

Dating Dark Blue American Themed Prints on Pottery

by Pat Halfpenny

To some extent, British collectors and ceramic historians have a different perspective on pottery than their American counterparts. Perhaps it is because of the nature of their available primary sources of information - that is, the information that came into being at the time the pottery was produced. On the whole, the British, living in the country of manufacture, focus on potters, factories, and dates, while Americans, who were the original consumers, focus on patterns and shapes. A combination of both aspects gives us a more complete picture of the wares and, to my mind, offers us more opportunities to reflect upon and enjoy the pieces.

When the Board of the Transferware Collectors Club approved the idea of creating an online exhibition on the subject of dark blue American themed prints, I did the British thing and asked when was it made? I got the American answer - "sometime after the War of 1812, and aren't these patterns awesome." This brief article suggests some answers to my question. For a fuller discussion and supporting information, a longer article will be completed in the near future and offered as a pdf on the TCC web site.

To follow up on my "when" question, I did what any good researcher would do, I checked the standard works of reference. Unfortunately I found little help: no past author seemed particularly interested in discovering the period in which dark blue printed pottery had been produced. My second line of enquiry was to review the potters who made the ware in the hopes that their working dates would reveal some clues. But that wasn't the answer: too many of the companies worked over too long a period. The last obvious potential possibility for discovering information was to study the sources of the printed designs. But that was



Group of dark blue printed American themed printed pottery c.1817-31

also a dead end: they were so varied and their timeframe was so extensive that it was not possible to draw any conclusions as to the production dates for the dark blue printed pottery. Finally, I came to realize that some surviving American documents might hold the answer, so I looked at advertisements in period newspapers and at the records of three importer/dealers that specialized in selling the products of the Staffordshire potters.

The following three companies had been studied by others. The papers of Horace Collamore a Boston "Crockery, glass, & china" dealer came to my attention through the work of Neil Ewins, and the letter books of the Baltimore importer and dealer Matthew Smith have been analyzed and are the subject of lectures and articles by Roger Pomfret. I have drawn extensively on the research of these two colleagues. The ledger book of George Coates, a Philadelphia dealer, was first discussed by George Miller,

and fortunately the original is in the library at Winterthur and was available for examination.^[i] None of the previous authors using these sources had focused on dark blue printed designs, so I combed through the works looking for references.

The exact shade or depth of blue cannot be determined from the written evidence, and it is not always clear which patterns were under discussion. However, there is enough information to draw some useful conclusions: 1) the term "dark blue" occurred in the documents from 1817 until 1831, and 2) pattern names with American connections are most heavily featured in the 1820s. Despite its current popularity with collectors, the evidence indicates that pottery with dark blue American themed designs constituted a very small portion of the Anglo-American ceramic trade in the 19th century.

The first indication that deeper blue prints were desired came in

1817 when, on September 19, Horace Collamore wrote to Mayer & Keeling, his commission agents in the Staffordshire Potteries, with an order that included “*Printed teapots ... darker blue.*” From this brief reference it is difficult to determine exactly what Collamore was trying to purchase for his customers in 1817. Subsequent orders from him, together with the letters and sales records of Smith and Coates, are mainly for other kinds of pottery with some requests of a very general nature for blue printed wares. Certainly there seemed to be no wholesale switch to dark blue prints, and the implication is that the darker blue had a small number of admirers, and that the importers were willing to indulge them while their fad lasted.

The earliest reference to pottery printed with an American scene appears in a newspaper. The *Boston Centinel* of March 28, 1818, carries a notice advertising an auction for Henshaw & Jarves, china and glass dealers of Boston. In the auction list of goods for sale is *120 hbds [hogsheads] blue, olive, red, and black, printed Teas, Bowls, Fruit Baskets, Plates, Dishes, Ewers and Basins; Tureens, Jugs, Chambers, & State House and other patterns*: I think it reasonable to conclude that *State House* refers to the printed pattern depicting Boston State House. As these goods were for sale in March of 1818, it seems likely that, allowing time for trans-Atlantic communications and shipping, they were in production in Staffordshire by 1817. The same pattern is also found a few months



Platter, “State House Boston,” Stubbs’ “Spread Eagle Border” series c. 1818-30



Wine Cooler, “Boston State House,” Rogers, Winterthur Museum collection c.1818-30

later in the order book of Horace Collamore. In August 1818, he ordered *Blue printed dining ware new dark pattern State House or other good pattern*. The design seems to have been very popular and is known to have been made by a number of potters in various shades of blue. The darkest is that by Ralph Stevenson & Williams, but since that partnership did not begin until at least 6 years after this order, it cannot refer to their productions. It is possible that the order references the version made by Stubbs. Joseph Stubbs was in Boston in 1816, and he may have known Collamore. Other makers include John Rogers & Son, Enoch Wood & Sons and John & William Ridgway.

