

History & Mystery

THE EARLY POTTERIES OF THE QUEEN CITY 1834 – 1896

By Peter Jablonski

Steve Rowe - Genealogy Research

To walk into the basement of Buffalo, New York stoneware collector David Potter is to walk into a time machine of Buffalo's early industrial past. If these earthen vessels could speak, what stories would they tell?

They are both objects of beauty and history. As a privy digger (one who digs old outhouse pits for trash from the past), digging for artifacts or tangible pieces of the past is to open a time capsule. Once an artifact is unearthed, the mystery begins—where was it made, who made it, what was it used for, and how long was the company in business?

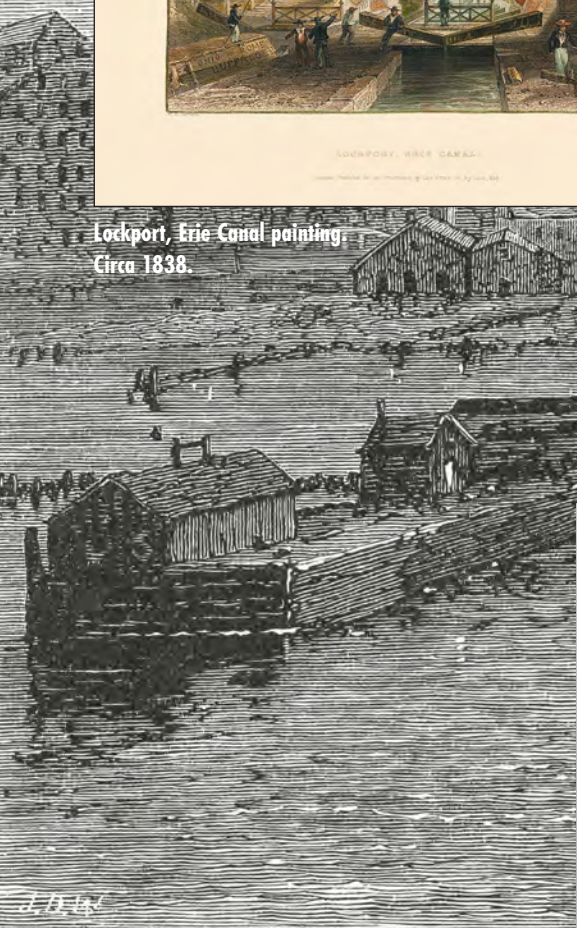
Dave Potter and I share this unusual hands-on quest for knowledge of the past, and it is the research that satiates the hunger for knowledge. Every September and May, a stoneware collectors group meets in Bennington, Vermont. A member conducts a lecture on a specific stoneware manufacturer or a specific region where stoneware was made. I volunteered to present on marked Buffalo stoneware manufacturers using Dave's collection and some sweat and tears of research. I thought it would be a good idea to repurpose and embellish this material and present to our members in *Antique Bottle & Glass Collector*.



Rare six gallon stoneware crock with cobalt blue decoration of a pheasant, C. W. Braun, Buffalo, New York, circa 1880. - Sothebys



Lockport, Erie Canal painting.
Circa 1838.



[Above background] Engraving of Erie Canal Basin and Elevator, Buffalo, New York, Circa 1872.



[Left] Rare four-gallon stoneware jar with elaborate cobalt rooster decoration, stamped "C.W. BRAUN BUFFALO, N.Y.," circa 1870. Crocker Farm

Thus began my journey into Buffalo's stoneware manufacturing past. William C. Ketchum had already written a book *Early Potters and Potteries of New York State*. Could I unearth new information unknown about our Queen City potteries? Could I make these inanimate objects speak of their rich historical past?

