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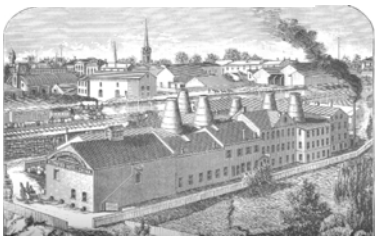
TRENTON POTTERIES



Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society

Trenton Makes Pottery: The Stoneware of James Rhodes, 1774-1784

Richard W. Hunter, Rebecca White and Nancy Hunter

Exhibit Background:

From mid-September 2012 through late January 2013 the Trenton Museum Society is presenting an exhibit at Ellarslie, the Trenton City Museum, highlighting the stoneware pottery of James Rhodes, one of the few known American stoneware potters of the colonial period.

The existence of James Rhodes and his distinctive wares has come to light over the past decade following the archaeological discovery of two kiln sites within the City of Trenton and some painstaking historical research into colonial documents. First, in the spring of 2000, a pottery kiln was discovered on the Lamberton waterfront during the construction of the Route 29 tunnel. Some 13,000 sherds and pieces of kiln furniture (items used to help in stacking pots in the kiln during firing) were retrieved from this site. The kiln is still intact, buried beneath the tunnel roadway. In 2005, a second kiln was found a mile from the first in the backyard of the Eagle Tavern property on South Broad Street during the City's restoration of this local landmark. Hundreds more sherds were recovered. Research into documents and analysis of the artifacts established a link between the two sites. It is now believed that James Rhodes operated the waterfront kiln from 1774 until 1777, working for the prominent Philadelphia merchant, William Richards. Then, from 1778 until his death in 1784, Rhodes ran his own pottery-making business on a property adjoining the Eagle Tavern site (which later became part of the tavern property). Despite our knowledge of James Rhodes's activities over the ten-year period he was in Trenton, virtually nothing is known of his earlier life.

The exhibit explains the discovery of the kilns and the archival research, but focuses mostly on displaying the extraordinary variety of gray salt-glazed stoneware products made by James Rhodes. Many of the items on display are fragmentary, a result of their archaeological provenance. However, among the reassembled vessels, visitors can view plates, dishes, bowls, cups and saucers, tankards, jugs and pitchers, coffee pots, tea pots and ointment pots, along with numerous pieces of kiln furniture. Rhodes employed some signature decorative motifs that distinguish his products from those of other potters – floral designs and rough geometric patterns, executed in naturalistic style in painted cobalt blue – but perhaps his most engaging trait was the quirky application of molded faces on to the shoulders of some of his jugs and pitchers.

This exhibit is being curated by Richard Hunter, President of Hunter Research, Inc., a Trenton-based historical and archaeological consulting firm, and Museum Society board member; Rebecca White, Archaeological Laboratory Director, URS Corporation; and Nancy Hunter, formerly manager of Gallery 125 in downtown Trenton.

The following article is based around the narrative panels, images and artifacts developed for the Ellarslie exhibit.

Contents

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

James Rhodes: An Incomplete Biography

James Rhodes is a mystery in so many ways. We don't know where or when he was born, or how he came to be in Trenton in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. We don't know where he trained as a potter. We don't know where or when he married his wife Catherine, or where or when their son William was born and raised. The Rhodes family has been challenging to research. The name is not uncommon and has several variant spellings – Rhodes, Rhoads, Rhoades, Roads – that are found scattered across a wide range of 18th-century documents.

Our best informed guess is that James Rhodes was English and that he lived and worked as a potter in either the Bristol area, or in Staffordshire, or possibly in Yorkshire, before coming to North America. He may be the James Roads, a potter in Brislington near Bristol, who was accused of counterfeiting the coin of the realm in 1764 …. he may also be the James Rhoades who was convicted of receiving stolen property in Bristol in early 1772 and was then sentenced to transportation later the same year. Even if this second individual is the correct James Rhodes, we don't know for sure that he was transported to the American colonies as opposed to some other location in the New World.

