

# The History of Etruscan Majolica

By Joseph Devanney

Chester County, Pa., as most people know, is an active center for the antiques trade. Not as well known, however, is the fact that Chester County in the last third of the 19th century was also home of the leading manufacturer of American majolica. This firm, Griffen, Smith and Hill, produced its wares under the Etruscan trademark in Phoenixville, a borough located in the northern part of the county. How Phoenixville became the site of this manufacturing endeavor is a tale that is relevant both to the study of majolica and the study of 19th-century American economic enterprises.

The story begins sometime during the mid-1860s, when W.A.H. Schreiber found large deposits of kaolin, or white clay, in various locations in the Phoenixville area. One pit was believed to have been located on Third Avenue near

Main Street in the heart of the borough. Other pits were found along a local creek and along a road leading to nearby Valley Forge.

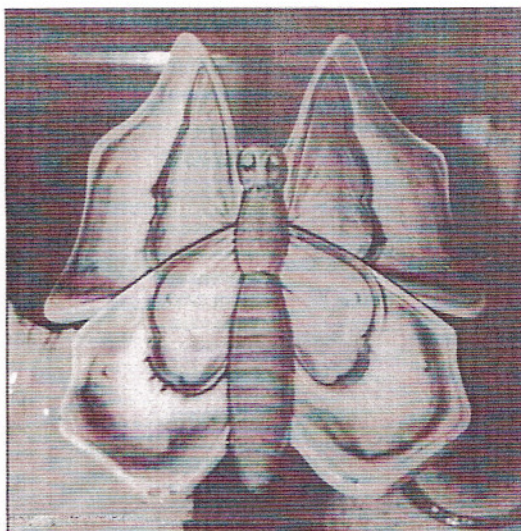
First discovered in China, kaolin clay is sometimes known as "Terra Alba" or white earth. One special characteristic of this clay is its inability to fuse or soften at high temperatures. Realizing this, Schreiber concluded that the Phoenix Iron Company might be able to use the clay to produce firebricks for its furnaces.

John Griffen, the superintendent of the Iron Company, agreed with Schreiber's idea and, in 1867, the Phoenix Pottery, Kaolin and Fire Brick Company began operations. (John Griffen, incidentally, is the same person who invented the Griffen Gun, used with deadly success in the Civil War.) The new venture employed Schreiber as superintendent and, from its loca-

tion at the intersection of Church and Starr Streets, produced both bricks and pieces of white pottery.

The company soon hired David Smith, an English potter who had completed his apprenticeship in Stoke-on-Trent, the area of Britain world renowned for its Staffordshire pottery. In the years following the Civil War, it was common for American firms to hire specialized talent from Europe, especially Great Britain. Smith took over as company superintendent around 1876 when Schreiber left his position to take a new job as superintendent of the United States Crockery Department at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia.

Around the same time, John Griffen purchased a share of the company for his son Harry, a graduate of the Polytechnic Institute in New York. Harry had



*This Etruscan butterfly wall pocket, one of only two known to exist, is on view at the Museum of the Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area. (Photo courtesy Joseph J. Devanney).*

an interest in pottery and, eventually, bought another share of the business for his older brother, George. Soon, another principal to the firm was added in the form of William Hill, a potter.

The stage was now set for the full emergence of the company that would be Griffen, Smith and Hill. Under this name, the firm began manufacturing majolica around 1880. The vibrant colors of the pieces came from adding tin and lead to oxides to create glazes. Copper oxide was used to produce green, while manganese oxide resulted in a black color, and cobalt oxide formed the blues. After the oxides were ground, they were added to liquid clay to create the glaze.

The process of making the pottery was both complicated and labor intensive. This was despite the fact that the factory utilized "state of the art" steam engines to run the pressing and grinding machinery. In the middle of the afternoon, the men who molded the clay requested their quota of raw material. Young boys would mix the clay with water to form a dough-like substance. The mixture was then put into a "pug machine," similar to a cider press, and the water was removed. The clay was next steam-dried and placed on a wooden rack. Beating them with large wooden paddles eliminated all the air bubbles. The pottery wheels, which were the next step in the process, were not electric, so they had to be turned by hand.

After the pieces were molded,

they were put in fire clay boxes in the 40-foot-high kiln. The first firing was performed in the "bisque" kiln, where it produced a hard finish. The piece was then smoothed, cleaned, decorated and glazed, usually by women who were often employed specifically for this work. Their payment was based on how many pieces they completed. Using a camelhair brush, they hand-painted each majolica item. These women needed to be extremely accurate since the process precluded any touch-up work to correct mistakes. Interestingly, the glazes showed no final color until the last firing.

The result of this effort was the Etruscan majolica so highly prized by collectors today. The term referred to the Etruscans who lived near Rome in ancient times. They were, according to archeologists, particularly skilled at making pottery. Griffen also demonstrated comparable skill. The majolica that was manufactured in Phoenixville was universally recognized for its fine workmanship and distinctive coloration.

