Stuck in the Mud: The Folk Pottery of North Carolina

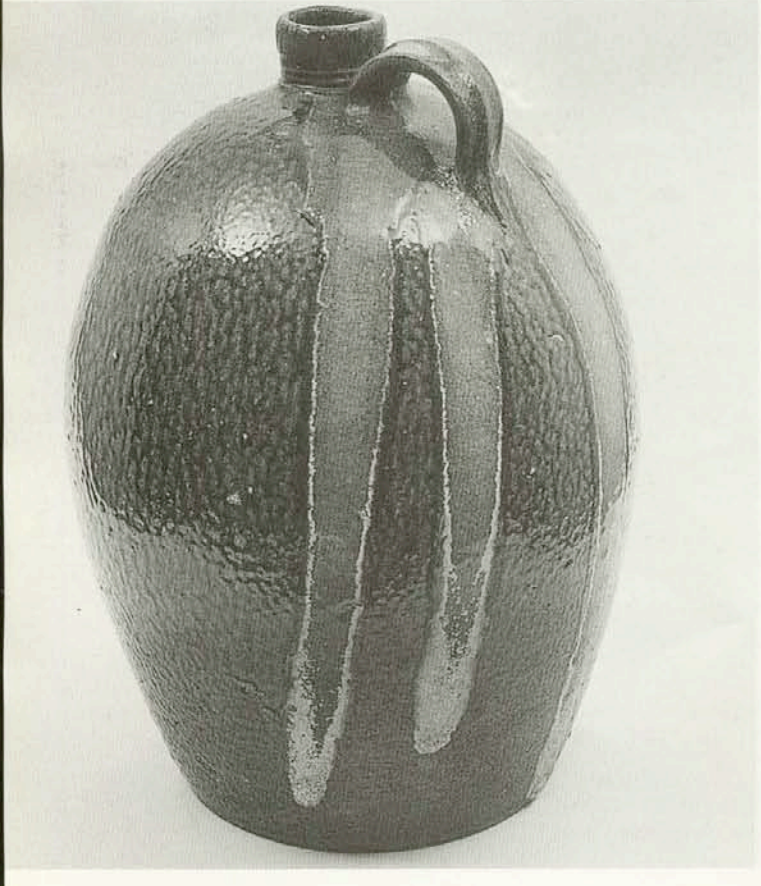
Mark Hewitt, a potter who studied with Michael Cardew, and whose grandfather and father were directors of Spode, looks at the history of traditional folk pottery in North Carolina, USA, where he has lived and worked since 1983.

The American South has a culture as strong as moonshine and as sweet as molasses. A collection of a few regional idiosyncrasies provides a loose context in which to place the traditional pottery of North Carolina. "Summertime," cotton and tobacco. Slavery, Civil Rights, the Klan, Martin Luther King. Brer Rabbit. The Blues, Gospel, Bluegrass, Country. Elvis. William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor. Gone With the Wind. Shotgun shacks and white trash. The Bible Belt. The New South. Magnolias and dogwoods, watermelons and porch swings.

Above all, the South is not tame. Caught somewhere between the first world and the third, it is to the rest of America what Korea is to Japan.

As one of the transitional Southern States, North Carolina lies between Washington, D. C. and Virginia to the North, and the Deep South. It is the same size as Great Britain but has only 5 million inhabitants. Divided into three geographical zones, the Appalachian Mountains, the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain, the state is covered with a dense mixed forest cleared into a patchwork of farms, towns and cities.

Daniel Seagle – 4 gall jug, h. 16" c.1850



Not surprisingly the pottery that comes out of the region is as vibrant and peculiar as the tensions within the wider culture. Falling within the larger southern pottery tradition that extends through South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, North Carolina's pottery remains distinct and particular. At their best North Carolina's pots display a massive serenity stemming from great clarity and relaxed proficiency, while at worst, an unconcealed hurriedness that nonetheless reveals a cursory deftness and direct purposefulness far removed from the prissy caution of more elevated ceramics. Handles are wiped on so vigorously as to make more flamboyant expressionism redundant, stones and twigs burst forth with uncontrived effortlessness.

