

TRENTON POTTERIES

Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society



The Pottery Decorating Shop of the Mayer Arsenal Pottery Company Richard W. Hunter

In the 1930s, the city skyline, especially in the Coalport area and along the Delaware and Raritan Canal, boasted countless kilns and Trenton's industrial pottery heritage was still plain for all to see. Today, it is frequently remarked how Trenton, the "Staffordshire of America," has not a single surviving example of a bottle kiln. Even so, as we enter the 21st century, there are still scattered around the city numerous historic buildings that once were part of Trenton's thriving potteries – workshops, storage buildings, offices, power houses – and which are now largely forgotten. A few, as for instance at Star Porcelain and General Porcelain, are still in use in pottery or porcelain manufacture, but the vast majority (the old Lenox complex is a prime example) are abandoned and in an advanced state of deterioration. In this and future issues of the newsletter, some of the surviving pottery buildings in the city's urban landscape will be highlighted in the hope that consciousness will be raised and some may be spared the wrecking ball and put to new uses.

all of different sizes. The easternmost window in the one-story building, with its stone sill and brick arched lintel, matches all the windows in the two-story building, an indication that the two structures were built around the same time. The lettering between the first and second stories on the front of the two-story building, "THE PATTERN MACHINE & FOUNDRY CORP.," belies its original pottery-related use. For much of the 20th century, a metalworking machine shop was operated here.

Neither the two-story nor the one-story building is shown on the Sanborn fire insurance maps of Trenton, issued first in 1874 and then updated in 1886. Both buildings are, however, depicted on the newly surveyed Sanborn-Perris maps of 1890, where they receive the annotation "DECORATING" and were under the ownership of the Mayer Arsenal Pottery Company (Figure 1). From the pink and yellow coloring used on these maps (not reproducible here), it is clear that the shell of the two-story building was constructed entirely in brick, while the one-story building had only a brick façade, the remainder being of frame construction, apart from a rectangular brick feature in the center of the building footprint. This latter feature may have been a kiln used for firing and affixing decoration to pottery vessels. To the west of the one-story building, the Sanborn-Perris map of 1890 shows a pair of frame buildings which appear to have been

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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, Jay Lewis, Emma Lewis, William Liebeknecht, Molly Merlino, George Miller, Brenda Spring-

In Trenton's South Ward, on the north side of Schenck Street between Second and Third Streets, is a row of four adjoining dilapidated brick buildings, the two central components of which were erected as part of the Arsenal Pottery in the late 1880s (Plate 1). The larger of these two central buildings is a two-story, six-bay structure, two bays deep with a shed roof that slopes down toward the street. To its west is a less distinguished single-story building with a large loading bay and three windows,

Mayer Arsenal Pottery



Plate 1. View looking northwest showing the Arsenal Pottery decorating buildings on Schenck Street [Richard Hunter, July 2003].

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earlier dwellings co-opted by the pottery for decorating use. These two buildings, which no longer stand today, are depicted on the earlier Sanborn map of 1886.

As shown on the Sanborn-Perris map of 1890, the decorating buildings at the Arsenal Pottery lay on the southern edge of the pottery complex and, based on a comparison with the 1886 map, they appear to represent an expansion of the site in the late 1880s. By the end of this decade, the pottery was making use of the entire eastern half of the block formed by Second, Schenck, Third and Temple Streets. To the north of the decorating buildings in the original core of the pottery were four brick kilns bordered to the north and west by a series of four adjoining three-story brick buildings used for forming wares and carrying out other decorating tasks. Al-

though a fifth kiln was later added, the Arsenal Pottery effectively attained its peak of development around 1890 and it is interesting to speculate on how the addition of the pottery decorating facilities on Schenck Street might have fitted into the overall expansion of the Mayer operations. In the following brief history of the Arsenal Pottery, it is noted that the Mayer firm began producing majolica in the mid- to late 1880s and was also making ironstone china by the early 1890s. Quite possibly, the impetus for construction of the buildings on Schenck Street lay in the company's specializing in one or other of these areas (perhaps majolica manufacture being the most likely).

