

TRENTON POTTERIES

Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society



Lenox Factory Buildings Demolished

Richard W. Hunter

In March and April of 2005, one of Trenton's most cherished industrial potteries finally fell victim to the wrecking ball after many years of abandonment. In the space of a few days, all of the older buildings at the site of the Lenox pottery works on Mead Street and St. Joes Avenue were demolished to make way for a mini-storage facility (Plate 1). Several of these structures dated from the period of Lenox's predecessor, the Ceramic Art Company. The final edifice to bite the dust was the already partially topped but still eye-catching chimney stack, originally erected by Lenox in the early 1920s as part of a major expansion at the site (Plate 2). With the assistance of a few carefully selected maps and photographs, this article offers a historical overview of the site.

The Lenox site was first developed for industrial purposes in 1889 following the founding of the Ceramic Art Company by master potters Walter Scott Lenox and Jonathan Coxon with the financial support of William S. Hancock and Joseph Rice. Lenox and Coxon had both by this time reached the upper ranks of Trenton's pottery industry, having gained considerable experience working at several of the city's best known factories. Lenox (1859-1920), a Trenton native, apprenticed at the pottery of Isaac Davis in 1875 working for the noted decorator Elijah Tatler. In 1881 he joined Ott & Brewer, then the city's leading producer of fine porcelain, where he eventually became the art director. Three years later he moved to the Willets

Manufacturing Company's Excelsior Pottery to head the design department, where he remained until setting up in partnership with Coxon. Jonathan Coxon (1837-1912) came to the United States from Staffordshire, England as a child and worked as a potter in Jersey City, Bennington and Baltimore before settling in Trenton in 1863 following Civil War service with the Twenty-first New Jersey Volunteers. He was next employed as a foreman at the Empire Pottery (also known as the Clinton Street Pottery), owned by his uncle Charles Coxon and John F. Thompson, and subsequently worked as a foreman at the Mercer Pottery Company and the Greenwood Pottery Company, as a manager at the International Pottery Company, and as superintendent at Ott & Brewer.

While colleagues at Ott & Brewer in the early 1880s, Coxon and Lenox both worked closely with William Bromley, Sr. and his sons, who had been lured to Trenton from Ireland where they perfected the manufacture of Belleek china. Within a few years both Coxon at Ott & Brewer and Lenox at the Willets Manufacturing Company were deeply involved in making an American version of Belleek, developing further the expertise that they would soon bring to their new venture. The Ceramic Art Company (CAC), launched with the relatively modest capitalization of \$7,000, was thus headed by a pair of highly skilled and experienced principals with a clear sense of mission. In modern parlance,

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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, George Miller, Brenda Springsted, Rebecca White. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal

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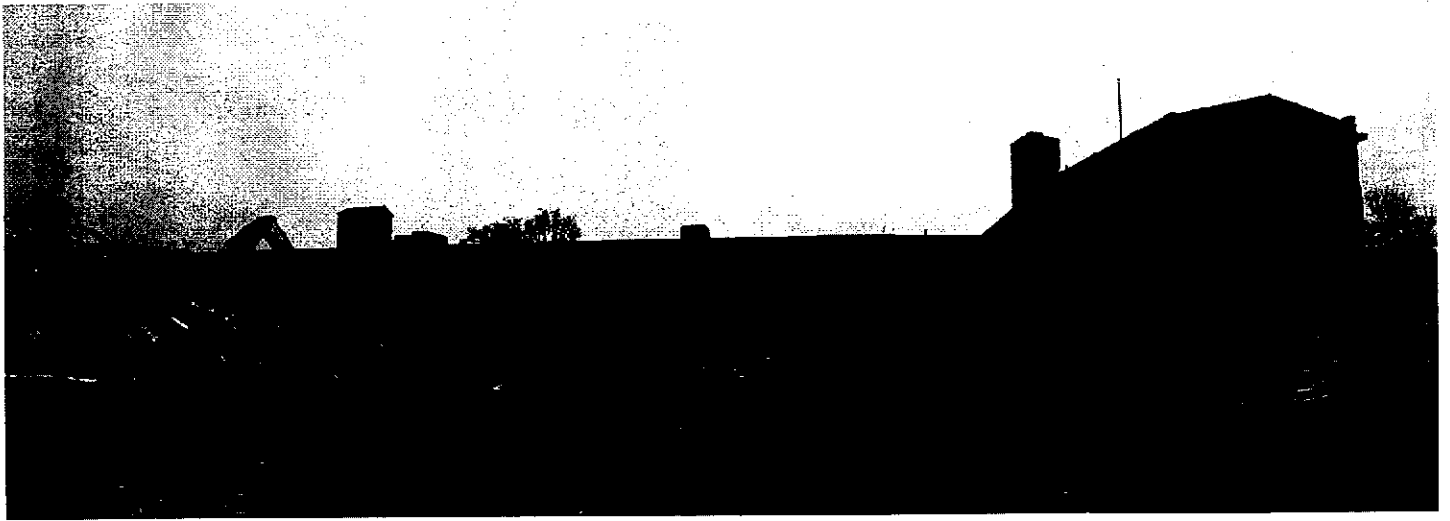


