

# SOUTHERN FOLK POTTERY

AT PEBBLE HILL



AUBURN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

*Caroline Marshall Draughon  
Center for the Arts and Humanities*



An ovoid, mid-nineteenth century alkaline-glazed jug attributed to an upstate South Carolina potter.

## **SOUTHERN STONEWARE AT PEBBLE HILL**

Most of the impressive collection of Southern pottery owned by Pebble Hill, the home of Auburn University's Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities, was assembled by noted art patron Ann Draughon Cousins, the daughter of former Auburn University president Ralph B. Draughon and Caroline Marshall Draughon for whom the Center is named. Though regarded as art objects today, these beautiful pottery forms represent essential household items required by American lifeways in the nineteenth century.

Through their form, function, and glazes these pieces also reflect differing American pottery traditions and eras which speak to migration and technological change affecting the people who settled the South. The makers were artisans who worked in a family-based folk tradition in communities where clay suitable for pottery production could be found.

## POTTERY AND THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER

The pottery made and used in the historic South was different than that of the American Indian and West African traditions. The relatively low-fired, unglazed earthenware forms made by Africans and the first Americans, though well-constructed, were relatively fragile. Consequently, the sturdy glazed earthenware and stoneware provided by European ceramic technology came to dominate the pottery market during the Colonial and early Republic periods of American history. These durable vessels were impervious to liquids and thus more suitable for travel and the storage, preparation, and service of food.

The presence of a glaze is the signature feature of most European ceramics. A glaze is a slick surface on the interior and/or exterior of a pot that makes it waterproof. Glazes are often named for the fluxing agent used such as lead, wood ashes, or salt. Fluxing agents lower the melting temperature of the glaze mixture's required silica component of sand, clay, or glass. Glaze traditions are important in helping us understand the development of American pottery and its regional variations.

Pottery-making families were among the first to settle the South after the native peoples were forced from their lands. The pottery trade, like that of blacksmithing, coopering, etc., was often a family tradition shared by men. Female participation in traditional pottery making was unusual until the twentieth century because women were occupied with attending to the essential needs of the large families of this era including childrearing, the raising of kitchen gardens, providing health care, and preparing food. However, it is likely that women, as users of the pottery forms created by their husbands, fathers, and sons, provided feedback on forms and innovations. To these men, pottery production was an enterprise that helped provide for their families. Therefore, their work was guided by market pressure and, in some instances, competition with other local potters. These artisans produced the storage jars, jugs, churns, chamber pots, and other pottery essentials for life on the frontier.

## **REGIONAL STONEWARE TRADITIONS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

By the nineteenth century, two major pottery traditions were being carried forward on the southern edge of the advancing American frontier. The salt-glazed and the alkaline-glazed stoneware traditions dominated the Upland South and Lowland South, respectively supplanting earlier lead-glazed earthenware traditions practiced by the colonists. The clay body in a stoneware vessel vitrified at the high firing temperature of 2100 - 2500 degrees Fahrenheit at which point not only the glaze melted but silica within the body of the vessel fused and thus made it even more waterproof and ideal for “canning.” This also produced a durability needed for travel and for frequently handled forms such as chamber pots, smoking pipes, and churns.

## *The Salt Glaze*

The salt-glazing stoneware tradition was introduced into the South through migrations of potters from the Upland South, the North or directly from Europe through southern ports. Fully developed by the fifteenth century in Europe, salt glazing technology differs from other types of stoneware glazes in that it does not involve dipping pottery in a slip solution. Instead, the potter throws or pours salt into the kiln at the zenith of the firing process when temperatures have reached approximately 2400 degrees Fahrenheit. The resulting gasses of sodium oxide and hydrogen chloride attack the clay surface resulting in a soda glass coating. This is an effective way of glazing the exterior of pottery, but interior surfaces not exposed to the kiln gasses are not glazed well. To remedy this, potters sometimes put a slip glaze on the interior of vessels. Salt glazing produces a finish that has been described as an “orange peel” texture.



Salt-glazed jug, late nineteenth, attributed to Moore County, North Carolina, perhaps by a member of the Craven family.

## *The Alkaline Glaze*

The alkaline glaze for stoneware was first developed in Asia and its introduction into American ceramics is a topic of great interest and debate. The glaze is made of wood ashes or lime-sources of alkaline flux-and sand. Most scholars believe the Southern use of the alkaline glaze began in the Edgefield District of South Carolina just after 1809 when Dr. Abner Landrum (1785-1859) found a source of high quality clay there. Landrum and his potters learned to use this glaze either from printed sources about Asian ceramics, communications with other potters who were trying to replicate Far East glazing, or perhaps a trip Landrum reportedly took to visit potters in Philadelphia who may have been experimenting with the alkaline glaze.

