Nineteenth Century Pottery Production In Illinois¹

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Abstract

Fortunate to have a wealth of fine potters clay suitable for ceramic production, Illinois has played a significant role in the development of the United States' ceramic industry. By the early 1830s, several redware production centers had been established in the state supplying local and regional markets. Except for the far northwestern portion of the state (where redware production persisted into the early 1890s), stoneware production began to replace redware by the 1840s. By the middle nineteenth century, several stoneware production centers had developed. At these centers, small, traditional, family oriented workshops clustered around a single community. During the late nineteenth century, changing transportation systems, shifting population centers, and the introduction of the factory system of production quickly altered the character of the ceramic industry in the state as well as the nation as a whole. By the early twentieth century, several large factories had been established along the major railway corridors and supplied the state and much of the trans-Mississippi west with stoneware. This paper presents a brief contextual history of the Illinois pottery industry stressing both temporal and regional variations in pottery production within the state.

¹ This paper represents portions of a chapter in the manuscript entitled "Early Industrialized Pottery Production in Illinois: Archaeological Investigations at White and Company's Gooselake Stoneware Manufactory and tile Works, Rural Grundy County, Illinois" which was produced by Fever River Research for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources in 1994, and later published by the Illinois State Museum (Mansberger 1997). This paper was previously presented at the 1995 Society For Historical Archaeology Conference on Historical and Underwater Archaeology, which was held January 4-8, 1995 in Washington, D.C.
Nearly a decade ago, I received a phone call from a fellow Springfield (Illinois) resident named H. Wayne Price wanting to know if I’d be interested in riding with him and Warren Roberts (among others) to the upcoming Pioneer America Society meetings. I was thrilled to have been asked, but unfortunately, was not able to attend the society’s annual meetings that year. Nonetheless, this was the beginning of a yearly event in which several “students” of material culture and the vernacular landscape spent one or two days together traveling to the annual Pioneer America meetings. Several times, Warren and his wife Barbara joined us in these cross-country trips in Wayne’s large van. Non-stop discussions (some might say lectures) revolved around such a variety of topics as the proper pronunciation of the word “quarry” or the true meaning of the word “Hoosier” (and, by the way, how did those Missourians get that nickname of “Pukes”). At times, we were even treated to a limerick, some more “spicy” than others. It was during these annual trips that I came to know Warren Roberts, and I am proud to have been considered his friend. One topic that Warren and I shared a common interest in was early Midwestern pottery. It is with this in mind that I present the following paper.

Illinois, with its abundant supply of quality clay as well as coal, developed into a major ceramic producing state by the middle to late nineteenth century. Although ceramic production in Illinois never attained the prominence it did in such states as Ohio or New Jersey, by the late nineteenth century, several large industrialized potteries were competing in a national market — particularly with respect to the trans-Mississippi West. Mounce (1989) presents an inventory of the hundreds of documented potters within the state.

Settlement of Illinois initially occurred in the twilight years of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. By the middle eighteenth century, French colonial settlements had been established within the American Bottom region (Cahokia, Prairie du Rocher, Kaskaskia) as well as the upper Illinois River Valley (near present day Peoria). Little evidence exists that pottery was produced in the Illinois Country during the French Colonial period. In 1763, the French ceded the region east of the Mississippi River to the British. American settlement began shortly after George Rogers Clark captured the district from the British during the American Revolution. During the last two decades of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the early American pioneer settlement was concentrated within the southern third of the state within the American Bottom region as well as along the lower reaches of the Kaskaskia, Wabash and Ohio Rivers. Frontier lead mining helped open northern Illinois to settlement in the 1820s. Additionally, the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 promoted development of transportation on the Great Lakes (and settlement in northern Illinois). By 1830, these frontier settlements had extended up the Illinois River and into the central Sangamon River Valley and the Military Tract of west central Illinois. The opening of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1848 resulted in a dramatic increase in settlement and industrial growth along the upper Illinois River and northern third of the state. By the Civil War era, the introduction of railroad transport beginning with the construction of the Illinois Central Railroad in the middle 1850s) quickly modified the cultural landscape into one recognizable today.