Plate 1. View of the Lenox site looking east from St. Joes Avenue following completion of demolition in April 2005. The buildings left standing, here seen from the rear, were erected in 1920 as part of an expansion of the plant along the Prince Street frontage (Hunter Research, Inc.).

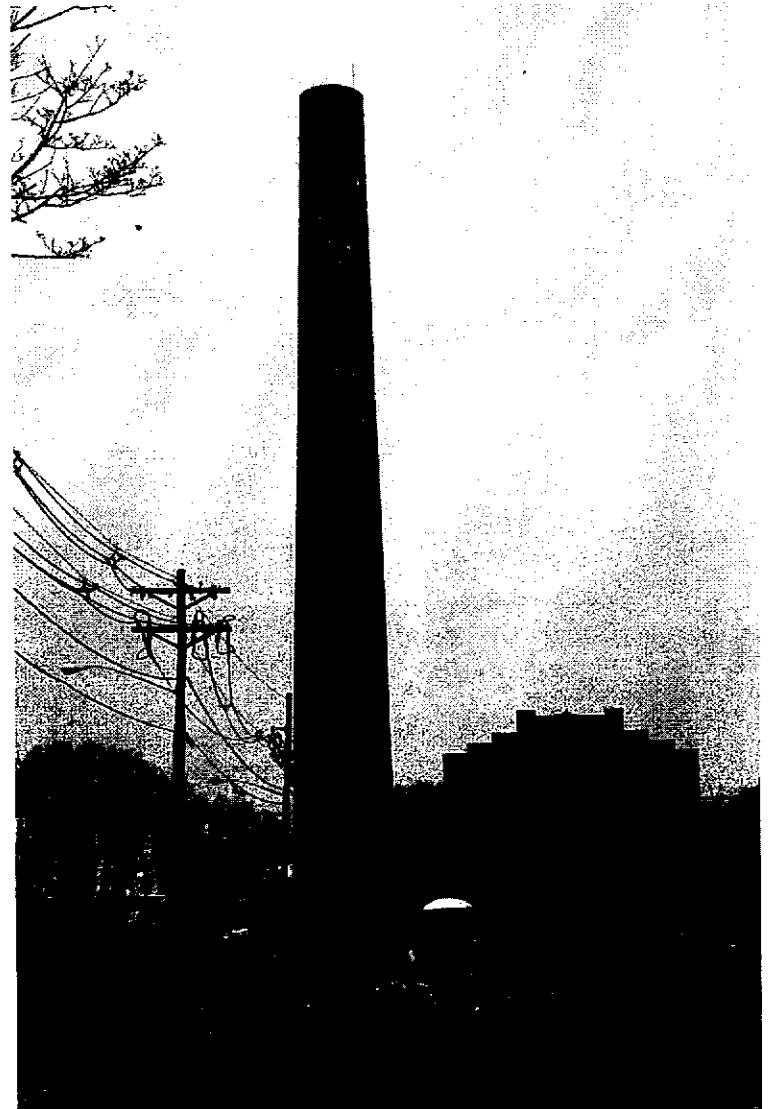


Plate 2. View looking north along St. Joes Avenue toward North Olden Avenue showing the "-NOX INC." brick chimney stack (along with an aspiring portable toilet) in April 2005 a few days before demolition (Hunter Research, Inc.).

