



Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society

James Sheldon, Belleek Master in Trenton

By Ulysses Grant Dietz

Senior Curator, Newark Museum

In 1911, Walter Scott Lenox gave “31 pieces of Belleek & bone china”¹ to the fledgling Newark Museum. These pieces had all been part of the year-old museum’s 1910 inaugural exhibition of art pottery simply titled “Modern American Pottery.”

Mr. Lenox lent his works to Newark in 1910 to be displayed alongside the products of other well-known art potteries of the day such as Grueby, Marblehead, Paul Revere, Newcomb and Van Briggie. The only other New Jersey ceramics in this exhibition were a series of Chinese-form vases by Newark’s Clifton Art Pottery. While it seems odd from a twenty-first-century perspective that Lenox China was seen as art pottery, it was perfectly logical to both Mr. Lenox and John Cotton Dana, the visionary founder of the Newark Museum. Mr. Dana felt that it was in the decorative arts that one found true art in the modern world. He made little value distinction between factory made products that were well designed and hand-crafted pieces. The thought of Lenox dinner plates being displayed near hand-painted Marblehead vases raised no anxiety. Art was art was

art.

Included in this display were two pieces that were hardly modern looking, but exemplified the virtuoso craftsmanship of Mr. Lenox’s potters. A bowl-like basket and a tazza-like piece on legs were both formed from spaghetti-thin strands of ivory colored belleek porcelain, their rims encrusted with pastel-colored blossoms crafted from finger-nail like petals of the thinnest porcelain. Of all the loaned objects, these alone were attributed to a specific craftsman by Mr. Lenox: Mr. James Sheldon. No other information was provided, but the name was carefully noted on the Museum’s accession cards after the porcelains were donated in 1911 (Figures 1 and 2).

According to a ledger in the Lenox Archives, the mysterious Mr. Sheldon seems to have produced

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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 – Jay Lewis; Secretary – Brenda Springsted. Board: Ellen Denker, Richard Hunter, Meta Janowitz, Jay Lewis, Emma Lewis, William Liebeknecht, George Miller, Brenda Springsted, Rebecca White. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal



Figure 1, Sheldon woven basket.

James Sheldon, Belleek Master in Trenton

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thirty-five different examples of this belleek-type “woven” porcelain, numbered sequentially from 1145-1179. All but one of these entries is accompanied in the ledger by a cyanotype photograph, sometimes including both an overhead view as well as a profile. The pieces that ended up in the Museum were designs 1147 and 1167. Only one entry, number 1179, is not illustrated, but it is listed as a “basket” and thus is likely part of the Sheldon series.² None of these delicate belleek-type basket wares were apparently marked, and to date only two other examples from this series are known: two saucer-sized pure white flat dishes, which remained in the Lenox Archives and were given to the New Jersey State Museum in 2006.

Until 2010, nothing at all was known of James Sheldon. It had been Walter Lenox who first brought members of the Bromley family from the Belleek factory in Ireland to Trenton for the firm of Ott & Brewer in the 1880s; and it was Lenox who shepherded the development of ivory bodied belleek-type

wares subsequently at Willets Manufacturing Company in Trenton and at his own Ceramic Art Company from 1889 onward.³ But who was Mr. Sheldon?

In November 2010 Lisa Wieger of Los Vegas, Nevada, contacted me and reported that she was a great-granddaughter of James Sheldon through his daughter Catherine – and did we have any of her ancestor’s work in our Lenox holdings? Imagine Ms. Wieger’s joy at finding out that her great-grandfather’s name was known to me; and my own at finally knowing more about this elusive master porcelain artist – a man who had been important enough to Walter Lenox to be immortalized (however vaguely) a century ago.

James Sheldon, of Coalisland parish in the mining district of Tyrone County, Northern Ireland, was twenty-nine years old when he married the 19-year-old Sarah McGrath on May 25th, 1889.⁴ His occupation was listed rather mysteriously as “flower winding,” but this may be a mistranscription of an older document. His father, John Sheldon, was listed as “potter” on the couple’s marriage certificate. The elder Sheldon’s roots were in England’s Staffordshire pottery district, where James was born in 1860. According to the 1861 British Census, John, his wife Louisa and four children were living in Stoke Upon Trent. James was the baby, at one year old. Exactly how James came to move from Staffordshire, England to Tyrone, Ireland, remains a mystery, but it would be a good guess that he went for the work.