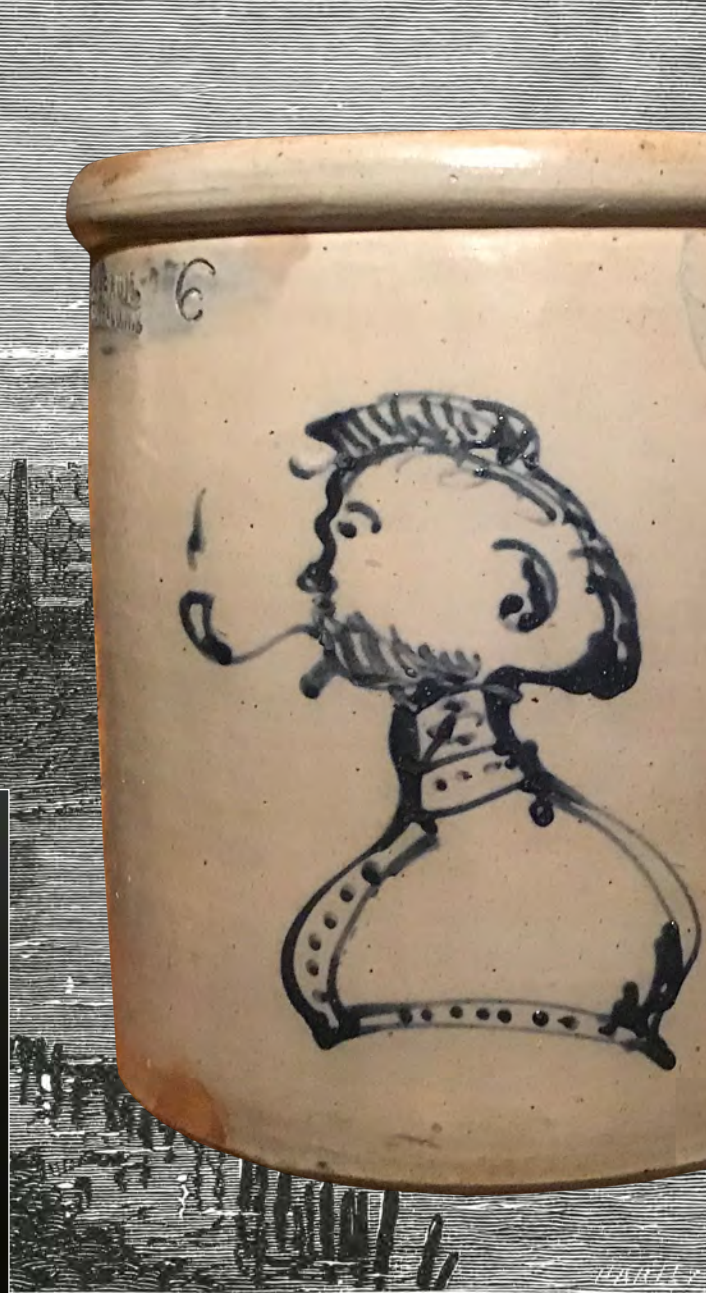
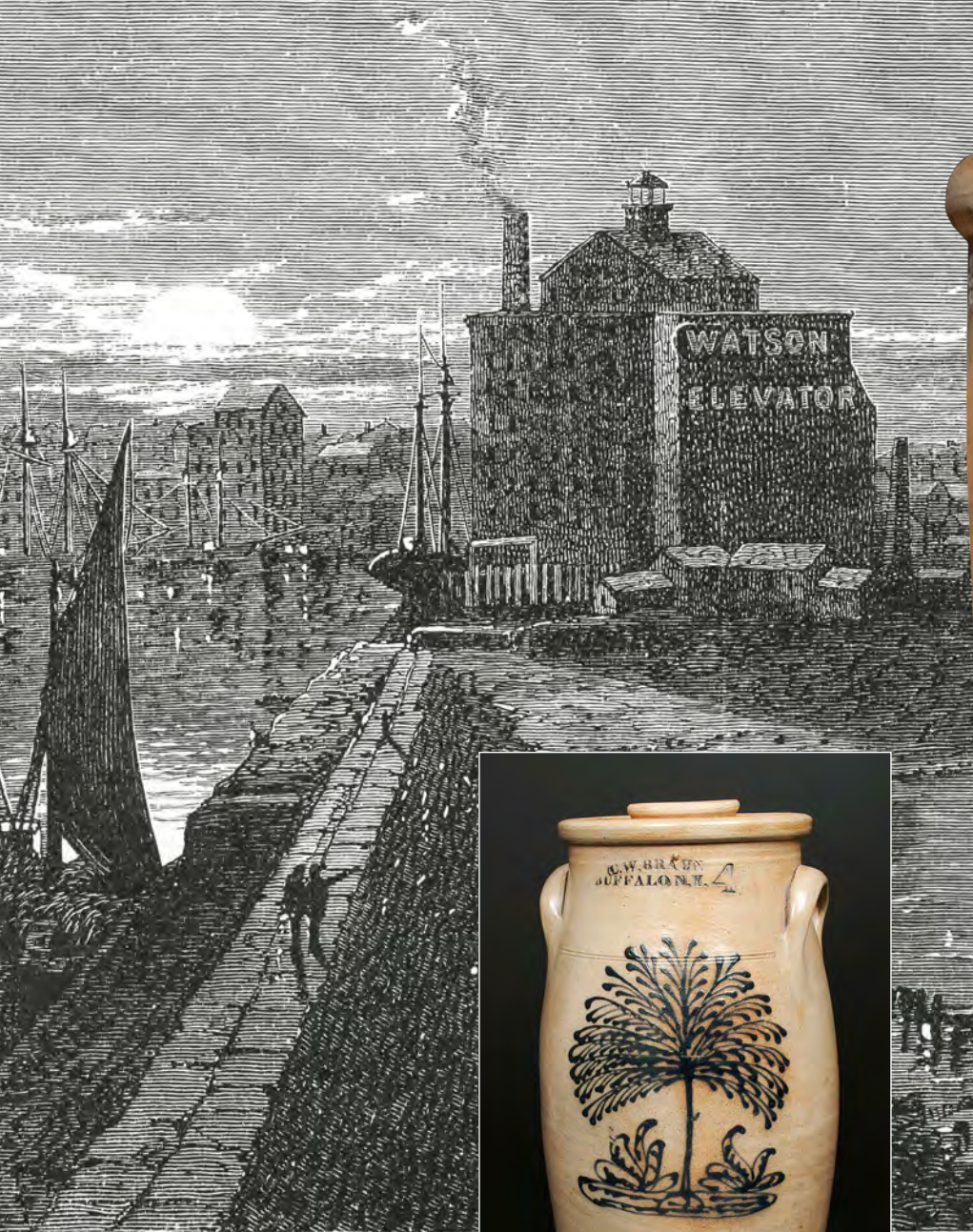
Potters were making earthenware and redware in the United States from the very beginning of colonial times. They used clay that was available in their region. Most clay in the United States is of inferior quality and cannot withstand the high temperatures required to make heavier, longer-lasting, nonporous stoneware. Remember, there were no refrigerators, Tupperware, or Saran Wrap. Food and leftovers needed to be kept cool and stored where vermin couldn't have easy access.

