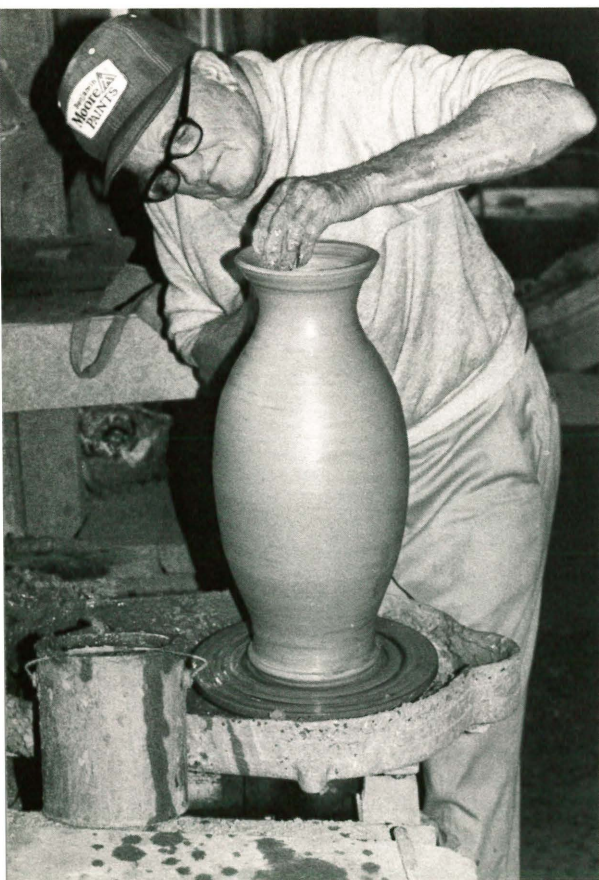


# Evolution of the Southern Potting Tradition

by Nancy Sweezy

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Joe Owen turning Rebecca pitcher. Seagrove, North Carolina.  
Photos by Tom Jackson

The southern potting tradition has evolved through three phases, each determined by the needs and living styles of its time: early lead-glazed earthenware patterned after British and European ware; 19th century utilitarian stoneware of indigenous style; and the brightly-glazed earthenware of the past sixty years showing eclectic inspiration.

Today, the thirty-five principal traditional pottery shops still operating in the South lie in a crescent swath from Kentucky through North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi to Texas. During the 19th and early 20th centuries there were hundreds of small potteries supplying ware essential to farm and homestead throughout the agrarian South. Notes a Mississippi potter, "They were like hillside sawmills, scattered around the countryside. Sometimes they had their kickwheels out under a shade tree." Southern potting has always been a family enterprise, combined with farming, with children helping in the shop as well as in the field, learning skills as they grow. Waymon Cole remembers that, when he was young, "We didn't have to buy nothing at our house but coffee, sugar, sody and salt."

Some simple earthenware was being produced on English coastal plantations by the mid-17th century. By 1720 William Rogers, referred to as "the poor potter of Yorktown" in reports sent back to England, was producing a substantial amount of earthenware and brown salted stoneware in Virginia despite regulations curtailing such manufacture. Lead-glazed earthenware for daily use was imported as well as produced in settlements here throughout the 18th century with techniques potters brought from Britain and northern Europe. Finer ware continued to be imported after Independence.

As interior regions of the South became settled, the pioneer homesteads needed a sturdy ware. By 1820 potters, some of them slaves, began making more durable vessels of stoneware: jars and jugs for storage, pitchers, cream pans and butter churns for milk processing and other necessary items, such as oil lamps, baby bottles, animal feeders, chamber pots and even grave markers. Early potters settled on farmland in the clay-rich piedmont crescent west or north of the sandy coastal plains. They dug clay, then moistened and ground it to a workable consistency in a simple mill rotated by the farm mule. In a small, earth-floored shop the potter sliced the clay to pick it clean of roots and gravel, worked it smooth by wedging and kneading, then turned a series of repeated shapes standing at a treadle kickwheel. The ware was burned hard with wood in a long, shallow "groundhog" kiln, built of homemade brick into a slope for insulation. The pottery was glazed with either an alkaline glaze indigenous to the region, made of ash, clay and sand or powdered glass, or by salt fuming, a technique brought from Europe. For salting, a kiln of unglazed pots is burned to high stoneware temperature, then salt is poured into the ware chamber through ports in the arch. The salt vapor-





izes and its sodium content bonds with the clay of the pots to form a clear glaze of orange-peel texture.