These pots, customarily lumped uniformly together, display a variety as consistent as that of humanity. To read these pots with sensitivity is to be taken into the lives and times of their makers. To live with a Daniel Seagle pot is to live with majestic rural assurance, proud, eloquent and dignified. Whereas to live with an A. R. Cole is to live with a tobacco spitting proto-punk in bib overalls – a more colourful virtuosity.

Tradition

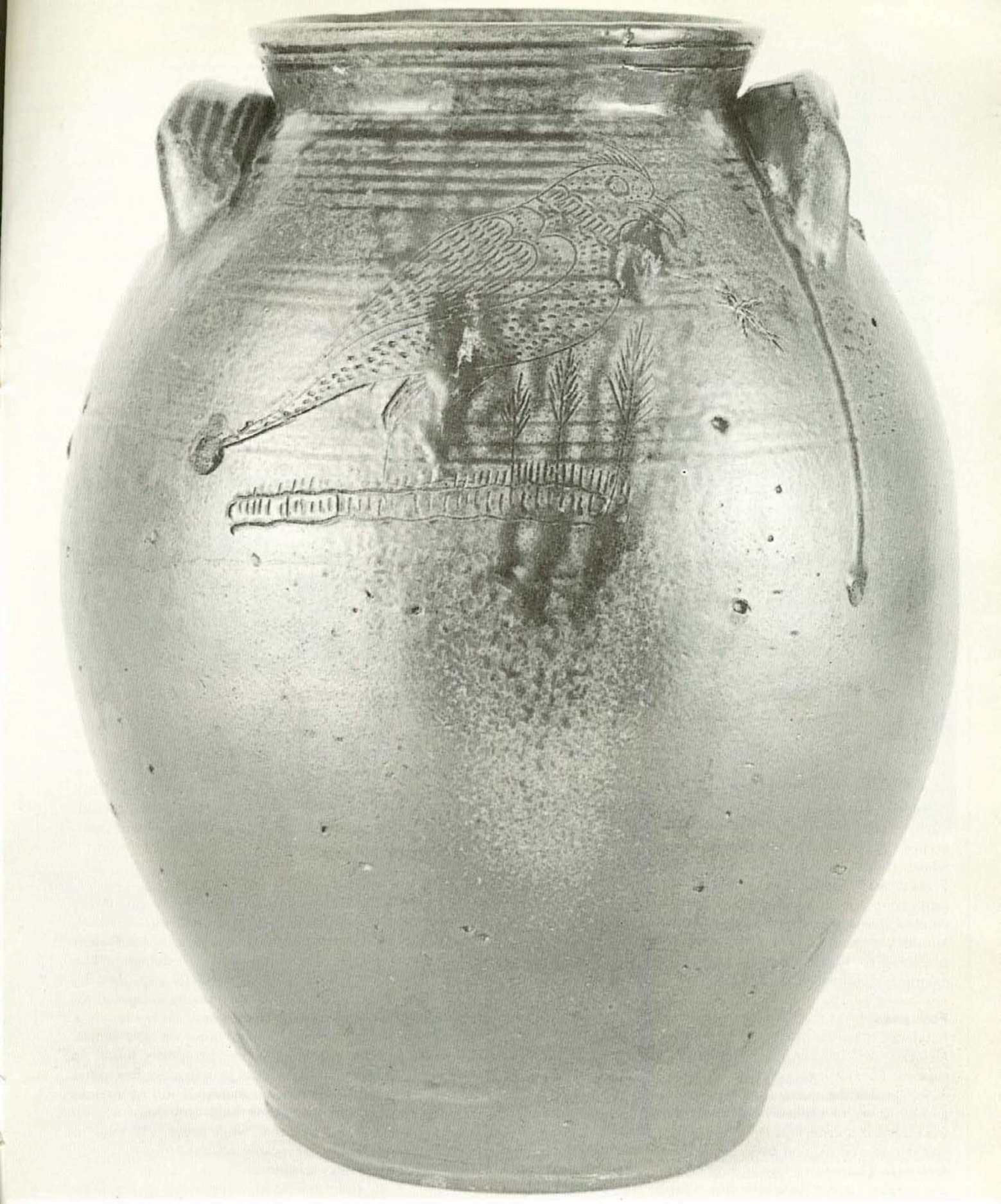
To begin at the beginning: the first pots made in North Carolina were made by Native Americans. Frequently overlooked in favour of pots from the American Southwest, the pots of the Cherokee, Catawba and Lumbee tribes are eerily similar to West African pots, with shapes, decorative techniques and firings of great beauty and refinement. Today, alas, apart from a few potters in the Cherokee Reservation in the Great Smokey Mountains, this tradition is all but destroyed.

