

TRENTON POTTERIES



Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society

The Providential Tile Works

by Michael Padwee

Another of the Trenton, New Jersey art tile manufacturers was the Providential Tile Works, located on Enterprise Avenue in East Trenton. Providential was founded in c. 1885 by Joseph Kirkham, James Robinson and Louis Whitehead. They remained partners until 1891 when Mr. Kirkham was bought out by the other two.¹ Then, about 1900 Whitehead bought out Robinson and took over the business.² In 1912 Whitehead died, and his wife, who had been the renowned concert singer, Emma Thurston, decided to run the company. Providential lasted only about a year more and then passed into receivership in 1913.³ At this time everything in the plant was sold, including tiles and molds.⁴

According to his obituary, Mr. Robinson was responsible for starting a decorating department at the Providential plant. In about 1885 Isaac Broome, the master designer at the Trent Tile Company, came to work at

the Providential Tile Works.⁵ It is thought that Broome could have brought some of his tile molds, as well as his artistic skills, with him. In about 1890 Thomas Scott Callowhill replaced Broome as an artist and modeler at Providential. Callowhill "was an Englishman who had gained considerable experience working at the Royal Worcester, Doulton, and Lambeth Potteries in England. Callowhill's two sons, Hubert and Ronald, were also hired as decorators..."⁶ In 1899 Providential hired another well-known ceramicist, Fred Wilde, to manage its plant.⁷ Wilde had a varied career in art tile works in New York and New Jersey as a talented ceramicist, but he did not stay long at Providential.

The art tiles manufactured by Providential "were glazed tiles, plain and in relief. Early on, some relief tiles had the raised designs painted different colors, or tints, with some good results. Underglaze decoration was also produced for a while, but both styles were abandoned as being unsuitable for the American market. Tiles were made for mantels, hearths, and wall decoration, in relief and intaglio. From 1900 to 1910, beautiful relief designs, in white glaze decorated in gold, were very popular."⁸ "The Company never grew to be a very large one, as it confined itself to high-class ware... They did not make floor tile, and their greatest output was probably around 500,000 square feet."⁹

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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, Meta Janowitz, Jay Lewis, Emma Lewis, William Liebeknecht, Molly Merlino, George Miller, Brenda Springsted, Rebecca White. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal

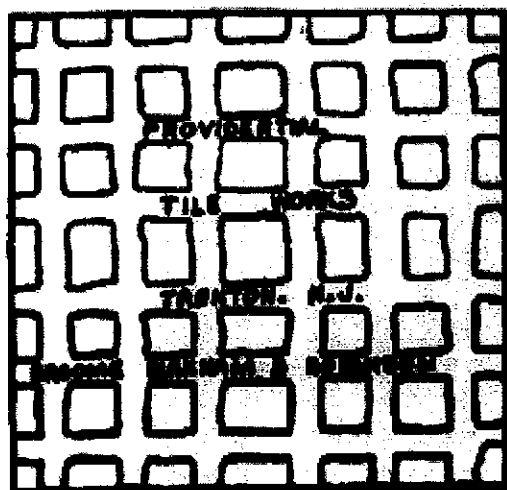


Figure 1. Grid tile back, c. 1886-1890.

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Providential Tile Works

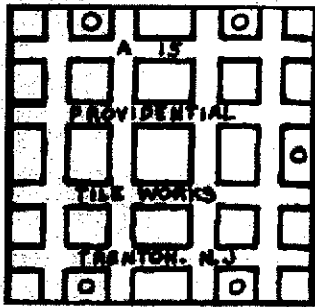


Figure 2. Grid tile back.

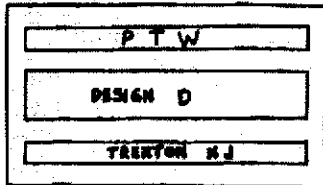


Figure 3. Molded relief tile with recessed bars.

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Providential, like the Trent Tile Company, used a variety of key patterns on its tile backs, and I have found evidence of at least 48 distinctive tile back patterns. Many tiles are marked "PROVIDENTIAL" or "P.T.W." Recently, a transfer tile made by Providential was discovered, making Providential one of five known U.S. tile manufacturers that made this type of tile in the 19th or very early 20th centuries.¹⁰

Figures 1 and 2 are raised "grid" tile backs on 6" molded relief tiles, both with raised marks. The Figure 1 tile was probably made c. 1886-1890 when Isaac Broome worked at Providential. It is not known why the tile is marked "Broome, Kirkham & Robinson" rather than "Whitehead, Kirkham & Robinson", the founders of the company. The Figure 2 tile was possibly made after Broome left the company. Figure 3 is a 6" x 3" molded relief tile with three recessed bars and raised marks within those bars. Figure 4 is a 6" advertising tile for a tile, grate and mantel company in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Figure 5 is the back of the advertising tile, and Figure 6 is the "Wee Willie Winkie" transfer tile, that has a similar back as Figure 4. Figure 7 is another "Broome, Kirkham & Robinson" tile back--a 6" diameter stove tile with raised marks in a central recessed area.

