

Redware & Stoneware



"I should like to be again settled...with a small pottery on a small but good piece of land...and then if I am favored with good health, I might be an advantage to the boys that are yet with me in attending to their education." Elijah Cornell wrote these words in early 1841 to his son Ezra. And so it turned out: in 1835 Ezra had purchased land near Fall Creek that was ideal for such a venture. Records show that by the summer of 1841 a kiln and small shop were built and the elder Cornell was producing redware pottery that

he sold in the Ithaca market for the next several years. His output was prolific. One page of his journal from the early 1840s lists milk pans, jugs, tea pots, ink stands, bowls of many sizes, pudding pans, and chamber pots, all by the dozen.

Redware is earthenware pottery, made from the same local clays that were used to make bricks. Containing iron mineral compounds that produce a reddish tint, it was made in America, primarily in the northeast, from early Colonial times until the late 19th century. It was replaced by stoneware, made from fine-grained white clay, a much stronger material that produced a more durable and more aesthetically pleasing vessel. Stoneware also didn't require the lead-based glaze that earthenware, which was very porous, required to keep it from leaking. Later, many such household items were made from tin and, ultimately, glass.

In 1853 Ezra, overextended with his financial ventures in the telegraph business, was forced to sell his Fall Creek property, and Elijah and his wife moved to Michigan, where they lived their remaining years with a daughter. The pottery was sold to James B. Magee for \$445.00, and quickly changed hands over the next few years. It was also converted to stoneware production, which required specialized kilns that could reach much higher temperatures than redware required. From the 1860s through the 1880s Fall Creek potters include Dennis Mooney, Griswold Apley, and James Macumber, under whom it seems to have prospered. The last year the pottery shop is listed in the Ithaca city directories is 1888.

Ithaca redware and stoneware is really lovely. The stoneware ranges from fawn colored to a smoky grayish-green. Many have a decorative splash of cobalt blue on the front, usually in a floral or other natural pattern, like birds or butterflies. The redware is darker and more subdued, with a deep russet glow to it. Because redware was more fragile, few examples of New York redware are found today. The History Center has a number of examples in our pottery collection, including one redware pitcher made by Elijah Cornell.

Nineteenth century pottery was artistic as well as functional, filling a kitchen shelf or corner with a soft glow of color and warmth.

Photo captions:

Elijah Cornell made this pitcher at his Fall Creek pottery in the 1840s or early 1850s. The dark reddish-brown color is typical of Ithaca redware, which is made from local clay.

Stoneware is made from lighter, finer clay than redware. This Ithaca crock displays the characteristic cobalt blue design common to mid-19th century New York pottery.