Landrum was a monied, educated, inventive entrepreneur who established a pottery industry in the Edgefield District on the western frontier of South Carolina. In what subsequently became an important regional center of stoneware production, he produced the alkaline glaze with success within a small community that became known as Pottersville. Perhaps due to his more progressive politics, Abner Landrum moved to Columbia, South Carolina, by 1832 and opened a pottery there. His son, also named Abner, took over operation of the pottery after Dr. Landrum's death in 1859.

Scores of potters trained at his and other potteries in the Edgefield District would later establish their own potteries in other South Carolina communities and throughout the South. Potters

from here and other potteries in North Carolina and Georgia perfected the shiny green alkaline glaze and brought it westward with the advancing Southern frontier. Well-known Edgefield potters who migrated west during this period were Cyrus Cogburn; Matthew Duncan; John, Holland and Robert Leopard; Abraham Massey; Jefferson Nash; James Prothro, and Joseph Rushton. These and other potters who migrated out of Georgia and North Carolina helped establish “jugtowns” westward to Texas. All along the way, this uniquely Southern pottery tradition would flourish as an inexpensive and dependable glaze.



Landrum Storage Jar with alkaline glaze attributed to the Columbia, South Carolina pottery.

## THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL POTTERY SHOPS

After the Civil War, family-run potteries flourished briefly as the South first became industrialized. But when the accompanying railroad development began to bring cheap stoneware from large northern factories, many local shops could not compete and went out of business. Additionally, northern potters came and either opened businesses that competed with local shops or competed with the local work force for jobs in factories and family shops. And perhaps most importantly, developments in food preservation technology made some of the local potter's best-selling forms obsolete. Consequently, the period after 1880 marks a watershed period for Alabama folk pottery when local traditions changed and many families were forced from the trade. Those who managed to remain in business diversified their repertoire of forms to include more decorative art pottery and non-traditional glazes, for instance, such as the use of the salt glaze, in areas like Randolph County, Alabama, where the alkaline glaze had been used, and the Albany Slip glaze.

Albany Slip was the glaze of the legendary "Little Brown Jug" exported throughout the United States from New York. This glaze was a popular interior glaze used with an exterior salt glaze but was also used as an exterior glaze. Mined in the Hudson Valley of New York, it had been used widely in the North before the Civil War, but by about 1880, Alabama's railroads developed enough to lower bulk transportation costs to almost every area of the state. Albany Slip came in barrels of raw clay that, when mixed with water, created a dependable glaze that eliminated a lot of the time, cost, and labor associated with alkaline and salt glazing. Albany Slip glaze had a high success rate and gave a lustrous brown that was popular with Southern customers. The last major use of the glaze was in the crock pots manufactured in the 1970s. The Albany Slip mine closed in 1987.



## THE FORMS AND THEIR MAKERS



Alkaline-glazed jug attributed to Lucius Jordan, Washington County, Georgia.

## *Jugs*

Stoneware jugs stored the cider, oils, turpentine, syrup, molasses, vinegar, and whiskey produced and consumed in the nineteenth century south. The jug, especially the  $\frac{1}{2}$  gallon size, was usually a container for corn whiskey but larger jugs would have probably held syrup or other consumables. Early American pottery forms were ovoid, and jugs are no exception. These earlier jugs tend to have strap handles attached from the body to the shoulder. Later jugs usually have strap handles attached from body to neck. Many early jugs such as the Lucius Jordan whiskey jug had a neck collar presumably to allow the use of cord or wire to secure a covering over the opening of the jug. The use of cork and other stopper materials eventually replaced the

need for this jug neck treatment. As time went on, jug forms became more straight-sided, perhaps in imitation of mold-made Northern factory-produced jugs.

Every type of useful liquid could be stored in a jug. Most potters made a quantity of jugs in anticipation of the need for either whiskey or syrup containers. Syrup was an important product for many farmers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some syrup jugs were made with wider mouths to facilitate pouring out the thick contents.

Lucius Jordan (1816-1889) was born in Georgia but may have been trained in the Washington County, Georgia, shops of the Edgefield potters Abraham Massey or Cyrus Cogburn. He was one of the few potters who bothered to sign his work, in his case, with a scripted “J” or “LJ.” A 1836 tax record for Washington County lists Jordan as a “free man of color.”

