BLUE-PRINTED POTTERY ITEMS IN THE STOCK BOOK OF AN EARLY 19th. CENTURY NEW YORK GENERAL MERCHANT (Finally!! Proof the American term “Cup Plate” is correct)

by

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A n interesting hand-written stock-book, kept meticulously from April 28th. 1835 to March 20th. 1840 by a New York merchant, has somehow survived intact. The owners would no doubt have been astounded to learn that the line after line of items of stock with their individual prices, extensions, totals and suppliers’ names, could hold any interest at all for readers over 180 years in their future. Yet we know that the chance of detailed contemporary information of the business procedures of such relatively humble firms is rare enough to excite our collectors, if ever it does turn up.

This particular firm starts out on April 27th. 1835 as “Messrs. North & Wheeler, New York” and in May 1836, it becomes “Messrs. Wheeler & Co., New York”. The Company name remains the same until July 1839, although the address is occasionally varied from the majority of entries where it is still “New York”, to “Catskill”, “Walton”, “Albany” or “Hudson”. In July 1839, the firm’s title becomes “Messrs. Wheeler, Gardiner & Co., New York” with an occasional address change to “Walton”. There is a change of handwriting on 16th. October 1839 indicating a change of bookkeeper at that point and the address is less often given as “New York”. The other addresses are “Athens”, “Walton”, “Catskill” and “Oxford”. The last entry is dated March 20th. 1840 under “Wheeler, Gardiner & Co., Walton”.

While the general merchandise purchased by this firm is fascinating in itself, preserved food, textiles, clothing and household supplies are not our particular interest - except where the household supplies are ceramic and peak of excitement - blue-printed pottery! Such items form a very small percentage of the goods listed, only eight pages out of ninety-seven show some mention and we illustrate a portion of these for clarity.

The reader will note that individual pricings are in British currency, presumably because, with few exceptions, the goods were purchased from importers handling only British goods, and then those prices were converted for totaling, to American currency. Details of the conversion rate, although not absolutely consistent, seem to indicate that eight British shillings (8/-) equalled $1 American. As eight shillings in today’s British currency equals forty pence, this indicates a conversion rate in 1835/40 of $2.50 to £1. (Perhaps some fiscal historian among our readers would be kind enough to confirm or refute my suggestion). At this point, our younger readers might find a table of the older form of British currency of some help. In that system, abandoned as recently as the early 1970s, twelve old pence equaled one shilling and twenty shillings equaled one pound sterling (therefore two hundred and forty old pence equaled one pound sterling).

Round sums in shillings were indicated thus 5/- (five shillings) and fractions of a shilling thus 3/6. The latter would indicate three shillings and six pence or three and one half shillings, (remember twelve pence, not ten, to a shilling). Where actual fractions of half or quarter were shown, they referred to old pence and fractions of a penny. Finally, in the book, quantities are priced in units or fractions of dozens (lots of twelve) or grosses (lots of one hundred and forty-four).

The book’s earliest list devoted to ceramic pots is dated 27th. April 1835 and holds a great deal of interest for us. It is as follows:

- 2 doz. Black (?) tea pots
- 1 doz. C.C.(?) Chambers
- 3 doz. C.C.(?) Bowls (two prices presumably indicate two sizes)
- 1 doz. enamel ditto and half doz. creams (two prices again)
- Half doz. salts (two prices) and two doz. tumblers (two prices)
- 1 doz soups
- 2 doz. plates (three sizes)
- Half doz. nappies* (two prices and large items as reflected in the prices)
- Half gross printed teas (priced in pence and no colour mentioned)
- 2 doz. pink muffins (not a popular colour in Britain at that time)

**CUP PLATES** (PROOF AT LAST! THEY DID EXIST)

Half gross enamelled teas “strangely enough, cheaper than the printed teas”

Cartage for all the above totalled twenty-five cents. The supplier was “J. Barrow & Co.”
We can pick out several items of particular interest from the next delivery of pots. This was listed on October 1st, 1835 and the supplier was “Jno. Wright Jr. & Co.” (Incidentally, this name tends to confirm what we might in fact expect, that the importer was American and not British; the suffix “Jr.” being found much more commonly in American business names; and if more confirmation is needed, the list includes “Picchors”, a term used very rarely in Britain, the preferred description being Jugs).