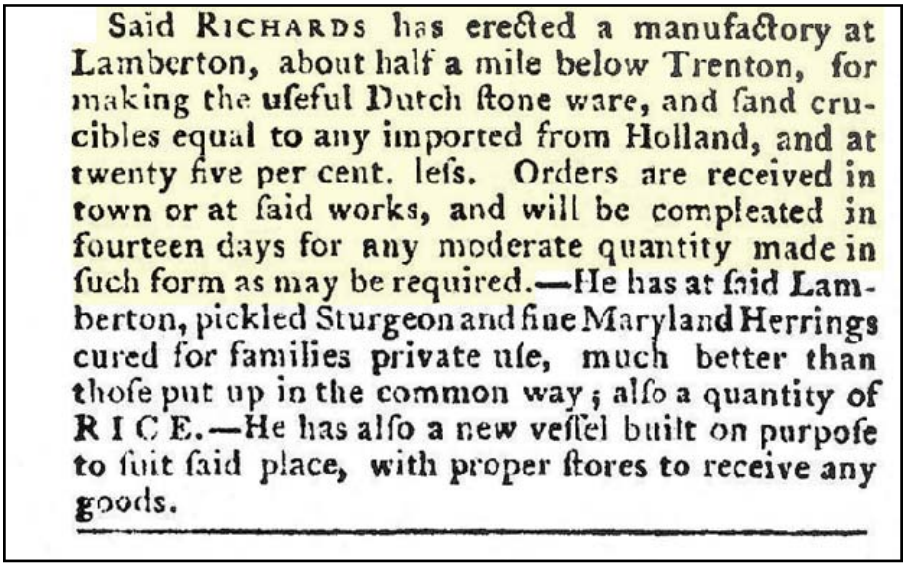

Said RICHARDS has erected a manufactory at Lamberton, about half a mile below Trenton, for making the useful Dutch stone ware, and sand crucibles equal to any imported from Holland, and at twenty five per cent. less. Orders are received in town or at said works, and will be compleated in fourteen days for any moderate quantity made in such form as may be required.—He has at said Lamberton, pickled Sturgeon and fine Maryland Herrings cured for families private use, much better than those put up in the common way; also a quantity of RICE.—He has also a new vessel built on purpose to suit said place, with proper stores to receive any goods.

Figure 1. August 22, 1774, Pennsylvania Packet. *William Richards advertises stoneware for sale at Lamberton.*

What is known is that James Rhodes, by 1774, was living on the Lamberton waterfront and working as a master potter for the Philadelphia-based merchant William Richards. Rhodes is identified as a "householder" in the Nottingham Township tax ratable assessments for 1774. The tax assessor followed a definite route from house to house, much like a modern postal deliveryman. From the identity of Rhodes' immediate neighbors, we can establish that he was living at this time on today's Lamberton Street in the vicinity of present-day Cliff and Landing Streets, very close to William Richards' pottery where he was then believed to have been working.

In the August 22, 1774 issue of the Philadelphia newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Packet*, William Richards was offering stoneware for sale at his recently built pottery on the banks of the Delaware River in Lamberton (or, more precisely, Trenton Landing) (**Figure 1**). In addition to his riverfront pottery at this location Richards controlled several wharves, warehouses, a store, a bakery and a fishery. He also operated a schooner "packet service" between Philadelphia and Trenton Landing. Most of Richards' facilities at Trenton Landing, including his pottery, were situated on land owned by Daniel Coxe. Coxe, a wealthy and ardent Loyalist, fled town for Philadelphia at the beginning of December 1776 just before the Battles of Trenton. Among the several buildings and structures at Trenton Landing destroyed by marauding American forces around the time of

the battles were William Richards' house and pottery.

Richards, a patriot, took charge of provisioning the Pennsylvania Navy during the early years of the Revolutionary War. He began to re-establish his commercial presence at Trenton Landing in the summer of 1778 after the British withdrew from Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley. By August of that year he was looking to revive the pottery and was advertising for "a man that understands making the GR Holland stone ware." In the meantime, however, James Rhodes bought a property of his own on the Bordentown Road, immediately adjacent to the building today known as the Eagle Tavern, and set up his own "potworks," which he operated up until his death in 1784.