Pots were sold at the shop but were also hauled to distant general stores by wagon, the price of ware fluctuating between four and ten cents per volume gallon. Charles Craven remembers his father quitting a day's work when he had turned one hundred gallons of ware, satisfied that the four dollar income was more than he could make at any other work. Boyce Yow recalls hauling pottery with his father from Seagrove to eastern North Carolina counties in the early 1900s:

They let you know when they had the ware ready. You'd pack it in straw, or it would break running over the roots. The wagon had a white cover on it, kinda pitched up and stuck out over the front end. Had narrow wheels that cut down ruts. We hauled all the old pots — churns, crocks, flowerpots. We'd buy up other stuff they didn't have down there — dried fruits, peanuts. Sometimes we'd trade coffee, lard, plow points, axe handles. Bring 'em back for people here.

After the Civil War, a commercial market for whiskey jugs developed. New shops sprang up and old ones increased production to fill the new demand as well as the continuing farm needs. In the late 1900s many potters built large round "beehive" kilns or raised the shallow groundhog to a tunnel shape. Some began using commercially available brown Albany slip or off-white Bristol glazes.

Early in the century the enactment of Prohibition and the economic changes brought by the first World War precipitated a decline in the need for jugs and the farm ware, but, as potter Evan Brown from Arden, North Carolina noted, "The demand for churns didn't just up and disappear." In sparsely populated rural areas the style of living changed slowly; it was not until the 1940s and 1950s that several family enterprises in the deep South turned from a peripheral line of flowerpots to full production of a wide range of unglazed garden ware.

In more industrialized areas of the mid-South, however, the old potteries had to find a new market in the 1920s. During the Depression years many shops adapted their "bigware" skills successfully to making brightly-

Loading pots in rectangular downdraft kiln. Hewell Pottery, Gillsville, Georgia.



Wood firing of tunnel kiln. Lanier Meaders Pottery, Cleveland, Georgia.





Wood-fired, salt-glazed pitcher. Charles Craven Pottery, Raleigh, North Carolina.

#### *Suggested reading*

Burrison, John A. *Brothers in Clay: The Story of Georgia Folk Pottery*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983.

Greer, Georgeanna H. *American Stonewares: The Art and Craft of Utilitarian Potters*. Exton, Pa.: Schiffer Publishing Company, 1981.

Rinzler, Ralph, and Robert Sayers. *The Meaders Family: North Georgia Potters*. Smithsonian Folklife Studies No. 1. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1980.

Sweezy, Nancy. *Raised in Clay: The Southern Pottery Tradition*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984 (in press).

This article presents background information for the exhibition *Southeastern Potteries*, organized by the Office of Folklife Programs for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The exhibition will open June 27 in the National Museum of American History, adjacent to the Festival site, and continue until August 19.

glazed, decorative earthenware urns and jars — “big enough for a child to hide in” — for patio, porch and garden. World War II depressed this pottery market and the small family shops survived through the 1950s by making ware “18 inches on down” for the home, as well as wholesale tourist items.

The range of the old stoneware forms had been fairly narrow and well-defined. To establish a market for homeware the potters had to produce a wide range of forms and colors that required more refined turning skills, a new knowledge of complex glazes, and attention to aesthetics as well as function. As Dorothy Auman remembers:

People were so picky. You were trying to appeal to them enough to buy, so you make many, many shapes. The very same bowl shape ended up in several forms — it's been crimped, fluted, pulled in and made a squat basket.

In this period, labor-saving machinery was devised, kilns were improved and fired with modern fuels. Today, the potteries with roots in tradition extend from small shops, burning churns and jugs with wood, to the large horticultural shops, with specialized turners and semi-automated equipment. Most of the shops remain simple and labor-intensive with an assortment of mechanical aids built or adapted by the potters for their needs.

While the product of each period of pottery making in the South has differed, certain elements of form have been retained which link the earlier types of ware to that which is traditional today. These elements have been formed by the potters' view of the craft as functional and are inherent to their method of shaping the ware. Because the potter expects to make many utilitarian pots, he or she turns a series of one shape — twenty casseroles or a hundred mugs — completing each form on the wheel. The turning is rapid, deftly economical. Because each form is completed *on* the wheel without later trimming, the spontaneous integrity of the pot's shaping is caught in a swift moment. Pots shaped completely by the turning of plastic clay are, of necessity, wide-based, giving them an earth-bound, practical quality.

Overall, the production processes, even when aided by mechanical means, follow the inherent rhythms of earlier patterns, from the digging of clay in dry season, daily turning and periodic firing, to passing skills from one generation to the next. Many potters agree with one who says, “It's just something to make a living.” But, it is not a living that many, once involved in it, have given up.