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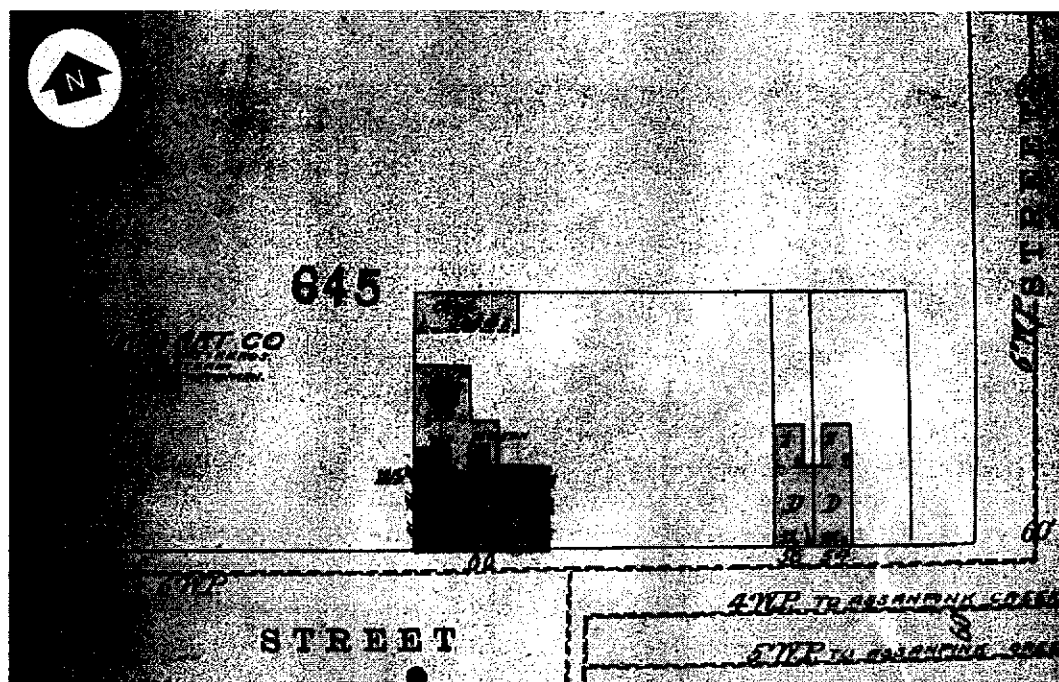


Figure 1. Scarlett & Scarlett.
Scarlett & Scarlett's Fire Map
of Mercer County. 1890

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Lenox and Coxon's endeavor would have qualified as a high-end "niche" business, with the firm being focused initially on the production of elegant art porcelain for sale to wealthy upper class Americans.

The CAC pottery works, erected in the spring and summer of 1889, was small in comparison to the factories churning out tableware and sanitary earthenware in the city. A contemporary newspaper account (*Daily State Gazette*, August 13, 1889, page 3) and a fire insurance map produced in the following year (Figure 1) combine to give a clear impression of the fledgling plant. The main building was a large three-and-a-half-story brick structure fronting on to Mead Street at what would later become the corner of St. Joes Avenue. The first floor served as an office, salesroom and mixing room; the second floor was given over to decorating; while the third floor, used for slip casting, was where the molders

and modelers worked. Attached to the rear of the main building was a one-story wing containing a biscuit kiln, a decorating kiln, a 10-horsepower steam engine and a boiler with a chimney stack. While the decorating kiln, steam engine, boiler and chimney all adjoined the back wall of the main building, the larger bisque-firing kiln, six feet in diameter and ten feet high inside, was set further away, closer to a coal shed at the rear of the property.

The Ceramic Art Company was successful from the outset, producing high-quality wares that immediately caught the eye of china dealers in New York City. The firm's first catalog was issued in 1891, causing many new retail outlets to stock CAC products, and in the following year the company began deploying traveling representatives. The factory labor force remained small, increasing from only 18 in 1889 to no more than 50 in the mid-1890s. In 1896, the company reorganized following Coxon's retirement, with Lenox

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taking over his founding partner's shares and exercising increasing control over the direction of the firm.

With production and sales growing apace, the plant underwent considerable expansion in the 1890s. A photograph of the pottery yard, probably taken around 1900, shows two new buildings and a new kiln (Plate 3), while also illustrating earlier features of the site shown on the Scarlett & Scarlett map of 1890. The original main building is dwarfed by a new four-story brick addition to the east (used in part for offices), while the low one-story wing containing the original bisque and decorating kilns and steam engine is likewise overshadowed by a much larger one-story building containing a second, even bigger bisque

kiln. The pottery yard itself appears as a pleasant and surprisingly verdant space with lawns, flower beds, shrubs and vines, providing the factory with overtones of an art studio.

