Southern Pottery Tradition in a Changing Economic Environment

by Charles G. Zug, III

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From the middle of the 18th century through the early decades of the 20th, potters of North Carolina produced thousands of sturdy, utilitarian earthenwares and stonewares. The bulk of their output—jars, jugs, milk crocks, and churns—was used for the preservation of home-grown meats, vegetables, fruits, and dairy products. Other forms, such as baking dishes or pitchers, were designed for the preparation of foods and their consumption at the table. The potters also maintained a broad sideline of flowerpots, pipes, grave markers, chamberpots, and other useful wares. On rare occasions, they turned a whimsey or two, perhaps a face vessel to parody the looks of some neighbor or a ring jug* to demonstrate their virtuosity.

Their craft was by nature conservative, regional, and utilitarian. Essential ideas and basic practices were rooted in community life and passed on informally with relatively little change from one generation to the next. The family was the key unit of production and transmission: the Coles and Cravens, for example, settled in the eastern piedmont of North Carolina in the 18th century, and their descendants, now in the ninth generation, remain at pottery wheels today. The forms and glazes employed closely reflected the locales in which they were made. Of necessity, potters had to rely on nature's bounty, so they gathered their raw materials from the surrounding river bottoms, fields and forests; ultimately, the wares they produced from such materials were valued entirely for their utility, not for their appearance. Most were sold by the gallon—that is, according to their capacity, not their aesthetic appeal—and they were purchased by a rural, self-sufficient people who depended on them for survival.

Starting about 1900, however, large-scale economic, technological and social changes made it increasingly difficult for the traditional potter to sell his wares. Commercial dairies eliminated the need for churns and milk crocks in the home. An abundance of cheap, mass-produced glass and metal containers combined with improved methods of transportation and refrigeration to lessen the importance of home food preservation. Increasingly restrictive Prohibition laws greatly reduced the demand for whisky jugs. And, finally, the young men who left their communities to fight in two World Wars discovered new and more financially rewarding occupations than that of the potter.

* Ring jug—a pottery container in the form of a hollow ring with a spout on the top

Many of the old family shops closed, but some, like the Coles and Aumans, stayed at their wheels and learned to adapt to the new conditions and demands. In order to survive, potters reinterpreted their traditional craft for a new market outside of their farming communities. Particularly during the 1920s and 1930s they became active innovators and radically altered their products, technologies and marketing strategies.

Unquestionably the most visible evidence of the new order was an explosion of fresh forms and glazes. About 1932 Jacon B. Cole of Montgomery County published a catalog in which he offered no less than 524 different forms, ranging from tiny candlesticks and pitchers to massive urns. On the whole, the new wares were much smaller than their predecessors, mere "toys," as some of the old potters scornfully referred to them. Many were still associated with food, but their primary function now shifted from preservation to consumption, that is, they were designed to be used at the table. In addition, the potters produced a greatly expanded repertory of horticultural and art wares by drawing on diverse sources of inspiration, such as Oriental ware and the products of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Closely coupled to the innovations in form was a dramatic expansion in the variety of glazes. The earlier potters had a very limited palette, one that was severely restricted by the local materials available to them. By the mid-1920s, however, potters had begun to experiment with commercial oxides of iron, cobalt, copper, tin, manganese and other metals. In his catalog Jacon Cole declared that

> any article shown herein may be supplied in any of the following colors: yellow, white, rose, dark blue, Alice blue, periwinkle blue, turquoise, blue-green, enamel green, peacock blue, blue and white, orange, rust and antique.

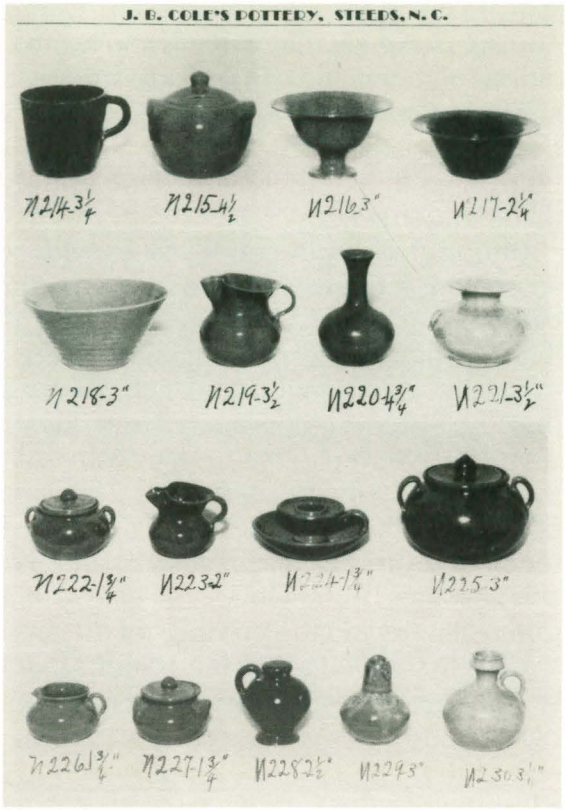
One can well imagine one of the oldtime potters contemplating this dazzling array of possibilities and puzzling over whether to glaze his molasses jugs Alice or peacock blue.