Washington County was Georgia's first pottery-making center and an important staging area for pottery makers who would later move into newly "liberated" Indian lands to the west. Edgefield potters Abraham Massey and Cyrus Cogburn established this pottery center during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Potters such as the Becham family then left Washington County and established another important pottery center in Crawford County.

Oscar Allen Becham (1871-1946) was from a family of Crawford County, Georgia, potters.

Crawford County in southwest Georgia was one of the most important centers of southern stoneware production. One feature of Crawford County pottery is the use of maker's marks by the pottery-making families such as the Bechams, Longs, Merritts, and Vaughns.



An alkaline-glazed jug, ca 1900, attributed to the Boggs Brothers shop, Rock Mills, Alabama.



Jug with alkaline glaze, attributed to Oscar Becham, Crawford County, Georgia.



Alkaline-glazed canning jar with lid ledge, late nineteenth century, attributed to Bacon Level, Randolph County, Alabama.

## *Storage Jars*

Early Southern potters made very large storage jars, some holding as much as 30 gallons to store food on farms and plantations. Three to six-gallon jars made throughout the South during the nineteenth century were more common. Later in the nineteenth century, potters produced fewer large storage jars and more, smaller canning jars-the precursors to the ubiquitous glass Mason jar. Small jars were often used for fruit preserves.

Early canning practices could not guarantee a vacuum seal but instead preserved foods with additives such as sugar, salt, or vinegar. Some foods were also dried. Jars held fruit, vegetables, lard, meat, or butter. Cooked meat could be sealed with a layer of lard or butter, and “putting up” salted, smoked, or pickled meat in stoneware jars was a common practice. Some of these canning techniques, such as packing sausage in its own grease, date to the Elizabethan period.

Early jars were made with a sharp wide lid rim to facilitate a cloth being tied tightly around the top. In other cases, lid ledges formed inside the rim allowed stoneware lids, usually with a small round knob in the center, to fit down into the top. These could be sealed with wax.

There were two basic handle types for jars – strap handles and lug hands. “Lug” handles, attached horizontally, were sometimes made on the wheel in the early days. A potter would turn a low, thin ring of clay,

cut it into about four pieces and then affix these to the sides of jars and churns. Lumpier, hand-formed lug handles were the norm during the late nineteenth century and beyond.

Greenberry Morton was born in 1804 in North Carolina. He immigrated to Randolph County, Alabama, in the 1830s. The 1850 Census for Randolph County recorded him in residence next to well-known pottery-making families such as the Duncans. At some point in the 1850s, the Mortons moved to Perry County. Here, Green worked as a potter, alongside his sons Jeremiah, George and Thomas. The Morton Pottery and others that followed were located near the old community of Pinetucky, which in the mid-nineteenth century was located on an important road linking Maplesville and Greensboro near where this road crossed the Cahaba River. The Morton family continued making pottery there for 30 years.



This mid-nineteenth century storage jar with alkaline glaze, attributed to the Morton pottery of Perry County, Alabama, features wheel-turned lug handles.



A salt-glazed “Alabama churn” with an interior alkaline glaze, attributed to Pittman Brothers Pottery, Rock Mills, Randolph County, Alabama.

## *Churns*

Southern potters made thousands of churns for family production of buttermilk, butter, kraut and home-brew. Milk was an important food source for nineteenth-century families who consumed and produced milk products from cows, and sometimes goats. The importance of home-produced milk products continued well into the twentieth century. Alabama potter Kenneth Miller (born 1904) recalled, “Well, everybody ... about 90 per cent of the people in the world farmed and had a cow or two and they churned the butter and drank milk.” Artist Theora Hamblett of Mississippi remembered, “When the milk clabbered someone put a long handle dasher into the clabbered milk, then a lid with a hole in the center for the handle to come through. Then someone took hold of the handle and began slashing it up and down in the milk. The cream on the top of the milk turned to butter after several minutes of working the dasher up and down. The butter was dipped from the milk with a spoon,

salted and pressed in a pound presser; then it was ready for eating. What had been clabber milk was now butter milk.”

Many Alabama potters would place two vertically-aligned strap handles, one at the top and one at the bottom, on the same side of their churns and then place a horizontal lug handle on the opposite side. Some pottery collectors refer to these as “Alabama churns.” Presumably, this extra handle facilitated steady handling of the container when it was full and heavy.

The alkaline-glazed piece attributed to Charlie Foster who worked at the Mapp Pottery in Bacon Level.

Charles G. “Big Charlie” Foster (born 1866) was a Georgia-born potter who worked for the potter Noah Mapp in the 1920s and 1930s in the community of Bacon Level in Randolph County, Alabama.



