

THE SEAGROVE AREA : A BRIEF HISTORY

The Seagrove area is one of the largest communities of potters with the longest continual history of pottery making in the United States. Today visitors can explore the rural landscape by back roads and visit the potters in their workshops and studios, to witness the Seagrove potters continuing the tradition of making pots. The area is home to more than 100 potters who offer a full spectrum of pottery and ceramic art. With a diversity of talents, Seagrove has something to offer both the serious collector and the casual buyer. The Seagrove area offers the visitor an opportunity to learn about North Carolina's ongoing pottery culture.

THE FIRST POTTERS

The ceramic history of the area begins with the abundant and diverse natural clay deposits found in the vicinity. Native Americans were first to discover this resource and used it for both functional and ceremonial objects. These ancient pieces are among the most important remaining artifacts of early civilization.

IMMIGRANT POTTERS

The first immigrant potters, mostly English and Germans, arrived in the latter half of the 18th century. Most came to our state from Pennsylvania and Virginia. Though information on these early immigrant potters is sketchy, they probably settled first in the areas closest to the Great Wagon Road, which ran from Pennsylvania to Georgia, and then migrated from there to the Seagrove area. Potters arriving in the Seagrove area in the 1700s were quick to realize the value of the local clay. They first made redware, some plain and some decorated, using clay that fired to a reddish orange color. By sometime in the first half of the 19th century, Seagrove area potters had switched predominantly to making the higher fired salt glazed stoneware.

The building of the old Plank Road in the mid 19th century, and later the emerging railroad system, gave potters access to even wider markets and helped to establish Seagrove's reputation as a pottery town. These pioneer farmer-potters forged new styles based on their skills and artistic visions, their surrounding natural resources, and the needs of their growing community. Today these early Seagrove area pots are gaining international attention as their value changes from that of utilitarian object to cultural treasure.

THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

The combination of modern food preparation methods and the Industrial Revolution, with its cheaper and more available factory-made pottery, was devastating to potters across the country. Most closed their doors forever. Because of their remote rural location and the local whisky distilling industry, Seagrove potters were able to survive a few decades longer than most, but the effects of Prohibition were crippling. Driven by economic necessity, lack of other job opportunities, family pride, and their own love of clay, many potters worked on against all odds.

Those who had persisted in the Seagrove area were joined in the early 20th century by an educated and worldly couple, Jacques and Juliana Busbee, who appreciated the local craftsmanship and used their considerable marketing skills to push the Seagrove area work more into the world's view. The increase in travel by wealthier Americans, a growing awareness of world pottery history, and the new availability of non-local ceramic materials

all contributed to change in Seagrove pottery styles. This period in the area's history is marked by an explosion in variety of forms and colors. Collectors embraced this work; their patronage and their view of pottery as more decorative than functional pushed potters to utilize new materials and new firing methods to develop their work further. By the late 1920s, Seagrove area pottery was well known from the galleries of New York to the garden shops of Florida. Thousands of these local pots have come on the secondary market at antique stores throughout the country and are passionately collected by many.

World War II ushered in a new era for Seagrove. In addition to evolving public taste and sending a generation of potters off to war, many of the materials for the new glazes became unavailable. By now it was obvious that flexibility and change were essential elements of the Seagrove tradition, and the potters were able to face the challenges with confidence. The immediate solution was high volume production of small pieces for the wholesale gift market. An individual potter might produce more than 500 pieces each day, all the same shape.

THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

By the 1950s, Seagrove area potters were working as a group to promote the area, produce exhibitions and print the first area-wide pottery maps. This was done in a thoughtful way that paid respect to their predecessors and laid the foundation for the current renaissance. The continued strong support of North Carolina and its people for individual craftsmanship helped keep the pottery industry vibrant.

The 1960s and 1970s were characterized by strong social changes across America. Both the "hippie" movement and the 1976 bicentennial brought about renewed interest in handcrafts. Some of the old Seagrove area pottery families continued to train their own children or other interested apprentices, as they had for generations. Other ways of learning to make pottery began to leave an imprint on the area as well. The development of ceramic programs by nearby community colleges led to the training of many area residents in the craft. Studio artists seeking a "back to the land" lifestyle, and academically trained potters began to settle in the area. These new potters, like the first English and German settlers, brought visible and constant changes to the area throughout the entire remainder of the 20th century. Some area potters continued the ideals and the traditions of the early Seagrove potters. Others embraced a wider perspective of what pottery could be, not as visibly influenced by the previous work done in the region. Yet few would claim that they had not been enriched by the Seagrove area's strong sense of history and tradition.

THE SEAGROVE AREA POTTERY COMMUNITY TODAY

A visit to the Seagrove area potteries gives visitors an experience no gallery can provide, which is a chance to visit with the artists in their own environment. It doesn't take much encouragement to get potters talking about their work, and their passion for clay is evident. Those who have visited a pottery shop or studio in the Seagrove area of North Carolina have learned some basic lessons about handmade pottery. They have learned that making pottery is much more complicated than one might think, requiring years of practice, honing skills on the potter's wheel as well as gaining knowledge of clays, glazes and firing techniques. They have also learned that handmade pottery is beautiful, and seductive. Whether utilitarian or decorative, the pieces that come from the hands of the potter enrich the daily lives of those who take them into their homes, and often lead to a life-long love affair with handmade objects.

The potters of the Seagrove area are a hardworking, dedicated and quirky bunch. The community's long ago traditions have blended with the art of the many newer potters drawn to this special community during the past twenty years, creating a wide variety of pottery styles that aptly reflects the diverse vibrant pottery community

itself. Though each potter's work is quite unique, a shared enthusiasm for clay unites them all as they contribute to the ongoing Seagrove tradition. Potters share a camaraderie defined by this very diversity. They educate and inspire one another, help one another fire massive kilns, lend glaze ingredients, provide assistance to one of their own in need, and support the greater community by donating their time, talents and artwork to many charitable organizations.

It is not unusual to find third-generation pottery customers driving the country roads on any given day, visiting potters that have become old friends, as well as checking out new shops that have opened since their last visit. The slow pace of rural life and the quiet of the countryside are a balm for city dwellers, who return time and again. When you come, be sure to wear a pair of comfortable shoes. If you like, bring a picnic and help yourself to picnic tables available at many shops. Find yourself wandering back in time to a place where neighbors are friendly, families work together, and people still make things by hand, from the earth, that will last into the future. We suggest that you take time to explore the more than 100 pottery studios and galleries of the Seagrove area, to meet the individual potters and share one of our state's most important cultural legacies.

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