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Queensware Direct from the Potteries

U.S. Importers of Staffordshire Ceramics
in Antebellum America
1820-1860



ILLINOIS STATE
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY
PRAIRIE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Studies in Archaeological Material Culture
No. 1



Published by the Illinois State Archaeological Survey. 2013. 353 pp., \$9.99 (eBook).

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This study was conceived by archaeologists and is biased towards our needs. We study material culture, human-made objects excavated from the earth, and therefore our main interest here are those importers who left us tangible evidence of their existence. In this case, the under glaze marks on ironstone, and other high-fired pottery, which is almost indestructible when buried.

Placing the name of American importers of Staffordshire earthenware in under glaze transfer print demonstrated to the buying public that these local merchants had special ties to the English manufacturers which, it was thought, would enhance the chances of the importers not only obtaining the latest fashions promptly but also comparatively cheaply. This strategy was successful decade after decade, until new technology and inexpensive rail transportation in the late 19th century allowed industrial potteries in Ohio and elsewhere in the United States to capture the ceramic tableware market from their British rivals.

While it is interesting to know that for every American importer who had pottery with his firm's name placed on some of the vessels he ordered, there were a dozen who, for whatever reason, did not. There was only one known importer's mark for pre-Civil War Illinois, yet from city directories, newspaper advertisements, and other sources, at least 30 such firms existed, from Cairo, to Quincy, to Peoria and northward to emergent Chicago. A few weeks ago, it could be said that there were no importers marks from Illinois. Thanks to a thoughtful amateur archaeologist who donated some of his finds to the Illinois State Museum, there is now physical evidence of at least one—hopefully with others yet to be discovered. Not only did few importers order pottery with their company name as a back-mark, even when they did, very few vessels in any shipment were so marked. It appears, based on some projected vessel counts, that maybe only one in a hundred vessels in an importers store may have had his back-mark. The same holds true for manufacturer's marks. Staffordshire potters appear to have marked only a fraction of the wares they produced. There are literally thousands of plates, saucers, cups, and even platters, recovered with recognizable transfer prints but with no back-marks of any kind. This doesn't seem logical to our current concepts of advertisement and "branding," but it was the norm in the period between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Even so, the sheer volume of the Staffordshire pottery trade with American meant that literally thousands of vessels with importers marks were broken and discarded—thus entering the archaeological record.

The internet has developed into a wonderful research tool and the author has added nearly twice the number of marks compiled during the PIE (Pre-Internet Era). Since the database owes so much to the generosity of so many researchers, it is fitting that it is available as an Internet Publication which can be used by the widest audience of interested scholars. This also allows revision of the data base as new information becomes available (and it surely will) and to correct errors in scholarship or miscalculations in judgment on the part of the author.

Book Notes

Directory of American Importers

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