One of the early craft industries that came to Illinois with the pioneer immigrant family during the American Frontier Period (post-1780) was pottery production. The earliest documented potters in Illinois produced utilitarian redware and probably arrived in the state.
during the late 1810s and early 1820s. Redware, a clear or lead glazed, red paste earthenware, had been manufactured by the earliest colonial settlers along the eastern seaboard (Turnbaugh 1985, Watkins 1950). Immigrant redware potters arriving in Illinois were carrying on a craft that had been practiced in the United States for many generations and which was deeply rooted in Old World traditions (cf. Barber 1893, Ketchum 1991b, Turnbaugh 1985, Watkins 1950). These early redware workshops were organized around skilled craftsmen as well as the seasonal agricultural cycle. Characterized by hand production methods, the workshops were often manned by a single craftsman and apprentice.

Early craft industries were closely allied with an agricultural economy and in many cases, early potters were considered farmers and secondarily as potters (Worrell 1985:162-165). Such farmer-potters worked the manufacturing of pottery and its related activities into the periods of low activity in the yearly agricultural cycle. Family operated workshops were small affairs and often incorporated into the fabric of a working farmstead. A small frame or log workshop and associated kiln were often located within the farmyard. Sayers (1971) noted that traditional Southern potters were generally male, lacked formal training in the craft, worked in isolated workshops producing utilitarian wares for local markets, were often of low social position and had a dynastic regeneration. Although discussing potters of the "Southern Tradition", Sayers' (1971) comments also describe the early farmer/potter in Illinois.

Unlike later stoneware production, redware production required minimal investment in materials and equipment. Besides the craftsman's house, a small workshop (which often was of log construction) and kiln was a necessity. Within the workshop, the potter needed a wheel for turning wares (which was generally kick or treadle powered), a small hand operated quern (mill) for grinding lead for glazing, as well as a workbench or table. Although wares could be dried in the open air outside the workshop, impermanent drying sheds were often incorporated into the fabric of the workshop. A horse (or mule) powered pug mill for grinding clay was often present. Generally, redware potters had only a single kiln structure in use at any one time.

Such workshops were small affairs. One of the best illustrations of a small Midwestern pottery workshop dating from the early to middle nineteenth century is Christian Schrader's sketch of a pottery workshop at Indianapolis (Buley 1950:80-81) (Figure 1). This illustration depicts an early redware potter turning a jug using a treadle wheel. The workshop is located in an impermanent open-air building that consists of poles set into the ground supporting a gable roof. At one end of the workshop is a small bottle kiln with either recently fired or air-drying ware scattered around the kiln. Adjacent to the opposite end of the workshop is a simple frame building that probably doubles as the potter's house, office and sales room. Jugs, crocks and bowls are stacked in front of the frame building as if they are on display for sale.

Some of the earliest documented redware potters in Illinois include Nathaniel Pinckard and William Heath who located in Upper Alton, and Robert Harrison who located along Cahokia Creek within the vicinity of present-day Edwardsville (all in Madison County). Both potteries were probably established during the very late 1810s or early 1820s (Madden 1974:189; Mounce 1989). By the middle to late 1820s, redware potteries had become much more widely established and were located 1) along the Wabash River at Wansborough and Albion (Edwards County), 2) along the central Sangamon River Valley in and around Springfield (Sangamon
County), and 3) near present-day White Hall (Greene County) (cf. Mounce 1989:10). By the early 1840s, redware potteries had been established at many other locations, especially along the Mississippi River valley communities (such as Nauvoo). By this time, several regional centers of redware production had developed in Illinois and the surrounding region (Figure 2). These local redware production centers played a significant role in the regional market economy until the early to middle 1850s. Except for the Lead Mine District in far northwestern Illinois, and to a lesser degree the German-settled region of St. Clair County, few redware potteries existed in Illinois past the middle 1850s.

