

# TRENTON POTTERIES

Newsletter of the  
Potteries of Trenton Society



*Joseph Mayer's Arsenal Pottery Dump  
Part 3: Cut Sponge Decorated Ironstone China*  
William B. Liebeknecht

The use of cut root sponge as a decorative technique was an innovative, time-saving device that was popular with many potteries in Scotland, England, Germany, Holland and the United States during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was invented in Scotland and brought to England in about 1845 (Bagdade & Bagdade 1987:380). Root sponges were sold both un-cut or "cut for painting" in different sizes by pottery suppliers (Earls 2000:3). Cut sponge shapes were dipped in paint and applied to wares to produce crisp patterns. The application of a pattern was often repeated before being re-dipped into paint, creating a variation of shades on a single piece. Most of these shapes were floral, scrolls, chains, and geometric forms strung together to create beautifully decorated yet inexpensive wares.

Collectors have been aware for some time that ironstone china decorated with a variety of cut sponge motifs was produced by the Mayer Pottery of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania (established 1881) (Robacker 1971, Ketchum 1987, Lehner 1988, Denker & Denker 1985 and Albertson 1989). The original owners of the Beaver Falls pottery were Joseph, Arthur and Ernest Mayer (Lehner 1988). Many collectors are unaware, however, that there was an earlier Mayer Pottery located in Trenton, New Jersey. From 1876 to 1905 the owners of the Trenton facility were James & Joseph Mayer (Goldberg 1998:44; Hunter 1999). Ar-

chaeological monitoring activities along the banks of the Delaware River for the construction of the new alignment for Route 29 in Trenton exposed thousands of cut sponge-decorated ironstone china sherds. These sherds were locally produced and decorated by the Mayer Pottery Manufacturing Company at the Arsenal Pottery. The cut sponge decorated sherds are nearly identical to those produced by the related facility in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania; only the maker's marks differ for the two potteries.

The Beaver falls mark is black transfer-printed "SEMI-VITREOUS CHINA" arched over the state seal of Pennsylvania over "WARRANTED" over "J. & E. M." (Figure 1). Another mark, (not shown) is transfer-printed "Mayer Pottery" "Beaver Falls Pa." (Ketchum 1983: plate 235).

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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, Richard Hunter, William Liebeknecht, Molly Merlino, George Miller, Brenda Springsted. Newsletter Editor: Patricia



Figure 1: The makers mark for the Mayer Pottery of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania.

## Cut Sponge Decorated Ironstone China

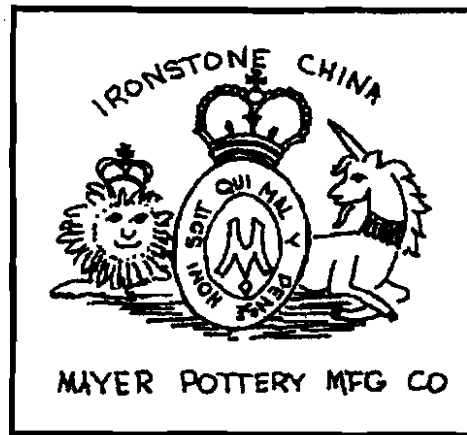


Figure 2: Makers mark from the Mayer Pottery Company of Trenton, New Jersey.

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The Trenton mark is black transfer printed "IRONSTONE CHINA" arched over a British crowned oval with a Latin inscription "Honi soit qui mal y pense" [shame be he who thinks evil of it] around an "M", over "MAYER POTTERY M'FG CO." This mark is very similar to other British coat of arms marks used by English immigrant potters working in Trenton in the 1870s and 1880s.

Pieces marked "MAYER MFG. CO." that have been associated with the Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania facility, were most likely manufactured in Trenton, New Jersey (Denker and Denker 1985:155). To complicate matters, many of these vessels were unmarked, as was typical for common, everyday dishes, where the appearance rather than the name of the manufacturer sold the wares.

Preliminary observations indicate that although the two facilities used the same vessel forms and cut sponge motifs, the color palettes differed slightly. For instance, the colors red and black seem to have been used only at Mayer's Beaver Falls pottery.