Why James Rhodes parted company with William Richards is unclear, but the two of them may have had a falling-out over the Revolution. Rhodes did not enlist in the military on either side of the conflict (he may have been too old to serve) and there is no record of him swearing allegiance to either the Crown or the patriot cause. Yet, so far as we can tell, he spent the war years in Trenton. He probably witnessed the Battles of Trenton, their lead-up and their aftermath, first-hand. He likely observed at close quarters the gathering of French and American forces in Trenton in early September of 1781 en route to their victory over the British at Yorktown later that fall. He probably saw the French army pass through Trenton again in September of 1782 on their return northward.

On August 3, 1783 James Rhodes was the victim of an assault and battery by Joseph Clunn. Clunn, a local tavern keeper and merchant, fought with distinction on the American side, attaining the rank of Captain. He was a former neighbor of Rhodes in Lamberton. What was the story here? Perhaps the assault stemmed from differences over wartime loyalties or business dealings. Rhodes took Clunn to court, and Clunn pressed countercharges. They both appeared before the Burlington Court of Oyer and Terminer on June 30, 1784 and were bound over for a future hearing. At some point between early July and late November 1784 James Rhodes died and the court case was finally dismissed on June 28, 1785. What was the cause of Rhodes' death? Did he die of injuries sustained during his altercation with Clunn? No one knows.

Figure 2. The Richards kiln fully exposed.

After James Rhodes died, the pottery soon shut down. It appears that his widow Catherine leased or sold the property to settle his debts. Catherine Rhodes died in Trenton in 1808; the fate of the Rhodes' son William is unknown.

A Tale of Two Kilns

James Rhodes the stoneware potter was exposed through some diligent and timely archaeological exploration, both in the field and in the laboratory, and some persistent research into historical documents. As a result of this work, two separate stoneware

pottery kilns were found, roughly three-quarters of a mile apart, and both have been securely associated with Rhodes.

The Richards Kiln: Construction of the Route 29 tunnel through South Trenton in 2000 removed much of the archaeology relating to the colonial port of Lamberton (aka Trenton Landing). Among the many features documented by archaeological monitors during construction was a stoneware kiln at the pottery of William Richards (**Figure 2**). Ultimately, the remains of the kiln were left in place. Today they lie buried beneath the roadway near the upstream end of the tunnel, inaccessible but preserved for the future.

Before being re-buried the kiln was examined and recorded by archaeologists working rapidly over a two-week period so as to minimize delays to construction. The kiln was photographed extensively. Plan and profile drawings were produced to scale in the field. Detailed notes were made of the kiln's construction and salient features. Roughly 13,000 artifacts were recovered, mostly consisting of "wasters" (defective pottery products), pieces of the kiln structure and items of kiln furniture.

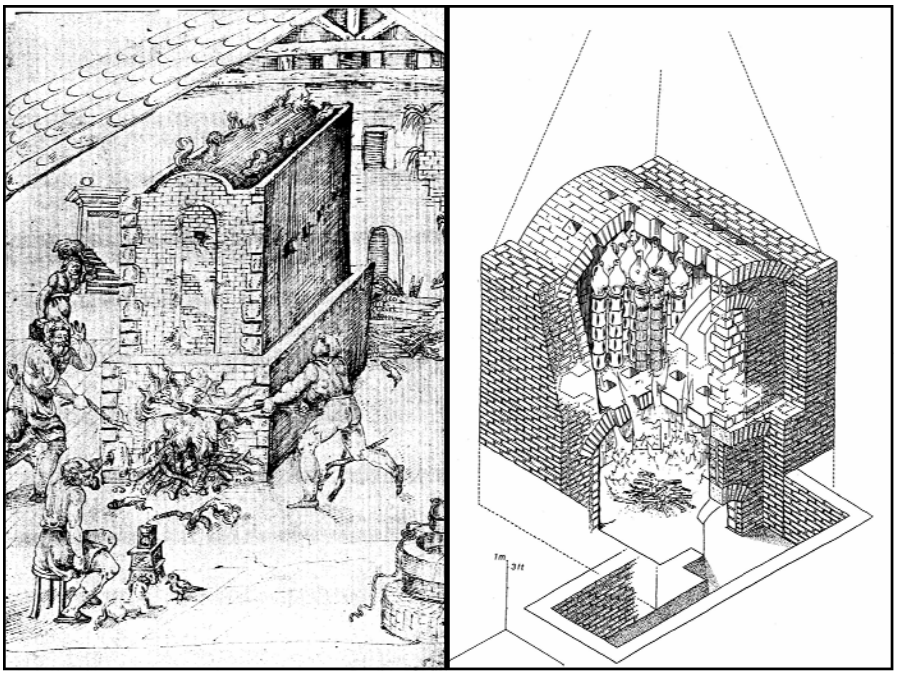


Figure 3. Left: Mid-16th century Italian kiln for firing tin-glazed earthenware. Right: Late 17th century stoneware kiln in Fulham, England.

