



A New Look at an Eastern Vermont Pottery

In May 1799 Richard W. Fenton purchased two five-acre parcels of land along the west bank of the Passumpsic River midway between St. Johnsbury proper and Center Village. A small stream on the property was dammed to provide water power to operate a potter's wheel and clay and glaze-grinding mills. The pottery flourished until 1859, despite a serious criminal conviction of its founder in its early years. Along with other seldom used sources, Leander Fenton's ledger of 1854–1860 reveals much about the work and workers of the Fenton & Hancock pottery

By WARREN F. BRODERICK

My research and writing on historic American ceramics to date has concentrated on potteries in upstate New York and adjoining Bennington, Vermont. So what fueled a major interest in potteries in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, four hours removed from my home? The spark was a pre-pandemic inquiry posted on one of the Facebook stoneware and pottery history sites questioning published information about what is likely the most famous article of St. Johnsbury stoneware production.

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A stoneware cooler with an elaborate cobalt slip-decorated depiction of a military officer and his wife, bearing the mark of “Fenton & Hancock / St. Johnsbury, VT,” is found in the famous Weitsman Collection of the New York State Museum. The well-known cooler, which sold for a hammer price of \$80,000 at auction, is shown on pages 248 and 249 of *Art for the People*, the oversize book covering that collection, published in 2015.¹ The book claims that the officer shown on the churn is Gen. Asa Peabody Blunt, a prominent St. Johnsbury resident who had a noteworthy military career including Civil War service. I will discuss the identification of the military officer shown on the churn later. A 2019 social media correspondent questioned this attribution because, according to author Lura Woodside Watkins, the pottery that produced the vessel had burned in November 1859, before the advent of the Civil War. As a ceramic historian I was requested to resolve this discrepancy.

ON SOURCES

Little useful detailed information that illuminates the question of the figure on the Fenton & Hancock cooler, and the history of that pottery, is found in the traditional published works on New England potteries. Coverage in John Spargo’s *Early American Pottery and China* (1926) and John Ramsay’s *American Potters and Pottery* (1939) is minimal. Lura Watkins, mentioned above, devoted a few pages to St. Johnsbury in her classic 1950 work, *Early New England Potters and their Wares*, known for many years as the definitive book on the subject. But Watkins’s book contains many errors and omissions, and lacking notes and other references, cannot be relied on without further verification of her sources.² The burning of the Fenton pottery in 1859 is indeed documented in Edward Fairbanks’s 1914 history of the town of St. Johnsbury and a local newspaper of that year.³ Researching the St. Johnsbury potteries appeared potentially very rewarding after reading the limited coverage of the subject in these published works, none dating more recently than 1950. A more thoroughly researched history of their potteries seemed necessary.

What resources were not consulted by authors and historians working more than seventy years ago? Certainly research has been rendered much easier because of automation, in particular Internet family history sites. Some of these sites contain copies of historic records such as census population schedules, deeds and mortgages, cemetery records, immigration and travel documents, and birth, death, and marriage records. While the Internet has greatly increased access to these records one must understand that they may be incomplete or inaccurate and that indexing and searching issues may be present. Original, microfilmed, or imaged records may need to be consulted.

While *Early New England Potters and their Wares* remains the most comprehensive work on the subject, Lura Watkins rarely mentions having consulted local government records, other than minutes or proceedings of selectboards and their predecessors, which contain few specific references to potteries, unless these records are cited in published local histories. She rarely mentions deeds, mortgages, and grand lists maintained by town or city clerks in Vermont. All contain valuable information on potteries and the land they occupied. Records of probate courts and various courts of civil jurisdiction are also not cited in her work. While these are county-level courts, many counties have since transferred their older records to the Vermont State Archives and Records Administration. In addition, errors and omissions in Watkins's work are perpetuated by other secondary sources such as the Crocker Farm auction catalogs.

Early newspapers are occasionally mentioned by Watkins but this resource is now far more easily searchable since some are available on the Internet and still more, but not all, have been reproduced on microfilm. Other sources of information include results of archaeological investigations of pottery sites and ceramic collections of historical societies and museums.

Records generated by the potteries themselves rarely survived. Leander W. Fenton's ledger of receipts and disbursements covering the period 1854–1860 is a noteworthy exception. The ledger, along with a significant collection of personal papers of Richard W. Fenton and his descendants, are preserved and were only recently arranged and described by the Bennington Museum. They were acquired from family members beginning in the 1940s by John Spargo, director of the museum and a well-known expert and author on potteries in Bennington. Leander's nephew, Christopher Webber Fenton (1806–1865), was well known to the St. Johnsbury cousins and both branches of the family interacted frequently in the nineteenth century.