The Trenton facility may have ceased production of spongeware after 1883 when they began the production of "majolica and barbotine ware" (Woodward and Hageman 1883; Wall n.d.:6). The production of sponge-decorated ironstone may have then shifted to the new facility in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania which opened two years earlier in 1881.

Five decorative motifs used by the Mayer potteries were also used by other pottery firms. The first, a chain or cable border, is a common motif used by several other potteries in Scotland, England and the United States. The second, a "clouds with rain" or "jellyfish" border was also used by the Clyde Pottery Company in Greenock, Scotland c.1850 to 1903 (Kelly et al 2001: 236; Godden 1964:154). The third is a single small daisy-like flower bordered by curvature compound leaves; which was used by William Adams in Staffordshire, England c.1800-1863. The fourth is a brown tulip border around an inner border of blue orchids with brown leaves; this decoration was used by the Columbian Art Pottery Trenton, New Jersey from 1893 to 1902 (Kelly et al 2001: 104). The fifth is a diamond-shaped floret used by the Willets Manufacturing Company, 1879 to 1909, also located in Trenton, New Jersey. This overlap in use of decorative motifs suggests the Trenton potteries making sponge-decorated wares were using a common cut sponge supplier. Likewise this observation should serve as a cautionary note to anyone trying to identify the manufacturer of unmarked pieces based on decorative motifs.

Vessel forms represented from the Route 29 waste tip are: shallow oval

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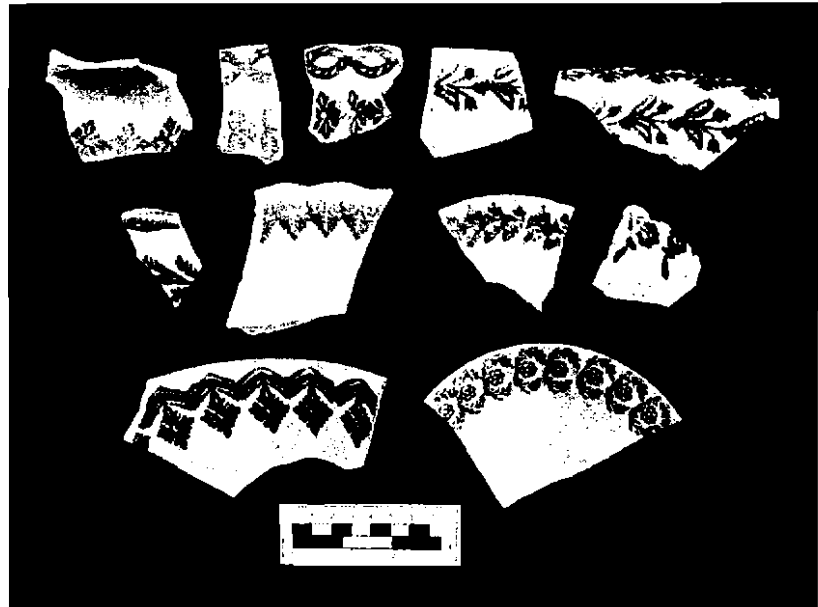
## Cut Sponge Decorated Ironstone China

-serving or baking dishes; cups; saucers; plain bowls; molded bowls with scalloped rims; serving dishes with scalloped rims; and spittoons.

No sherds from cut sponge decorated plates were found among the thousands of broken vessels from the dump. Kelly, however, in his book on Spongeware clearly shows an example of a plate from the Trenton facility (Kelly *et al* 2001:104).

Recorded color combinations and cut sponge motifs recovered from the Trenton dump are as follows:

1. Diamond-shaped florets (varieties - blue, green and brown).
2. Cable/chain (varieties - green, brown and blue).
3. Double ringed oval and diamond chain (green).
4. Untoothed simple leaves wreath-like border (green).
5. Wreath border with compound leaves (pink and green).
6. Single pink carnation-like flower isolated but alternating with green toothed simple leaves.
7. Single lily-like flowers with two toothed simple leaves (varieties - blue flower with brown leaves and pink flower with green leaves).
8. Alternating tulip and fleur de lis (varieties - brown or green).
9. Single large blue daisy-like flowers with three brown untoothed simple leaves.
10. Three tulip-like flowers with two leaves and stems (varieties - pink tulips and green leaves or blue tulips and brown leaves and blue/brown blended stems).
11. Triple ringed octagons (brown).
12. Single small blue daisy-like flowers surrounded by a curvature of



Dawn Turner

Figure 3: A sample of cut sponge decorated sherds from the Mayer Pottery waster dump in Trenton, NJ.

