



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The Alexandria Stoneware Manufactory

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Image: Slip-decorated Milburn jar found in excavations at Alfred and South Columbus streets in a 19th century free black neighborhood. Photo by Gavin Ashworth, for Ceramics in America, Courtesy Alexandria Archaeology Museum.

In honor of Virginia Archaeology Month, this week we examine The Alexandria Stoneware Manufactory, Alexandria's largest and most successful pottery. Alexandria Stoneware was located on Wilkes Street between St. Asaph and Washington streets from 1810 to 1876.

Almost every decorated piece of Alexandria Stoneware is marked, proudly indicating the names of the potters and owners of the manufactory: potter John Swann (ca. 1810- 1825), china and glass merchants Hugh Smith and his sons (1825-1841) and potter Benedict C. Milburn and his sons (1841-1876). Swann and Milburn both made stoneware stamped for the Smith company, with Swann heading operations from ca. 1810 to 1831, and Milburn taking over in 1831.

The Alexandria Archaeology Museum's collections include close to 16,000 potsherds, recovered from the pottery site in 1977 when state archaeologists and local volunteers conducted brief rescue excavations prior to construction of the Tannery House condominiums. The museum's collection also includes vessels recovered from 19th-century residential sites.

Swann and Milburn's works are also known from surviving examples. The Alexandria History Museum at The Lyceum has a fine small collection of Alexandria stoneware, and several collectors allowed their vessels to be illustrated in articles on Swann and Milburn in the 2012-2013 volumes of *Ceramics in America*.

Alexandria Stoneware pieces can be divided stylistically into five decorative types. Swann's earliest pots were undecorated, with a brown iron wash on the upper portion of the vessel. By 1820, his pots were decorated with simple, sparse brushed cobalt designs. In the Smith period, the brushed cobalt decoration became more exuberant.

Milburn introduced the technique of slip-trailed decoration, which allowed similar floral designs to be executed with fine lines rather than thick brush strokes. In the manufactory's final years, after the Civil War, Milburn's sons primarily produced simple undecorated utilitarian wares.

Both Smith and Milburn employed several apprentices and laborers. One employee was a free black potter, David Jarbour, who worked at Wilkes Street from 1826 to 1833. Jarbour left us with just one signed example of his work, a large 27-inch tall decorated jar in the collection of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston Salem, North Carolina. On the base is the freehand inscription "1830 / Alexa / Maid by / D. Jarbour." This pot shows that Jarbour was a skilled craftsman and that the role of African Americans in the potting industry was in no way limited to menial labor.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

To learn more about Alexandria stoneware, Barbara H. Magid's 2012 and 2013 articles in *Ceramics in America* are available online from the Chipstone Foundation, at www.Chipstone.org.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.