The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 changed that. Now potters could buy quality grey clay from Long Island or New Jersey to make salt-glazed stoneware for \$1 a ton. It is thought that Dutch

potters discovered the shiny salt glaze when they fueled their kiln with old barrels from herring that contained salt. Sodium from salt combines with quartz from the clay to produce a glassy, shiny impervious coating of the stoneware. They could now easily create superior quality food and drink storage containers that weren't brittle or glazed with the toxic lead of its predecessor, redware. Homemakers and whiskey proprietors alike were happy to pay the higher price.

The first potter in Buffalo was Armond Parsons, who ran a kiln in Cold Springs near Main and Ferry Streets. During Buffalo's early settlement, this was a hamlet surrounded by forests. No other information or artifacts from this pottery exist.

Godfrey Heiser was the first marked stoneware manufacturer in the city of Buffalo. He was a German immigrant born in Schwalbach, Germany, in 1799. Schwalbach is only an hour away from Westerwald, Germany's region known for its pottery.



[Right] Very rare four-gallon stoneware churn with cobalt tree decoration, stamped C.W. BRAUN BUFFALO N.Y., circa 1870, Crocker Farm



[Above] Very rare stoneware churn with cobalt civil war soldier smoking a pipe. Stamped C.W. BRAUN BUFFALO N.Y., circa 1870, Dave Potter collection.

Here Godfrey probably learned the German art of pottery making handed down from the Middle Ages. The Germans used cobalt salts that could withstand the high temperatures of the kiln, some 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, to decorate their stoneware wares with simple floral and leaf patterns and birds and animals on special occasions. Godfrey arrived from Philadelphia in 1828, taking a canal boat from Albany to Buffalo via the newly established

STONE WARE AND PORTABLE FURNACE FACTORY.—The subscribers (late of Albany) have established a Stone Ware and Portable Furnace Factory in East Seneca St where they intend to keep on hand a large assortment of Stone Ware and Portable Furnaces, which they will sell low for cash or approved credit. Ware packed in Crates or Hogsheads, at short notice, and delivered at the Canal Basin free of cartage, or at any place in the country on reasonable terms. They now have an extensive assortment on hand, and are constantly manufacturing, and will sell to their friends and customers as good an article in their line, and as cheap as any fair dealer. Also FIRE BRICK of all descriptions furnished to order. All orders by mail or otherwise, thankfully received and punctually attended to.
HEISER & VOGELSANG.
Buffalo, May 13. 39