Located less than 50 feet from the historic shoreline, the kiln measured 14.5 by 8.5 feet in plan and had a firebox at each end. The brick-built structure was oriented northwest/southeast and set at an angle to the riverbank to counter the prevailing southwesterly winds. The kiln was of updraft type and burned wood fuel. An upper chamber, where the pottery was stacked for firing, was positioned over a ring-like flue system that circulated heat beneath the floor. Vents in the floor allowed the heat to pass upwards into the firing chamber. Overall, the kiln is a relatively sophisticated structure and far more technologically advanced than the simple circular or oval updraft kilns used for firing earthenware pottery.

No close parallels have been found for the Richards kiln in North America, which is probably mostly a result of so few 18th-century stoneware pottery manufacturing sites having been subjected to archaeological excavation. The structure most closely resembles a type of kiln built in the late 17th century at John Dwight's Fulham Pottery in London, which in turn is similar in form to 16th-century Italian kilns used for firing tin-glazed earthenware (**Figure 3**).

The Rhodes Kiln: Between 1976 and 1981 Mercer County Community College and Rider College, in conjunction with the Trenton Historical Society, conducted an informal archaeological field school on the Eagle Tavern property. Much of the excavation activity took place in the rear yard of the tavern and a rich haul of artifacts was recovered. Sadly, no report was issued on this work and no catalog of artifacts was compiled. Much of the field documentation has since been

lost, although most of the artifacts have been retained by the Historical Society.

In 2003 Hunter Research archaeologists briefly examined the collection of artifacts and were surprised to find that it included pottery fragments and kiln debris remarkably similar to the material recovered from the Richards kiln site. With a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission, the Trenton Historical Society retained Hunter Research to catalog the artifacts and carry out historical research. In the course of this work, it became clear that not only was the pottery almost certainly fashioned by the same potter who had worked at the Richards site, but also there was very likely another kiln located on or very close to the Eagle Tavern property. Archival studies made the connection real in the person of James Rhodes, who bought the property immediately adjoining the original Eagle Tavern lot in 1778 and operated a pottery there until his death in 1784.

In 2005, when the Eagle Tavern was under restoration by the City of Trenton, Hunter Research monitored contractor excavations in the rear and side yards. This led to the identification of James Rhodes' stoneware kiln near the northern edge of the tavern property (**Figure 4**). Unfortunately, most of the kiln has been removed by the deep cut of the Amtrak Northeast Corridor railroad line, but enough evidence was gathered to broadly characterize the products of the pottery. Valuable data also still remain in the ground awaiting future scientific recovery.

Figure 4. The Rhodes kiln behind the Eagle Tavern, 2005.

What James Rhodes Made

The range of pottery and kiln furniture made by James Rhodes is prolific. Many of the decorative traits he applied to the wares allow his work to be characterized with some confidence. For most, if not all, of his production he made use of the local stoneware clays of the Raritan Formation that were accessible in the Lower Delaware Valley and along the banks of Raritan Bay.

Pottery Products: Much of Rhodes' output was utilitarian – simple forms suitable for use in the home (in the kitchen, dining room and bedchamber), in the dairy or on the farm. Storage jars, chamber pots, milk pans, plates, bowls, porringers and pipkins – these were all turned out in quantity, mostly as gray or gray-brown salt-glazed vessels, sometimes plain, sometimes decorated. He put out a fine line of jugs, pitchers, bottles, tankards and mugs that would have seen widespread use in inns and taverns as well as in private homes. Among his higher-end products were coffee pots, teapots, cups and saucers; and then there were other more specialized items such as inkwells and ointment pots (**Figure 5**).