Early in the first decade of the 20th century the Ceramic Art Company expanded its repertoire by making bone china tableware in addition to its Belleek art specialties. Within a few years the tableware had attained considerable popularity, ushering in the era of the fabled Lenox China, which continues to this day. Again, the plant required remodeling and expansion to enable the company to meet demand for the new wares. In 1905 a new three-story brick addition was completed in the old pottery yard, and was specifically used for bone china plate production. In this same year,

Plate 3. View looking southwest showing the yard of the Ceramic Art Company's pottery works circa 1900. The original main building, erected in 1889, is the three-and-a-half-story structure in the center. The two smaller one-story additions attached to the rear of this building were also erected in 1889 (Archives of Lenox China).



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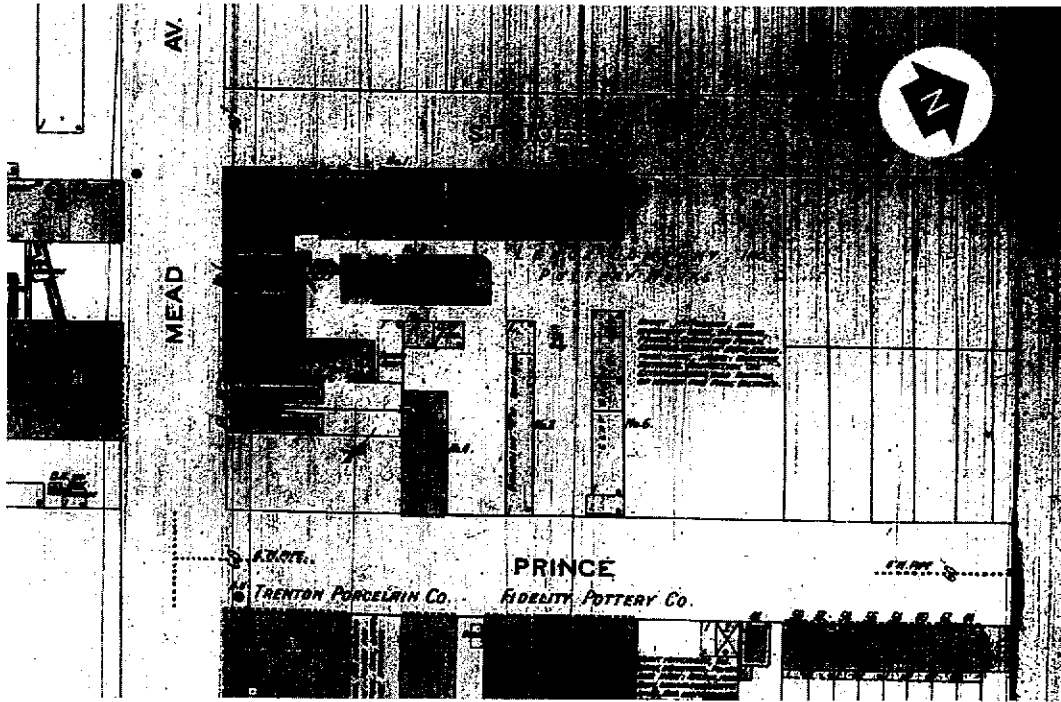


Figure 2. Sanborn Map Company. Insurance Maps of the City of Trenton. 1908.

with Lenox's eyesight failing, the company hired Frank G. Holmes as a designer. Holmes's development of tableware designs that appealed to a broad cross-section of consumers elevated the company to new levels of production and spurred the rebirth of the Ceramic Art Company as Lenox, Incorporated in 1906. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century the firm was well on the way to establishing itself as the premier American producer of fine tableware, a position reinforced in 1917 when President and Mrs. Woodrow Wilson commissioned Lenox to supply the White House with its first formal American-made dinner service.

Fire insurance maps and photographs again help to illustrate the intensifying use of the pottery site toward the end of the first decade of the 20th century (Figure 2; Plate 4). Sometime between 1905 and 1908 St. Joes Avenue was laid out and by the latter date the pottery works covered most of

the southern two thirds of the block defined by this street, North Olden Avenue and Prince and Mead Streets. The plant expanded along both Mead Street and St. Joes Avenue away from the original main building. A line of four bisque kilns extended along the St. Joes frontage, while the yard area, in addition to housing the new building used for making plates, now contained shops for making tiles, setters and saggars, a grinding room and clay storage sheds.