Erie Canal. His first business endeavor was a lime kiln on Exchange Street. In 1834 he started a pottery at 149 East Seneca Street, east of Michigan. He was listed as a partner in Jacob Henry's Albany Portable Stove Works from 1831 to 1832, even though he lived in Buffalo. His first advertisement appeared on May 7, 1834 in the *Buffalo Patriot and Commercial Advertiser*. [Left]

There is a marked ovoid stoneware jug bearing both proprietors' names. John Vogelsang was involved in a litigation suit and promised to move to Ohio. On December 12, 1835, a similar advertisement appeared under the firm name of G. Heiser & Co., with listed proprietors being G. Heiser, G. Doane, and A.F. Birchard. A marked 2-gallon ovoid jug also bears the last names of the three proprietors. In 1836 only Heiser and Doane were in partnership, verified by a jug incised with their names. There are also pieces marked Heiser & Co., with those mentioned above assuming to be the company.



[Above] This 3-gallon jug with "Incised Fish and Arrow" and number 3 (x4), G. Heiser Co Buffalo. From the the Henry Ford Museum collection.

[Inset Below] Three cobalt-decorated stoneware jars, stamped J. HEISER BUFFALO, NY, circa 1852-1856, Crocker Farm auctions.

Godfrey's artwork is primarily simplistic floral designs, but an incised fish crock is in the Henry Ford Museum collection in Michigan. This fish has an arrow in its mouth pointing to the right. Is the fish a Christian symbol of Christ? Is the arrow pointing to the right a symbol for protection, thus meaning Christ is our Protector? Here lies some of the mystery in deciphering these hieroglyphics. Another rare early crock from a private collection stamped Heiser & Co is incised with a pig pulling a sleigh and inside the sleigh is a man groping a woman's chest and crotch. There is no mistake in the meaning here: the man is a pig; thus, a horse is not pulling the sleigh but a pig. Detailed artistic pieces such as this were the rarity, not the norm, as this took time away from producing more pots.

In 1837 they dissolved their partnership, and G. Heiser became the sole proprietor.

Godfrey came from a family of 11 siblings, and three of them joined him in America—his brothers Henry, John, and sister Elizabeth. Elizabeth married Christian Hormel and her grandson, George, founded the famous Hormel Meat-packing Co. Godfrey's brother, Henry, came to Buffalo in 1834. Henry was a soldier who fought against Napoleon in the Battle of Waterloo. In 1836 he lost three children to cholera. Henry was a cooper by trade.

There are marked stoneware pieces bearing the name H. Heiser, but only one decorated floral piece is known in the John Burton collection. From 1847 to 1852, he helped manage Heiser's

brewery with Godfrey. In 1848 Godfrey transferred the pottery to Phillip Mugler and started a brewery with John Holzer on the same site as the pottery between Seneca and Carroll Streets. In the hot summer months, brewers could not brew as the beer would spoil without refrigeration. In the frigid cold of Buffalo's winter, potters could not operate their kiln, but they could brew beer. This business co-partnership helped keep the Heisers employed year round.

In 1856 the brewery burned, but Heiser's home, which adjoined the brewery, was saved. The fire originated in Heiser's store from tar stored near the furnace. In the buildings were 5,000 barrels of barley malt valued at 11 shillings per bushel, 500 barrels of beer valued at \$6 per barrel, and \$1,000 worth of hops.



In an 1850 census, John Holzer, who lived next door to the pottery, is listed as an ornamental Japanner; it's possible he used his art skills to decorate the stoneware. In 1864 the brewery business was passed down to Godfrey Jr. and John Holzer, who passed a few years later.

An 1840 city directory lists a Jacob Heart working as a potter for

Godfrey Heiser. He doesn't show up again. He does appear in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania as a potter making earthenware and passed in 1867. There are earthenware pieces attributed to him and a signed bedpan.

Phillip Mugler was born in Strasburg, the German part of France.

He arrived on the ship, *The Albany*, in 1838 and married Margaret Heiser, the daughter of John Heiser. There are more pieces marked J. Heiser than any of the other marks. Whether it was John Sr. or Jr. is difficult to say as there was a Godfrey Jr., and Godfrey Sr.'s nephews also bear these names, so tracing the genealogy and trying to keep the names straight is a challenging process.

When he took over the pottery in 1848, it was known as P. Mugler & Co. The company was John Heiser. They were partners until John died in 1856. They were both involved in the brewing trade, and there are known P. Mugler-incised stoneware beer bottles. In 1852 Phillip became a grocer at Seneca and Hamburg Street. It is possible he was helping sell stoneware at his store as potters seldom sold their wares on site but rather sold to retailers at a 30% discount.