THE FENTON POTTERY

St. Johnsbury, in Caledonia County in northeastern Vermont, is presently a town of approximately 7,300 inhabitants, serving as the gateway to the forested region known as the Northeast Kingdom. It is best known for the St. Johnsbury Academy, a well-respected private academy with a public high school, and the famous Fairbanks Scale company. In addition this relatively small town features three noteworthy museums. The town was first settled in 1787 and incorporated three years later. It was a farming town with an industrial center along the Passumpsic River and its tributaries.

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A newly settled, isolated rural New England community such as St. Johnsbury needed a local pottery to produce utilitarian wares and one was established here in 1800 or shortly thereafter by Richard W. Fenton. Richard's settling here may not have been totally by chance and the background of the well-known Fenton family of potters warrants an explanation. Richard Webber Fenton (1771–1851) was a son of Jonathan Fenton Sr. of Windham, Connecticut, and his wife Mary (Webber) Fenton. His brothers included Jonathan Fenton Jr. (1766–1851) and Gama-liel Fenton (1764–1849). The latter, a bell- and clock-maker and possibly a potter as well, settled in Walpole, Cheshire County, New Hampshire, by 1790. A cousin, Roger Fenton (c. 1768–1844), also resided in Walpole in the late eighteenth century.



Richard W. Fenton (1771–1851), daguerreotype, c. 1845–1850, collection 2005.296, courtesy Bennington Museum.

Jonathan Fenton Jr. had worked with his uncle, Jacob Fenton, in New Haven, Connecticut, in the early 1790s and removed to Boston to establish a pottery in 1793. Sometime in 1796 Jonathan relocated in Walpole, a fast-growing town along the Connecticut River opposite Rockingham and Westminster. His younger brother Richard also appears to have emigrated north from Connecticut to Walpole at this time. They established a pottery on the land of Colonel Christopher Webber (1740–1803) located on the current Ramsay Road east of the village. The pottery appears to have ceased operation c. 1799–1800. Col. Webber (a brother of Mary Webber Fenton) deeded one-half interest in his property, including “buildings belonging to the potters business,” to his son-in-law, Doctor Stephen Johnson, in 1800.⁴

Watkins knew of a redware jar “in which was a slip of paper saying ‘Probably made by Chris Webber of Cavendish [Vermont].’” This person would have been Christopher Webber Jr. (1773–1850), son of his namesake from Walpole. The younger Christopher has been referred to as a doctor and a farmer but never as a potter, and a visit to Cavendish by Watkins produced no supporting documentation of a pottery in that town.⁵ The cryptic note may refer to the jar being made (by the Fenton brothers) on the property of Christopher Webber Sr. in Walpole. The exhaustive inventory found in the estate of Webber Jr, interestingly enough, includes “2 earthenware milk pans (good for nothing)” valued at twelve cents.⁶

Jonathan Jr. and Richard W. Fenton decided to remove to communities where potteries were needed but they did not want to be competitors. Jonathan moved to Windsor, Connecticut, in March 1798, where he operated a pottery in an area that is now part of the town of Bloomfield. By April 1801 he finally settled in Dorset, Bennington County, Vermont, where he established an earthenware pottery in Dorset Hollow. Richard looked at recently settled northeastern Vermont, far removed from Dorset, for a community needing a pottery, and found St. Johnsbury.

In May 1799 Richard W. Fenton purchased two five-acre parcels of land along the west bank of the Passumpsic River midway between St. Johnsbury proper and Center Village from Nathaniel Edson and Thomas Pierce.⁷ He settled there shortly thereafter and constructed a wood-frame dwelling house and barns, which no longer stand, on the current Fenton Road just north of today’s Hospital Drive. He acquired other parcels as late as 1819 and at times operated a grist mill and saw mill on his property in partnership with Reuben Spaulding.

Various sources claim Fenton’s pottery was opened as early as 1800 and as late as 1808, but no exact year has been documented.⁸ A small

stream on the property was dammed to provide water power to operate the potter's wheel and the clay and glaze-grinding mills. Production during the pottery's early years would have been limited to red earthenware made from local clay, as stoneware clay needed to be imported from New Jersey, Staten Island, or Long Island and would have involved an expensive journey by boat up the Connecticut River to the mouth of the Passumpsic River. One source indicated that the redware clay was found nearby.⁹ Firewood needed to supply the kiln was abundant in the region, even if enough was not found on Fenton's property.