By the middle nineteenth century, redware was quickly fading from popularity in favor of the more durable (and safer) salt glazed stonewares. Redware (which has an earthenware body) production was considerably less difficult than stoneware production, particularly with regard to firing technology. Redware potters in Illinois at this mid-century point had four options that included1) learning the techniques of the more difficult stoneware production, 2) switching production to non-lead glazed, slip decorated earthenwares, 3) moving to another locality where redwares were appreciated (such as the far west), or 4) switching professions completely. Slip decorated earthenwares (ie. Albany-slipped wares) became common during the middle to late nineteenth century (post 1850) and were often associated with the small farmer/potter during this period.

Although the vast majority of the redware potteries had failed by the Civil War, a few redware workshops persisted in the state, particularly within the Lead Mine District of northwestern Illinois. Abundant redware clay and lead resources in the Lead Mine District of northwestern Illinois, southwestern Wisconsin and eastern Iowa resulted in a distinctive redware tradition that persisted until the early-to-middle 1890s. Generically known as Galena Redware (named after the community which was the economic center of the region), potters were established in this region by the early 1840s in both Galena and nearby Elizabeth. By the 1860s, potters had been or were working at such communities as Galena, Elizabeth, Dunleith (East Dubuque), Eleroy, Cranes Grove, Freeport, as well as in Dubuque (Iowa), Mineral Point (Wisconsin), and Cottage Grove/Belmont (Wisconsin). Across the border in Whitewater (Wisconsin), a distinctive hand painted (manganese) redware was also produced. The persistence of this redware tradition in northwestern Illinois has been attributed, in part, to the growth of the dairy industry in this region (Horney 1965; Mansberger 1994, 1995).

By the 1840s, redware production was quickly giving way to the more sought after stoneware product. Salt-glazed stoneware was a more durable, vitrified product than soft-paste redware (which has a porous earthenware body) (Ketchum 1991a;). Not only were stoneware containers impervious to liquids, salt-glazed wares also did not react to acidic foods in the same way that a redware's lead glaze did. As such, salt-glazed wares were often selected over the less desired redware. Lead glaze, common on low-fired redware, evaporated and thus was not possible to use on the higher fired stonewares (Ramsay 1939:18, 1939). For such reasons, a salt glaze was used on the higher fired stonewares. Salt glazing had its own unique problems of application as well as produced extremely poisonous chlorine gas as a by-product --often injuring careless potters. Since salt glaze was applied in a gas form and generally did not penetrate into the interior of stacked vessels, a light brown or tan slip (often referred to generically as Albany Slip) became popular on the interior of salt glazed wares. Albany slip, a
fine uniform colored brown clay found along the Hudson River in New York State, became popular in the 1830s for covering the surface of crockery vessels and was shipped all over the country, including Illinois by the 1840s (Ramsay 1939:21-22).

In the Western World, salt glazed stonewares were first developed in northern Germany. Often referred to as Cologne Ware, this ware was being produced at potteries along the Rhine Valley by the early sixteenth century (Barber 1906). The production of stonewares required more sophisticated glazing and firing skills, making it a more specialized endeavor to manufacture than the contemporary lead glazed earthenwares. The first stoneware production in the United States appears to have been during the early eighteenth century and apparently was produced by German immigrants. One of the earliest documented stoneware potters in the United States was "the Poor Potter" of Yorktown, Virginia who manufactured both earthenwares and stonewares between circa 1720 and 1745 (Barka 1973:291). Similarly, by 1735, John Remmey was producing stoneware at his pot works on Manhattan Island, in New York City (Barber 1906:22; Ketchum 1987:40-41, 52-53). By the late eighteenth, and especially early nineteenth centuries, American production of stoneware had become commonplace.

