

Brooklyn Potteries

By Mark Smith

Now, this article will not deal with the liquor jugs one sees frequently at shops, shows, and online, as these are in a different category of collecting. While it is true that dozens of potteries operated over the period of the 19th Century, the vast majority produced items such as roof tile, drain tile, sewer pipe, fire brick, stove linings, chimney linings, and such. While it seemed to be easy to enter the potting business, remaining in the potting business was another story. The average lifespan of these potteries was around two years. This piece is about the potters who produced and signed their ware, such as jugs, crocks, and what ever was required of them, so that it is identifiable to a potter or pottery, and collected as such today.

The stoneware industry in Brooklyn, at least in terms of the potters producing marked wares and remaining in production, did not have the early start or the long term longevity of firms as did the Manhattan potters, such as Crolius, Remmy, Morgan and Commeraw. While potters are known to have operated in Brooklyn in both the 17th Century, and the 18th Century, the operations tended to be very short lived, and to date, no marked examples of their wares have come to light. Perhaps this was due to the intense competition from the established Manhattan kilns, or the expense of importing much of the raw materials required to operate. In spite of being the industrial heart of the N.Y. area even in the 19th century, no marked stoneware is known from any Brooklyn pottery until we reach the year 1839, where we will begin.

In the year 1839 the Brooklyn City Directory lists two men employed in the potting trade, a William Beach, and a Dennis McLees. Current research indicates that William Beach was a potter employed in Poughkeepsie, and that Dennis McLees operated a pottery in South Amboy, N.J. Pottery with the impressed mark "D. McLees Potter/S. Amboy NJ" is known. I am blessed with a pot in my collection which is marked "D MC LEES BROOKLYN POTTERY/COR SANDS & NAVY STS." It should be noted that this pot was recovered by Mike Hoffman on a dig in Brooklyn many years ago, only a very few blocks from the corner of Sands and Navy Sts. Now, there is some speculation

in the hobby on the following point.

We do not know for sure if, as it is believed by some, Mc Lees came to Brooklyn under the guidance of Thomas Boone to build the pottery for Thomas Boone. On the flip side, William Beach could have been sent to Brooklyn to build the kiln. There is a third possibility, which the presence of this pot bears some weight to, that being Dennis McLees built the Pottery for his own use, and William Beach was his partner/employee, he ran into unforeseen problems, and with the potential for William Beach to know of Thomas Boone, Dennis McLees then sold the kiln to Thomas Boone. This thought does have some historical backing, as it was common practice for potters to leave from the Hudson Valley pottery works, and go establish a kiln on their own. In addition, several potteries which operated in Brooklyn had very short, or even unknown, life spans, e.g. The Wallabout Pottery and George. S. Andrews / 80 Furman St. We will most likely never know for sure. I tend to subscribe to the third line of thought. Since the pot bears Mc Lees name, and not Beach's, Mc Lees was in all likelihood the principle in the operation. Having operated a pottery in South Amboy, he would have some capital to invest into the new kiln. Along with being the principle in the operation, if he was building the kiln for use by Thomas Boone, why would he produce pots with his name on them? However, if he was building it for his own use, he would most certainly put his name on the pots. The decoration used on this example in my collection is a classic Hudson Valley floral design, which he most likely learned at his employers business, where he learned the potting trade. Potters would as apprentices learn decorations, and where ever they would set up shop, they would employ these decorations, since it is what they know. This line of thought is supported by how many of the Hudson Valley and upstate N.Y. ovoid pots and jugs from the 1820-1850 period bear similar designs. Nathan Clark of Athens, N.Y. was perhaps the most prolific in terms of training potters, and sending them out to set up potteries. Now, it is also very likely that this pot was decorated by William Beach, who was also employed as a potter

in Poughkeepsie. This too would explain the fine Hudson Valley floral decoration. In any event, this is the only example known to me at this time that is signed by Dennis McLees.

Poughkeepsie was one of the premier potting cities on the Hudson River, and Morgan's Bank, in South Amboy, New Jersey, was perhaps the premier source of stoneware clay in the area. Thomas Boone operated a pottery in Poughkeepsie from 1836 until he came to Brooklyn in 1840.

Current research of the 1840 era indicates that both Dennis Mc Lees and William Beach were then employees of Thomas Boone. Thomas Boone, as I stated above, hailed from the upstate New York city of Poughkeepsie (now, where have I heard this before, oh yes, both the Brown Brothers, and Frederick Caire are from there. They were active at Huntington L. I.). Thomas G. Boone was the first potter to set up shop in Brooklyn, producing marked pottery, and to be successful. His sons joined the firm, Benjamin R. Boone in 1842 and Thomas E. Boone in 1843. As a family business, the Boone's were able to survive until 1846, when the firm was dissolved. Yes, I know that six years are really not much of a long life, yet it is pretty good compared to the average life span of a pottery in Brooklyn. The production of the Boone firm was in some respects ahead of its time. In the 1840-1850 time period potters were still producing the more traditional shaped ovoid and semi-ovoid wares, the straight-sided forms we know had not yet become popular yet we see a strong percentage of the straight-sided examples in the Boone's production. Jars, jugs and crocks are found with the straight sides of the later post-1850 period. The cobalt decoration as a rule is simple and somewhat primitive, even by the standards of the time. However, the family did not quit the potting business when they closed the kiln in 1846, quite the opposite! Both sons remained active in the industry, producing drainpipe, roof tile, fire brick off and on into the 1860s, when their names no longer appear related to the potting industry. To date, no items bearing the marks of any of the firms they formed, or worked for has come to light.

