

Notes on the Morris Pottery Kiln (44RM430)

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In the early 19th century, Virginia's Ridge and Valley was a center of pottery production and came to dominate the state's potting industry. The presence of high-quality clays, water, and fuel, as well as an expanding consumer market and established transportation routes, created the conditions for small-scale potting shops to grow into regional businesses. Within the Shenandoah Valley, the largest concentration of potteries was located in Rockingham County, where 53 potters worked out of twelve shops. Coarseware traditions (redware and stoneware) emerged from the potteries in three locations: Elkton, Dry River, and Harrisonburg-Mount Crawford.

An example of the Dry River potters is seen in the history of the Morris family of potters who purchased land near present-day Lilly (six miles west of Harrisonburg) and began operating a salt-glazed stoneware pottery business sometime after 1872. The father, Lindsay, was listed in various census enumerations as a "farmer, brickmason, day laborer, broom maker" and, finally, "potter" after marrying the daughter of one of the best-known Rockingham County potters, Andrew Coffman. Lindsay learned the pottery trade at his father-in-law's operation in Elkton, starting in the mid-1850s. His entry into the pottery business followed a three-stage pattern common among shop potters:

- an apprenticeship with an established potter (usually a family member);
- a journeyman phase with other potters;
- and a proprietorship of his own operation.

Lindsay potted in Elkton, Augusta County, and Mount Crawford for fifteen years prior to purchasing land in western Rockingham County. During this "journeyman" phase, his eldest son, Erasmus, began potting, probably working in Augusta County and Mount Crawford along with his father. Together with the youngest son, Andrew, Lindsay and Erasmus ultimately moved onto the land across the Dry River from potter John Heatwole, bringing with them Lindsay's brother-in-law and potter, Reuben Coffman.

By 1880, four known potters -- Lindsay, Erasmus, and Andrew Morris and Reuben Coffman -- were living within a few hundred yards of the Morris shop and the kiln that still stands. The Morris Pottery Kiln (44RM430) is the only documented example of a standing 19th century kiln in Rockingham County. This is a circular updraft kiln, approximately 13 feet in diameter, apparently intact to the base of an interior firing chamber. An updraft kiln is one in which the fire is built underneath or at the low end of the tube or chamber. The heat moves up through the wares and out through the flue at the top. The brick structure is built up on a large mound of clay and river cobbles into which the base of the kiln is recessed. It appears that, over time, the Morris potters packed the outside of the feature with layers of river cobbles and soil, perhaps to shore up the walls and extend the firing life of the kiln. The entire mound measures ca. 35' east-west by 25' north-south and stands 12' high. Although removed today, the kiln would have had a domed roof with a chimney through which smoke exited the structure. The roof would have had openings through which salt was poured; heavy deposits of salt glaze coat the kiln's interior bricks. There are two openings on opposite sides of the kiln, and one or both of these were fireboxes in which fuel was burned, with the heat passing through the kiln chamber and out the chimney. Flues are also spaced around the periphery of the kiln, apparently to create a stronger draft.

In the mid-1980s, the Massanutten Chapter of the Archeological Society of Virginia, the James Madison University Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and Dr. Stan Kaufmann of Eastern Mennonite University undertook the initial documentation of the kiln site. Systematic surface collections yielded large numbers of salt-glazed sherds and kiln furniture (cut spacers, props, and coils). The Morris potters produced mostly grey-bodied, salt-glazed stoneware, although small quantities of red-bodied stoneware

and lead-glazed earthenware were also recovered. An analysis of the sherds indicates that the finished pots were overwhelmingly plain -- of nearly 1000 sherds, only ten had a cobalt decoration. The only ornamentation of any type is concentric lines near vessel rims. The Morris potters didn't mark their vessels with either maker's marks or capacity stamps. The most common vessel form identified in surface collections and among vessels in the Morris family are jars very similar in form to those from the Coffman potteries.

Lindsay Morris died in 1902, and although his son, Erasmus, lived well into the 20th century, it is not believed that the pottery operated much after 1900. The end of the Morris pottery paralleled the trend seen throughout the Shenandoah Valley, where small, family-operated potteries disappeared from the landscape in the wake of large-scale industrial production in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

References

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