How long the decorating of pottery continued in the two buildings on Schenck Street is unclear. The buildings are shown in the Lathrop atlas of

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the city, but the site by this time was under the ownership of John Exton. Since the main part of the pottery site to the north was then owned by William Balderson and the Mayer Pottery Company, it is possible that production had been cut back and the facilities reduced in size. By 1908, as indicated by the Sanborn maps of that year, the pottery decorating shop on Schenck Street had been put to other uses by Edward Logan, a machinist, and John Davidson, a weaver. Logan's use of the site for a machine shop was the beginning of a period of 20th-century metalworking usage that culminated in the operations of the Pattern Machine & Foundry Corporation.

A Brief History of the Arsenal Pottery

In 1876, Joseph Mayer established the pottery known as the Arsenal Pottery (on account of its proximity to the State Arsenal) at the corner of Third Street and what was then Ingleton (later Temple) Street. Joseph Mayer was the principal figure within the Mayer Pottery Company, the firm that operated this pottery in the early years of its existence, although he reportedly founded the business with the help of his brother, James. With two other brothers, Arthur and Ernest, Joseph Mayer was also instrumental in founding the larger and somewhat better known Mayer pottery works in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, a facility operated by the Mayer China Company. Joseph Mayer emigrated to the United States from England in 1865 and within a few years had secured several valuable patents relating to jiggering machinery, equipment that made use of

revolving molds to form pottery vessel shapes (Lehner 1988:283; Goldberg 1998:44; Hunter Research, Inc. 1999; Wall n.d.:6).

Joseph Mayer's Arsenal Pottery initially concentrated on the production of Rockingham ware, a distinctive type of mottled brown lead-glazed yellowware. An account of the pottery a year after its establishment noted "[m]anufactures of Rockingham and brown stoneware, fancy flower pots, hanging baskets, hanging logs, stumps and pedestals; all sizes of stove collars for masons use Mr. Mayer is the only potter in the city of Trenton who is manufacturing Rockingham ware The original Centennial baseball vase was executed by workmen in the employ of Mr. Joseph Mayer" (Mains and Fitzgerald 1877). Mayer's claim that he was the only maker of Rockingham ware in the city at the time may be overstated, however, since other manufacturers also list this type of pottery among their products. In 1884, the pottery, although already known by the moniker "Arsenal Pottery," was marked on a map accompanying the city directory of that year as "Rockingham Pottery" (Fitzgerald 1884).

Nevertheless, the production of Rockingham ware was in decline by the 1880s, and most Trenton potteries turning out tablewares were by this time focused on the manufacture of the more durable utilitarian pottery referred to as white granite ware or by the widely-used generic term, ironstone china. The Arsenal Pottery, interestingly, also looked to diversify its business by making "Majolica and Barbotine Ware vases, jardinières, jugs and flat ware" (Wall n.d.:6). This shift

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in production emphasis probably occurred in the mid-1880s, since it was reported in 1883 that the pottery was only then contemplating the introduction of majolica ware (Woodward and Hageman 1883:693). The manufacture of majolica was quite rare, the Arsenal Pottery being one of only a half-dozen or so establishments in the United States producing this material in the 1880s and 1890s (Van Hoesen 1973:160).

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, the Arsenal Pottery underwent two corporate reorganizations, which may have been related in part to shifts in production emphasis, although it appears that some difficult economic times may have been more at the root of these changes. The Mayer Pottery Company, a firm for which no record has been found in the New Jersey Secretary of State's corporate records, was apparently reconstituted as the Mayer Arsenal Pottery Company in 1889, a corporation that commenced business with capital valued at \$200,000. This company forfeited its charter in 1893 and was replaced in the same year by the newly formed Mayer Pottery Manufacturing Company, incorporated with capital of only \$100,000. Clearly the poor economic climate of the early 1890s had taken its toll on the firm.