- small blue compound leaves (varieties - pink flower with green leaves).
13. Single small tapered blue daisy-like flower bordered by two brown untoothed simple leaves.
14. Single small blue diamond-shaped flower bordered by two stems of blue compound leaves at 45 degree angles.
15. Single blue orchid bordered by two blue simple lobed leaves facing down.
16. Single blue open orchid bordered by two blue simple lobed leaves facing down.
17. Five lobed leaves connected by vines with over-glazed gilt highlights (brown).
18. Eight-lobed blue flowers with hand painted green stems and leaves. (These are the only examples of the two techniques [cut sponge and hand painting] from the assemblage. This decoration was

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## Cut Sponge Decorated Ironstone China

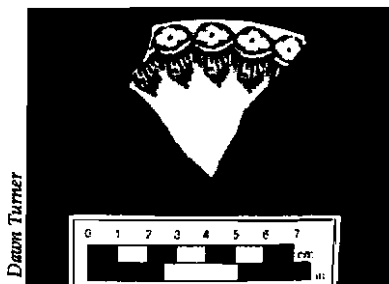


Figure 4: Saucer fragment with blue clouds and rain or jellyfish border.

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also only observed on bowls with shallow exterior vertical ribs and scalloped borders.

19. Blue clouds with rain or jellyfish border. All of these sherds are on saucers with an interior embossed band containing overlapping scales (Figure 4).

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*Join POTS for Dish Discovery Day  
Sunday, May 5, 2002*

The Potteries of Trenton Society is hosting our second "Dish Discovery Day," an afternoon of pottery and china identification, at Ellarslie on Sunday, May 5, from 1:30 to 3:30 p. m. Bring in your mystery ceramics and ask our panel of experts, "What is it?" The panel will include POTS members who are curators, collectors, and archaeologists. Please bring pottery and china only. There will be plenty of expertise, but no appraisals.

The event is free and open to the public. Light refreshments will be served.

Ellarslie, the Trenton City Museum, is located in Cadwalader Park, Trenton. The event will take place on the second floor in the galleries dedicated to the history of Trenton's ceramics.

For more information, call Patricia Madrigal at 609-695-0122 or email pmadrigal67@yahoo.com.

*POTS Completes "Teacups to Toilets" Reprint*

The Potteries of Trenton Society has completed its reprint of the booklet *From Teacups to Toilets: A Century of Ceramic Manufacture in Trenton, New Jersey, 1850-1940*. POTS received a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, to fund the reprint.

*Teacups to Toilets* was initially created as a teacher's guide by Hunter Research and Wilson Creative Marketing for the New Jersey Department of Transportation. POTS felt that the guide was of interest to educators and the general public alike and therefore warranted a reprinting. After securing permission from the New Jersey Department of Transportation to make minor editorial changes and print a second edition, POTS applied to the New Jersey Historical Commission for a publications grant to fund the project. We received a grant in 2001 to print 2500 copies. The Trenton Convention & Visitors Bureau generously provided the funds for an additional 1500 copies, thus raising the print run to 4000.

POTS worked with Wilson Creative Marketing to make editorial changes and print the booklets. The completed booklets were delivered in November, 2001. All POTS members were mailed a copy in early December.

The *Teacups* reprint committee would like to thank everyone who worked so hard to bring about this second edition of *Teacups to Toilets*. We are grateful to the New Jersey Department of Transportation for granting POTS permission to reprint the booklet. The New Jersey Historical Commission and the Trenton Convention & Visitors Bureau provided funding, without which the reprint would not have been possible. Finally, we would like to thank Janice Wilson Stridick of Wilson Creative Marketing, who worked with us from the beginning to bring about this second edition.

— *The Teacups Reprint Committee:*  
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## *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)

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

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