For the first time, the list clearly stipulates “Blue Printed” wares and the first three items seem to refer to “1 doz. sets” of each. “Twillers” is a plate size still recognized and refers to a “between” size - smaller than a tea plate but larger than a cup plate. “Hoop Plates” are mentioned. What are they? A word which is difficult to decipher but may be “Cov’d”, perhaps a shortened form of “Covered”, refers to “Dishes” and “Bakers” which is to be expected, but also to “Sauce Boats”. Were they also sometimes supplied covered? (Could this refer to a sauce tureen? ED) A most unusual form listed is “1 Pr. Decanters”. These would surely be a great rarity for collectors to find; however, there are just a few glass items in the list and as the decanters are immediately below “1 doz. Cut Tumblers”, which must certainly be cut glass, it is likely that the decanters were glass too, as were the next item - “1 doz. Wines” - and the next - “2 doz. Glass Cup Plates” clearly indicated. What exactly were a “Set Blue Soup Tureen Cups”? It is also quite a surprise to see “Tureen” spelt in the modern fashion; the old-fashioned spelling “Terrine” was used constantly in other documents of this date. “Moco Fruit Bowls” are also mentioned; could they possibly be referring to Mocha ware? (that body was certainly at the height of its popularity at that time, the earliest known dated piece being 1799).

The next section of particular interest to us is dated “May 28th, 1836. Once again the supplier is “Jno. Wright Jr. & Co.”, but this time their address is added - “36, Water St.” Here a “Sauce Tureen” makes its appearance for the first time and “Moco Picchors” are added to the “Moco Bowls”. It is also worth noting that “1 Blue Ewer” (not Piccher) “& Basin” is listed with other toilet items, “Soap Box” and “Brush Tray”. Finally, Lustre ware is mentioned for the only time in the book; “half doz. Lustre Creams”. This ware was greatly in demand in Britain at this time and so it is very surprising to find it forming such a small percentage of this firm’s imports of pottery.

The next listed section of pottery interest, dated “May 13th, 1837” seems to form the peak of the dealings in this material shown in the book. The total value of $115.24 for pottery plus a little glass, is by far the largest single transaction in those items. The same company has supplied the goods, (this time entered as “John Wright Jr. & Co.”) by the new bookkeeper. Unfortunately, his writing is not as clear as his predecessor’s and this makes it more difficult for us to decipher items of particular interest. Nevertheless, one item which alone totals the relatively enormous sum of $16.20, seems to be for “3 Gross Pink Blue & Brown Teas” followed by another $9 worth of the same. (Of course we can only speculate as to whether these “Teas” were a mixture of single coloured items, or whether each piece was printed in three colours mentioned.) The listing of “Yellow Peppers” is the
only occasion on which we find a mention of items with that
colour-glaze in this book, but this is in line with its comparative
scarcity in other markets. So far, our sections of interest
have contained items only of ceramics or glass, but two items
here are ambiguous. “Stove foot Lamps” (whatever they may
be) and “Japan Lanterns” might be manufactured in ceramics
or glass, but may equally well be of other materials
and have been included mention
of a “China”
item; (the
description itself
is indecipher-
able). At the time
in question,
“china” was an
acceptable
alternative word
for “porcelain”.
Could these
half-dozen items
have represented
a daring experiment by our merchant to raise his sights to
include wealthier customers (and if so, did it succeed)? The
cost of porcelains over earthenwares, since the earliest
productions to the present day, has maintained a remarkably
constant ratio of three to one and the high cost shown in the
stock figures indicates that this “china”, may well have
actually been some form of porcelain. (If it originated
in Britain, it would have been bone china, otherwise hard-paste).