Although salt glazed stonewares were being manufactured along the eastern seaboard during the eighteenth century, their production in Illinois did not occur until the early 1830s. The first documented salt-glazed stoneware produced in Illinois was manufactured by John Ebey. Ebey started experimenting with stoneware production while located near Springfield in the early 1830s. Selling his rural Springfield redware pottery to David Brunk, Ebey moved to White Hall in 1833, converted an existing redware kiln to stoneware production, and initiated the first stoneware production in Illinois. As Madden (1974:183) noted, "this turned out to be the initial step toward the subsequent development of a large stoneware industry in that area".

By the middle 1830s, George Ebey was producing stoneware in nearby Winchester, and his brother John had discovered a rich deposit of stoneware clay at Centerville (today known as Ripley, Brown County). The quality stoneware clay discovered by John Ebey in west central Illinois was part of a belt of quality underclays that stretched from Rock Island to Alton, and as Madden (1974:183) states, "was one of the most extensive and accessible sources of fine stoneware clay in the United States." By 1840, stoneware production (as well as slipped earthenware production) had become well established in Greene, Scott and Brown Counties (Figure 3). Other significant early Illinois stoneware producers included the Neukom Pottery (1840s; Saline County) and Queen Pottery (Jackson County) in Southern Illinois, as well as the 1830s Kirkpatrick family's Vermillionville pottery in LaSalle County (Mounce 1989, Gums, Mounce and Mansberger 1997). By the early 1850s, stoneware potters had become well established in Illinois.

Early stoneware producers, such as George Ebey (Figure 4), generally were farmer/potters typical of the earlier redware producers. Ebey's stoneware pottery, located one mile from the community of Winchester (Scott County), consisted of a substantial frame structure that incorporated the workshop, drying rooms and kiln into a single building. The house, other outbuildings, as well as farm fields and animals are prominently displayed as part of the pottery workshop. Generally, these individuals preferred to be identified with the more affluent farmers as opposed to the less well-thought of potters’ trade (Andreas, Lyter and
By the late 1830s and 1840s, several significant stoneware potters had become established in Illinois (see Gums, Mounce and Mansberger 1997; Walthall, Gums and Holley 1991).

During the middle to late nineteenth century, the ceramic industry in Illinois was transformed from a family operated craft to a industrialized factory system of production. The first step towards the development of a factory system of production for pottery was the intensification of the craft (the ability of the craftsman to devote full time to his craft and not give it secondary importance to agricultural endeavors). This intensification, which resulted in separating the farmer from the potter, was most often attained near urban markets or improved transportation systems. Although intensification often required the reorganization of the workshop, it generally represented the same hand workmanship and family oriented business operation. Mainly due to the harsh winters and cold working conditions in Illinois, the craftsman was still operating a seasonal 10-month operation.

With intensification came change, and the structure of the pottery production site was altered slightly by the removal of agricultural and in many cases also the domestic components. If present, domestic components took secondary importance to the industrial activities. The illustration of the "Old Bennett Pottery" in East Liverpool, Ohio depicts just such a pottery works. James Bennett, born in South Derbyshire, England, established the East Liverpool pottery in 1839 and produced Rockingham glazed and clear glazed yellowwares (Gates and Ormerod 1982:3-4). Although not located in Illinois, the Bennett Pottery Works illustrated in this figure depicts the character of the early commercial establishments located in the Midwest (Figure 5).