Walter Scott Lenox's health continued to deteriorate following the corporate reorganization of 1906 and he played less and less of a role in the firm's operations over the following decade. During this period, under Holmes' guidance, the company introduced Belleek tableware and this product line soon superseded the bone china tableware as the firm's dominant output. The Belleek art products, while still made in small

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quantities, gradually receded in importance. In 1917 the firm began using lithographic printing to fix decal patterns on its tableware, a method far superior to transfer printing and more economical than traditional hand painting.

Following Lenox's death in 1920, a

much-needed and wide-ranging reorganization of the plant was overseen by a new wave of stockholders, led by the Kuser twins, John and Anthony. Most of the older manufacturing buildings were reconfigured as warehouse space; the kilns along St. Joes Avenue were rebuilt; and an enormous new manufacturing complex

Plate 4. View looking northeast showing the Lenox pottery works around 1910. The original main building is in the center of the view with earlier expansions of the 1890s extending to right and left. The plate manufacturing building, erected in 1905, lurks behind the kilns. The white coating on the end of the original main building testifies to its use for mixing ground flint into the clay (Archives of Lenox China).

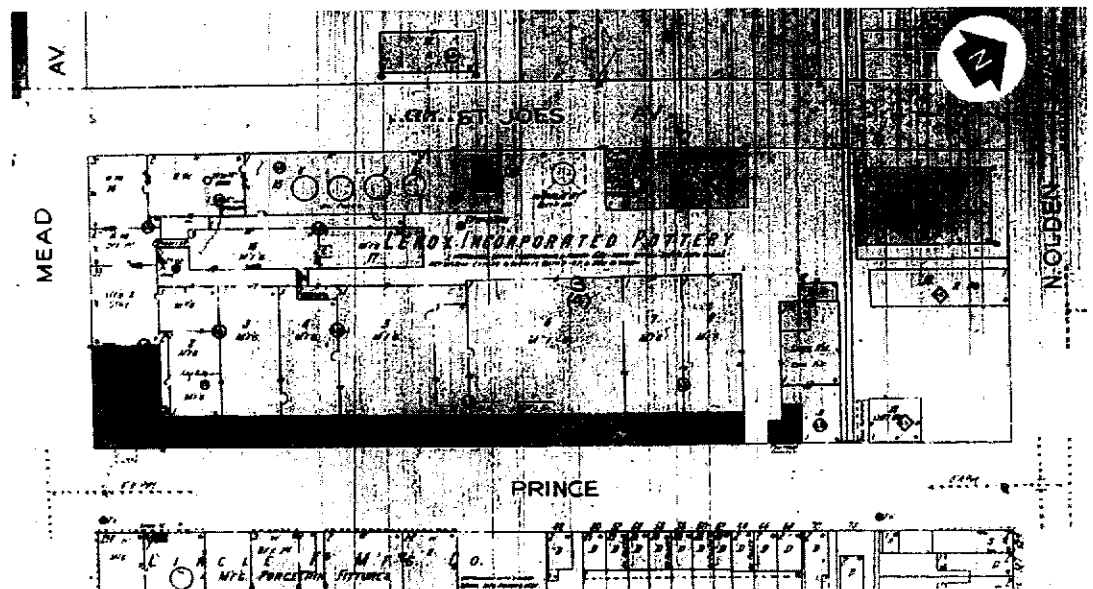
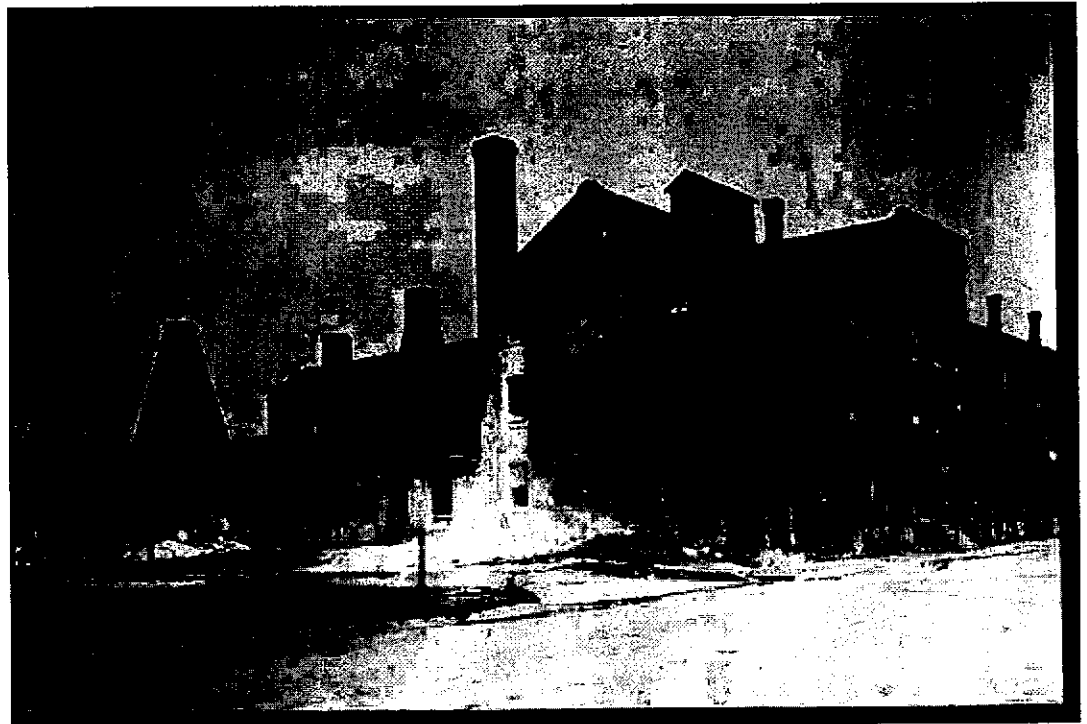