Most of what we know about the personal life of Richard W. Fenton comes from early selectmen's meetings, church records, and published reminiscences. He married Leefe Harrington of Walpole around 1801. He was appointed brigadier general of the state militia in 1816 and was often known merely as "General Fenton." He was active in the Universalist Society of St. Johnsbury. Richard was also active in town affairs, serving for a while as town treasurer and getting involved in animal-control measures, such as expelling dogs from meetinghouses. According to one local reminiscence, Fenton "was a large, strong, muscular man, very fond of fox hunting . . . and the only fiddler in the place."¹⁰ His presence was said at times to have been intimidating, and a criminal conviction in 1818 sheds light on a darker side of his personality.

In June 1817 the State of Vermont received a complaint from Samuel French (1788–1850), a neighbor of the Fentons, and Richard Fenton was arrested on February 15 of that year and charged with "the crime of assaulting Huldah French [1789–1846] of St. Johnsbury aforesaid, a married woman, the lawful wife of Samuel French . . . with intent to ravish wickedly & feloniously."¹¹ The detailed and graphic grand jury report stated that Fenton used force "against her will" and that Mrs. French was "beat, bruise[d] and wounded . . . so that her life was greatly despaired of."

After the grand jury issued an indictment, Richard pleaded not guilty and insisted on a jury trial, suggesting that Mrs. French was the instigator. A jury consisting of twelve "good and lawful freeholders of said Caledonia County" quickly found Fenton guilty, and Richard paid court costs and surrendered \$300 to the Frenches, agreed to with the state's attorney in lieu of Fenton's incarceration in state prison. Soon thereafter he resigned his state militia commission, having been convicted of what amounted to a felony.¹² After this incident, which was surely most embarrassing in a small New England town, Richard appears to have had no public persona and he turned the operation of his pottery over to his son, Leander, as early as 1825. Born in 1807, Leander surely began working for the pottery as a boy. Exactly when he took over operation of the pot-

tery has not been documented. Nor may we ever know how long Richard was actively involved in the pottery's operation. The property was apparently still in Richard's name upon his death in 1851 but the grand lists found at the St. Johnsbury town clerk's office state that Leander was the owner beginning when they were first compiled in 1842.

During the early years of the Fenton pottery the production seems to have been utilitarian wares such as "milk pans, jars and jugs . . . and much smaller ware."¹³ "Little brown jugs" were especially popular; this is not a reference to miniature souvenir jugs popular later in the century but rather ovoid jugs of less than a gallon capacity with a brown slip or manganese glaze. Earthenware clay was used from the as yet unlocated local source that fired a bright orange-red. The St. Johnsbury History and Heritage Center owns two outstanding examples of this production that were donated to the Fairbanks Museum in the early twentieth Century. One is a small jar or vase with loop handles bearing a brownish gray glaze with two brown slip bands. The other is a small lidded pitcher with a greenish-gray glaze. The Bennington Museum owns two miniature jugs with a bright orange glaze, one accompanied by a note stating it was given to Lucy Lord just prior to her marriage to Leander Fenton in 1829. All have provenance to this pottery. The former were owned by Rebecca Bullard Staples and the latter by her sister, Agnes Bullard Husband, both great granddaughters of Richard W. Fenton.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine how long redware was made at the Fenton pottery beyond 1829. The only redware produced here from this time on may have consisted only of miniatures and other novelties, as potteries that switched to stoneware



Redware jar or vase with brown glaze, slip-glazed bands and free-standing handles, probably potted by Richard W. Fenton, c. 1825–1845, courtesy St. Johnsbury History & Heritage Center.

production often continued redware manufacture on a limited basis. Stoneware firing on a major scale would have required construction of a new kiln and the surviving c. 1850 images of the house and pottery seem to show the outline of more than one kiln. However, we do not know when stoneware was first manufactured here. Few ovoid vessels bearing a St. Johnsbury mark have been identified and a cooler with the molded applied figure of the Goddess Diana, owned by the Vermont Historical Society, would seem to date from the early 1850s. Other ovoid vessels that seem to have been made in the 1840s and 1850s are marked “L. W. Fenton/St. Johnsbury.”

Leander Fenton took Frederick Hancock (1817–1903), an experienced English-born potter who has previously worked in Troy, New York, Louisville, Kentucky, and South Amboy, New Jersey, as his partner. Hancock had also previously worked for the Norton stoneware pottery in Bennington in the 1840s and following a brief stay in California appears to have settled in St. Johnsbury circa 1852. Lura Watkins owned a two-gallon blue-decorated stoneware jug bearing the mark “Fenton & Hancock / St. Johnsbury, Vt.” and the date 1852.¹⁴ A broadside price list for the “St. Johnsbury Stone-Ware Pottery” of “L. W. Fenton” originally owned by Agnes Bullard Husband and now owned by the Bennington Museum bears the printed date of “185-,” suggesting it dates between 1850 and 1852, before Hancock’s arrival. Hancock left for Worcester, Massachusetts,

in 1856 (the year of his final entry in the pottery ledger), where he joined Franklin B. Norton (1829–1886) in the new pottery firm of F. B. Norton & Company.¹⁵ Norton, also from Bennington, was a grandson of Capt. John Norton, the owner of Bennington’s first pottery.