While American potters making salt-glazed stoneware in the 18th century commonly decorated their

Figures 5. Pottery recovered from the Rhodes kiln. Top: mug. Middle: storage jar. Bottom: ointment pots.

products with incised and painted blue patterns, Rhodes made use of certain decorative elements that distinguish his work from that of his colleagues. Incised multi-lobed flowers (often with "penny" coggle rouletting) and fishscale triangles, usually highlighted in cobalt blue, are typical of his production (**Figure 6**). He also adopted motifs such as checkerboards, fleur-de-lis, watchsprings and "GR" medallions, although these were widely used by other potters. One of Rhodes' most notable trademark treatments was the application of molded or sprigged designs of floral reliefs and mask-like faces on to jars and pitchers (**Figure 7**).

Rhodes' production was likely geared less to the local Trenton market and rural consumers in the Delaware Valley than it was to the emerging towns of the eastern seaboard. The plantations of the south and the Caribbean were another probable outlet for Rhodes' wares. In this context the William Richards and James Rhodes potteries were competing with European stoneware producers, especially those in England, at a time when American manufacturers were about to break free from the constraints of British mercantilism. In the years to come, as Rhodes' pottery is more readily recognized by archaeologists, museum curators and collectors, the trade aspects of this distinctive American-made stoneware should become more clearly understood.

Kiln Furniture: Rhodes made use of a whole set of ceramic products, usually fashioned out of coarse fireclay, when placing and separating his carefully made vessels inside the firing chamber. Mugs and other fragile vessels were placed inside cylindrical containers called saggers (**Figure 8**). The sturdy construction of saggers allowed them to be stacked preventing damage to the delicate rims of the

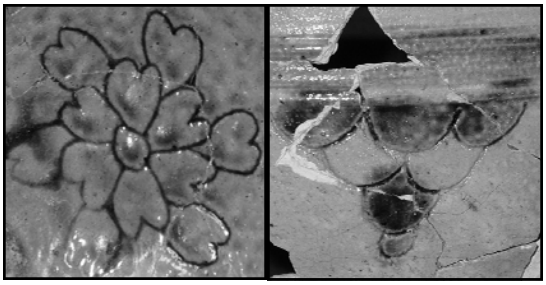


Figure 6. Examples of decorative treatment on Rhodes' pottery. Left: incised multi-lobed flowers. Right: fishscale triangles.

Figure 7. One of the faces recovered from the Rhodes kiln.

vessels inside. Saggers also protected vessels from direct contact with the flames and exploding debris during firing.

Most of the saggers recovered from the two Trenton kiln sites have a slightly wider base and thick rim to provide strength and stability for stacking. The wide base doubled as a lid for the sagger below. Most of the saggers have from three to five round or oval openings cut out of the body and shallow U-shaped notches cut out of the rim. These allowed the salt vapor to pass into the sagger and glaze the vessel inside. They also made them easier to lift and carry, and made it easier to pry the saggers apart if they were fused together by the salt

Figure 8. Saggers of different shapes and sizes from the Richards kiln.

glaze. Some of the saggers have a long U-shaped gash cut out of one side that allowed the full length of a vessel handle or spout to be glazed. At least five different sizes of saggers were recognized at the Richards kiln. By examining the shadows, areas of discolorations and small pieces of vessels adhered to the insides and outsides of sagger bases it is possible to match the different saggers to the vessel forms that were most likely fired in them (**Figure 9**).

In addition to the saggers, many other types of kiln furniture were used to support and separate vessels in the firing chamber. Large slabs of refractory fireclay served as shelves or were fashioned into pillars. Individual pots were stacked using makeshift clay dividers often referred to as wads, pips or props. All of these materials were found in abundance at the two kiln sites as they were typically discarded after the firing was complete.

Figure 9. Sagger base showing discoloration from fired vessels and vessel form that might have produced the markings.