The new pottery was brightly colored and carefully finished; it was made to be seen, not hidden away in a springhouse or a cellar. The potters had to master new technologies, such as mechanical devices to mix and purify the clays, or electric wheels to increase the output and quality of these decorative wares. Even the old wood-fired groundhog kiln became a casualty. While it worked well for the large utilitarian pieces, it proved a poor choice for the more numerous and smaller pots that required a carefully controlled firing to attain proper texture and color. Gradually, kilns were shortened and raised so that the wares could be stacked on shelves or set in protective saggers.* Using new fuels, such as coal, oil and electricity, these redesigned kilns assured a more even flow of heat and hence more predictable results.

To market their output, potters had to develop new strategies to attract tourists and a more urban clientele. Some relocated their businesses. In 1934 Arthur R. Cole left rural Randolph County, moved to the town of Sanford and set up shop on Route 1, which was heavily traveled by tourists heading to and from Florida. Others issued cata-

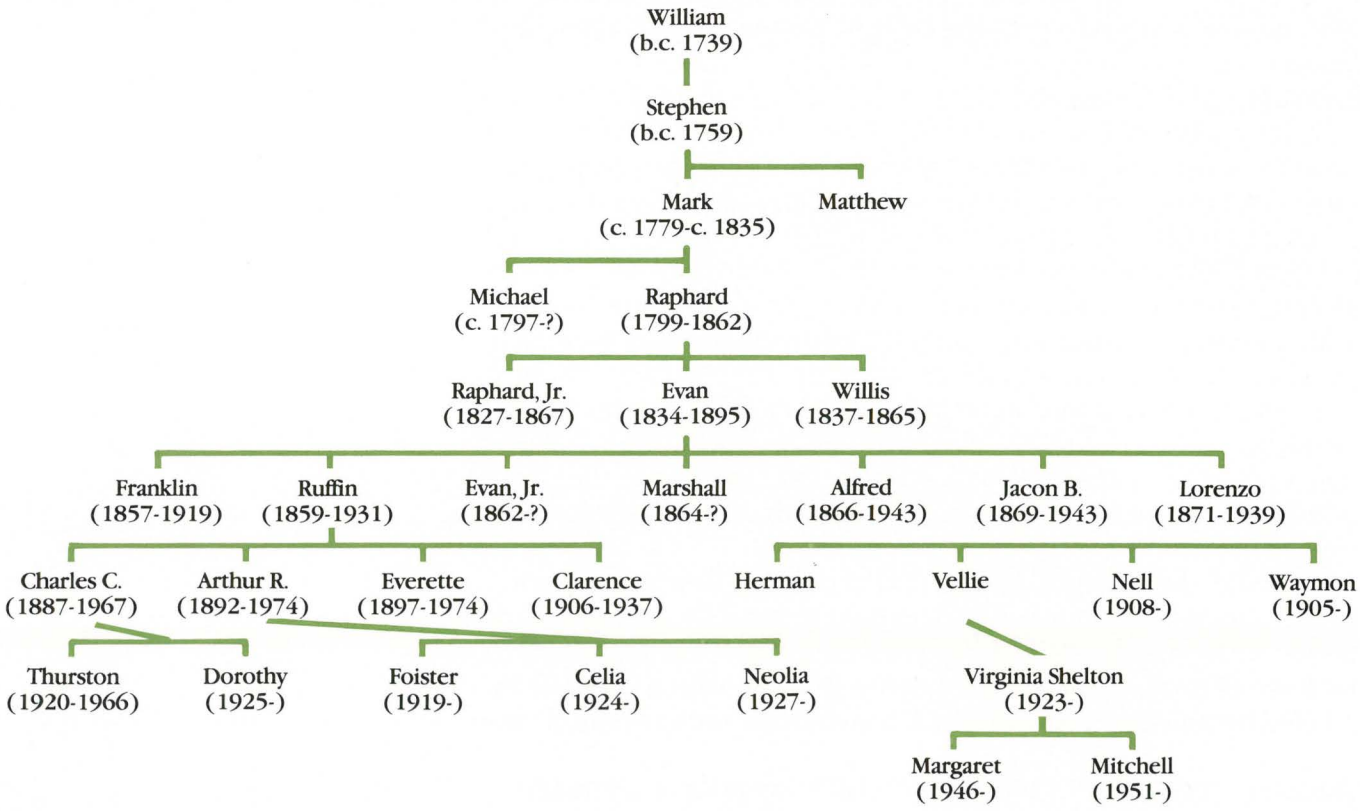
* Saggers—a protective container in which wares were set inside the kiln

Nell Graves and Waymon Cole, the present owners of J. B. Cole's Pottery, Montgomery County, as illustrated in their father's catalog, ca. 1932.