During the 1820s, references to dark blue continue but, despite this being the peak of its popularity, the orders are still few and far between. Mostly the color is mentioned generally in complaints from the importers that the wares are “not sufficiently dark”, or in entreaties that “the darker blue the better”, or requests that wares should “be well covered with a very dark blue”. Specific references to patterns are very infrequent. In May of 1825, the prints *City Hall* and *Woodland* are named when George Coates of Philadelphia sells muffins (small plates) of these designs. No pattern “Woodland,” in the singular, is recorded. Stubbs is the only firm known to have made something similar: his dark blue “Spread Eagle Border” series includes “Woodlands,” and his



Saucer, “City Hall, New York,” Stubbs’ “Wild Rose Border” c. 1824-30



Platter, “Woodlands near Philadelphia,” Stubbs’ “Spread Eagle Border” series c.1818-30



Compote, “City Hall, New York,” John & William Ridgway’s “Beauties of America” series c.1824-30

"Wild Rose Border" series features "City Hall." The latter is a New York view also produced by John & William Ridgway as part of their "Beauties of America" series.

In August 1825, Matthew Smith of Baltimore wrote to his agent, *All the ware from Clewes has turned out remarkable well. I am very much taken with the pattern of blue print'd flat Ware, of Lafayette Landing.* Lafayette was a national hero and to celebrate his return and triumphant tour of the new republic, potters produced a number of patterns. Popular designs included scenes of his landing in New York in 1824, various portraits, and depictions of his visits to the tombs of Franklin and Washington. All of these patterns are printed in dark blue. An enduring subject, Lafayette continued to be a popular figure and wares with related designs were still being ordered as late as 1830.

In December 1826, Matthew Smith's letter to his British agent suggests that the fashionable society of Baltimore was beginning to turn towards a lighter blue for their tableware, as he writes. *For Country trade the call is still for dark and well cover'd patterns in Blue Printed Ware, but in a few instances I have been asked by retail buyers for Dinner Sets of light patterns* The order attached to the letter includes *Blue Printed Handsome light Pattern Goodfellows Rural Scenery or in that Style.*

Orders for blue printed pottery continue with occasional references to "Fayette" "Franklin" and "Baltimore Railroad" patterns, all of which are known in dark blue. In January 1828, Matthew Smith requests pale blue patterns from Ridgway including "India Temple," "Asiatic Temple," and "Portland Basket." In March that same year, Smith comments, *I was in expectation that the preference for very dark Patterns in blue printed Ware would not be so great this spring as hitherto - I am disappointed, it is still greatly preferred by the Country Dealers.*

In June 1831, George Coates sells 1 doz. dark blue printed ½ pint bowls and 10 setts dark blue printed teas. This is the final reference to dark blue that oc-



Platter, "Landing of Gen. La Fayette at Castle Garden New York 16 August 1824," Ralph & James Clews c.1825-30



Plate, "Rural Scenery," produced by Bathewell & Goodfellow, a series of designs continued after 1823 by Thomas Goodfellow



Plate, "Hartford, Connecticut" John & Job Jackson, 1830-35

curs in the records of Collamore, Smith, or Coates. By 1830, new styles are in vogue. Not only is lighter blue in greater demand, but other colors have reached the market place. Designs that were once printed all over the surface of the pottery are now less robust, often with a central motif and restrained borders leaving more of the white pottery showing. American themes continue but are less graphic as the fashion for an intense dark blue fades to a pleasing but less vibrant hue.

My question "when?" now has an answer - dark blue printed wares were produced from about 1817 to about 1831 with the 1820s being the most prolific years. The evidence suggests they were never the wares most commonly imported and sold in America. The bulk of the orders for ceramics are consistently common cream colored, both plain and with painted decoration, shell edge in blue and green, and colored ware including mocha, all of which were less costly than printed earthenware. Nevertheless, today these scenes of America are particularly valuable, not just for their beauty but for their content: they form one of the most comprehensive visual depictions of the young republic of the United States.

For more information on dark blue printed patterns with American themes see www.americanhistoricalstaffordshire.

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End Notes

- [1] Ewins, Neil. *Supplying the Present Wants of Our Yankee Cousins....: Staffordshire Ceramics and the American Market 1775-1880*. Journal of Ceramic History Volume 15. City Museum & Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent 1997; Pomfret, Roger. 'A Staffordshire Warehouse in Baltimore: the Letter Books of Matthew Smith 1806-32', *Northern Ceramic Society Journal* Vol.26. 2010. pp. 33-107; Miller George L. 'George M. Coates, Pottery Merchant of Philadelphia, 1817-1831'. *Winterthur Portfolio* Vol. 19, No. 1. Spring, 1984, pp. 37-49.