James and Sarah’s first child, Catherine was born in Coalisland on

(Continued on page 3)

Figure 2, Sheldon woven basket.



James Sheldon, Belleek Master in Trenton

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October 26, 1891, and her father was by then recorded as a “worker in pottery.” The Sheldons would eventually have six children, several of whom must have been born in Trenton. The Sheldons emigrated from Ireland in 1893, sailing on the State of Nebraska from the port of Moville in June with their young family. For the rest of their lives, James and Sarah lived in Trenton.

It is likely that James went immediately to work for Walter Lenox upon his arrival in the United States. His obituary in the *Trenton Evening Times* on May 10, 1933, said that Sheldon had come to Trenton forty-one years previously.⁵ The obituary further reported that he had been trained in Belleek Ireland, and was “employed as a decorator for many years by Lenox, Inc.” Coalisland is a long way from the famous porcelain town of Belleek, although both are in Northern Ireland. It is hard to find a moment in Sheldon’s life as a husband and father when he would have had time to work in Belleek, on the opposite side of Northern Ireland from Coalisland. Although he could have left his young family in Coalisland to spend time in Belleek learning his skills, it is just as possible that he learned the belleek process from Irish workers already in place at the Ceramic Art Company when he arrived in Trenton. Similar belleek-type white porcelain baskets produced at the Willets factory in the late 1880s are well known, and whoever made those at Willets might have followed Walter Lenox when he set up his own shop in 1889.⁶

James Sheldon died in 1933, having retired from Lenox in 1930.⁷

Sarah died on February 4, 1939 and their graves are in St. Mary’s Cemetery in Trenton. They had twenty grandchildren. Now, thanks to the curiosity of his great-granddaughter Lisa Wieger, the ceramic history world has a much better sense of who this porcelain artist was.

Notes:

¹Object files, Newark Museum, registrar’s office.

²I have Ellen Paul Denker to thank for showing me this ledger and making me a copy of these pages in 2000 when she was the archivist for Lenox, Inc. The original ledger is now in the Special Collections at the Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, New Jersey.

³See Ulysses Grant Dietz, *Masterpieces of Art Pottery, 1880-1930* (Newark: the Newark Museum, 2009) p. 32.

⁴The wedding certificate lists his age as 25, but other documents show he was born in 1860.

⁵Object files, the Newark Museum, thanks to Lisa Wieger.

⁶One of these is in the collection of the Newark Museum, gift of Dr. Harold H. Kelsey in Memory of Arthur V. Colletti, 2002, accession number 2002.38.16. There were two more Willets baskets in the Colletti collection, one of which is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 2005.316.

⁷Based on Sheldon’s death certificate, a copy of which is in the Newark Museum object files.

Artists and Decorators of the Trenton Pottery Industry

Mayor Tony F. Mack announced that the Trenton Museum Society and the Trenton City Museum at Ellarslie Mansion in Cadwalader Park are opening a new exhibit entitled *Artists and Decorators of the Trenton Pottery Industry* on January 29, 2011. The exhibit will run through May 8, 2011.

According to exhibit curator Robert Cunningham, the exhibit will focus on "the best of the best" the decorative work of the artists and artisans, known and anonymous, who worked in Trenton's premier pottery factories during the American Belleek period from 1882 until the 1920s.

The finest hand-painted porcelain in the United States was produced in Trenton, New Jersey. The exquisitely painted and modeled vases, pitchers and tea sets were hand-painted and gilded by top artists working in Trenton's ceramics industry. No two pieces were alike. Customers could order delicate porcelain artware painted with favorite scenes or family portraits. The quality of the artist-decorated pieces created in Trenton during this early period has never been exceeded by any other American pottery and rivaled the top pieces produced in Europe.

Although the pieces on display will represent a number of Trenton potteries, most will come from the pre-eminent firms of Ott and Brewer, Willets Manufacturing Company, and the Ceramic Art Company (which later became Lenox). The Ceramic Art Company, unlike other potteries, was originally organized as an art studio.

