

# A Potter's Privy

# *Pieces and people help put together a picture of the past*

By Peter Jablonski

The first weekend of May for the past three years my wife, Heather, and I have attended a stoneware collectors' group biannual get together. It starts with a lecture on a specific type of pottery presented by one of its members at the New York State Museum in Albany. Following the lecture, members are given a behind-the-scenes tour of the Adam Weitsman stoneware collection. Members then proceed to Bennington, Vermont, for camaraderie and dinner at the Madison Brewing Co. Pub & Restaurant. The next morning is an outdoor stoneware flea market.

Three years ago the lecture was on Rochester (N.Y.) area potteries presented by Dr. John Sladek. In his presentation he showed a slide of the house of Thompson Harrington, who ran the stoneware pottery in Lyons, N.Y. Fast forward three years to the Covid crisis and now I have nothing but time on my hands. I obtained permission to dig the privy of Thompson Harrington. Digger Dave Potter, who collects Buffalo stoneware and belongs to the stoneware group, joined me.

The day started off by digging a trash pit in the yard next to Harrington's home. Dave found a Pennsylvania Keystone pint mason jar, and I unearthed a brass dragon. In Harrington's yard we did two

test holes, each being a well. Four weeks later the Privy Meisters were prepared to dig at a new permission. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned, because the tenant complained to the landlord even though we had not even started digging.

We decided on Plan B and probed the heck out of Harrington's yard. The soil is a sandy loam and the probe sinks everywhere. Luckily we had our six-foot probe. Right behind the backdoor Dave plunged it and pulled out ash on the tip. As we started removing dirt we could see it was a brick-lined privy. In all my years of digging I have never seen a brick lined privy in western New York state.

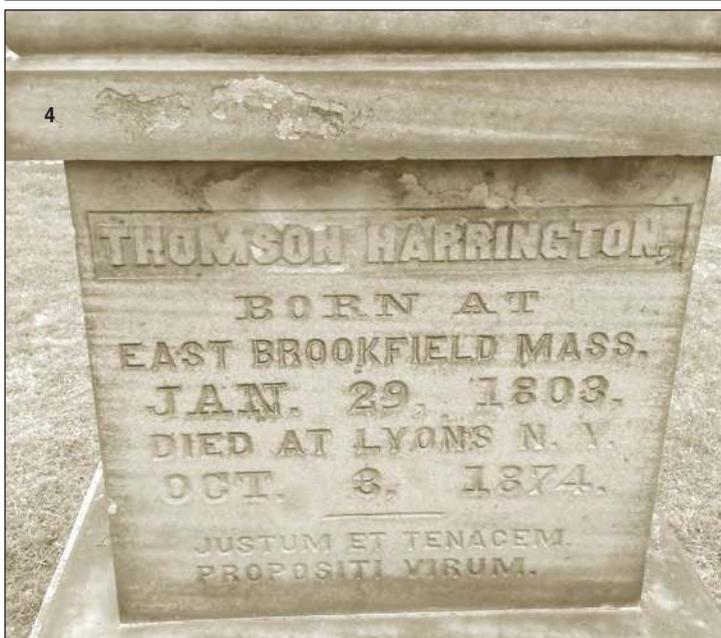
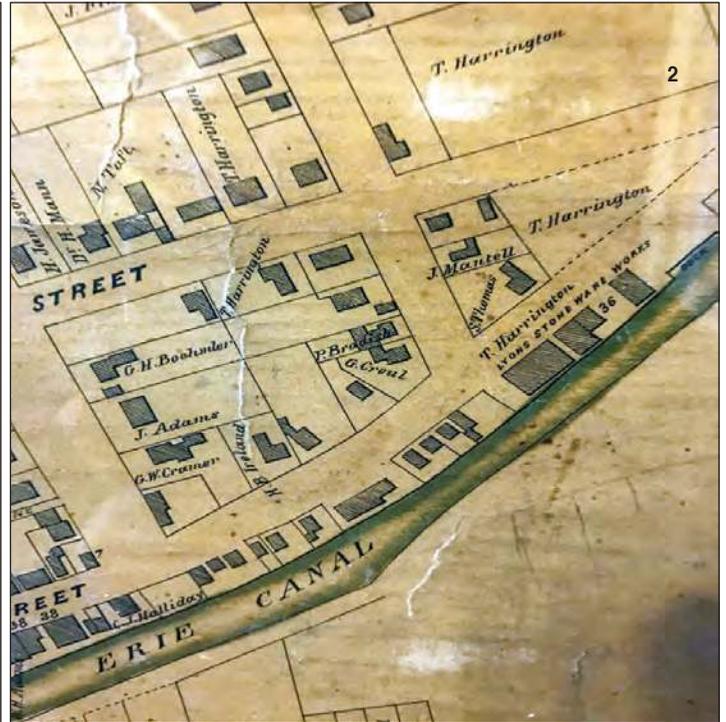
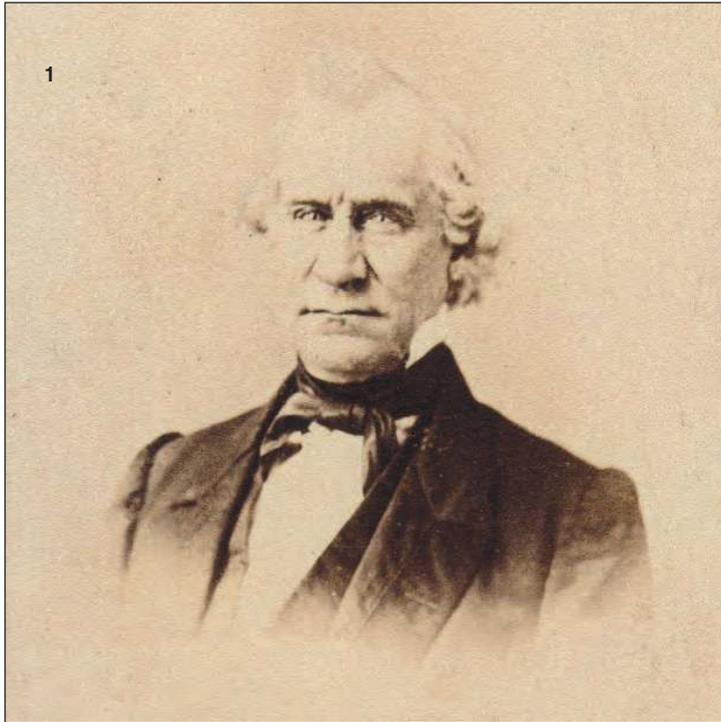
As we took turns clearing the vault of ash and debris we could see there was no end in sight. Coming out with the ash were typical shards of salt-glazed stoneware, ironstone china, clam shells and bones. Brandon St. John, aka Brando (his branded digging name), pulled out the first bottle, a stoneware master ink impressed Bourne England, followed by a beautiful ornately colored Pratt-ware jar depicting a detailed scene with ladies picnicking above a mansion with water and clipper ships below. Dave pulled out an unembossed cylindrical olive jar and a broken ovoid jar marked Lyons. The hole was getting too deep to throw the dirt out so we began to use a rope and a bucket.