Figure 3. Sanborn Map Company. Insurance Maps of the City of Trenton. 1927.

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was constructed along the Prince Street frontage (Figure 3). This latter set of buildings, mostly one-story and containing large open workspaces, was fronted by a two-story reinforced concrete structure and anchored by a new three-story reinforced concrete office building at the corner of Prince and Mead (Plate 5). The second floor of this office building was graced with a spectacular factory showroom where the company displayed its newly designed wares and most prized creations (Plate 6). The site by now covered fully three quarters of the block and included a rail siding along its northern edge as well as a new power house, chimney stack and a 100-foot-tall, 50,000-gallon water tower midway along St. Joes Avenue. Overall, working conditions within the factory were vastly improved and the total work-

force numbered in excess of 300 employees.

Lenox continued to flourish in the inter-war years, with tableware still growing in importance at the expense of giftware and art products. A new Presidential dinner service was designed for Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, while the broader market for Lenox tableware began to extend down into the American middle class. The lay-out of the Trenton factory remained relatively unchanged, but one important modification was the gradual substitution of twin continuous-gas tunnel kilns for the older periodic "bottle" kilns, which greatly increased the firing efficiency and removed the need for cumbersome kiln furniture. During World War II the company shifted production into the manufac-

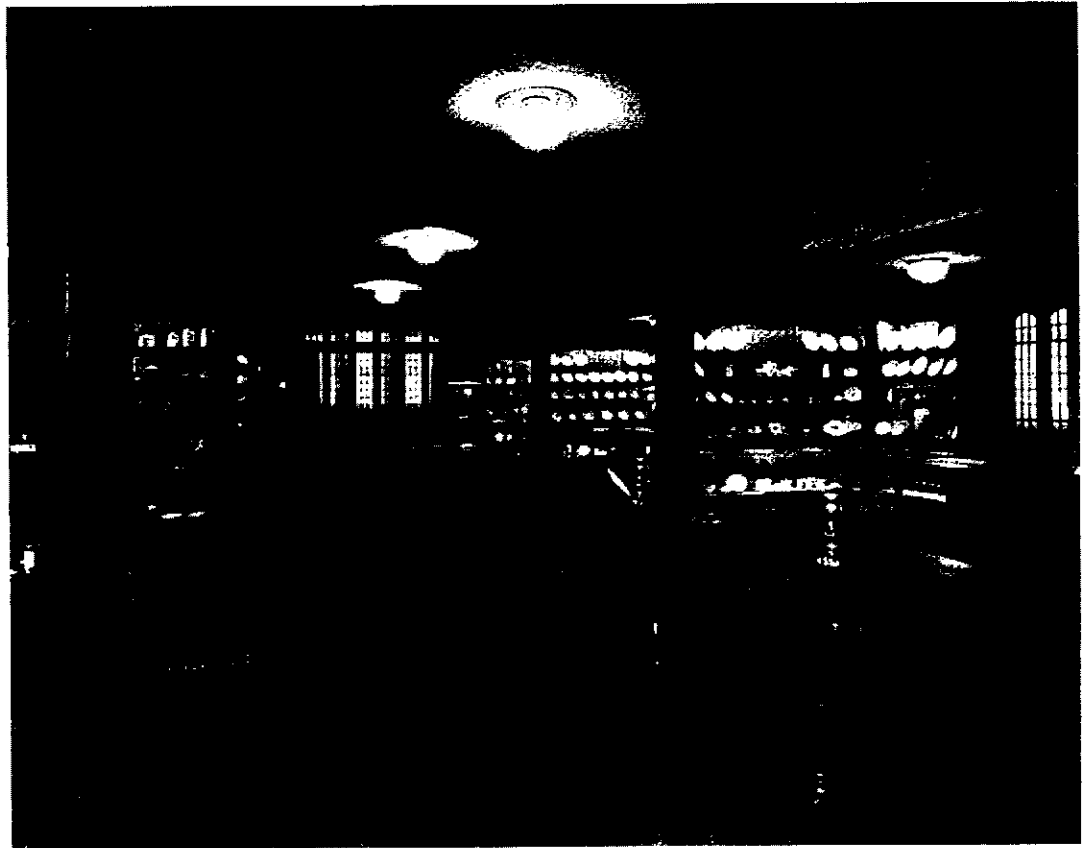
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Plate 5. View of the reinforced concrete office building and manufacturing complex on Prince Street built shortly after the death of Walter Scott Lenox in 1920 (Archives of Lenox China).