It is hard to imagine the work that went into creating these pieces or the cost of producing them. The work would be impossible to replicate today. Carried in the most exclusive shops, only the extremely wealthy could afford the unique, lustrous china. In

1903, for example, large Lenox-decorated vases sold for \$700 to \$1400 each. Factoring in for inflation, today's price would be approximately \$30,000, an astounding amount to pay for a decorative piece then as well as now.

The hand-painted porcelains on display represent some of the best pieces ever produced anywhere in the world. Creations from most of the known factory artists like Bruno Geyer, George and William Morley, and Walter Marsh will be displayed as well as signed work from a few unknown artists. This is a chance to see some of the world-class porcelain that helped to make Trenton the top china production city in the United States.

Trenton City Museum
at Ellarslie Manison

Tuesday - Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
Sunday 1:00 - 4:00 p.m. Closed Mondays
and Municipal Holidays. Visit
www.ellarslie.org for more information
and directions or contact Museum Director
Brian O. Hill at 609.989.3632

Ellarslie Mansion is owned, maintained and operated by the City of Trenton, Mayor's Office of Recreation and Cultural Affairs and is located in Cadwalader Park. This program is made possible in part by the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission through funding from the Mercer County Board of Chosen Freeholders, and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, A Partner Agency of the National Endowment of the Arts.

All programs and additional support are provided by the TrentonMuseum Society 609-989-1191.

2011 Trenton Ceramics Symposium Explores the City's Decorating Trade

This year's Trenton ceramics symposium will focus on the many facets of Trenton's ceramics decorating industry. The day-long symposium called *Skin Deep: Trenton's Decorating Trade* will be held Saturday, April 2, 2011, in the Auditorium of the New Jersey State Museum and the galleries of the Trenton City Museum at Ellarslie Mansion. When a ceramics industry grows as large as the one that existed in Trenton at the turn of the twentieth century it becomes extremely complicated with many sub industries that feed into it and off of it. In Trenton these sub industries included merchants who dealt in raw materials and specialized machinery as well as independent decorating workshops. The workshops provided mass market decorations as well as custom painting on order to the potteries or to retailers and middlemen in the retail business.

Award-winning historian and author Regina Lee Blaszczyk will present the keynote address (www.imaginingconsumers.com). She will explain how the workshops supplied the potteries with decorations and decorators and highlight the work of selected decorating shops. Additional speakers for the day will focus on the current exhibition at Ellarslie, *Artists and Decorators of the Trenton Pottery Industry*, which is on view until May 8, 2011 (www.ellarslie.org).

The symposium will begin with registration and coffee at 10:00 a.m. The morning session will include Blaszczyk's keynote address and one or two shorter talks. Lunch will be served at Ellarslie, where participants can view the current exhibi-

tion. A show-and-tell session will follow at Ellarslie from 2 to 4 p.m. Audience members can bring items decorated in Trenton for experts to examine and discuss. Each participant will be limited to submitting one item and no appraisals will be given.

The symposium, which is co-sponsored by the New Jersey State Museum (www.state.nj.us/state/museum) and the Trenton City Museum, is being presented in conjunction with the Ellarslie exhibition *Artists and Decorators of the Trenton Pottery Industry*. The exhibition features the work of the artists and artisans, known and anonymous, who worked in Trenton's premier potteries from 1882 into the 1920s. In addition, the museum's permanent exhibition and study collection on Trenton's pottery industry includes mass market decorating by Trenton's many workshops operating well into the twentieth century.

The symposium is open to the public. The registration fee is \$35 if paid by March 18. Members of the Potteries of Trenton Society, the Friends of the New Jersey State Museum, and the Trenton Museum Society may attend for \$30, if paid in advance. Everyone who pays at the door will be charged \$40. Registration includes all lectures, lunch, and the show-and-tell session. A mail-in registration form may be downloaded and printed from POTS website: www.potteriesoftrenton.org; or interested parties may contact POTS President Patricia Madrigal at 609-695-0122 x 100 or president@potteriesoftrentonsociety.org.

Winterthur Ceramics Conference

This year's Winterthur ceramics conference, *Exotic Tastes: Eastern Ceramics & Their Impact on the West*, will be held April 7-8, 2011. The conference will follow paths that lead to the Far East and back while examining Chinese porcelain and other Asian wares, some of which found their way to the West. It also will delve into the origins of exotic shapes and ornament and how they fit into the "Modern" tastes of 17th-through 19th-century Europe and America. What will be discovered as intact objects, documents and archaeological evidence are examined?