Rhodes Stoneware in Context

European Precedents: During the 12th and 13th centuries German potters found that vessels made from unglazed high-fired stoneware clay could hold liquids without leaking. By the 15th century German stoneware potters had established techniques for salt-glazing their wares and were developing methods for embellishing their stoneware with elaborate molded and incised decorations. The peak of brown German stoneware production may be seen in the distinctive jugs and bottles known as "bellarmines" decorated with molded long-bearded faces and named for the Italian Cardinal Roberto Bellarmine (1542-1621). In the 16th and 17th centuries stoneware potteries in the Westerwald region in the Rhineland dominated the industry producing bluish gray wares decorated in

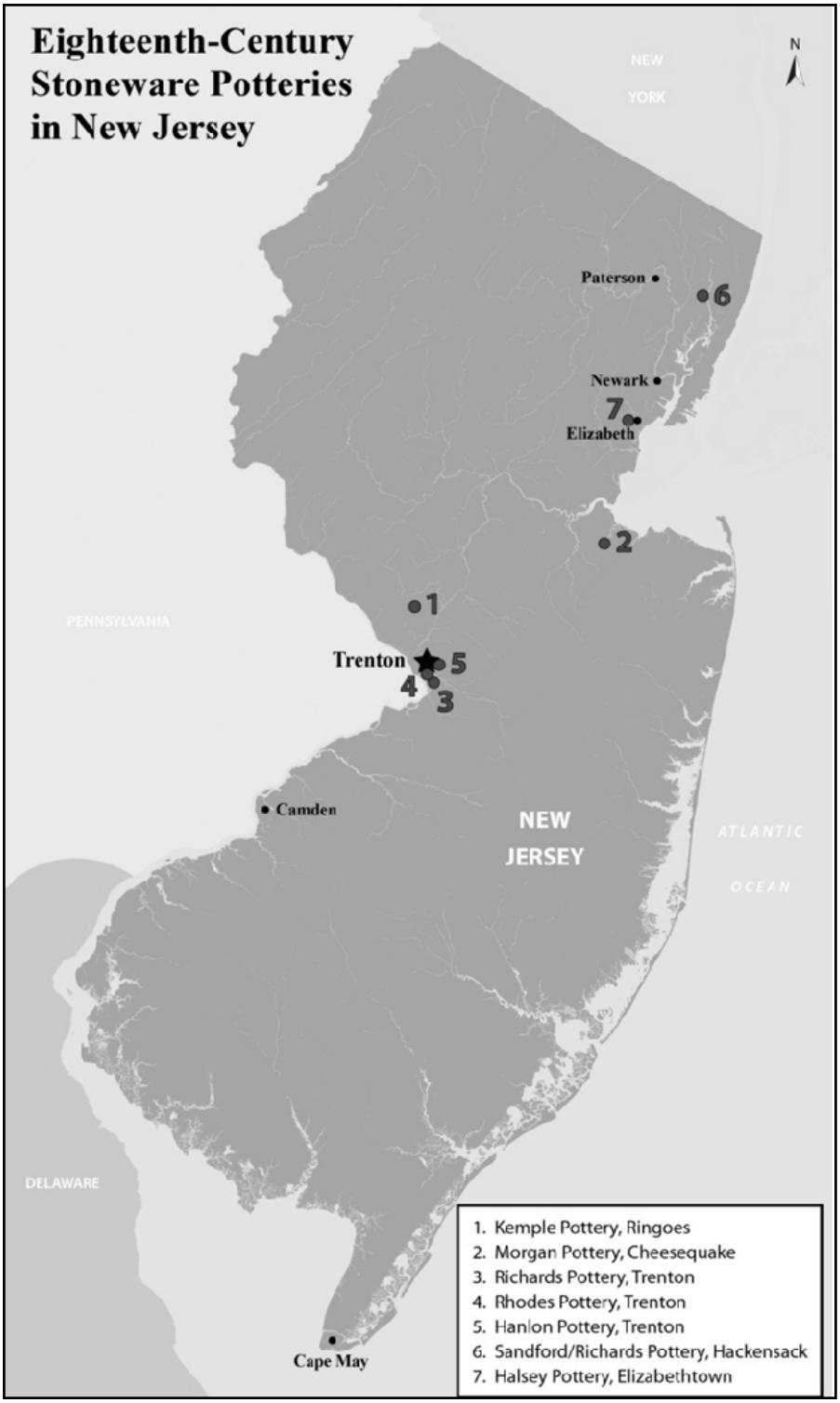


Figure 10. Eighteenth-century stoneware potteries in New Jersey.

contrasting black, brownish purple, and, most frequently, dark blue designs.