The palisade built in July 1756 around the vulnerable Moravian community of Bethabara, just outside contemporary Winston-Salem, is evidence of the nature of the relationship between early settlers and Native Americans. The eventual prevailing of the colony allowed the flourishing of the first European pottery tradition in North Carolina. Coming out of the confines of a rigorous religious guild system, the Moravian potters Gottfried Aust and Rudolf Christ produced slipware of the highest quality, with decoration ranging from the fastidiously ornate to the loosely alive, along with plainer more strictly utilitarian ware. On June 15, 1761, 'People gathered from 50 and 60 miles away to buy pottery, but many came in vain, as the supply was exhausted by noon.'[1] The demand for pots in North Carolina has not abated since.

High temperature wares

By the 1830s the earthenware tradition was in decline, in part the result of information about lead poisoning and in part because of the emergence of stoneware, both the saltglaze and the alkaline glaze.

The first major production of saltglaze in North Carolina was at the firm of Gurdon Robins and Company in Fayetteville, at the head of the Cape Fear River. Set up by entrepreneurs from Hartford, Connecticut, they established a pottery there in 1820. They persuaded Edward Webster, and later his younger brothers Timothy and Chester, all from a prominent family of potters in Hartford, to 'assist



Chester Webster – Jar, h.8" 1850

with constructing the kiln and new stoneware factory.'[2] Early pots closely resemble New England saltglazed stoneware, but after the departure of Robins in 1823 and the eventual demise of the Webster Pottery in 1837, the influence waned. Chester Webster moved into the back country of Randolph County where he worked with Solomon Craven and his son, Bartlet Yancey Craven, and was only recently identified as the 'Bird and Fish Potter', so called because of the quirky incised decorations he executed on his unsigned pots. His pots took on a leaner Southern style as he got older, and began to show the characteristic markings of the Southern groundhog kiln.

Javan Brown – Face jug, h.14" 1930

The precise origins of the groundhog kiln are unknown, though it is most similar to a Newcastle kiln. They are long, narrow, rectangular wood burning kilns with low sprung arches. Their open, cross-draught design produces pots whose closest counterparts are those from La Borne in France, and Tamba and Shigaraki in Japan. Wood ash settling on the pots, when fluxed with salt, produces ash runs of spectacular fluidity. Brick drips from deteriorating kiln arches combine with these ash runs to produce a high temperature liquification of surface that is a supreme example of controlled pyromania.

Folk pots

Folklorist Charles 'Terry' Zug collected numerous oral histories in compiling his definitive book *Turners and Burners: The Folk Potters of North Carolina*. Asking many of the older potters the question, 'What makes a good potter?' a consistent set of replies were given. Firstly, steady output was deemed a criterion. Bragging aside, 100 gallons a day was considered a good average. Secondly, prudent use of materials. There were 4 pounds of clay to the gallon and the pot needed to be reasonably thin. Thirdly, the pots should be relatively neat, smooth and not rough. These three fall into a humane economic system based on the notion of reasonable efficiency. Finally, all the potters mentioned perfectionism or virtuosity, to describe those that went beyond these requirements and made pots that stood out, usually in terms of shape, consistency or size.