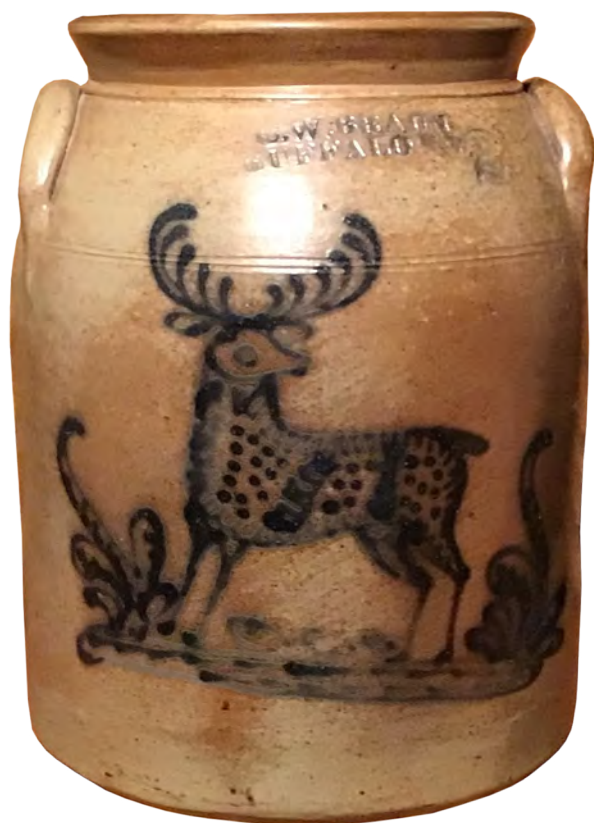
At the Forest Lawn Cemetery, looking west from the tomb of Buffalo's President Millard Fillmore, you can see the obelisk tomb for the Mugler family with the Heisers' earlier tombs laying flat in the grass. The Heiser tombs are adorned with Masonic symbols. Researching this clue, I discovered they belonged to the second German-speaking sect of Freemasons formed in Buffalo. While the dead do not speak, their proximity to each other tells us of a close familial relationship they shared in the stoneware and brewery business and in the joys and trials of everyday life.

An 1855 city directory shows a potter, Christian G. Bruehl, living with and working for John Heiser. Christian was a Wurttemberg potter. In 1860 he lived with Charles W Braun, who took over the Heiser pottery. Was Christian a relative to the other potters or just hired for his skills as a potter? Genealogical research thus far does not show any relationship, but it is very plausible as he was living with Braun.

In 1866 Christian ventured out on his own and started a pottery on Buffalo's East Side at the corner of Watson and Peckham Streets. Oddly, the Heiser pottery was only blocks away from the ship canal, where clay could easily be transported to the pottery via wagon. Christian would have had much more expense getting the clay to his pottery. In 1869 his pottery burned, and he became a grocer briefly. Christian was active in German singing societies, the Saengerbund and Liedertafel, of which Braun was also an active member.

Bruehl rebuilt his pottery and maintained it until 1885, when he returned to work for Braun. We unearthed the privy on this site, hoping to find some marked pieces. We filled a bucket full of shards. The following morning I anxiously washed the mud-covered artifacts and, much to my delight, found a shard incised "Chr. G. Bru" with a W below it. Bruehl-marked stoneware is very rare. Our efforts were not wasted.

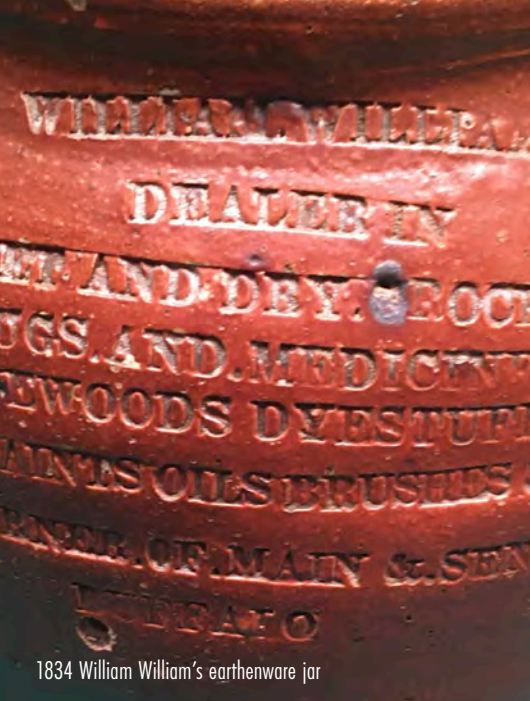
Looking at one shard with just a smidge of cobalt blue, we could tell comparing it to an intact piece that it matched his workmanship. He tended to overfire the kiln, and the cobalt would blister. Another feature of his pots was a groove encompassing the pot, so other shards also could be attributed based on the grooves.



