

## Seeing

## RED

Historical Society offers a look back at a rich history of clay pottery

By RENEE WINKLER

For the Courier-Post

Three hundred years ago, long before anyone used glass for cooking or storage, let alone dreamed up the concept of Tupperware or Ziploc bags, clay was king.

And the land where it ruled most supreme among Colonists was the Delaware Valley, where the iron content of clay — whether it was brown or yellow — produced a kiln-baked vessel that turned red.

It was malleable. It was strong. It could be, and was, decorated. It was cheap. Best of all, if the teapot cracked or the batter bowl was dropped, the clay could be melted down and reshaped.

"It was being green 300 years ago. What did those silly Colonists know about ecology? They knew it all," said Jack Peoples of Collingswood, a collector of redware pottery and owner of a showcased spot in the Yellow Garage antique co-op in Mullica Hill.

Peoples described redware as "the poor man's china. You could almost make it in your back yard, molding it by hand and using a tiny kiln that would reach 1,500 to 1,700 degrees."

It was used for drinking, dining, and storage of food and liquids, Peoples said.

Records show that in the 1850s, there were between 500 and 600 manufacturers of redware in the region that reached from Maine to Massachusetts, New Hampshire to the Carolinas, and were especially productive in Pennsylvania and Ohio.



Photo: Hoag Levins

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## Clay

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Peoples, who retired from a management post in industrial supply sales, mused that residents speak with pride of the history of glassmakers, another profession tied to the area's natural resources. "There were 50 or 60 glassmakers, but 500 potters making redware," he said.

Peoples, who has a collection of about 30 redware pieces, was speaking about the pottery type, which along with stoneware, will be discussed Sunday at the Camden County Historical Society. The free 2 p.m. lecture is the first in a monthly series that will continue through May.

Those attending can bring up to three pieces from their own collection for examination and identification.

The speaker at Sunday's event is William Liebknecht, principal researcher for Hunter Research, Inc., in downtown Trenton. A professional archeologist for more than 25 years, Liebknecht has excavated stoneware kilns in the mid-Atlantic region. He has created museum displays for the Lower Delaware Valley Chapter of the Archaeological Society of New Jersey, the University of Richmond, and the New Jersey State Museum. He also has helped Colonial Williamsburg with its early American stoneware exhibit.

Most recently, Liebknecht has been supervising an archeological dig along the path of Delaware's future Route 301.

The early Colonial potters worked in defiance of Britain's trade laws, which required British settlers to provide clay to England, where it would be turned into items that would be sold back to the settlers through the East India Company.



Photo: Hoag Levins

Red clay pottery was once produced throughout the Delaware Valley as a versatile, earth-friendly, readily available form of kitchenware.

Historical records show pottery was being produced in the colonies as early as 1625.

By the late 1700s, according to historical accounts of pottery in early America, the mobility and intermarriage of potter families led to sharing techniques and artistic guidance that favored decorative touches.

Immigrants to the new nation brought their own pottery styles and know-how. Most, but not all, were glazed. The lead content in the clay used in redware shortened life spans for potters as well as families who used the items — cups, jugs, platters and teapots.

That risk wasn't found in stoneware, which also will be discussed at the Historical Society event.

Records show that salt-glazed stoneware first was produced in Germany in the Middle Ages. Because the glazes made it resistant to acidic contents, it was ideal for storage and was used widely until Britain developed its green glass bottle industry.

Archeological evidence of early Colonial settlements shows stoneware was imported from Germany by the late 17th century.

Many shards recovered show decorative work that includes monograms of monarchs of the day.

Staffordshire potters in Britain perfected the white slip (wet clay) used initially for mugs and tankards. By the mid-18th century, stoneware was in wider use than pewter in homes of the middle class and gentry.

Among the most successful stoneware potters in the English midlands were Adams, Aynsley, Doulton, Minton, Spode and Wedgwood.

Even in the late 1700s those pieces were marked, unlike redware, said Peoples.

Today, the rustic appearance of redware is making a comeback in country kitchens, and potters note that their wares are safe for dishwashers, microwaves and freezers.

"There's no mistaking the new stuff for the original," said Peoples. "You can look at it across the room and tell. Today's potters put their names and dates on all their pieces. They're not trying to snooker anyone," he said.

Peoples said not a single piece of his collection of antique redware is marked. "I have no idea who made them." He does know that the antique pieces are to be admired, not used.

He said one of his collectibles was damaged when a family member used an antique mold for a Christmas pudding. "We don't talk about it," he said very gently.