Providential may also have sold blank biscuit tiles to other companies to be decorated. Figure 8 is a 6" hand-painted tile with a Marblehead Potteries (Marblehead, Massachusetts) paper label. The blank has been attributed to Providential, and the unmarked tile back has twelve raised partial bars.

Some of Providential's best work are its portrait tiles. Figures 9 and 10 are intaglio relief portrait tiles of a 17th

or 18th Century, Romantic Revival style, man and woman. Figure 11 is the back of the tile with the woman's portrait. This tile back has five recessed bars with raised marks in all five bars.

Notes:

1. Sigafosse, Dick, *American Art Pottery*, Collector Books, Paducah, KY, 1998, p. 163.
2. *Trenton Evening Times*, September 24, 1909, p. 11, "Jas. H. Robinson Dies of Peritonitis."
3. *Ibid.*, Sigafosse, p. 163 and Townsend, Everett, "Development of the Tile Industry in the United States" in the *American Ceramic Society, Ceramic Abstracts and The Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 5 May 15, 1943, p. 133.
4. *Trenton Evening Times*, June 5, 1913, p. 7, column 8.
5. *Trenton Times*, February 11, 1905, p. 1, "Trenton Foremost In Pottery Ranks Says Isaac Broome."
6. Karlson, Norman. *American Art Tile, 1876-1941*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York, NY, p. 44.
7. *Trenton Times*, October 25, 1899, p. 1
8. *Ibid.*, Sigafosse, p. 163.
9. *Ibid.*, Townshend, p. 133.
10. The others being the International Tile Company of Brooklyn, New York; Burroughs & Mountford of Trenton, New Jersey; the American Encaustic Tiling Company of Zanesville, Ohio; and the Mosaic Tile Company of Zanesville, Ohio.

Providential Tile Works



Figure 4. Six-inch advertising tile.

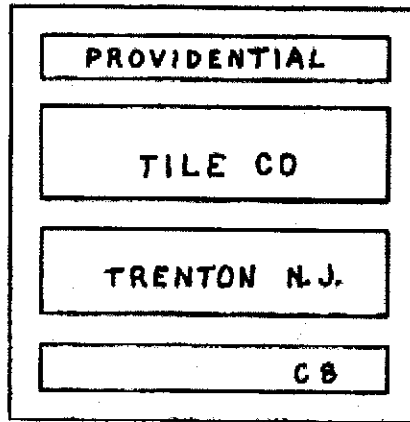


Figure 5. Back of Figure 4.



Figure 6. Wee Willie Winkie transfer tile.

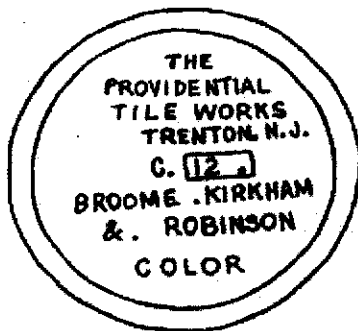


Figure 7

Figure 7. Stove tile back.

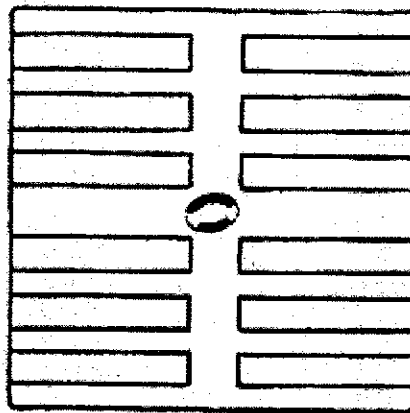


Figure 8. Back of handpainted tile.



Figure 9. Intaglio relief portrait tile.



Figure 10. Intaglio relief portrait

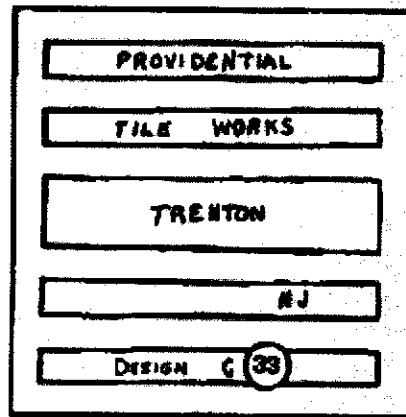


Figure 11. Back of tile in Figure 9.

Uncommon Clay: New Jersey's Architectural Terra Cotta Industry
 Hillary Murtha with preface by Susan Tunick and foreword by
 Richard Veit

When I was a kid in Sunday school we were taught in catechism that we came from dust and we shall return to dust...I assumed God made babies in the terra cotta plant.