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Plate 6. The second-floor showroom inside the office building on Prince Street (Archives of Lenox China).



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Plate 7. The Mead Street frontage of the Lenox site in the mid-1990s. The three-story building at left is the original main building of the Ceramic Art Company; the four-story building in the center also dates from the CAC era and was originally used in part as an office (Hunter Research, Inc.).



ture of Lenoxite, a steatite-based ceramic used for insulators in high frequency radar devices. This specialized output brought John M. Tassie into the firm in 1942. In Lenox's subsequent re-entry into the tableware and giftware market in the late 1940s and 1950s, it was Tassie's efforts at streamlining production and increasing sales which made clear that the company was outgrowing its original home. The Trenton factory was literally bursting at the seams and was also unable to draw sufficient gas supply to fire its modern tunnel kilns.

On June 1, 1954, Lenox opened its brand new state-of-the-art Pomona plant in Atlantic County, New Jersey, where natural gas and developable land were both plentiful. The Trenton

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Plate 8. Remaining today - just the office building and front section of the manufacturing complex on Prince Street, built in the early 1920s (Hunter Research, Inc.).

plant continued in service, but the decision to expand the Pomona operations in the mid-1960s was soon accompanied by the phasing out of the original factory and the relocation or lay-off of its workforce. Over the past four decades the Lenox site in Trenton has suffered through the ignominy of losing its manufacturing capabilities, being used for storage, and then being exposed to years of abandonment and deterioration (Plate 7). Today, following the recent demolition, only the worse-for-wear structures along Prince Street still remain, including the once much-heralded office building with its showroom, now vacant and posted as available real estate.

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Brown-Forman to Sell Lenox, Inc. to Department 56

On July 21st of this year, Brown-Forman Corporation announced its intended sale of Lenox Inc. to Department 56 for \$190 million. Founded in 1976, Department 56 is a designer, distributor, wholesaler, and retailer of fine quality collectibles and other giftware products sold through gift, home accessory and specialty retailers, department stores, and general merchandise chains, as well as through its own stores and consumer-direct home show sales business. Department 56's principal offices are located in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. Lenox, founded in 1889 as the Ceramic Art Company, was purchased by Brown-Forman, a Louisville-

based liquor distiller, in 1983. Several other tabletop brands were subsequently added to the company, including Gorham, Kirk-Stieff, and Dansk. The transaction, which is subject to regulatory clearance in the United States, financing, and customary closing requirements, is expected to conclude in September. Brown-Forman will retain ownership of the Lenox headquarters property and building located in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. The portion of the Lenox business being sold had sales of \$465 million for the fiscal year ending April 30, 2005. The company employs approximately 2,850 people.