Contrast these quotes from Burlon Craig, the last of the old time alkaline potters from the Catawba Valley. " 'Sam [Propst], I guess, was about the best turner of all as far as uniform [shape] and turning it out top to bottom the same thing. I'd have to give him credit; . . . I'd class him above myself! Yes, I would, I'm not kidding. Now he didn't turn out an awful lot, but what he turned. He could turn out a board full of five gallon jugs or jars, set 'em on a long board, and I'll bet you there wouldn't be more than a matchstem difference in [height in] say five of six.' "[3]

Floyd Hilton, who Burlon Craig worked for, passed on this advice. " 'Don't make any differences, said 'Just so they hold about what they're supposed to and get a good glaze on it.' Said 'People's gonna set 'em in the smokehouse or cellar, and nobody'll see 'em anyhow.' "[4]

Individual styles

Give ten potters the same sized lump of clay and the same shape to make and ten different pots will be made. Of all the many excellent potters in North Carolina's history three who stand out particularly are Nicholas Fox of Chatham County, J. A. Craven of Randolph County and Daniel Seagle of Lincoln County. Their work has a resonant stillness, like a silent nave, or a solitary oak in full leaf.

The patriarch of the North Carolina alkaline glaze tradition, Daniel Seagle, 1805–1867, ranks with the best from anywhere. Potting in the more isolated Catawba Valley, Seagle produced pots that possess an intuitive classicism instinctively unidentifiable as good. Equally, they are as romantic and virtuosic as Liszt or Brahms. The way they evoke the landscape makes one think even of Elgar. Unusually bulbous, ovoid and large, his jugs and jars are summations of the virtues of folk pottery, strong, assured, generous and calm.

A farmer potter, like most of the early potters, he spawned a tradition that continues today. The olive green, ash, clinker (or glass), and clay glaze is still made by Burlon Craig, Charlie Lisk and Kim Ellington.

A curiosity that has become a staple of the alkaline glaze potters is the face jug. Originating either as whimsy or, less likely, transferred over the Americas from West Africa through the slave trade, these jugs were said to ward evil spirits away from graves or well houses. Nowadays, though somewhat hackneyed, the face jug is a prized collector's item.

Twentieth century

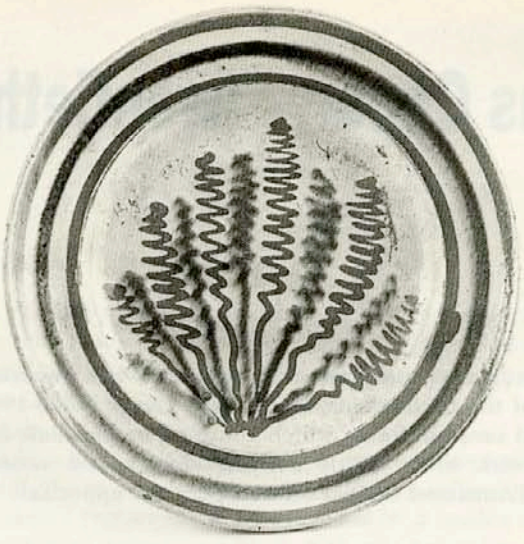
Around the turn of the century social and economic forces began to change the nature of pottery making in North Carolina. Having served the needs of a rural, self sufficient people, the tradition had been slow to change. "The precipitous decline has been most succinctly explained by the late Enoch Reinhart. When asked what had crippled his business, he responded: 'Prosperity, I guess' "[5]

But many North Carolina potters hung on and shifted their production to benefit from the prosperity found in another market, namely tourists and people more interested in artistic ceramics. Gradually new materials and equipment became available. New ideas took hold and there was an explosion of colour and style that, while preserving some of what had gone before, irrevocably changed the nature of North Carolina's pottery tradition.

"In 1932 J. B. Cole published a catalogue in which he offered no less than 524 different forms ranging from tiny pitchers and candlesticks to massive urns several feet in height . . . Many pieces listed are still associated with food, but the emphasis is on consumption rather than preservation. This clear shift in function reveals that pottery was designed to be seen, not merely used."[6]

At the same time that Bernard Leach was setting up his pottery in St. Ives, Juliana and Jacques Busbee were establishing Jugtown Pottery near Seagrove, and Rebecca

Rudolf Christ – covered jar, h. 16" c.1810



Gottfried Aust – Plate 11" c.1780

and Henry Cooper were setting up North State Pottery. "By fusing the contemporary American admiration for oriental ceramics and the ideals of the Arts and Crafts Movement with the folk tradition, the Busbees and Coopers stimulated a hybrid pottery that still flourishes today and appeals to diverse customers because of its blend of old and new."[7]