6-gallon, alkaline-glazed churn attributed to Charlie Foster, Bacon Level, Randolph County, Alabama.





Alkaline-glazed Crawford County, Georgia, batter bowl by Billy Merritt.

## *Bowls*

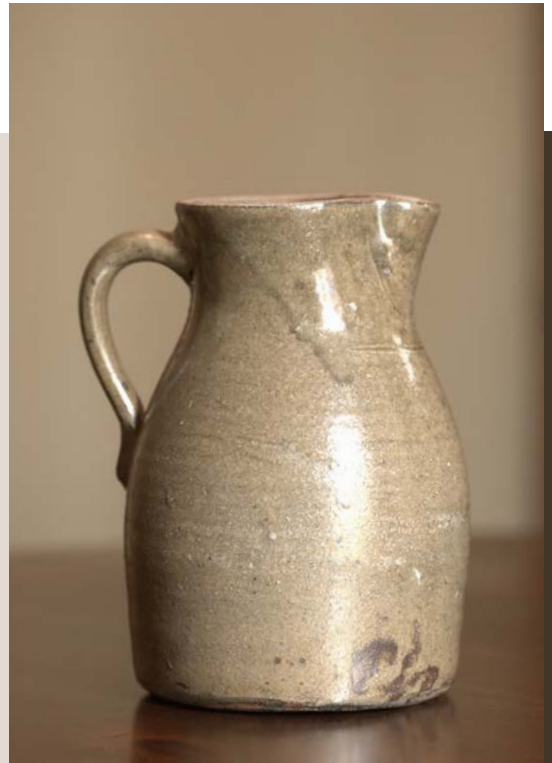
Potters produced a wide variety of bowls because they have so many uses. Some known as cream risers or clabber bowls, were used to allow cream to separate from milk. Their straight sides, usually with a handle, gently sloped up and out so that the top was slightly larger than the base. The cream was skimmed and then could be churned into butter. If you took a clabber bowl and added a handle and flattened the rim, you had a chamber pot. Smaller handle-less bowls were also made by Southern potters but these are less plentiful.

William Dennis (“Billy”) Merritt (1861-1929) was prolific Crawford County, Georgia potter who made a distinctive batter bowl. This is a side-spouted variant of a Merritt batter bowl, also called a flower pot pitcher and had a variety of uses. Todd Steiner, a pottery collector, says, “Mary Merritt which was Billy’s youngest daughter said that they were for cooking rice.”



## *Pitchers*

Every household had one or more milk pitchers. In the nineteenth century, pitchers held milk or buttermilk, or accompanied a wash basin. Today, most of us associate pitchers with iced tea. Pitchers are one of the few traditional forms that are as useful today as they were in the 1830s. On the wheel a pitcher is formed like a jar. The potter then forms a spout on one side and attaches a handle to the other. Southern potters made many shapes of pitchers from straight-sided to ovoid.



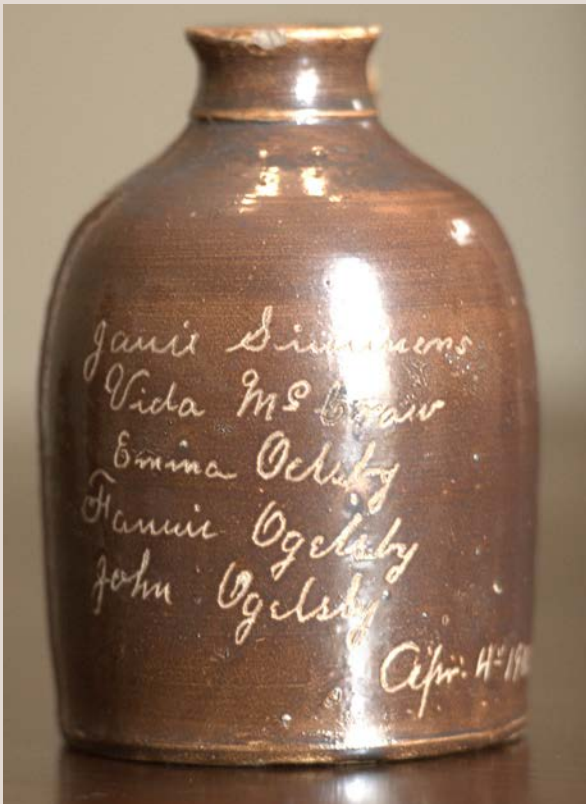
An alkaline-glazed pitcher, ca 1890,  
attributed to Bacon Level, Alabama.