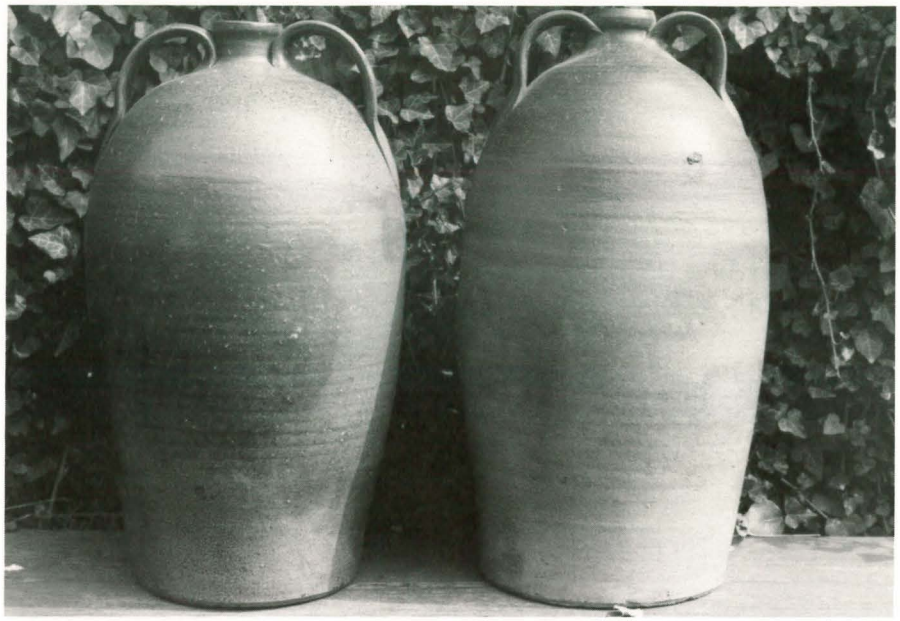


A sample page from the catalog issued by J. B. Cole's Pottery, Montgomery County, ca. 1932.
Photos courtesy Walter and Dorothy Auman

Cole Genealogy



Dorothy Cole Auman, an eighth generation potter, turns a pot in her shop in Seagrove, North Carolina.
Photo courtesy Randolph Technical College



Two salt-glazed stoneware five-gallon storage jugs made by Ruffin Cole, Randolph County, ca. 1890.
Photo by Charles G. Zug, III, courtesy Walter and Dorothy Auman

logs, went into wholesaling and shipped their wares as far as New York, Florida and California. They also added display rooms to their shops and stamped their names on all of their pots to identify them for the purchasers.

One subtle consequence of these changes was a new pattern of work. Because the earlier potters were also farmers, the practice of their craft had to dovetail with nature's cycle of planting and harvesting. Now the potter's peak periods were weekends and summers; he had, in effect, become a full-time craftsman, one who responded to clock time rather than the old seasonal rhythms.

Change is a constant process in all societies. At times it occurs so rapidly that it tears apart the earlier cultural fabric; yet just as frequently, in retrospect, it seems to proceed in a sane and orderly fashion, creating new principles and procedures out of the old. Clearly this latter sort of change is apparent in North Carolina pottery, where the innovations in product, technology and marketing flowed naturally out of the older folk tradition.

Over time, innovation largely replaced conservatism; eclectic inspiration, the old regionalism; and conscious artistry, the once pervasive utilitarianism. Yet many elements of earlier days remain. The potters dig and process their own clays and retain time-honored forms and glazes. They remain production potters, who replicate large numbers of useful forms at very reasonable prices. Most important, the informal, cluttered shops continue under the firm control of the old families. As Jacon Cole proudly affirmed in his catalog,

> I have made pottery all of my life, and so did my father before me. Then I taught my son and daughter, whom you see at their wheels. Later as business increased, extra workers were required. So I taught my two sons-in-law.

Through the persistence and wisdom of families, such as the Coles and Aumans a healthy new hybrid tradition has evolved, one built on the old southern folk tradition but also infused with contemporary American ceramic tastes and addressing new needs.

Suggested reading

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

Crawford, Jean. *Jugtown Pottery: History and Design.* Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Publishers, 1964.

Rinzler, Ralph and Robert Sayers. *The Meaders Family: North Georgia Potters.* Smithsonian Folklife Series 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.

Zug, Charles G., III. *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming, fall, 1986.

Suggested films

Jugtown: Pottery Tradition and Change. 28 min. color. Smithsonian Institution.

The Meaders Family: North Georgia Potters. 30 min. color. Smithsonian Folklife Series.

Potters of the Piedmont. 19 min. color. Halycon Films, Raleigh, North Carolina.