*Leander W. Fenton
(1807–1864), daguerreotype,
c. 1845–1850, collection
2005.297 a, b, courtesy
Bennington Museum.*

The Fenton & Hancock pottery produced a wide variety of stoneware. Determining the amount of ware on hand at any time is problematic. The Industrial Schedule for the 1850 census list 300 jugs, 1,600 pans, 200 pots, and a numberless miscellany of "custom work" constituting Leander's "annual product." But the accuracy of those figures is questionable because the census taker listed only two employees (Leander's ledger makes us certain there were more), and the source of power was said to be only "hand power" when we know that water power was also employed.¹⁶

ST. JOHNSBURY STONE-WARE POTTERY.

St. Johnsbury, Vt., ... 185 ..

No

Bought of E. W. Fenton,

Manufacturer of Every Description of Stone-Ware.

		Amount brought forward,			
		Dis.	Cts.		
JUGS.	PER DOZEN.			BUTTER POTS.	PER DOZEN.
Dozen, 4 gallon,	\$8.50			Dozen, 6 gallon,	\$15.00
" 3 "	6.50			" 5 "	13.00
" 2 "	4.50			" 4 "	10.00
" 1 1/2 "	3.75			" 3 "	8.00
" 1 "	3.00			" 2 "	6.00
" 3/4 "	1.75			" 1 1/2 "	5.00
" 1/2 "	1.00			" 1 "	4.00
" 1/4 "	0.75			" 1/2 "	3.00
POTS.				FLOWER POTS.	
Dozen, 4 "	8.00			Dozen, 2 "	4.50
" 3 "	6.50			" 1 "	3.00
" 2 "	4.50			" 1/2 "	1.75
" 1 1/2 "	3.75			" 1/4 "	1.25
" 1 "	3.00			" # "	1.00
" 1/2 "	1.75			Fancy do. 2 "	7.50
CHURNS.				" 1 "	5.00
Dozen, 6 "	12.00			" 1/2 "	3.50
" 5 "	10.00			STOVE TUBES.	
" 4 "	8.00			Dozen, 1st size,	6.50
" 3 "	6.50			" 2d "	4.50
" 2 "	4.50			" 3d "	3.00
JARS—COVERED.				CHAMBERS.	
Dozen, 4 "	8.50			Dozen, 1st "	2.00
" 3 "	7.00			" 2d "	1.50
" 2 "	5.00			BUTTER BOXES.	
" 1 1/2 "	4.25			Dozen, 6 "	12.00
" 1 "	3.50			" 5 "	10.00
" 1/2 "	2.00			" 4 "	8.00
" 1/4 "	1.50			" 3 "	6.00
PUDDING POTS.				BOSTON BUTTER POTS.	
Dozen, 1 "	3.00			Dozen, 4 "	9.25
" 1/2 "	1.75			" 3 "	7.75
BEER BOTTLES.				" 2 "	5.75
Dozen, 1/2 "	1.00			" 1 "	3.75
SPITTOONS.				BEAN POTS.	
Dozen, 1st size,	6.00			Dozen, 1 "	3.50
" 2d size,	4.00			" 1/2 "	2.00
PITCHERS.				MILK BASINS.	
Dozen, 2 "	4.50			Dozen, 1st size,	2.50
" 1 "	3.00			" 2d "	1.50
" 1/2 "	1.75			MUGS.	Dozen, quart,
" 1/4 "	1.00			Do. un-shape, ornamented,	Per gal. 25 cents.
SOFT SOAP DISHES.					1.00
Dozen,	1.50				
Carried forward,					

Blank order form for the St. Johnsbury Stone-Ware Pottery, 1850–1852, predating the co-ownership of Frederick Hancock, collection 2005.141.29, courtesy Bennington Museum.



Ovoid stoneware cooler with sprig-applied molded decoration, attributed to Franklin Wight, working at the Fenton pottery, ca. 1850–1852, Vermont Historical Society.

Detailed molded figure of the Goddess Diana on the ovoid stoneware cooler, Vermont Historical Society.