[Above Right] C. W. BRAUN BUFFALO N.Y. four-gallon butter churn with stoneware guide. Decorated with a large cross hatch flower design in cobalt blue.

[Left] Very rare stoneware jar with a stag. Stamped C.W. BRAUN BUFFALO N.Y., circa 1870, Dave Potter collection.

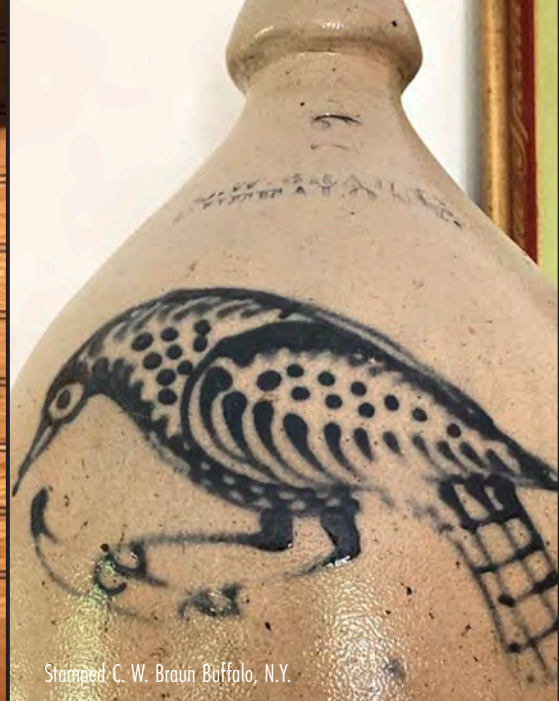




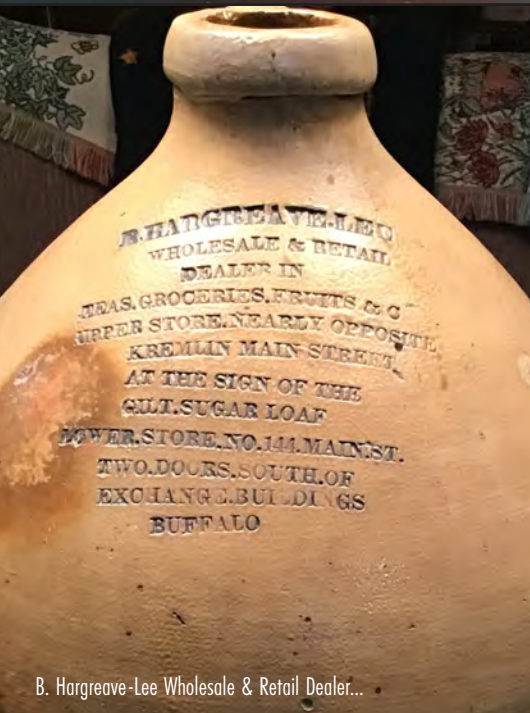
1834 William William's earthenware jar



Stamped C. W. Braun Buffalo, N.Y.



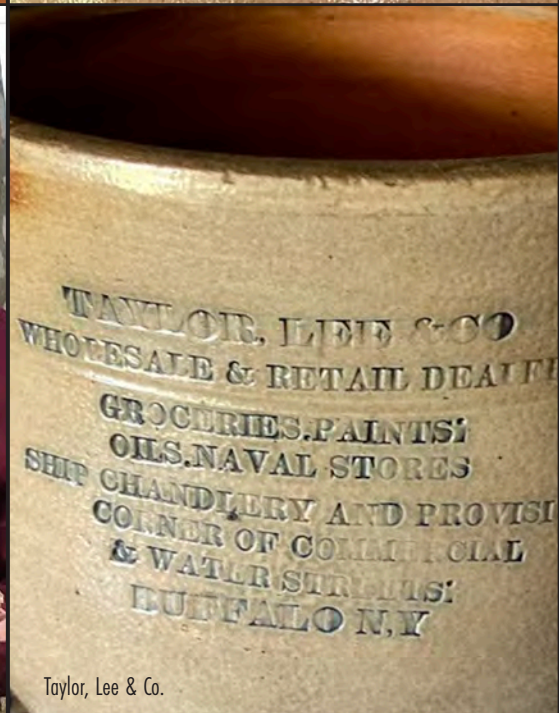
Stamped C. W. Braun Buffalo, N.Y.