## *Twentieth Century Whimsies and Commemorative Pieces*

Around the turn of the century, potters from outside the South, such as James Wesley Curry (1858–1920), born in Iowa, came south. It is hard to imagine why this pottery-making community would need to import potters. J. W. Curry may have come to Alabama as a journeyman potter, but he eventually owned his own shop in the Bethlehem community north of Sprott. He primarily made salt-glazed pottery with an interior Albany Slip and marked it with one of two stamps “JWC” or “J. W. Curry.” This piece was totally glazed in Albany Slip, perhaps so that the freehand inscriptions would show better. The names “Janie Simmons Viola McGraw, Emma Ogelsby, Fannie Ogelsby and John Ogelsby” and the date “Apr 4th, 1903” are written down one side and at the base of the other side is inscribed “J W Curry Mfr/Bethlehem, Ala.” The Ogelsbys and McGraws may have been friends, customers, or neighbors who were presented with this jug. The Ogelsbys were young adult siblings from nearby Centreville in adjacent Bibb County. It is unclear who the other women were.

Curry’s story is like that of other itinerant potters who moved between regions seeking work as the pottery industry was declining. He was trained by his Virginia-born father Robert Curry. The family lived in Iowa but by 1870 was in Barton County, Missouri. By 1880, Robert had died, and James is listed as a “potter” in his mother’s household in the US Census of that year. By 1900, he was a potter in Perry County, Alabama, with wife Sally. One of the few surviving scraps of the 1890 US Census is from this community in Alabama. Since Curry is not on this 1890 Census and since Sally was born in Georgia, he may have been working as a potter in Georgia in 1890. Like many potters of this period, he eventually left

the business. Curry was working for the rail road in Colquitt County, Georgia, in 1910. But by 1920, the last year of his life, he had returned to Perry County and was making pottery again. James W. is buried at Bethlehem Cemetery next to his wife Sarah.





An alkaline-jug, ca 1900, attributed to the Boggs Brothers shop, Rock Mills, Alabama.

## THE APPRECIATION OF SOUTHERN FOLK POTTERY

Scholarship on Southern traditional pottery lagged behind that of the rest of the country. The small scale family nature of the region's pottery production stymied historians who focused on better-sourced colonial and early Republic ceramics of the mid-Atlantic and New England. In the 1960s, American folklorists such as the Smithsonian's Ralph Rinzler and Georgia State's John Burrison became interested in the Meaders's family pottery of North Georgia. Being folklorists, they were not deterred from the lack of historical materials and delved into interviewing older potters and their descendants. Rinzler interviewed folk potters in Georgia and Alabama who he would later present at the Festival of American Folklife on the mall in Washington, DC. Burrison would work diligently for 15 years or more and compile the first state pottery history for a Southern state called "Brothers in Clay: the Story of Georgia Folk Pottery."

The work of Burrison, Rinzler, and other scholars of Southern pottery, along with the nation-wide interest in heritage fostered by the American Bicentennial in 1976, helped create a new market for those few family potteries still in existence. No Southern pottery family benefited from this new found attention more than the Meaders of White County, Georgia.

As John Burrison was researching and writing his comprehensive book on Georgia folk pottery, Lanier Meaders a folk potter, using traditional techniques including an ash-based alkaline glaze, helped him understand more about the historic potteries that he was investigating. On top of that, the Meaders family had continued the tradition of making face jugs and using the alkaline glazes. By successfully selling utilitarian forms such as pitchers as well as artistic works such as face jugs, Lanier became the face of Southern folk pottery tradition and thus encouraged other members of his family to enter or re-enter the pottery business. Their success also heartened other pottery-making families such as the Hewells in Georgia, and the Millers, Boggs, and Jerry Brown in Alabama who enjoyed success during the remainder of the Twentieth Century.



Miniature alkaline-glazed jug by Alva Gusta Meaders (1923-1994).

The future of the surviving family pottery shops seems secure today as an informed clientele are now asking for the older, traditionally Southern alkaline glazes as well as decorative forms such as the face jug. Their pottery making ancestors would be surprised that one can now sell a jug for its mere artistic qualities but in doing today's traditional potters are ensuring the perpetuation of one of the South's most distinctive folk art traditions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND SOURCES

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The historic Scott-Yarbrough House, also known as Pebble Hill, is an 1847 Greek Revival style cottage in Auburn, Alabama listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Pebble Hill has served as the home of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University since 1985.

The Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities creates opportunities that explore our individual and collective experiences, values, and identities through the creativity of the arts and the wisdom of the humanities.

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