

JUGTOWN, SOUTH CAROLINA ITS POTTERS AND THEIR STONEWARE

*Gary Thompson**

Today's paper is dedicated to Howard Smith – a true pioneer in the field of Southern alkaline-glazed stoneware. A friend. A man who willingly shared his knowledge and expertise. A man who will be deeply missed by his friends and the ceramic world in general. A man one was better off by merely having known.

Stoneware of the Northeastern States has long been admired and collected. Its cobalt blue decoration and salt glazing has adorned the pages of virtually every magazine related to any aspect of country living. It is rightfully sought after by collectors and museums alike. Only very recently has Southern stoneware begun its rise to prominence as an art form and collectible vestige of our past. Within the last ten years, the Edgefield area of South Carolina has become recognized as a major center of stoneware production and most probably the birthplace of what is commonly referred to as "alkaline-glazed stoneware," a unique glazing process combining wood ashes and water, known only to exist in our Southern states and the country of China. Neither time nor purpose of today's meeting allows the examination and exploration of how southern potters became aware of a procedure for glazing stoneware known only to the potters of China. Suffice it to say that research indicates how that association could have occurred.

From the Edgefield District of South Carolina the production of alkaline-glazed stoneware spread throughout the southern states as its people migrated to various parts of the region.

Where ever large concentrations of clay deposits were located, the potters opened their shops (usually nothing more than log huts or wooden sheds). Generally, these areas became known as "Jugtown" – for obvious reasons. North Carolina had at least

* Gary Thompson is a collector of South Carolina stoneware. He is a CPA with Employee Benefits and Investment Services. This paper was presented to the Greenville County Historical Society on January 16, 1994, and was illustrated by examples from Mr. Thompson's collection.

two Jugtowns – The Randolph/Moore County area and the Buncombe County location. Georgia likewise had a Jugtown in Crawford County and another in Dekalb County. South Carolina had but one! But where is Jugtown, South Carolina? Margaret W. Morley, in her 1913 book, *The Carolina Mountains*, describes it as follows:

There is a fascination about a life where the people themselves make what they need. It returns us in imagination to an age of peace and plenty for everybody, to an era of happiness free from hurry, worry and sordid ideals, and if reality falls short of the poet's fancy, there yet clings a touch of romance about the home-made chairs, baskets and potters of the Southern mountains. When can one forget the long, sweet days of wandering about the country in search of the "jug-makers"! – "jugs" being the generic title of every form of home-made pottery. It was while in Traumfest that one was fired with ambition to discover the makers of the rude but picturesque jugs in such general use there. The people tell you they are made in Jugtown, down in South Carolina, but when you go out to find Jugtown, there is no such place. At Gowansville, below the mountains and some ten miles from Traumfest, one makes a serious effort to find – not Jugtown, that quest has long since been abandoned, but the nearest jugmaker.

Cinda Baldwin in *Great and Noble Jar* locates Jugtown, South Carolina as being on the Spartanburg-Greenville line south of Gowansville. Indeed that was the location of South Carolina's Jugtown – here in the Upstate and specifically in Greenville County. Jugtown was a major center of stoneware production, emerging in the mid-nineteenth century along the Tyger River, and lasting well into the twentieth century – approximately 1945. Jugtown was South Carolina's most important upstate pottery center. To this day Jug Factory Road exists and is well known to local residents as an important road through this area.

Now that we have established what Jugtown was and its location, who were these potters? What families were involved? What type vessels were made? Were these vessels made for a

utilitarian purpose or due to some need of artistic expression?

When one examines the potters involved, many familiar names arise. Names such as: Henson, Tapp, Clayton, Atkins, Belcher, Williams, Fulbright, Brown, Van Patton, and Johnson are but a few of those associated with stoneware production in the Jugtown area. The Henson family was one of the earliest clay families in the area. However, tradition states that circa 1825 "an old Irishman named Pennington was the first jug maker in the upstate." Perhaps additional research will result in a definitive answer.

William Henson, born December 15, 1818, was the patriarch of the Henson clan. His pottery shop, located on Jordon Road in Greenville County was reportedly one of the first in the area. Two of his sons, David Carr Henson and Jesse Vardry Henson operated pottery shops in the Mt. Lebanon Community of Greenville County in the late nineteenth century. Another son, William Thomas Henson, produced stoneware in a pottery shop behind Mt. Lebanon Church. Many years ago several grave markers in the form of stylized urns were present in the Mt. Lebanon Church cemetery. Those markers have long since disappeared. It is highly probably that Hensons or another Jugtown potter produced those markers. Today, his descendent, Billy Henson, has decided to carry on the tradition and now operates a pottery shop in the area.

The Tapps, another Jugtown family, also operated a stoneware factory. Being related by marriage to the Hensons resulted in vessels produced by the Tapps bearing a striking resemblance to that produced by the Hensons.

John Leonard Atkins established a pottery shop on Jug Factory Road after learning the pottery trade from the Hensons. Many of his relatives and descendants were known to have either operated a pottery shop of their own or "turned" for other potters. Among the other Atkins known to have operated in the area were: Pinkney Atkins, James Atkins, Jim Atkins, Gene Atkins, Theron Atkins, and Fack Atkins.

George Clayton, not a potter himself, founded a Jugtown area pottery around 1912 and hired both local and itinerant potters to turn ware. Among those working for the Clayton Pottery

(until May 8, 1940, at which time it was destroyed by fire) were:

- Several members of the Atkins family
- Albert Fulbright (an itinerant potter who also worked for the Johnsons at Lanford Station in Laurens County)
- Evan, Davis, Rufus and William Brown (all itinerant potters) later in Arden, North Carolina
- James Trull (who later started his own pottery in Buncombe County, North Carolina)

The Belchers (Wallace and Clarence, two brothers) established a pottery in the Motlow Creek Community after their father's death as a part-time means of supplemental income. Primarily art pottery was produced at this location.