By the early 1850s, salt-glazed stoneware production in Illinois was fiercely competing with traditional redware production. Communities such as Ripley in Brown County attracted a wide range of potters where several small workshops had become established. Incipient industrialization at these workshops resulted in early factory production of stonewares. These small, incipient factories were still operated seasonally under the control of a single master craftsman/owner and produced predominately hand manufactured goods. Mechanization, particularly in the form of jigger-molded bowls, was introduced during the later years of production. The clustering of workshops resulted in attracting skilled labor to a region and supplying a labor pool larger than was normally available in a farming community. In Illinois, several communities such as Ripley (Brown County) developed a specialized ceramic production industry, predominately because of their location near quality clay resources. Multiple workshops clustered around and within a single community drawing upon the specialized, skilled labor force and collective marketing of wares. In Illinois, this “Ripley Model” was common from the late 1840s through early 1880s. Rice (1987:184-185) refers to these as "nucleated workshops" or a "clustered industrial complex (Peacock 1981, 1982)" which is in contrast to the “Individual Workshop Industry” typical of the farmer/potter. As Rice (1987:189) notes, this organization scheme generally was associated with site specialization, not producer specialization. Ramsay (1931:229) discusses this process in terms of the "centralization” of the pottery industry.
By the late 1850s, advancements in ceramic production techniques that had been initiated earlier at eastern manufactories such as at Bennington (Vermont) and Jersey City (New Jersey) were beginning to filter to the Midwest. Eastern capital and skilled craftsmen were beginning to look at Illinois for manufacturing sites. Two early attempts at industrialized, factory production of ceramics in Illinois occurred in the middle to late 1850s—one near present day Morris (rural Grundy Count), the other at Peoria. William White's pottery was begun in 1856 and operated for approximately ten years before succumbing to hard economic times. This industrial endeavor was one of, if not the original, attempt at large scale stoneware production in Illinois. Originally from Utica, New York, White moved west and settled in rural Grundy County along the recently opened Illinois and Michigan Canal in hopes of establishing a successful operation like his father's pottery works in New York State (see Ketchum 1987). Besides producing typical stoneware crockery for the domestic market, White established a tile works and supplied the quickly developing community of Chicago with some of that community’s earliest stoneware sewer tiles. As White’s industrial facility was located in a rural setting, a “company town” developed around the industrial works established by White. Unfortunately for White, he located his factory near the clay source in a remote area too far from the transportation corridor at nearby Morris. Combined with the Economic Panic of 1857 and the labor shortage during the Civil War years, the firm floundered and eventually failed in 1865 (Mansberger 1997).

The second attempt at factory production of pottery in Illinois occurred in 1859 along the Illinois River at Peoria. The American Pottery Company was initiated by Christopher Fenton and Decius Clark, both from Bennington, Vermont and formerly with the U.S. Pottery Company of that city (Ramsay 1939). With the failure of the Bennington factory, many skilled potters relocated to new centers of production including central Illinois. The first pottery ware produced at the new pottery works in Peoria was fired at the newly constructed pottery works in June 1860. The physical plant at this establishment was a large, architect-designed factory with a steam power system and multiple kilns. Based on the expansion plans of the firm, they had grand expectations for growth (Figure 6). According to the New York Tribune, the pottery works then being constructed at Peoria was to be "the largest and finest pottery in the world" (as cited in the Peoria Journal Star 1/6/1882; Mansberger and Mounce 1990:4-5) and intended to produce refined tablewares to rival those produced in the Staffordshire district of England. Fenton and Clark brought Daniel Greatbach, chief designer and mould maker at Bennington who had immigrated to the U.S from England in the late 1830s, to Peoria with them and apparently was responsible for several distinctive molded vessel designs. For reasons unclear, the enterprise was unsuccessful. By 1865, under new management and reorganized as the Peoria Pottery Company, the firm had shifted their emphasis from refined tableware to crockery production (Mansberger and Mounce 1990).

Neither of these early attempts at large-scale, industrialized production was initially successful. Although true factory systems of production were introduced into Illinois' ceramic industry during the late 1850s at Peoria (Mansberger and Mounce 1990) and to a lesser degree at White’s Gooselake Pottery in rural Grundy County, it was not until the 1870s and particularly 1880s that industrialized production took hold. With the advent of improved rail transportation systems, development of a larger market area, and the mechanization of the craft, these small family operated workshops typified by the Ripley Model were replaced by large industrialized factories typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mansberger and Mounce
By the late 1870s, these small incipient factories were being replaced by a non-traditional, factory system of production. One advancement associated with the factory system of production was the reorganization of the workshop into a factory system of production, a system that was highly mechanized with a well defined division of labor and one that required large capital outlays for machinery. Unlike the earlier system of production, this system required large numbers of relatively unskilled labor to operate the machinery. Associated with this system of production were the introduction of organized labor (trade unions) and a dramatic change in the social status of the pottery worker.