The founding members of the Mayer Pottery Manufacturing Company were Joseph Mayer, holder of 880 of the initially issued 1,000 shares, Isaac Davis, another well-known Trenton pottery entrepreneur, with 100 shares, and Michael Sewell, with 20 shares. This company continued operation of the Arsenal Pottery until its final demise midway through the first

decade of the 20th century (Secretary of State 1895:252; New Jersey Incorporation Records Filing A6027). By 1893, following its second corporate reorganization, the Arsenal Pottery, in addition to expanding into the production of majolica, was also making white granite ware. An advertisement in this year describes the Mayer Pottery Manufacturing Company as makers of "White Granite, Decorated Biscuit, Painted and Majolica Ware" and notes "Jugs, Cuspidors and Jardinieres [as] a Specialty" (Potters National Union 1893). The materials recovered recently from the Lamberton riverfront during archaeological monitoring confirm that the Mayer Pottery on Third Street later expanded its repertoire to include white granite ware, and demonstrates more specifically that the company was producing a variety of ironstone china with distinctive "cut-sponge" decoration.

Throughout its history of operation from the mid-1870s into the first decade of the 20th century the Arsenal Pottery appears to have been a relatively small and specialized factory, of a scale far less than its neighbors like the Lamberton Works. In 1880, in providing data to the industrial census, the Mayer Pottery reported a capital investment of \$20,000, a labor force of 20 males over 16 and ten children working a ten-hour day, and year-round operation with a total annual payroll expense of \$7,800. Skilled workers earned \$2.10 a day; regular wages were \$1.25 a day. Raw materials were valued at \$2,000 and the annual value of the finished product was given as \$20,800 (U.S. Federal Census, Industrial Schedules 1880). While no other detailed census data is

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available post-1880, from the evidence of historic maps, the pottery appears to have maintained much the same

level of operation into the early 20th century and it is doubtful that it ever employed in excess of 50 hands at any one time.