Anything can appear during a dig.



Peter Jablonski unearths another treasure.



Cheney Bought of T. HARRINGTON, LYONS, Wayne Co., N. Y.

1855

STONE WARE. MANUFACTURED BY T. HARRINGTON, LYONS, N. Y.

A general assortment kept on hand. All Wares warranted to please customers. Orders by mail promptly executed.

DOZEN	PER DOZEN	EACH	DOLLAR'S CENTS
<b>ORRAM POTS.</b>			
6 Gallons	\$12 00	1 00	
5 do	10 00	83	
3 do	8 00	87	
3 do	6 50	54	
2 do	4 50	38	
1 do	3 00	25	
1-2 do	1 75	15	
<b>JUGS.</b>			
4 Gallons	\$8 50	71	
3 do	6 50	54	
2 do	4 50	38	
1 do	3 00	25	
1-2 do	1 75	15	
1-4 do	1 00	9	
<b>MOLASSES JUGS.</b>			
1 Gallon	\$3 50	29	
1-2 do	2 25	19	
<b>PRESERVE JARS.</b>			
3 Gallons	\$7 00	58	
2 do	5 00	42	
1 do	3 88	27	
1-2 do	2 00	16	
<b>BUTTER POTS WITH COVERS.</b>			
6 Gallons	\$15 00	1 25	
5 do	12 50	1 04	
4 do	10 00	83	
3 do	8 00	67	
2 do	6 00	50	
1 do	4 00	33	
<b>CHURNS.</b>			
6 Gallons	\$13 00	08	
5 do	11 00	88	
4 do	9 00	75	
<b>CAKE POTS WITH COVERS.</b>			
4 Gallons	\$10 00	88	
3 do	8 00	67	
<b>BATTER PITCHERS WITH COVERS.</b>			
1 Gallon	\$3 75	81	
1-2 do	2 25	19	
<b>PITCHERS.</b>			
1 Gallon	\$8 00	25	
1-2 do	1 75	15	
<b>MILK PANS.</b>			
2 Gallons	\$4 50	88	
1 do	3 00	25	
<b>SPITTOONS.</b>			
1st size	\$6 00	50	
2d do	4 50	38	
<b>SAFETY STOVE TUBES.</b>			
Assorted	\$4 50	38	
<b>WATER FOUNTAINS.</b>			

5



Sam found a most unusual item, a canine bear tooth whistle along with a Miliken's Parlor Pride Stove enamel bottle. Digger Don was next. When he found a bottle I eagerly asked, "Is there anything on it?" "Yes," Don replied. "What is it?" "Dirt," Don retorted. "Ha, ha," the Privy Meisters chimed in.

Donning a hard hat I went back in, carefully climbing down the ladder into the abyss. Hurray, I found two large shards marked T. Harrington Lyons, NY with cobalt flower decoration.