The company, unlike many other American majolica manufacturers that left their wares unidentified, also had distinct marks. Intertwining initials of G, S and H were positioned in a circle as its stamp. Although Hill left the business relatively soon after it opened, the stamp continued to bear his name letter even though its formal business name was altered to Griffen, Smith and Company. According to one



*Punch bowl by Griffen, Smith and Hill (active 1879-1903), Phoenixville, Pa. (Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa. Photo credit: George J. Fistrovich)*

source, Smith claimed that the letters G, S and H, after Hill left, meant "Good, Strong and Handsome."

The firm also used the word "Etruscan" in marks on its goods. It was this mark that gave rise to the general name of "Etruscan majolica" when referencing the Griffen products. While some pieces are marked with both the intertwining initials and the word "Etruscan," other pieces have just the words "Etruscan" and "Majolica" stamped on them. Still others bear only the word "Etruscan" on them. Letters and figures were also stamped onto the pieces. The letters, from A to O, indicate the shape of the piece. For example, A was used on butter plates, while B was reserved for pickle dishes. The number denoted the type of decoration.

Recognition came early to the firm. A few years after its opening, it received a prestigious award from the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition, held in Louisiana. For that event, Griffen produced a three-piece set called a "garniture," consisting of two vases and a pitcher, all adorned with patriotic motifs. It was this set that captured the gold medal.

At its height, Griffen employed hundreds of men, women and children. However, within a decade or two, the nation's tastes began to change, and soon an abundance of majolica came onto the market. As with other majolica companies, the success of Griffen went into reverse in the 1880s and '90s.

Part of the downfall may have been caused, ironically, by one of the company's best customers.

Tea merchant George H. Hartford, founder of The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company, more commonly known as the A & P supermarket chain, was seeking a way to attract more customers.

He concluded that, by giving away a piece of pottery with a purchase, he would increase his market share. He decided, for this purpose, to use majolica made by Griffen and soon became the firm's biggest customer.

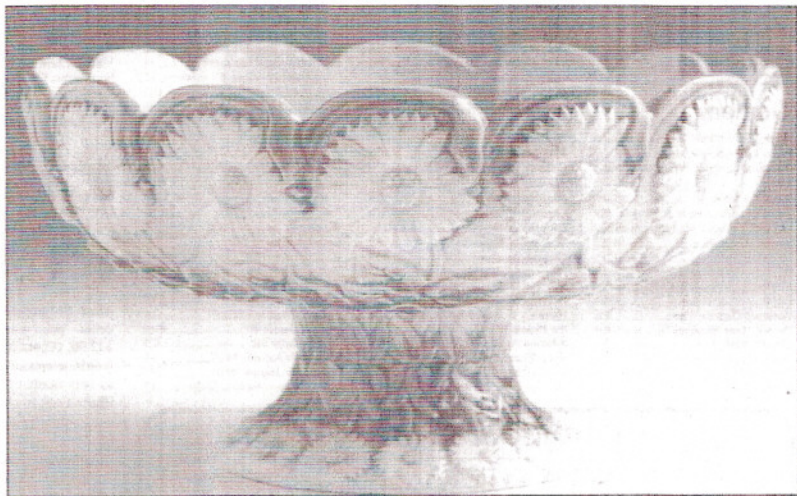
The end result, however, was a market glutted with majolica. No longer was it something to be valued by the typical middle-class owner. Instead it was seen as a supermarket premium. In 1889 David Smith retired and sold his interest in the company to J. Stuart Love, the father-in-law of Henry Griffen. The firm then changed its name to Griffen, Love and Company.

On Dec. 3, 1890, a fire destroyed the plant. Although it reopened a mere four months later under the name of the Griffen China Company, it no longer produced majolica. The company never achieved the success of its predecessor and, after years of struggling through nine different owners, it closed its doors in 1903.

Griffen, Smith and Hill and its successor companies kept well-detailed records. The company's product list was extensive. It included plates, dishes, pinchers, coffeepots, teapots and bowls in a variety of sizes and colors. Its 14-page catalogue from 1884 listed 134 separate items for sale.

One attractive feature of Etruscan majolica is that the designs on the products often utilized American motifs. Another of its popular lines was a shell and seaweed dinner service, which featured all types of serving pieces. The true beauty of the line, however, as with all Etruscan majolica, lay in its vivid coloration.

Many museums display pieces of Etruscan majolica. An extensive collection is on view at the Museum of the Historical Society of the Phoenixville Area. Located



Salad bowl by Griffen, Smith and Hill (active 1879-1903). Phoenixville, Pa. (Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa. Photo credit George J. Fistrovich)

in an old church, the Museum contains an entire display case with some extremely rare pieces. The set that won the gold medal at the 1884 Exposition in Louisiana can also be seen there. Other related artifacts include the "glaze formula book" of the company.

Although the Museum is open only on the first Sunday of each month, it may also be visited when the archive offices are open, Wednesday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The phone number is (610) 935-7646 and the Web site is [www.voice.net.com/dstaw](http://www.voice.net.com/dstaw).

The Chester County Historical Society in West Chester also has a small Etruscan dish on permanent display in its introductory gallery. In addition, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. displays Etruscan majolica.

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