Familiar though this may sound to a British audience the results have been very different. While Jugtown retained a stricter, more subdued artistic emphasis more similar to Leach's philosophy, none of the other potteries retained any ideological components. Large wholesale orders for inexpensive, brightly coloured, 'Folk Fiesta' ware sustained potteries such as North State through the '40s, '50s and '60s. M. L. Owens, father of Vernon Owens, the current owner of Jugtown, remembers making 15,000 candle holders a month during the 1950s. Times were hard for many years, with high production and low prices. To visit with these older potters and watch them turning is humbling. They do the work with no fuss, with ease. They make pots, not statements.

Georgia folk potter Lanier Meaders expresses his ambivalence about making pots. " 'What makes the best potter is somebody that's hungry. He's got to be hungry and in debt and about to be fore-closed. If he's like that, he's got to make a good product. But if he's got plenty of money, always had a silver spoon in his mouth . . Lord what difference does it make?' "[8]

Zug describes the transition: "Innovation replaced conservatism; eclectic inspiration, the old regionalism; and conscious artistry, the once pervasive utilitarianism. And yet elements of early days remain. The potters dig and process their own clays, and they retain long established forms and glazes. Most learned to turn and burn at an early age by working alongside their parents or neighbours. They remain primarily craftsmen – production potters who replicate large numbers of useful (if no longer necessary) forms at extremely reasonable prices."[9]

Today

Prosperity has returned to North Carolina pottery. The seventies and eighties saw the publication of several books about pottery in North Carolina and the South. The state takes great pride and interest in its pottery – not as intensely, but somewhat akin to Japan. Collectors have elevated the price of the old pots, and the prices of new pots have risen accordingly. Down in Seagrove 10 years ago there were 9 potteries, now there are 45. Burlon Craig, age 79, still digs his own clay by hand, turns on a stand up treadle wheel, has an Onta-like, water powered glass crusher, and fires 500 good sized pots about three times a year in his huge groundhog kiln. He sold his last kiln load in less than a minute.

Inevitably things are different from the way they were 20 years ago. The changes in pottery making in North Carolina reflect changes in the wider economy and society. Though still itself, the South is diversifying, it is no longer as isolated and distinct as it was. Many outsiders have moved here, including many younger potters. Fifteen of the thirty-five new potteries have come out of Montgomery Technical College located close to Seagrove, today the dominant influence. So, layered on top of the old tradition are pottery styles reflecting a wide variety of backgrounds, from art schools to apprenticeships served outside the area. Rather than having a purely regional flavour, what is being made in North Carolina today is more of a mirror of what is being made in the rest of the country.

To live and make pots in North Carolina is to be surrounded by this tradition, which as a Cardew student, and student of folk pottery from around the world, I deem a good thing. Above all, to be here is to have connections with the potters themselves. I have tremendous respect for them and have been greatly helped and encouraged by them. The late Dorothy and Walter Auman, Vernon Owens at Jugtown and his father Melvin, and Burlon Craig have generously provided information, materials and equipment. Most importantly, to witness their skill, enthusiasm and commitment is to be inspired. I remember Dorothy talking of how her father, C. C. Cole, would admonish his helpers to "Treat the clay as if you are going to eat it." Michael could have said that. I see Vernon moving clay on the wheel as easily as he breathes, and I see Burlon pedalling his stand up treadle wheel in dignified protest against more modern easier ways.

Mark Hewitt wrote about his own wood-fired pots in Ceramic Review 142.

Footnotes

1. Charles G. Zug III. "Turners and Burners. The Folk Potters of North Carolina." University of North Carolina Press 1986
2. Quincy Scarborough, Jr. "North Carolina Decorated Stoneware. The Webster School of Folk Potters." Journal of Early Southern Decorative Arts 10, No. 1 1984
3. Charles G. Zug III. 4. 5. 6. 7. Ibid.
8. Nancy Sweezey. "Raised in Clay." University of North Carolina Press 1994
9. Charles G. Zug III. Ibid.