With continued mechanization and the introduction of a structured division of labor typical of true factory systems of production, the character of the pottery works changed dramatically. One such change was simply the size of the pottery works, the more industrialized pottery had to produce a much greater output to be viable and thus was much larger in size compared to the smaller family-oriented workshops. These late nineteenth century industrialized workshops are often characterized by large, multiple story buildings located adjacent to railroad lines. Another characteristic of an industrialized pottery workshop is the presence of multiple kilns. To keep all the workers busy doing their specialized tasks, an industrialized workshop minimally required three kilns in operation at one time: one being loaded with green ware, one in the process of being fired and/or cooling, while the third was being unloaded. Such was the case at the both the American Pottery Works at Peoria (Mansberger and Mounce 1990) as well as at White’s Goose Lake Pottery Works in rural Grundy County (Mansberger 1997) --both early Illinois factory systems of production that were established in the late 1850s and early 1860s. By the early twentieth century, potteries often worked with seven to nine kilns and re-cycled the heat from one-kiln to the other as well as into the workshop (Ceramic Products Cyclopedia 1928:131Q).

Although some of these enterprises were often family owned and operated businesses (such as W. J. Pech's Buckeye Pottery which operated from 1882 to 1938 in Macomb), many of the large industrialized potteries incorporated, sold stock, and were operated by a Board of Directors (such as The Macomb Pottery Company which began operation in 1882 with a capital stock of $30,000) (Mansberger and Mounce 1993). By the early twentieth century, several of the larger, more productive factories were consolidated under the guise of the Western Stoneware Company that had plants in several Illinois communities. This was typical of the industry at several major production centers across the state (White Hall, Macomb, Monmouth, Rock Island) (Mounce, Walthall, and McGuire 1988; Mounce 1988; Martin and Cooper 1983). This “Macomb Model” characterizes production in Illinois from circa 1880 until the Great Depression years when many of the large firms succumbed to economic and consumer pressures and closed their doors, thus ending a tradition of pottery production in Illinois (Figure 7).
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Figure 1. Early Midwestern redware pottery workshop as illustrated by Christian Schrader. This workshop was once located in what is today Indianapolis, Indiana and documents an early craftsman at his trade (Buley 1950:80-81). Christian Schrader Collection, Indiana Division, Indiana State Library.
Figure 2. Illinois and regional redware districts, circa 1845.
Figure 3. Early Illinois and regional stoneware production centers, circa 1860.
Figure 4. *Farm Residence and Pottery of George Ebey*, located one mile northeast of Winchester, Scott County, Illinois (Andreas, Lyter and Company 1873:29).
Figure 5. Illustration of early industrialized pottery workshop along the Ohio River, circa 1840s. The “Old Bennett Pottery” in East Liverpool, Ohio, produced yellowwares and Rockingham-glazed wares (Barber 1893:193). The open faced structure adjacent to the kiln is a large horse or mule driven pug mill.
Figure 6. Grandiose scheme of the American Pottery Company Works, Peoria, Illinois as envisioned in circa 1860. This illustration was a small detail on the Map of Peoria County, Illinois (1861). Only one of the buildings forming the spokes of this large industrial complex was constructed (Mansberger and Mounce 1990:4).
Figure 7. Illustration of the Peoria Pottery Company buildings as depicted on C. J. Pauli’s *View of Peoria, Illinois* (1888). These structures document a large, industrialized pottery from the late nineteenth century.
Figure 8. Centers of industrialized pottery production in Illinois, circa 1900.