Early Potters and Potteries of Delaware

Early Potters and Potteries of Delaware: Historical and Commercial Perspectives tells the story of the ceramic industry in Delaware from 1760 to 1890. Extensive research by the author, James R. Koterski, details eleven manufacturing sites and over 80 owners, proprietors and potters, the most prolific of whom was William Hare. Several factors influenced the success and failure of their hard work, including the Revolutionary War, Jefferson's Embargo of 1808 and the Panic of 1837. In the end, market forces and new technologies led to the demise of the local pottery. Products fashioned from tin and glass and inexpensive, yet finer and more decorative wares, replaced the earthenware and stoneware of the early potter. Yet millions of hand-thrown pieces, fired in Delaware's kilns, served an extremely important everyday purpose in 18th and 19th century homes.

A number of these craftsmen also plied their trade in other states and their lives are traced beyond Dela-

ware's borders. John Jones, whose family owned the site of his operation for 97 years, apprenticed under Philadelphia's John Thompson in the 18th century. Branch Green established a pottery in Wilmington after he sold his Philadelphia shop to Henry Remmey. Charles F. Decker, the well-known Washington County, Tennessee, stoneware maker spent some years working at a Wilmington pottery.

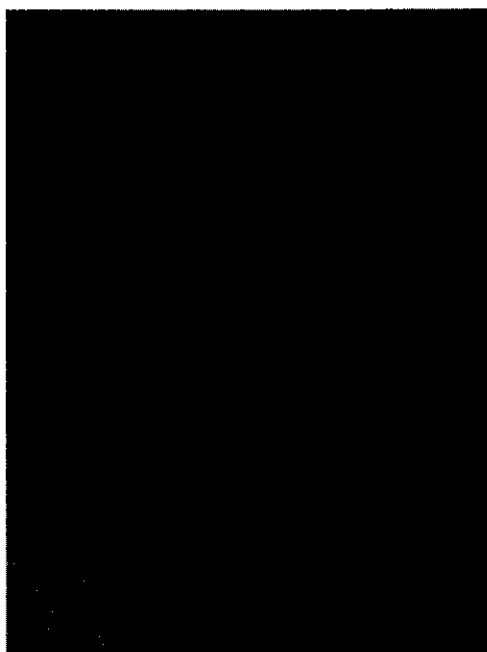
The book, published by Cedar Tree Books, Ltd. of Wilmington, is 216 pages long, is illustrated with reproductions from newspapers and ledgers, and includes numerous photographs and tables. A checklist of potters and an index provide ready access to the stories of individual potters. Orders can be placed with History in Print, P.O. Box 185, Mendenhall, PA 19357, or by sending an e-mail to: farhill3@aol.com. The book is \$30.

Morven Museum and Garden, located in Princeton, will be hosting the exhibit *A Place to Take Root: The History of Flowerpots and Garden Containers in North America* from May to May of 2006. Morven is interested in information pertaining to historic flowerpots and garden containers originating in New Jersey. Please contact Anne Gossert, Curator of Exhibitions, at 609-924-8144 x102.

A Mark from the Monument Pottery Company

Jan Dykstra of Wilmett, Illinois sent this elaborate mark from the Monument Pottery Company. The mark is from a sink that measures 33 by 24 inches and was originally installed in the Railway Exchange Building (Santa Fe Building) on Michigan Avenue in Chicago. This building was designed by Daniel Burnham and the sink was used in the private executive lavatory.

The Monument Pottery Company was located at 600 Ingham Avenue, Trenton. It was established in 1896 and went out of business in 1929. They were one of many firms in Trenton that specialized in sanitary ware (bathtubs, toilets, sinks, etc.),



Greenwood Pottery Pitcher

POTS member Jay Lewis recently acquired this porcelain ice pitcher manufactured by the Greenwood Pottery Company c. 1875-1885. The pitcher is 8 3/8" high and is impressed on the base in block letters "G. P. Co."

One side shows King Gambrinus, the mythical inventor of beer, offering a lager to Brother Johnathan. A goat is on top of a keg marked "C. Pick & Co. Chicago." The other side shows Bill Nye attacking Ah Sin, characters in the Bret Harte poem *The Heathen Chinee*. The spout has a figural head of a walrus with tusks, and the scrolled handle has a polar bear with its paws on the rim of the pitcher.

The pitcher was originally produced by the Union Porcelain Works of Greenpoint, Brooklyn in 1875 from a design by Karl L. H. Mueller. Examples of this pitcher can be found in numerous museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Newark Museum, the New Jersey State Museum and the Brooklyn Museum.



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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.

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