

# The Confusing Pottery Companies of 19th Century South Carolina

By Gary P. Dexter

*(EDITOR'S NOTE: Gary Dexter is a master potter and historian who lives in Aiken County, South Carolina. He has explored the waster piles of the Southern Porcelain Company and South Carolina Pottery Company, with this story as the result)*

## The Southern Porcelain Manufacturing Company

KAOLIN, S.C., (near present day Bath, in Aiken County) – There has been an immense amount of confusion among historians, collectors and auction houses regarding several similar sounding names belonging to 19th century pottery companies, two of which were located in present day Aiken and Edgefield counties in South Carolina.

Not only are the names similar, but the hallmarks stamped on the ware and the pattern of the ware are very similar to those of other potteries in the United States that were being manufactured about the same time.

There are a number of pieces in the collections of museums and private collectors which have become entangled in the web of confusion and are improperly attributed. There are many pieces which have sold at auction that were attributed to the wrong maker.

The following addresses the companies individually and give examples of respective marks and wares made.

The Southern Porcelain Company opened in 1856. Important potters from the United States Pottery Company in Bennington, Vermont closed down their business and headed South. They believed that all necessary ingredients for the production of fine porcelain, flint ware and granite ware were on hand at the South Carolina location.

The company set about manufacturing using only local materials and results were mixed. Soon, the company changed managers

as well as philosophies and started importing needed materials. Near failure changed to success.

America's premier potter, Christopher Weber Fenton, of Bennington, assisted the firm until it had attained a profitable footing. As the Civil War came into the picture, the northern owners sold the firm to southern interests. Among the new owners was Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederate States of America, and George Bullock, governor of Georgia.

The company devoted a large amount of its production to insulators for the Confederate Telegraph Co. The firm also made sturdy molded wares for Confederate hospitals, including large tile drainage pipes, refractory tiles and refractory brick.

Early wares of the company were slip-cast in molds crafted by Daniel Greatbach, Decious Clark and Josiah Jones, all of whom were America's premier modelers at other great northern potteries. Some of the molds created were used only at Southern Porcelain Company. Others, like the corn pitcher and the waterfall pitcher, were also made in Bennington. The handles and exquisite knobs on the ware were unique to Southern Porcelain. Full dinner sets and related items like compotes, gravy boats, spittoons, vases, covered jars, tureens, trivets and soap dishes were just a few of its products.

It has been falsely written that the molds of the Southern Porcelain Company were used at two other Horse Creek potteries in Aiken County. There is no evidence to support this and the



Here's the Southern Porcelain Company mark.  
(Photos courtesy of Gary Dexter)



**Civil War-era insulators made by Southern Porcelain Company in Kaolin, S.C.**

supposition has been printed so much that it has almost become a fact in peoples' minds.

It also has been mistakenly written that Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's army burned the company on the March to the Sea. Truth is, in 1864, a fire started in the steam engine house and quickly spread through the mold house, ware shop and other buildings. All were destroyed.

The company reorganized and attempts lasting into the 1880s to restart the concern, but little was accomplished. The kaolin holdings and land were sold to William McNamee, of New York, who was engaged in the manufacture of wall paper. He set up an office in nearby Augusta, Georgia from where casks of kaolin were shipped to locations throughout the world. McNamee clay is still being mined today from the old Southern Porcelain Company lands and is known as some of the finest in the world. It even carries a registered trade mark after the McNamee name. It is the

area's only kaolin capable of making fine hard paste porcelain.

There are several different marks used on the company's various wares. The eagle within a cartouche is most likely the earliest mark and is almost identical to the last mark used by the U.S. Pottery Company in Bennington. The name inside the shield was the last mark used and is found on some Confederate insulators. Most of the ware fragments found at the site bear no mark on the base, or are marked with an X. The X was found with or without marks, on porcelain as well as insulators.

The most in-depth study of the company was published in 1995 by "Jon E. Wreb." The Southern Porcelain Company is often confused with, or wrongly identified because of the Speeler Pottery Company, a 19th century Trenton, New Jersey firm. The Speeler mark is very similar to that used by Southern Porcelain. Both firms used a curious double hashmark below

the "o" in Co.

### **The South Carolina Pottery Company**

Sunny Brooke, present day Aiken County – The South Carolina Pottery Company operated in the 1880s on land along Big Horse Creek that was purchased from the Lewis Miles estate. Miles had operated a pottery for many years. His daughter, Sallie, was married to John Cahill, who with James L. Jervy and A. Craig set up the company.

It produced an assortment of cast and molded yellow ware, china pitchers, bowls and teapots as well as large storage jars, churns and jugs. Perhaps the single item most mistakenly attributed to the firm is the Rebecah at the Well teapot. While that style was made by the firm, it is unlike the dozens of other pottery companies' models in that it has a square handle and a square interlocking tab which keeps the lid from falling off while pouring.

The Rebecah at the Well teapot





**REBECAH AT THE WELL pitcher found at Southern Porcelain Company.**

is believed to be the most reproduced ceramic item in the history of the United States. South Carolina Pottery Rebecah teapots have been found with different numbers appearing on the bottoms as well as the word "Fireproof." Other companies' teapots also were marked with the word. It refers to an 1880s patent involving notches or raised pads on the teapot's bottom, supposedly enabling it to be placed on the wood stove's burner lid without cracking.

The bulk of the waster pile of the South Carolina Pottery Company site is of bisque-fired items. There is a noticeable absence of glazed shards. A few Rockingham or mottled manganese glazed shards have been found as well as clear feldspathic glazes. Numerous shards from large jugs, jars and churns appear mostly as pink, due to a trace of iron in the clay body, which is covered by a white, frosty, transparent glaze. Other glazes on utilitarian ware range from gray to a rich cinnamon color. The

heavy utilitarian pieces often can be found in antiques stores or flea markets around the area.

Much of the cast yellow ware is identical in appearance to wares made at several prominent New Jersey potteries of the late 19th century., Those include the Mayer Pottery, the Arsenal Pottery and the Speeler Pottery. It is possible that these companies' molds were purchased and being used at the South Carolina Pottery Company. It is also possible that much of the unglazed ware was being made and fired at the Horse Creek site, then shipped north from the Charlotte, Columbia and Augusta Railroad depot located at the Sunny Brooke site. Much of the cast ware is identical to the rusticated majolica patterns popular in that period.

Similar slip-cast chamber pots have been recovered from archaeological site 38ED221, the Joseph G. Baynham site, near Trenton, South Carolina. This was a part of the original 1,080-acre Miles

Mill tract.

Loss of hundreds of cords of firewood to wild fires and the break of the dam caused by burrowing muskrats forced the company to close.

The Speeler Pottery Company mark is most often confused to be that of the South Carolina Pottery Company, or the Southern Porcelain Company. Compare the respective marks in the photos accompanying this story.

It is interesting to note that all of the upper Horse Creek and Shaw Creek potteries used Pinehouse as a reference to their locations. It wasn't until the South

Carolina Pottery Company started that the town of Trenton became the point of reference for that portion of present day Aiken and Edgefield counties.

*A final note:* To cause further confusion, there was a much later company called the South Carolina Pottery Company in North Augusta, South Carolina. It was started by the Baynhams in 1910. It made mostly garden ware, but also kept a small inventory of utilitarian ware. The company used an incuse stamp with South Carolina Pottery Company on it.. In no way does it resemble the older company's mark. The Aiken County Historical Museum has one such piece in its collections.