B. Hargreave-Lee Wholesale & Retail Dealer...



David Potter holding shards from the Christian Bruehl pottery site in Buffalo, N.Y.



Taylor, Lee & Co.



Fuchs Brothers...



Stamped C. W. Braun Buffalo, N.Y.



Stamped C. W. Braun Buffalo, N.Y.

Although just a vacant plot now in the urban prairie, a large Sycamore tree near the curb gave me great joy, knowing it provided shade on a hot summer's day in the city when Christian ran his kiln. Driving home, I passed three deer at a vacant lot on Shumway and Peckham. Never did deer roam when I lived in the area forty years ago; no, probably not since Bruehl ran his kiln over 100 years ago.

There are three known cobalt blue decorated crocks stamped "Christian G Bruehl Corner of Peckham & Watson St," and a marked plain brown Albany slip glaze molasses jug and crock with the potter's fingerprints on the bases where he held the pots upside down to dip them into the glaze. We haven't found a photo of Christian yet, but we have his prints. Christian became a policeman at one point and ended his career working for The Buffalo Pottery Company from 1894 to 1906. Stoneware potters could not compete with the lighter-weight, mass-produced porcelain being produced. Christian is buried with his wife, Marie, in the Buffalo Cemetery on Pine Ridge in Cheektowaga.

In 1857 Charles W. Braun bought the kiln from Heiser. Charles married John Heiser Jrs. wife, Augusta, who had a four-year-old son John Heiser. He was later adopted and named John Braun. It's a mystery as to what happened to John Heiser. According to Ancestry.com, it appears he went back to Germany and remarried. There are no records of a divorce. Charles and Augusta's daughter, Bertha, married George Dold of the world's largest meatpacking company, Dold Meats, and moved to Wichita, Kansas, where they had another factory. Braun had a relative, Frederick, also listed as a potter.

Braun's decorated stoneware was superior in artistic design. Besides flowers, he had birds, roosters—a symbol of agrarian society, and stags—a symbol of the wilderness. Potters added personality to animals with startling and humorous results often influenced by circuses that came through town.

Frequently, potters were inspired by current events in their local town. Two of Braun's rarest pieces in the New York State Albany Museum feature Wild Buffalo Bill Cody wearing a cowboy hat and another an Indian with the balloon saying "hold him." Wild Buffalo Bill Cody had a touring Wild West show where Indians would capture white men and who else could save them from their captors but Wild Buffalo Bill.

Other rare detailed Braun pieces include a 5-gallon churn depicting a dog. On December 21, 1874, Charles was playing with his children outside when he moved to catch one of them. It was then that their family dog jumped up and bit Charles on the lip, severely cutting him and requiring stitches. That was the last of Rover as the paper stated he now lay where the snow lays. Was this churn in memory of a beloved pet? It's the only known dog crock from Braun pottery.

Another rare crock depicts a Civil War soldier smoking a clay pipe. Any stoneware decorated with people, buildings, and animals other than birds is considered very rare among collectors and historians. A crock featuring an onion,

carrot, and potato may have been celebrating a fruitful harvest season. One of the most mysterious crocks features a branch with arrows in each corner pointing downward. Was this a crock designed to commemorate a deceased loved one? Willow trees were

To walk into the basement of Buffalo, New York, stoneware collector David Potter is to walk into a time machine of Buffalo's early industrial past. If these earthen vessels could speak, what stories would they tell?



David Potter stoneware examples.

frequently engraved on tombs as a symbol of immortality and represented the mourning of a loved one. Downward arrows are symbols of peace. Potters also made one-of-a-kind presentation pieces to commemorate historical events like world fairs.

Two unique pieces created by Braun include a tankard for the Academy of Music with the name “William Cambell Carpenter” and another depicting a fire rescue wagon with the words “Rescue and Social Club.” Braun’s factory closed in 1896. There are no pictures of the old potteries or records of who decorated their stoneware. It was challenging to find Charles’s final resting place because his real name was Carl, although everything written about him is in the name Charles. He rests with his wife, Augusta, in Forest Lawn Cemetery.