Now, this brings us to one of Brooklyn's many short lived potteries, the Brooklyn Salamander Pottery. In the year 1846, one George S. Andrews started up stoneware production at 80 Furman St. Not very much is known about the firm due to the very

short time of operation. Here is a very interesting situation. It appears that George Andrews was only the owner, as in 1846 only William Beach, and Benjamin Boone are listed in the City Directory as potters. Perhaps they were employed by Andrews. This could well be the case, as with the Boone operation closing up, the men would be available for employment. The Brooklyn Salamander Pottery did advertise a sales office in New York City, but the firm closed up the same year it opened! I am very lucky to have an ovoid crock in my collection with the mark "G. S. Andrews/No 80 Furman St Brooklyn NY." I know of less than five examples from this firm.

Now, we are at the year 1847. While there are firms in Brooklyn producing stoneware, no one had marked them to our knowledge today. As such, this makes it very difficult to study them! The potting industry was relatively simple to enter in Brooklyn, and the capital required to set up a pot works was also low, and small shops came and went with abandon. It appears that while it was easy to get into the business, making a go of it was a far different matter. The vast majority of them produced drainpipe, stovepipe, chimney or flue pipe, firebricks, sewer pipes, and a device called a portable furnace, which was a rather clever device. Portable furnaces were stoneware buckets or pots, with some sort of metal handle, generally having a tripod base, or legs, to hold it up off the floor. They would be filled with hot coals from the stove or fireplace, and brought to another room to provide heat. The original portable space heater!

Some of these firms were very successful and remained in business for many years, while others would open and close the same year. Among the more successful was the firm of F. ROOS & SON. They operated the Williamsburg Pottery, located at 56-60 North 11th St. in Brooklyn for almost 20 years, 1875 to 1892. I am lucky to have in my collection a letter or flyer for this firm, with a date from the 1870s. Another was the Hamilton Pottery, which operated from 1868-1894. Located at the corner of Bush and Hamilton Sts (later Hamilton became Smith St) the production consisted of flowerpots, stove pipe, drain pipe and the like. Operated by a John Badum, it must have been profitable, since he sold the pottery in 1885 to Henry Bieg. Henry Bieg owned the Central Pottery, located at 52-66 Wallabout St. While these firms list in their

advertisements stoneware, no marked examples have yet to surface. The typical products were the ever present sewer pipe, drain pipe, stench traps, fire brick and the portable furnace. These firms while long lived, are just a few of the dozens of potteries who operated in Brooklyn at this time period.

Now we are up to the late 1870s to the early 1880s. At this late time period, the potting industry was already past its prime, but we find a potter who would produce marked and decorated stoneware for the longest time of any potter in Brooklyn! Cornelius Vaupel founded the Brooklyn Pottery, first being located in Williamsburg, at No. 11 Union Ave. This address is the site of a pottery operated by Joseph Hetticher, who began operation in 1864. Cornelius Vaupel began production in 1877 with a partner by the name of Anton Boss. It is likely Vaupel was using Hetticher's kiln either "on shares" or a rental agreement. This partnership lasted just one year. Vaupel remained at the 11 Union Ave. address until 1881, when he moved to 388 (previously known as 366) Wallabout St. There are also marked pots from Vaupel bearing the address 444 Broadway. Whether he produced pottery at this address, or used it as a store front, is unknown at present. He produced the traditional ware of jugs, jars, crocks and decorated them with designs typical of the Hudson Valley potters. Perhaps he learned his trade in the lower Hudson Valley, we may never know. He closed the Brooklyn Pottery in 1895.

Just in case you, the reader think that there is nothing left to know about the Brooklyn potting industry, think again. There are a very few stoneware bottles in collectors hands, which are marked on the lower sides "Wallabout/Pottery/Brooklyn". Who was this? Where were they located? What time frame did they operate in? Currently we have no clues or information on this mysterious pottery. Many potteries did operate near the Wallabout Canal, located in the Eastern District, or E.D. As no information has come to light on this pottery, currently we can only speculate that this was a potter using a kiln either on shares, or after hours, perhaps he was associated with the Central Pottery, which was on Wallabout St? Or perhaps this potter built the kiln that Cornelius Vaupel moved to in 1881 at 388 Wallabout St? With a known output of a few bottles, it would appear the operation did not last very long,

or amount to very much.

Next we have the Charles Graham Chemical Pottery Works. Founded by Charles Graham in 1882, the firm was located on Metropolitan Ave in Brooklyn. This was a specialty potter, as they supplied the industrial pottery required by the chemical works located throughout the city. The product line featured items such as sinks, strainers, traps, valves, pipe, acid jars or receivers, pumps, pitchers and so on, all of which were required by the vast chemical industry present in Brooklyn at the time. Stoneware has fairly high acid resistance and as such was a good choice at the time for the chemical industry. All their ware was marked, and you can find it today, generally with reasonable prices. I have seen a number of examples from the Charles Graham firm on eBay, even the sinks! While the products are not decorated, and having just a plain tan glaze, the valves, are quite lovely to see. Carefully molded and fitted they are quite something to behold. The firm was in business at least until 1913, and perhaps longer. Of all the pottery produced by the Brooklyn potters, the wares of the Charles Graham firm are the most available, and are very reasonable in price. Prices for examples of this firms output range from 20 to about 100 dollars, very reasonable prices for signed stoneware today.

Well, there you have it, my summation on the potting industry in Brooklyn. The pottery produced by the craftsmen in Brooklyn is really no different in form or decoration than that produced by the other potters in the region. While no doubt large amounts of stoneware were produced, due to the potters not marking the bulk of the ware, signed examples in general are uncommon. However, as the decoration is simple or crude, this has held down the prices, and the prices are affordable relative to other signed and decorated stoneware for the most part. I hope you have enjoyed it, and find it interesting. If you have any questions or can add information to it, please feel free to contact me at libottle@optonline.net.

References:

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