The last two sections to concern us show a marked decline in
purchases of pots. Probably it was found that profits in those
items were less than expected and capital could be more
usefully laid out in other directions, (The possible speculation
in porcelain bodies may have gone horribly wrong). On
“November 28th, 1837” a small purchase totalling $9.76 for
three items was made from “John Wright Jr. & Co.” once
again and, a long time after, on “July 3rd, 1839, the last order
in the book for the material in which we are interested, was
placed with a firm which may have been a continuation of the
last supplier, “Wright Shillin & Co.”. There is nothing of note
in the items ordered on this occasion, except perhaps that
green printing is mentioned for the first time - “2 gross
Emerald Teas”. The total cost was a respectable $41.62, but
still did not approach that of earlier orders and seems to have
been a last fling after a long pause. As we know, the last
overall entry in this book (by no means necessarily the end of
the firm) was to be less than a year later. For all we know,
business in pots may well have picked up again in succeeding
years and reached unprecedented heights.

To try to make definitive judgements on the entire early 19th,
century ceramics import business into the USA, on the basis
of the stock records of a single relatively small general
merchant over a five year period, is of course an impossibil-
ity and I do not claim to do anything of that nature. How-
ever, this unexpected survival of a contemporary document
gives us an opportunity to lift a corner of the veil which hides
from us a way of life (and business) which is long gone. In
addition, steeped as we all are in our current business atti-
dudes, without the puzzles posed by some of the seemingly
incomprehensible preferences and actions of our business
forbears, we would probably never be stimulated into trying
to get into their skins
and understanding a
small part of their
world.

**“Nappies” were made
at many British
factories in the early
19th century. Unfortu-
nately, their precise use
and appearance seems
to have been forgotten.
I have consulted Mr.
Robert Copeland of the
Spode/Copeland
factory who is a former practicing potter and who passed on
to me his best educated guess. He thinks that they were
flat-bottomed bowls (rather like soup plates without a rim)
made in various sizes from six ins. diam. upwards. However,
he cannot make a sensible guess at their use. Naturally, if any
reader can put us right on this, we should be delighted.

**“Cup Plates”, as you know, have long been a source of
dispute as to whether they actually existed, or whether the
name was fabricated to fill a gap in our knowledge. On the
whole, American opinion has been that cup plates have
always been around and have always been referred to by that
name. British opinion has always expressed doubt and has
inclined to attribute it to American “wishful thinking”. I feel
that the references in this book establish beyond doubt that
cup plates were a perfectly normal label to put on small
plates in early 19th century America. To claim that it was in
international use is a far more difficult matter. After much
discussion, I feel that these plates may have originated in the
early American method of taking tea, which followed closely
the contemporary Continental European (not the British) of
using the saucer to cover the cup while allowing the tea to
steep. The wet saucer would then not be usable in polite
society as a receptacle on which to put down the cup and so
a small plate would have been necessary to take on that duty.
This may have been the origin of the cup plate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT: My profound gratitude goes to my
good friend, Mrs. Bella Kleinman of New York who originally
found the ledger, which inspired this article. She was later
kind enough to present it to me, in view of my great interest
in the subject.

Two pages of the original ledger are reproduced on the next page.
Ed.
Ed. The confusion concerning the term “cup plates” has been around since A. W. Casysh disputed the term in his 1970 publication, Blue and White Transferware. Mr Casysh saw the light in his later book The Dictionary of Blue and White Printed Pottery, co-authored with R. K. Henrywood. Many Americans do share Mr. Casysh’s questions regarding these plates (see Norman Wolfe’s comments at the end of his Part II coverage of the Clews pottery, in this issue), but the majority of us “Yanks” have sailed serenely along, unconcerned by these questions and totally at ease with our terminology (and possible ignorance). Both the American Glass world and the American collectors of English ceramics have always assumed the usage, as put forth by Mary Louise Gutman, in the next article was correct. The usage, as discussed by Mr. Pinter, at the end of his article, seems to make a lot more sense to me, however, who really knows?? These little plates will continue to be highly sought after and extremely hard to obtain, no matter what we label them.

"AROUND THE BLOCK" continued from page 25

The fourth lot also produced another surprise. and fragile pieces of Americana. I have felt for years, that this market has a long way to go to catch up. There may be
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