There are many advertising incised jugs featuring grocers, druggists, and whiskey proprietors. Many have no potters makers mark stamped on them, emphasizing the proprietor’s name instead. Based on some of the decorated floral designs, we can attribute them to certain potteries based on similarities in the design.

The earliest known piece of Buffalo pottery is a jug incised “James Miller Dealer in groceries and provions (sic) Main St near the Phenix (sic) Hotel Buffalo Cash Paid For Produce.” In 1821 James Miller placed an advertisement in the paper offering a reward for his lost cow, “She gave a good mess of milk when she strayed.” In 1829, James Miller was in partnership with R. Lee Hargreave, manufacturing soap and candles. In 1830 they purchased a brewery from Captain Myndert M. Dox of the War of 1812. Breweries produced a large amount of ash to germinate the barley to make malt. Perhaps this ash was then used to produce their soap and candles. An ovoid jar advertising the R. Hargreave Lee grocery store gave directions to the customer “R Hargreave Lee Wholesale & Retail Dealer in teas, groceries, fruit, Upper store nearly opposite Kremlin Main St at the sign of the Gilt Sugar Loaf Lower Store No 144 Main Street Two Doors South of Exchange Buildings Buffalo.”

An ovoid jug from Lucius Hubbard Pratt, son of Captain Sam Pratt of the Revolutionary War, matches an 1848 advertisement from the paper bearing the same advertising “Lucius H. Pratt Wholesale & Retail Dealers Groceries Paints Oil Glass Putty Powder, and Shot Wines Liquors Sugars Dye Stuffs No 163 Main Street Buffalo NY.”

When Buffalo was being burned by the British during the War of 1812, the Pratts’ slave girl, Tam, ran back to get their family silver. It was too late; she saw the following: “the soldiers and Indians were in the front room, had all the earthen jugs on the table, and ate up the sweetmeats and mince pies. Of the first, Mrs. Pratt had, as usual, a good winter supply consisting of native crabapples, wild plums, berries, etc.” This is probably Buffalo’s earliest reference to earthen vessels. Earthenware was made from local clays and fired at a much lower temperature in the kiln. It was much thinner, porous, and more fragile than salt-glazed stoneware. Salt-glazed stoneware was not possible until superior clay from Long Island and New Jersey could be shipped via the Erie Canal.

The Pratts were prominent businessmen in Buffalo, owning Pratt

Hardware and Pratt & Letchworth. They were proprietors selling horse saddles and later paint with Letchworth, donating his land that became Letchworth State Park.

When unearthing artifacts from a privy, more often than not, any stoneware retrieved is nothing but shards, but on rare occasions, a piece is retrieved unscathed by the ravages of time. One such piece was unearthed near the Buffalo River from a privy in the Old First Ward. It was stamped “C. W. Braun Buffalo NY.” In cobalt script were the initials “C.L.A.” I had no clue who this proprietor was until I talked to fellow stoneware collector John Burton from Brocton, New York. He informed me that he was saloon owner Charles Abel of Ohio Street from 1870 to 1908, which made perfect sense. It was only blocks away from where it was unearthed. A Buffalo newspaper clipping about the jug spoke of Buffalo’s rich waterfront past.

“Charley Abel of Ohio Street was once the most frequented resort in the city of Buffalo, being a favorite rendezvous at lunch time for the kings of the Board of Trade and grain buyers and the wheat importers and speculators in puts and calls, and lake captains and all sorts and conditions of men with money in their pockets. Abel’s stands alone, a landmark of the vanished greatness of a once prosperous locality, just as a lonesome tree whose brothers have all been chopped down stands towering in a meadow which was once a forest.”

Though one of the most simplistic pieces of Buffalo stoneware I own, it represents Buffalo’s wilder days when whiskey flowed, like the grain from ships but not into the grain elevators but into the earthen vessels of men. If it could speak, this tangible piece would tell tales of merciless storms on the Great Lakes, and the sailors who survived their wrath needing its healing power to calm their nerves. Or grain scoopers who needed this elixir, fire water, to alleviate their aches and pains after a twelve-hour shift. Sad but true, it’s well known that Buffalo’s waterfront district also bred squalor and prostitution: this harsh reality was a tad more palatable with a swig from one of Buffalo’s many whiskey proprietor’s stoneware jugs.

The potteries are long gone, with no known pictures, but the jugs and crocks that remain are folk art for the people who are fortunate to obtain them. Folk art that speaks volumes if we just listen or take the time to read about the master potters and the mud they turned into utilitarian art for the people.



David Potter



Peter Jablonski

