

THE STORY OF HAMPSHIRE POTTERY

by A. Harold Kendall - 1966

THE STORY

James Scollay Taft founded "Hampshire Pottery" in 1871, starting its manufacture in the Milestone Mills, a former clothespin factory on lower Main street, in Keene, N. H.

The site was ideal for pottery manufacture as the land around contained rich blue clay deposits and white silicas, while at nearby Troy was feldspar and clay suitable for ceramics.

Later, clay was obtained in Whitehall, N. V., ~~Keene~~^{As} in New Jersey, and in later years, special clay imported from Europe.

At first the company made stone jars and jugs, flower pots, soap dishes, large pitchers and milk pans. These were either a dark brown or grey color.

Mr. Taft had many trials and difficulties including many disastrous fires, one of which burned the buildings to the ground. Despite these troubles, Mr. Taft gradually began to enlarge the scope of the business making many new products.

In 1878 he began to make articles in the majolica ware producing these in green, brown, yellow and blue colors with raised figures and decorations.

In 1883, a new kiln for finishing decorative pottery was added and Mr. Wallace L. King, an artist, was hired to run this new department. The company now began to manufacture art specialties in many new and graceful patterns. These included fancy jars, pitchers, vases, rose bowls, trays and tea sets. They all consisted of white opaque body covered with flower and other decorations mostly painted by girls trained by Mr. King. Some of these pieces were marked with the initials of the decorator such as E. A. the initials of Eliza Adams.

The finish given these decorated pieces were known as the RoVal Worcester finish. Some of these required as many as five separate firings.

The Pottery also had the services of an old English Potter, Mr. Tom Stanley, who had brought from England many ideas new to Mr. Taft. He made many unusual pieces, shaping them by hand on a potters wheel. At this time many souvenir pieces were sold to summer resorts throughout New England decorated with local views of the vicinity in which they were sold. One notes that the old Boston store of C. F. Hovey advertized Hampshire Pottery, excellent for Christmas gifts.

In the July 2, 1895 edition of the Keene

Sentinel one reads the following:

One of the busiest manufacturing establishments in Keene just now is Hampshire Pottery on Main Street owned and managed by James S. Taft. Now is the time when orders for an important branch of the business carried on here are filled and what with applications for goods which have arrived late and the completions of assortments for different dealers and purchasers anxious for immediate shipments, there will be a considerable rush for several weeks. The recent change in the tariff deprived the potters of the United States of a protective duty of about 50 percent. The effect of this has been to close a good many concerns entirely and compel others to change their product almost wholly so as to supply goods not made abroad for which a demand could be found. Our pottery stood practically idle for several months while Congress was deliberating on the Wilson bill, but after the Democratic policy became settled by an adjournment, the proprietor set himself to work in earnest to manufacture attractive goods which could be sold.

Mr. Taft has for some time made a specialty of souvenir work and this branch of trade is still continued and is being enlarged. By making wares of artistic and pleasing shapes and ornamenting them with bits of landscape,

views of buildings and other typical scenes from many different localities the souvenir wares are produced.

Plates, bonbon dishes, pitchers, vases and various other shapes are made and the scenes represented upon them are from photographs taken at mountain, seashore and other resorts in all parts of New England, the middle and southern states. The wares are cast from special patterns giving a conformity of shape to each class and securing the best artistic effects. They are then fired in one of the large kilns from which they emerge as finished pottery but without ornamentation or decoration.

They pass next to the decorating rooms where the desired tints and colors are added and the views traced upon them by a special process which secures an accurate reproduction. The scenes are then finished by the brush of the decorator in the same manner as a picture is painted. A second firing in a special kiln is required after this by which process the colors are indelibly fixed and glazed upon the surface.

Souvenir goods are not the only ones which are being manufactured here however. An equally important branch of the business is that which deals with decorated pottery for

Household use and ornamentation. Mr. Taft has aimed to produce as fine class of decorative work as is made in this country and in this aim he has been most successful.

The employment of a Japanese artist having all the delicacy and peculiarity of touch and expression for which his country men are so noted has added a novelty and attractiveness of true merit to the wares produced and many original Japanese designs are found among the decorations. One of the handsomest pieces made is a tall chocolate pot with a heavy gilded handle ornamented with raised Japanese designs representing flowers or ferns of different kinds with a bird flying above them.

A variety of these decorations are found upon these and other wares, such as pitchers, vases, jars, plates and dishes of many patterns. Tea pots, sugar bowls with and without covers, creamers, etc. are made in many styles and colors and with varied decorations many of which are very modest and pretty. Some of the new figured bowls and platters appear to be handsome before they are decorated, the porcelain being remarkable smooth and free from defects. Among the most difficult patterns to produce are several large fruit dishes, salad bowls and plates or platters which are cast by a new process which produced very successful results.

The manufacture of several standard types of glass colored wares in greens, rich blues, etc. is continued thus making a greater variety than has hitherto been produced at this pottery.

A large show room has recently been built in the warehouse where the office is situated so that visitors find it much easier to make selections of goods than heretofore.

In 1904 Cadman Robertson, brother-in-law of Mr. Taft, entered the business as superintendent. He soon developed new and original patterns including the famous Mat glaze for which the firm became so well known. Mr. Robertson took extreme pleasure in working out new and original designs and finishes. It is said that he worked out over 900 different formulae in his work and it is these designs which most of us today see in the different homes in Keene and vicinity.

He developed different shaped bowls, - vases, lamps, candle holders and dozens of other articles in beautiful shades of browns, reds, blues and greens.

Although many of the earliest pieces of the pottery were unmarked, in later years several different trade marks were used. The most common were James S. Taft & Co., Keene,

N. H., J. S. T. & Co., Keene, N. H., Hampshire Pottery, and in some cases, just plain Hampshire. Also many of the pieces designed by Mr. Robertson were marked with an Minside of an 0 designating Emmo, the wife of Mr. Robertson. Mrs. Robertson assisted a great deal especially in the local showroom where the Pottery was sold at retail.

In 1914 Mr. Robertson died suddenly and his death was a great blow to the business.

In 1916 Mr. Taft finally sold the business to Mr. George Morton of Boston, who had been employed for some time by the Grueby Company of Boston.

In May of 1916 Mr. Morton fired a kiln containing over one thousand pieces which included most of the former popular shapes and standard colors with two or three new styles.

When we entered the first world war the demand for Pottery was decreased to such an extent that it was deemed advisable to close the factory.

Mr. Morton returned to the employ of the Grueby Company. With the approach of the end of the war, Mr. Morton returned to Keene and began the manufacture of Pottery again. He added machinery for the manufacture of common white china which was sold to hotels and restaurants.

Later he added presses for the manufacture of Masaic floor tile and through the years 1919, 1920 and 1921 the factory was busy on these new lines.

In 1923, because of the intense competition for pottery plants in New Jersey and Ohio, the Keene Factory was obliged to close its doors forever. In that year the plaster molds were either destroyed or scattered.

Mr. Taft passed away in December of 1923.

During the last few years, Hampshire Pottery has become a Collector's item and there are several sizeable collections in and around the Keene area.