Plan to experience:

Lectures, presenting new research by Winterthur staff and respected visiting scholars

Workshops, with opportunities to get close-up access to Winterthur

collections

Study opportunities and discussions of your favorite ceramics with old and new friends.

Selected speakers and workshop leaders:

Leslie B. Grigsby, Curator of Ceramics and Glass, Winterthur

Pat Halfpenny, Ceramics Scholar, Wilmington, DE

Suzanne Findlen Hood, Curator of Ceramics and Glass, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA

Rose Kerr, Honorary Research Associate, Needham Research Inst., Cambridge & Honorary Senior Research Fellow, University of Glasgow, Scotland.

For registration information please visit: www.winterthur.org/pdfs/CC2011-online-brochure.pdf

White Ironstone China 17th Annual Convention

The White Ironstone China Association is holding their 17th annual convention from April 29 to May 1 at the Holiday Inn Conference Center, York, Pennsylvania. Events include four educational programs, a china display, and three opportunities to purchase white ironstone – a live auction, a combined flea market and tops and bottoms sale, and a show and sale. Three meals and hors d'oeuvres

during two social hours are included in the \$95 per person registration fee. Members will also have an opportunity to participate in the annual WICA Raffle, a silent auction, and to purchase items from the WICA Shoppe. Must be a member of the White Ironstone China Association to attend. For more membership and registration information, visit www.whiteironstonechina.com.

Wedgwood Seminar Celebrates the Arts of the Potter

Wedgwood enthusiasts and scholars will convene in Chicago for the 56th Annual Wedgwood International Seminar (WIS). The lectures and related activities will speak to this year's conference focus, "Celebrating The Arts Of The Potter". The event takes place from April 27th to May 1st at the Avenue Crowne Plaza Hotel Chicago, its host venue.

Among the lectures and speakers are: 'The Homeric Vase: Wedgwood's Other Famous Vase', presented by Peggy Kerner, researcher and collector; 'Wedgwood Redux: The Science of Restoration', demonstrated by ceramics conservators, Margaret and James Burnham; 'A Greek Form Reinterpreted: The Volute Crater in 19th Century European Ceramics', by anthropologist and Ithaca College professor emeriti, Dr. Nancy Ramage; 'Josiah Wedgwood and the Gods: Use in Wedgwood Ornamentation', from Jeffrey Milkins, collector and lecturer; 'Very Fine Ware For Very Fine Folk', delivered by Dr. Monnie Kanter, Wedgwood specialist; 'Two Jewish Families of the 19th Century Collect Wedgwood', by Harwood Johnson, ceramics editor; and 'Milkmaids and

Mistresses: Wedgwood's Dairy Ware', presented by Dr. Anne Forschler-Tarrasch, curator of decorative arts for the Birmingham Museum of Art.

In addition, seminar attendees will enjoy a private viewing of the Wedgwood reserves at the Art Institute of Chicago, a trip to the Crab Tree Farm - an estate housing fine furnishings and decorative arts, and visits to private home collections. Attendees will also have the convenience of purchasing Wedgwood wares from member dealers and the pleasure of meeting new ceramics enthusiasts and reuniting with old fellow collectors.

The lectures, receptions, banquets, lunches, and tours are all inclusive under the modest registration fee. And the special hotel rate includes a continental breakfast. To obtain more information on the seminar, registration and the hotel, and to make your reservations, visit the web site at: www.wedgwoodinternationalseminar.org or contact the director of seminars by email at: wismembers@aol.com.

The WIS organization, which first gathered in Philadelphia in 1956, has held its annual seminars in major cities in the USA, Canada, the UK, and elsewhere. These conferences offer the opportunity for Wedgwood enthusiasts the world over to gain expanded insight into the related topics, visit private and public collections, and network in an informal forum. In addition, WIS members (whether in attendance or not) receive a bound copy of the Proceedings. Annual membership fee is \$35 per individual and \$50 per family (+ \$10 for outside USA). And PayPal payments are now accepted for both membership and seminar fees.



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 Membership \$25

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