After many years of importing German stoneware, the English began to manufacture their own stoneware during the 17th century. John Dwight's Fulham pottery, operating outside London in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, was one of the leading factories producing wares that closely imitated Rhenish stoneware. As the 18th century wore on English potters in a number of cities and in the Staffordshire region developed high-quality white salt-glazed table wares, both plain and decorated, and also turned out vast quantities of brown "iron-dipped" utilitarian wares. The American colonies provided a sizeable market for both English and European stonewares in the 17th and 18th centuries.

American Stoneware Potteries: The first stoneware potteries were established in North America in the early to mid-18th century. The earliest and one of the best documented in archaeological terms is the William Rogers pottery in Yorktown, Virginia, which was making British-style brown stoneware from around 1720 until 1760. Rogers, like William Richards in Trenton, was primarily a merchant and not a potter himself. His Yorktown pottery was just one of many different Rogers business interests.

In the mid-1720s, Anthony Duché opened a pottery in Philadelphia and produced both brown and gray stoneware in imitation of English and Rhenish styles for sale in the American market. Duche was a master potter and stayed in business until his death in 1762. Three of his sons followed in his footsteps, making pottery in Philadelphia, New England, South Carolina and Georgia. In the late 1720s and 1730s, two German families, the Croliuses and the Remmeys, recent immigrants from the Rhineland, set up stoneware potteries in New York City, setting in motion a potting dynasty that continued into the early 19th century. Their distinctive gray stoneware made widespread use of incised and painted decoration

with German motifs.

These early American stoneware potters reproduced the forms and decorations that reflected the methods and traditions of their country of origin. James Rhodes, following in their wake later in the 18th century, adopted some forms and decorations that appear German, others that are more obviously English, and some that are a blending of the two. For example, his "lighthouse-shaped" coffee pot is similar to forms made in English stoneware and refined earthenware, while the cobalt blue decoration on the gray body is more commonly associated with German stoneware. Rhodes' pottery sits squarely at the beginning of an American stoneware tradition that would flourish throughout the 19th century.

Eighteenth-Century New Jersey Stoneware Potteries: The foundation of New Jersey's stoneware industry lies in the high-quality clay of the Raritan Formation. This material was much sought after by stoneware potters throughout the Middle Atlantic region from the early years of the 18th century. On the south shore of the Raritan Bay, near the mouth of Cheesequake Creek, a "clay bank" controlled by the Morgan family was an important source of clay for New York City potters perhaps as early as the late 1720s. By the 1760s clay from this vicinity was being shipped to stoneware potteries from Maine to the Carolinas. James Rhodes may have insisted on using this prized material for the wares he was making in Trenton.

The earliest stoneware manufactory so far identified in New Jersey is the Kemple pottery near Ringoes (**Figure 10**). John Peter Kemple, a native of the Rhineland who probably knew the Crolius and Remmey potter families in New York, set up his stoneware pottery in the late 1740s and likely made use of clay brought in from the Cheesequake area. Although primarily earning their living as farmers, three generations of Kemples made German-influenced stoneware pottery at this site well into the 1790s. This pottery site was explored in the 1950s by Robert Sim and then again in the 1970s by Brenda Springsted, yielding a valuable sample of Kemple wares, although no evidence of a kiln structure.

By the 1770s the Morgan family had expanded their activities beyond the mining and shipping of clay and established a stoneware pottery of their own. This operation, run by Captain James Morgan and his son James Morgan, Jr., fueled the growth of the village of Cheesequake in the later 18th century. The Cheesequake stoneware industry began to expand in the 1790s and early 1800s as other potter families, notably the Warnes and Letts, set up additional potteries in the village. The Cheesequake potteries were also explored by Robert Sim in the 1950s. Excavations in the mid-1990s by Hunter Research in connection with the widening of N.J. Route 34 discovered one of the Morgan kilns.

The Kemple, Morgan and William Richards potteries are so far the only New Jersey stoneware producers known to have been active before the American Revolution. By 1778 James Rhodes and Bernard Hanlon had set up stoneware potteries in the Trenton area, while either during or shortly after the war Peter Sandford, possibly in association with Burnet Richards (a younger brother of William Richards), was making stoneware in the Barbadoes Neck/Hackensack vicinity in Bergen County. Ichabod Halsey was also producing stoneware in Elizabethtown before the end of the century, but by this time most of New Jersey's stoneware output was originating from Cheesequake.

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