Jugtown, South Carolina is unique in the annals of Southern stoneware production for several reasons:

- Its relative obscurity until recent years
- Its large concentration of highly skilled potters
- Its unique and varied glazes made from various mixtures of wood ash, feldspar, sand and water.

However, its uniqueness is heightened and accentuated by a little known fact when compared to the Jugtowns of other states. Within the Jugtown area of South Carolina, near Gowansville lived Rich Williams, Jugtown's only known black potter and the only known black potter of any of the other states' Jugtown communities.

Margaret W. Morley speaks of Rich Williams as follows:

On we go, and in the end find Rich – this side of the Tiger. Yes, he makes jugs, and he is at it. You get out of him that a great many people in that region make jugs, and you conclude that "Jugtown" is a jocular expression for the whole region of pottery clay, but having found Rich Williams, you bear no resentment.

He is an old-time negro, as black as ebony, evidently very proud of your visit, and you are soon watching the bony, black hands knead the clay and pat it into a loaf, then on the wheel coax it into shape. The veins stand out like cords on Rich's sinewy arms, his long hands draw the flat clay loaf up, up into the stately two-gallon jug with its narrow mouth,

or into the wide-mouthed butter crock, or the pub-nosed pitcher, big or little. Rich loves his work. He says he can make anything he wants to out of clay. Looking at him, you seem to see before you the original potter. His wheel, which looks as though he had made it himself, is in a little log hut, lighted by one tiny window. His outfit consists of the wheel, a tall stool, his clay, and a stick or two. He digs the clay from the bank of the Tiger River that runs near, - slate-colored, adhesive clay that Rich says is "powerful good" for jug-making. He grinds it in a wooden box by the help of a slow-footed mule that walks in a circle at the end of a long curved beam which turns an upright shaft fitted with wooden teeth at its lower end. Rich has a jug of water at his elbow, one of his own make, and there he sits all day, and every day, busy with his clay.

You watch tall jugs rise as by magic under his hands, and when they are done he lifts them off the wheel, and on every jug are slight indentations caused by the pressure of his hands as he lifts them. There are queer hollows in them, sometimes, and lopsidedness, for Rich is not always in the best mood, and while on some days jugs fly easily from under his hands, there are other days when they are contrary.

Rich tells you that this glaze is made from ashes and clay, that he washes the jugs inside and outside with it, and then sets them in the oven. His oven, out of doors near the shed in which he works, is a long, low vault of bricks and clay, with a fire-hole at one end and an opening at the other. He sets in his jugs, makes up a wood fire, and bakes them until they are done.

It seems as though one could learn to tell, from looking at a jug, what manner of man made it - and whether he was black or white. Black men's jugs are like them, some way, very careless, generous, picturesque. Rich's jugs are homely, but one likes them, they are so honest. A jug made by a potter who dug the clay out of the bank with his own hands, and soaked it, and ground it and shaped it, and glazed it, and baked it, must be a wholesome sort of jug to have in any

house. We had formed the habit of setting groups of Rich's jugs in the fireplace, partly to heat the water and partly for the picturesque effect, long before we knew of the ebony hands that molded them out of the gray clay of the Tiger River.

The place of the jug would seem to be firmly established in the mountains. Yet in these later days its existence is threatened. The tin lard pail has risen above the horizon. Everybody buys lard, and the "buckets" become family treasures. Even in to the remotest regions the insidious foe has crept, until one finds the unlovely lard pail occupying the place where, a few years ago, only the decorative brown earthenware jug would have stood.

The early years of stoneware production in Jugtown, South Carolina were concentrated in the manufacture of vessels for a purely utilitarian purpose. Forms such as milk pitchers, churns, butter crocks, jugs, cream pitchers, chicken waterers and the like constituted the potters daily production. The glass jar, refrigeration and the aforementioned tin lard pail forced potters to change their product mix and attempt to appeal to and react in accordance with a changing market. The craft revival of the 1920's likewise caused the Jugtown potters to adapt. While the need for a certain amount of utilitarian ware continued to exist, an increasing number of potters began the manufacture of items such as flower pots, miniature pitchers and other collectibles as opposed to utilitarian vessels.

Jugtown, South Carolina is becoming well established as an important upstate stoneware production center. It's production, while significantly diminished today to a point of relative non-existence provided our ancestors with the necessary means to function on a daily basis. Only now has Jugtown begun to rise to its rightful place of prominence in the world of Southern alkaline-glazed stoneware. Research is continuing in this area and will bring to light additional facts of significance.

The exhibit today contains a few examples of stoneware produced by Jugtown potters, specifically: the Tapp family, Clarence Belcher, Theron Atkins, William Henson, Rich Williams, Sam

Whelchel and John Smith, and Clayton Potter. As you view this stoneware, several points of significance are in order that emphasize the importance of jugtown stoneware in ceramic history:

- The Whelchel & Smith jug and the Rich Williams storage jar were previously on loan to the McKissick Museum for two years as a part of a national traveling exhibition.

- The Rich Williams storage jar will be on loan to the American Craft Museum in New York for two years beginning later this year as part of their national exhibition of articles from throughout the United States.

- The photographs are of Rich Williams, *circa* 1913.

In conclusion, I wish to express my gratitude and thanks to: the Greenville County Historical Society for allowing me this opportunity; my wife, Pat, and son, Gary, who have so patiently endured my hobby and encouraged me throughout the years, every step of the way; Cinda Baldwin, an incredibly 'wonderful researcher and author; and lastly, the Jugtown potters themselves who made all of this possible.