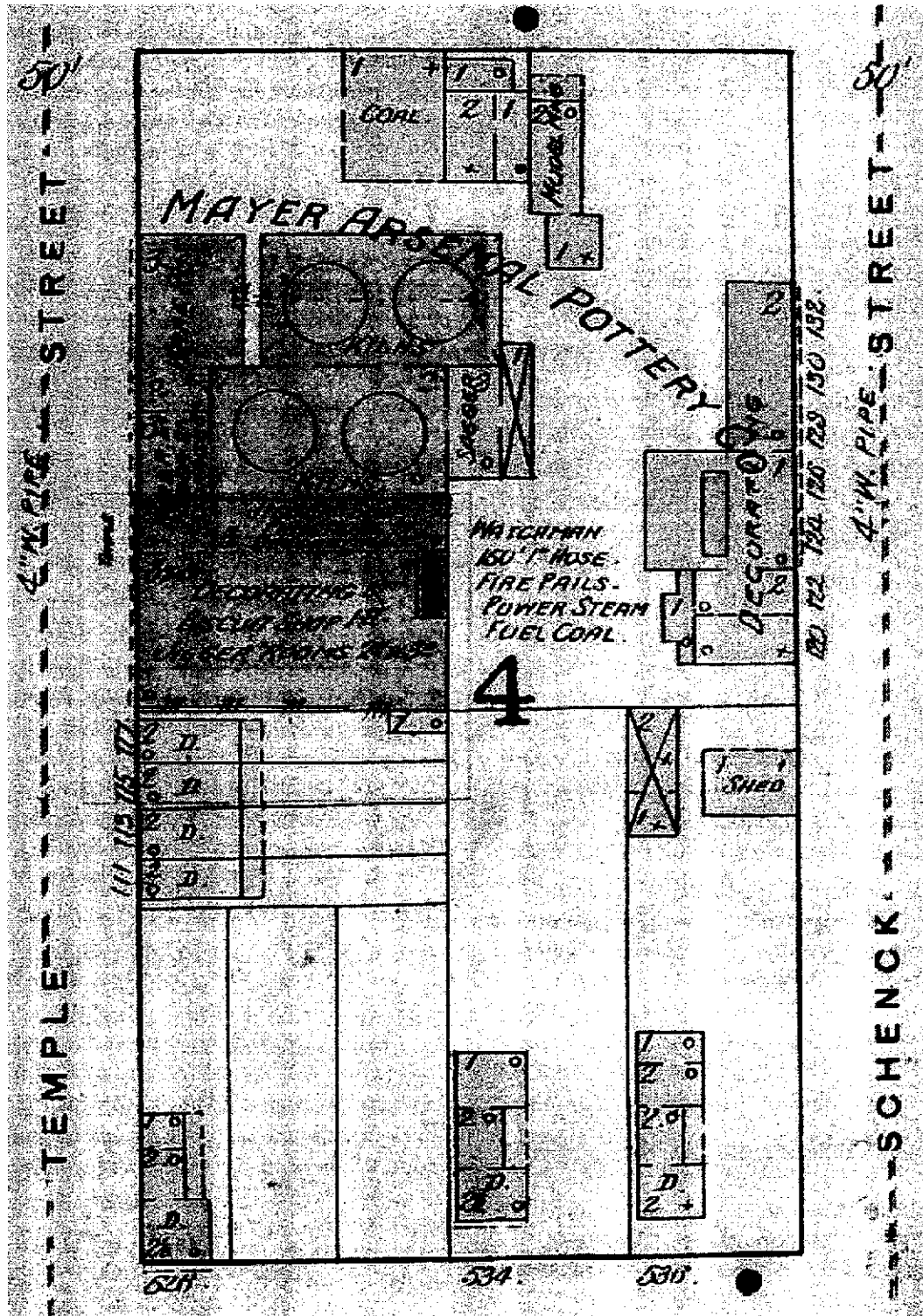


Figure 1. Sanborn-Perris Map Company. Insurance Maps of Trenton. 1890.

Mayer Arsenal Pottery

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At some point in the middle of the first decade of the 20th century the pottery appears to have ceased operation. The factory had closed its doors certainly by 1908, as the Sanborn map of that year notes the site as formerly belonging to the Mayer Pottery Manufacturing Company and vacant except for the stable. By the late 1920s, the bulk of the Mayer Pottery site had been taken over by Petry's Express & Storage Company, a business that continued operation there until at least the 1950s (Sanborn Map Company 1927, 1955).

[This historical outline of the Arsenal Pottery is excerpted from a more extended description of this site and its wares authored by Richard Hunter and William Liebeknecht and included as Chapter 6 in Volume 3, "Historical Archaeology of the Lambertton/SouthTrenton Riverfront," in the five volume series *Archaeological Data Recovery Excavations and Monitoring, New Jersey Route 29, City of Trenton, Mercer County, New Jersey* (forthcoming)].

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POTS Holds First Membership Meeting

Ellen Denker

The first annual POTS members' meeting was held Sunday, May 4, at Ellarslie, Trenton's City Museum in Cadwalader Park. About thirty members and friends gathered on Ellarslie's second floor, a cozy meeting space where we were surrounded by some of the best examples from Trenton's kilns. The meeting was not for the purpose of conducting any official business. Rather we decided to meet informally, talk about Trenton pots, and get acquainted with each other.

Judy Wells and Scott Anderson put up a beautiful display of Robertson Art Tiles (Morrisville, PA) and briefly discussed the history of the company and their interest in it. They also announced that they have received a grant from the Tile Heritage Foundation to help with their continuing research. Bill Liebknecht and Patty Madrigal put out an assortment of recent archaeological finds from several Trenton sites, and we learned a

lot from Bill about some of the industrial manufacturing processes that were represented by these remnants.

Many members brought in items from their own families and collections, some intending to stump the small panel of experts who chatted about the goods. The toilet paper roll holder was a mystery to many, until Richard Hunter revealed its purpose. We also saw a wide array of 19th and 20th century ceramics, including some beautiful Trenton porcelains, Broome tiles, Mayer earthenwares, and Woodbridge Pottery lamps along with a useful trade catalogue.

Delicious cakes and cookies together with punch were served for refreshment in the galleries on the first floor after the show-and-tell session. We hope to schedule a second members' meeting next spring and continue these friendly gatherings annually.

We're on the web! Check us out at
www.potteriesoftrenton.org

Phone: 609-695-0122
Fax: 609-695-0147
Email: madrigal@hunterresearch.com

120 W. State Street
Trenton, NJ 08608

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: _____

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

Potteries of Trenton Society
Amy Earls, Treasurer
P.O. Box 121
Florence, NJ 08518