—Peter Book, a worker at Valentine Brick Company

U*ncommon Clay* is the remaining evidence for a remarkable public history project that consisted of a year-long exhibition, educational workshops, a lecture series with distinguished historians, and public outreach programs. It is a model for what New Jersey's other clay communities might do in the future to explore and interpret the state's extraordinary clay history. Middlesex County, and particularly Woodbridge, the Amboys, and Sayreville, was the location of a thriving clay industry — creating architectural terra cotta. Once considered a super material, terra cotta was lighter than stone, impervious to climatic changes, easily sculpted, and colorfully glazed. This monograph describes these attributes, explains the design and manufacturing process, demonstrates the use of terra cotta in regional architecture, and explores the history of New Jersey's leading terra-cotta manufacturers.

During the era of terra cotta's greatest popularity, between 1880 and 1930, New Jersey was a major center for architectural terra-cotta manufacture, having the largest concentration of manufacturers. The state's significant clay deposits, proximity to large cities where terra-cotta clad buildings were popular, and many transportation options during this era (rail, water, and road) all contributed to its primacy in this material.

Original research added significantly to this project and included extensive interviews with workers in the terra-cotta industry and their families, archaeological excavations at former factory sites, the discovery of movies that show manufacturing techniques, and the finding of original design drawings for projects and photographs of workers. The text gives the historical and geological background for terra cotta in New Jersey then traces its history from the 1850s through its heyday, when New Jersey's industry blossomed out of mundane brick and drainage tile factories. Companies from Perth Amboy to Rocky Hill are profiled. Murtha carefully explains how custom terra cotta was commissioned and designed, modeled and fired to completion, packed and shipped to its destination, and finally installed on a building. The design, manufacture and use of brick, tile and standardized terra cotta is also explained, with special emphasis on Trenton's important tile makers — Trent Tile Company and Mueller Mosaic Company. Social life of the workers is also profiled using information gleaned from extensive oral history interviews.

Illustrations in the monograph include a map of Raritan Bay area clay pits that documents the primordial pockets of clay deposited 65 to 140 million years ago along the Raritan River from the bay to Trenton; historic photographs of workers hauling clay from pits, designing and sculpting the clay, and glazing and firing final products; examples of buildings with terra-cotta ornament, including those built for ceremony, commerce, and

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Uncommon Clay was published in 2004 by the Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission, Cornelius Low House/ Middlesex County Museum

A limited number of copies of this publication are available for the asking by addressing your request to:

Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission,
 703 Jersey Avenue, New Brunswick NJ 08901

POTS Announces Spring Symposium

For the second year in a row the Potteries of Trenton Society will team with the New Jersey Historical Society to bring a day-long series of lectures on New Jersey's ceramic industry. Titled *Filling America's Cupboards: New Jersey's Nineteenth-Century Earthenwares*, the symposium will bring together ceramic historians, archaeologists and collectors to discuss New Jersey's 19th century earthenware industry.

Archaeologist Richard W. Hunter will provide an overview of the earthenware industry. Collector and historian Emma Lewis will then discuss the Rockingham industry in New Jersey, and Jane Claney, author of *Rockingham Ware in American Culture 1830-1930: Reading Historical Artifacts*,

will discuss the role Rockingham ware played in expressing cultural identity.

After a break for lunch, the symposium will resume in the afternoon with a presentation by archaeologist Rebecca White, who will discuss the yellow ware industry in Trenton. Archaeologist William Liebeknecht will follow with a paper on Trenton Majolica products. Ceramic historian Ellen Denker will end with a presentation on china painters and their use of Jersey City cream-colored blanks.

The symposium will be held on Saturday, April 9 from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark. More information will be available in the next issue of *Trenton Potteries*.

Rockingham and Yellow Ware

A member of the Potteries of Trenton Society, Arthur F. Goldberg, has written a review article on Rockingham ware: "Highlights in the Development of the Rockingham and Yellow Ware Industry in the United States - A Brief Review with Representative Examples" (*Ceramics in America 2003*, pp. 26-46. Edited by Robert Hunter. The Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee). The article provides an overview of the development of Rockingham and yellow ware in the United States, and is richly illustrated with over 30 photographs from Mr. Goldberg's private collection.

POTS Board Meeting

The next meeting of the POTS board will be held from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on January 18, 2005 at the offices of URS, 561 Cedar Lane, Florence, New Jersey. All POTS members are invited to attend. Please RSVP with Patricia Madrigal : pmadrigal67@yahoo.com or 609-695-0122 (M-Th, 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.)

Uncommon Clay (cont.)

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business; and examples of interior terra-cotta murals and ornament. An informative glossary, extensive checklist of the exhibition, and bibliography complete this exemplary publication.

Reviewed by Ellen Denker

We're on the web! Check us out at
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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:

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