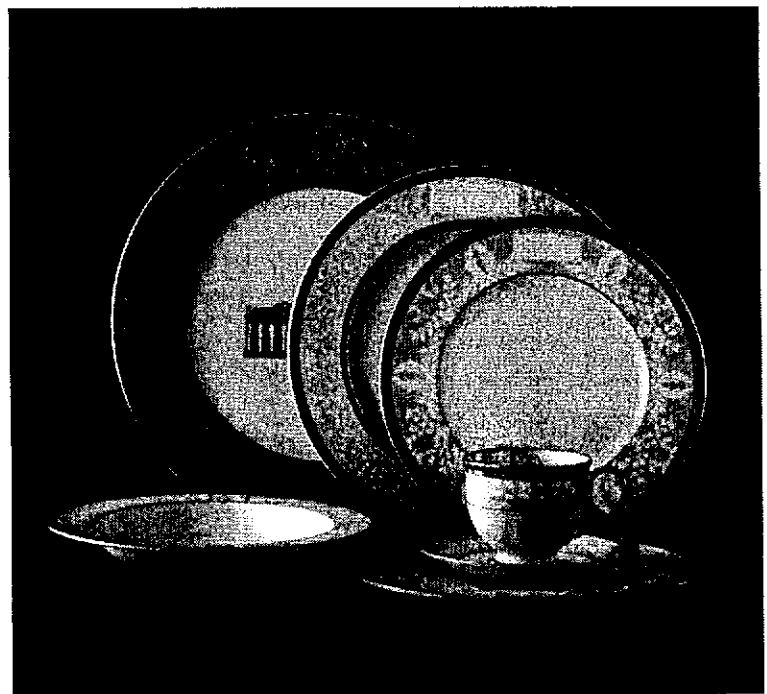
A new Lenox China table service was unveiled at a dinner in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the White House last November, bringing to five the total of services made by Lenox to serve the nation's guests over the past 82 years. Lenox China, which was founded in Trenton as the Ceramic Art Company in 1889, is headquartered in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. The factory where the new china was made is in Pomona, New Jersey, near Atlantic City. Lenox opened the Pomona factory in 1954.

The new service, designed by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and Timothy Carder, Lenox's Vice-President of Design, features a pastel yellow border decorated with white scrolls, flowers, and wreaths adapted from architectural details in the State Dining Room, East Room, and Diplomatic Reception Room. Each piece of the service's 12-piece place setting is a little different from the others. The wide, deeply etched gold border of the service plate surrounds a large gold portrait of the White House in the center. The same view of the building is shown in smaller size in the borders of other plates in the service.

The design of the new service departs from tradition in several ways. Pastel yellow for the border is quite different from the deep, dark colors of previous services. Choice of the new color was based in

part on the hue chosen by Mrs. John F. Kennedy for a service (never made) just before her husband's assassination. For the new service, the Presidential Seal, which was prominently displayed on the four previous Lenox services, has been replaced with the image of the White House. The use of a different pattern on each piece is also a new approach.

The service consists of three hundred place settings, the largest number ever made for the White House. Previous Lenox China services were made during the administrations of Woodrow Wilson (1918), Franklin Roosevelt (1934), Harry Truman (1951), and Ronald Reagan (1981). White House china continues to be used by subsequent administrations, despite being named for the president who orders it. The Reagan Service, for example, has been used in the White House since 1981, but its smaller size (only 220 place settings) was insufficient for some state dinners.



*The new White House China manufactured by Lenox, Inc.*

## *POTS Receives Grant from New Jersey Historical Commission*

The Potteries of Trenton Society has received a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission to reissue *From Teacups to Toilets: A Century of Ceramic Manufacture in Trenton, New Jersey, 1850-1940*. Initially created as a teacher's guide by Hunter Research and Wilson Creative Marketing for the New Jersey Department of Transportation, the guide is of interest to educators and the general public alike for the information it contains on Trenton's ceramic past.

As part of the reprint effort, POTS will make some minor editorial changes to the booklet. A minimum of

2500 copies will be printed. In keeping with the spirit of the first printing, where the New Jersey Department of Transportation distributed the booklet free of charge to interested educators, the second edition will also be made available at no charge. All members of the Potteries of Trenton Society will automatically receive a copy of the booklet, and copies will be distributed to others interested in Trenton's ceramic past.

POTS is hoping to have the *Teacups* reprint complete by the end of the summer.

## *POTS Update*

### Lectures

David Goldberg recently spoke at Ellarslie, the Trenton City Museum, on Trenton's ceramic industry. His lecture was part of the Senator Joseph P. Merlino Lecture Series, sponsored by the Trenton Museum Society and the Potteries of Trenton Society.

### Heritage Days

The Potteries of Trenton Society plans to participate in this year's Heritage Days by identifying ceramic pieces brought in by visitors. Look for Heritage Days publicity and advertisements for more information on where POTS will be located and when ceramic identifications will be available.

## *Exhibits*

### Historical Archaeology of Colonial New Jersey

The New Jersey State Museum is showing "The Historical Archaeology of Colonial New Jersey." The exhibit, co-sponsored by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, illustrates how historical archaeology contributes to our knowledge of New Jersey's colonial past. The exhibit combines artifacts, historical documents, historic maps, and archaeological excavation records to document New Jersey at the time of the American Revolution.

One site represented in the exhibit is William Richard's stoneware kiln, encountered during archaeological monitoring of the N.J. Route 29 highway project in Trenton (see *Trenton Potteries*, Vol. 1: 3). Visitors will see a sampling of artifacts recovered from the kiln, as well a photographs of the kiln during excavation.

### Attention POTS Members!

*Trenton Potteries* is looking for announcements, brief articles and other submissions. If you have something you would like to see in an upcoming newsletter, please send it to: Patricia Madrigal, Potteries of Trenton Society, 120 W. State Street, Trenton NJ 08608, email to pmadrigal67@yahoo.com.

Phone: 609-695-0122  
Fax: 609-695-0117  
Email: [marketing@pottersociety.com](mailto:marketing@pottersociety.com)

120 W. State Street  
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Newsletter of the  
Potteries of Trenton Society

## *POTS Membership*

Membership in the Potteries of Trenton Society is open to all interested in Trenton's pottery industry and the ceramic products manufactured here. We welcome pottery workers, historians, archaeologists and collectors. Your contribution is used to support newsletter, lecture, meeting, and conference costs.

Annual Memberships:

\_\_\_\_\_ Regular (\$20)    \_\_\_\_\_ Couples (\$25)    \_\_\_\_\_ Students (\$15, with ID)    \_\_\_\_\_ Seniors (\$15)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

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Please make your check payable to the Potteries of Trenton Society and mail to:

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