

## A Brief History of the Trenton Pottery Industry

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In the 1850s, as the economic advantages of the fast-growing urban center of Trenton, New Jersey began to be appreciated by potters and entrepreneurs along the eastern seaboard and beyond, the first true industrial potteries were established in the city. In 1850 there was one traditional redware pottery in the city, but by the turn of the century there were close to 50 factories churning out a variety of utilitarian ceramics, especially kitchen and table wares. In the pre-Civil War era, the emphasis of manufacture was on the mass production of tablewares, principally the ubiquitous whitewares that formed the basis of most American household dining and tea sets, and yellowwares, such as pie plates, food molds and pitchers, that were essential to food preparation in the kitchen. The city became known as the “Staffordshire of America,” a reference to the industrial potteries of the English Midlands, where many Trenton potters learned their trade before emigrating to the United States.

While expanding its output of china to cater increasingly to the food service industry, the military, department stores and dealers, Trenton’s potters also diversified into new types of production, notably sanitary ware and electrical porcelain. At the same time, a select group of companies developed lines of art porcelain. Throughout the period of the industrial potteries, Trenton was also home to a wide range of related endeavors, such as fire-brick and terracotta manufacture, crucible making, kiln furniture production, the grinding of flint and spar (for use as clay tempering materials) and pottery decorating. At the peak of the industry, between roughly 1880 and 1920, only one other industrial center in the United States (East Liverpool, Ohio) came close to challenging Trenton as the nation’s leader in pottery manufacture.

The reasons for the growth of the Trenton potteries during the second half of the 19th century lie in the city’s superior location in relation to raw materials and markets, and in its central location in the rapidly developing regional transportation network. Canals and railroads both played their part in supporting the industry. The Delaware and Raritan Feeder Canal, the Delaware Canal and the Belvidere-Delaware Railroad brought coal from Pennsylvania to power equipment and to fuel the kilns. The main stem of the Delaware and Raritan Canal, the Camden & Amboy Railroad and the Delaware & Bound Brook Railroad (both later absorbed into and supplemented by the Pennsylvania Railroad system) brought clay and tempering materials in addition to coal. These latter transportation routes were also used to ship the finished products out to consumer markets across the country. Trenton’s geography was not, of course, the only reason for the growth of the potteries. Other important factors were the convergence and interaction in the city of many entrepreneurs and master potters, the city’s acceptance of industrialization (not just in pottery manufacture, but also in iron and steel, textile and rubber manufacture), and the ready availability of capital and industrial labor.

Although the Trenton firm of William Young & Company was a leading nationwide maker of porcelain door furniture, chiefly door knobs and back-plates for door handles, the manufacture of tablewares was the heart of the Trenton pottery industry. By the 1860s and 1870s, close to a dozen industrial potteries, among them the City Pottery, the Etruria Pottery and the Excelsior Pottery, were ranged along the Delaware and Raritan Canal, especially in the section of the city known as Coalport, which emerged around a group of railroad sidings just north of the city where shipments of coal were unloaded for industrial use. Immediately adjacent to the sidings, a cluster of some of Trenton's largest and most notable potteries grew up in the 1860s and 1870s — the Etruria Pottery Works, Coxon & Company's Pottery (later the Empire Pottery), John Maddock & Sons Coalport Works (later the New Jersey Pottery Company) and the Mercer Pottery (later taken over by John Moses). By the late 1870s, the pottery industry had also expanded southeast of the city along the canal and railroad into the neighboring community of Lambertton. By the early 1890s, the dominant pottery in this area was the Maddock Pottery Company's Lambertton Works (later taken over by the Scammell China Company).

In 1873 Thomas Maddock moved to Trenton to become part owner of the Carroll Street Pottery and began experimenting in the manufacture of sanitary earthenware. Maddock was instrumental in developing the toilet flushing mechanism and many of the water closet designs that are still in general use today. Within a few years, the Carroll Street Pottery had switched to making predominantly sanitary earthenware. In 1879, a competing firm, the Enterprise Pottery Company, established the first factory built for the mass production of sanitary wares and, within a decade, Trenton was nationally renowned for these goods. By the turn of the century, numerous potteries in Trenton were producing items such as bathtubs, basins, sinks, toilets, urinals and various bathroom accessories. Among the city's leading sanitary earthenware producers were: successive Maddock enterprises that were eventually absorbed into American Radiator & Standard Sanitary (now American Standard); the Trenton Potteries Company (an amalgam of six earlier firms, the Crescent, Delaware, Empire, Enterprise, Equitable and Ideal Potteries), that later became the Trenton branch of the Crane Plumbing Company of Manitoba (now American Standard); and several other smaller firms, such as the Bellmark Pottery Company and the Keystone Pottery Company.

In stark contrast to the utilitarian focus of Trenton's sanitary earthenware industry is the city's reputation for producing ceramics of superior artistic quality. The early leader in this area was the Etruria Pottery, established in 1863, which by 1871 was in the hands of Joseph Ott and John Hart Brewer. The firm of Ott & Brewer produced countless pieces of fine porcelain sculpture known as parian ware, culminating with an award-winning bust of Cleopatra and a pair of Baseball Vases that were exhibited at the Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia. Ott & Brewer also developed a delicate ivory colored porcelain with pearly glaze as an American version of the much-prized Irish Belleek ware. The other leading figure in developing Trenton's reputation for art porcelain was Walter Scott Lenox, who was design director for Ott & Brewer and the Willets Manufacturing Company before establishing

the Ceramic Art Company in 1889 (later Lenox China Company). In the mid-20th century Trenton's tradition of art ware was continued through the porcelain sculpture of firms like the Boehm Porcelain Studio and Cybis.

With the widespread adoption of electricity as a source of energy in the home and factory, a vast new area of ceramic production opened up based around the insulating qualities of fired clay. Beginning in the 1890s, the manufacture of electrical porcelain – insulators, light fixtures, wall sockets and plugs – rapidly emerged as a force within the Trenton pottery industry through the growth of firms like Star Porcelain Company, Union Electric Manufacturing Company and the Circle F Manufacturing Corporation.

In the 1880s and early 1890s the geographic distribution of potteries within the city was extended with new factories like the Delaware Pottery (later the Artistic Porcelain Company) being established in the Prospect Street area, west of the city center, along the Delaware & Bound Brook Railroad.

Between 1880 and the Depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Trenton reached its zenith as a center of industrial pottery production. Factories large and small ranged across the city, tied to the all-important canal and railroad network that gave access to the outside world. City directories published between 1901 and 1918 list between 38 and 47 pottery establishments, reaching a peak of 52 facilities in 1924. The number of plants dwindled to around 30 at the time of the Depression and by the end of World War II only 18 were listed as being in operation. While the Depression was responsible for much of the industry's decline, many factories closed during World War II when energy resources were redirected from consumer goods to the manufacture of war materials. Other factors that contributed to the decline included labor disputes, resistance to the introduction of new labor-saving technologies, and the increasing use of plastics in the home.