It's always fun to dig a privy, but now when you know whose home it was it takes on new meaning. Thompson Harrington was born in Brookfield, Mass., in 1803. He worked at a pottery in Hartford, Conn. before arriving in Lyons, N.Y., in 1826. In 1832 Nathan Clark & Co hired him to manage the pottery. He produced finely decorated stoneware depicting lions, horses and starbursts that sometimes incorporated a human face in the center.

According to Dr. Sladek, he was probably influenced by his time working at the Clark Pottery in Rochester, N.Y., that was run by John Burger. He owned shares of the pottery with Burger between 1851-54, when the pottery was known as Harrington & Burger, which made some of the finest stoneware of the nineteenth century.

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**PHOTO 1:** Thompson Harrington photograph.

**PHOTO 2:** An old map showing Harrington properties along the Erie Canal.

**PHOTO 3:** The Harrington home in Lyons, N.Y.

**PHOTO 4:** Thompson Harrington grave marker with Latin inscription.

**PHOTO 5:** A product and price list for T. Harrington stoneware.

#### THIS PAGE

**TOP:** Two examples of Harrington stoneware.

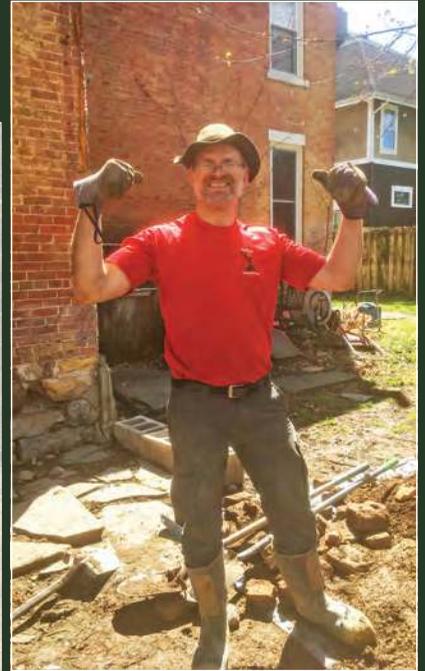
**BOTTOM:** A beautiful, ornately colored Pratt-ware jar depicting a detailed scene with ladies picnicking by a mansion, with water and clipper ships behind.





A collection of kiln furniture.

The finds are piling up quickly.



Peter flexes his digging muscles.



An unusual canine bear tooth whistle.

You never know what might come up.



Peter pulls a shard out of the pit.

The pottery equipment inventory for July 1836 valued it at \$20,651.57, which included tools, horses and a canal boat named the Water Witch. The Lyons pottery was located along the Erie canal, which gave them access to superior clays from Long Island and New Jersey needed to make stoneware.

Harrington was a very astute businessman who advertised throughout New York state. One ad boldly read: "Warranted superior to any manufactured in the state, purchasers themselves being the judges." Clearly, Harrington was successful and was well thought of in the community. Local history depicts him and his brother, Amos, riding at the head of parades and given positions of honor at public meetings. In the 1870s Harrington was aged and suffered from dementia. He leased the works in 1872 to Jacob Fisher. Harrington passed away in 1874. (From *Potters and Potteries of New York State, 1650-1900*, by William C. Ketchum Jr.)

Harrington's tomb is engraved with this epitaph in Latin: *Justum et tenacem propositi virum ...* Which translates to "The just man, firm of purpose, cannot be shaken in his rocklike soul, by the heat of fellow citizens clamouring for what is wrong, nor by the presence of a threatening tyrant."

Next, I unearthed a Hoffland's German Bitters. Brando pulled out a Burdock Blood Bitters Buffalo, and Dave a quart-sized stoneware pot lid. Sam discovered a house ink embossed Fred Aillings Rochester N.Y. along with an aqua cone ink. Brando found a broken Warner's Safe Cure. I pulled out a tear-jerker, a stoneware stand for a water jug with lots of cobalt decoration.

In a different privy at a different house I dug with digger Brian Gage — a talented artist who draws comical cartoons of our privial pursuits — and Digger Don, metal detectorist extraordinaire. Besides pontiled shards, we unearthed round and rectangular

stoneware squares along with an odd-fist squeezed clay that was clearly fired in the kiln. These pieces are kiln furniture.

When firing stoneware in a kiln for 2,300 degrees for three days potters had to stack the kiln with as much pottery as they could. The kiln furniture was placed on top of each crock so they wouldn't stick together in the kiln. Along with the kiln furniture we dug two broken stoneware lambs and a stoneware base showing legs of a human. Although we don't know who resided in this home in the 1840s clearly they had worked at the pottery, and perhaps they were good friends with Thompson.

Unearthing privies for tangible pieces of the past can be disheartening when most bottles and stoneware are in pieces. However, when using these shards to give us a glimpse into life in the past and helping us view the potters skills and tools they used in their trade, finding shards is priceless in teaching others about the past.

Most important is sharing the moments and history with good friends with a common goal. Special thanks to Dr. John Sladek for use of pictures and research information and, especially, for inspiring me to write this article.



The privy meisters celebrate another successful dig.