

The Lure of Historic Ontario Earthenware Pottery

By Alvin “Nick” Cameron

Earthenware pottery, made from clay, played a critical role as gradually, Ontario became settled and industrialized with all the new immigrant arrivals from Europe and USA. Its more basic technology was a perfect fit for a nineteenth century Ontario with its rural lower-tech settler-oriented industry and economy. And a labour-intensive work force still needed their beer at the days end.

The Germanic settlers in Waterloo, Perth and adjacent counties seem to have been responsible for a greater density of potteries and their various redware forms and glazes than any similar area elsewhere in Ontario.

The most active and prolific potteries in this area seem to have been those of Anselm Wagner of Berlin (Kitchener), Adam Bierenstihl of Bridgeport, William Eby of Conestoga, Xavier Boehler of New Hamburg, and Henry Ahrens of Paris, Brant County.

There seem to have been many other potteries, usually very small, and most often operated as a winter sideline to farming.

Fortunately, for us pottery sleuths, each of the four aforementioned potteries tended to provide some signature clues, here and here, as aids to their identification.

Please note the examples in the photos are just that; ideal examples. One exasperating feature of redware is that delightful variability in form and glaze colour. Enjoy!

1. **Anselm Wagner** pottery usually marked the size of their pots with green markings on a grey background. This piece by Wagner has the shade of green preferred by Wagner decorators.



2. **Adam Bierenstihl** decorated his pottery with a mixture of coloured splatterings; brown, black, blue, and green. Here is a flowerpot by Bierenstihl. Note the range of splatter colours and the lack of “pie crusting” of the rim unlike those from the Eby pottery.



3. **William Eby** pottery takes a little more sleuthing. With the Eby glazes and forms being capable of such marvelous variability, this made the works of William and Cyrus Eby copycat targets by some of the lesser potteries. The Eby's preference for occasional use of a particular intense green is usually a good giveaway.



4. **Xavier Boehler** pottery is enigmatic, with identification stuck in the realm of the advanced pottery sleuth; relying on things like comparisons with shards dug from the waste pit of their New Hamburg pottery site. Like I said: advanced sleuthing! The picture below might possibly be done by Boehler pottery – the flared top is used to retain a lid, which is typical of the pottery.



5. **Henry Ahrens** redware pottery glazes usually, but not always, tend to rely on a muddy mix of their distinctive sage green/grey with patches of reddish brown. This redware jar glaze is classic Ahrens. Note the sage green /grey base coat with scattered red brown additions.



Pair of earthen redware steins from the pottery of William and Cyrus Eby, Conestoga, Waterloo County Ontario

When Eby is mentioned, people think of pie plates, glaze decorated with cherries on a branch. These steins are not what first comes to mind.



The pair surfaced at an Old Order “plain-folk” (Mennonite) estate sale in Waterloo County, Ontario, about 10 years ago. Given the high regard with which this particular potter and his works are held among the historically oriented local collector community and having been sold separately; before the usual taxes and buyer’s premium, the steins reportedly (I wasn’t there) fetched in the neighbourhood of ca. \$1,500 - 1,600 each! Sold as a pair, they’d might have fetched considerably more.

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