The broadside list at the Bennington Museum features “Water Fountains, urn-shaped, ornamented,” priced at \$1.00 per dozen. The urn-shaped “fountains” or water coolers were only produced in a few places, but otherwise the items listed were typical products of north-eastern stoneware potteries of this era. Their maker was probably Franklin Wight (1814–1895), a potter from Dublin, New Hampshire, who worked in Ashfield, Massachusetts, beginning in the early 1850s following a brief stay in Charlestown, Massachusetts. He signed a remarkable blue-decorated ovoid water cooler, potted in Ashfield, with a molded applied figure of the goddess Diana, now owned by the Wad-

sworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut. A very similar cooler owned by the Vermont Historical Society bears the St. Johnsbury mark of L. W. Fenton, suggesting that Wight was working there as early as 1852. He is mentioned frequently in the pottery ledger between 1854 and 1859 and returned to Burlington soon thereafter. Wight worked as a potter and in law enforcement in Burlington in a number of years before moving to Gardiner, Maine, between 1880 and his death there in 1895. An ovoid cooler with a sprig-applied patriotic motif attributed to Franklin Wight and sold at a Crocker Farm auction in 2014 was attributed to Gardiner.¹⁷ But its earlier form—ovoid vessels were not produced in the United States after about 1860—indicates it was potted when Wight was living at Ashfield or St. Johnsbury. Photographs of Franklin and his wife, Eliza (Atwood) Wight, found in Fenton family papers at the Bennington Museum, suggest they were good friends with Leander Fenton and his family.

The Fairbanks Museum was once given a five-gallon churn bearing the Fenton & Hancock mark and featuring “hens and chickens on the side in base [*sic*] relief,” probably referring to molded sprig-applied designs, but this unique vessel no longer can be located and is believed to have been stolen.¹⁸ In 2006 a four-gallon jug bearing this mark and featuring a cobalt-slip decoration with six chickens in a barnyard was sold by Crocker Farm Auctions. A similar jug with extensive surficial damage was donated to the Vermont Historical Society by the well-known collector, Harold Rugg.¹⁹

Fenton & Hancock also produced the remarkable four-gallon stoneware cooler with the slip-decorated depiction of a military officer and his wife, mentioned at the beginning of this article and the subject of some controversy.

Stoneware crock with the Fenton & Hancock mark, probably depicting a classical warrior, with extensive surface loss, Harold Rugg collection, Vermont Historical Society.



We know that it dates from the years c. 1852 to c. 1856, well before the onset of the Civil War, and at least one expert on military attire consulted by the author believes the man's service coat could have been worn by an officer of the Vermont state militia in the 1850s. The identification of the officer as Asa Peabody Blunt (1826–1889), a prominent St. Johnsbury industrialist who later had a distinguished military career, has been called into question. Blunt served as a draughtsman for the Fairbanks scale works and later operated his own planing, jointing, and matching shop. He entered the war service in 1861 and left St. Johnsbury, but earlier was documented as a first lieutenant in the state militia in 1858.²⁰

The claim that the figures on the churn depict General Blunt and his wife was first made by the Zipp family, principals of the auction house, as the piece has no relevant provenance. They logically assumed that the male figure was a prominent Civil War officer from the St. Johnsbury area and an Internet search they conducted revealed an image of General Blunt in the Library of Congress. While there is indeed a similarity between the two men, the facial hair worn by both was common at that time. Whether or not this type of research constitutes absolute proof of the identity of the man depicted on the churn as the published work claims is debatable. A jug owned by Agnes Husband, which she loaned

for an exhibit at the Fairbanks Museum in 1954, bore the image of a similar female figure who was said to represent Queen Elizabeth.²¹ Until further information emerges, the identity of the man on the cooler should remain undetermined.



Four-gallon cooler with elaborate cobalt decoration of a military officer (possibly Asa Peabody Blunt) and his wife, Adam Weitsman stoneware collection, courtesy New York State Museum.

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REVELATIONS FROM LEANDER FENTON'S POTTERY LEDGER

Identifying potters and other pottery workers associated with early nineteenth-century rural potteries such as Fenton's in St. Johnsbury is very difficult. Street directories were not published this early for St. Johnsbury and censuses were not enumerated at five-year intervals as they were in Massachusetts and New York. Unless the potter owned land they might not be documented in any town or county records.

Much physical work, skilled and unskilled, was involved in these business concerns traditionally referred to as one- or two-man operations. We are fortunate that some of these men have been found in Leander Fenton's 1854–1860 ledger, owned by the Bennington Museum. They may have been traveling journeymen potters or local residents needed for specific short-term tasks. Robert Haggerty was reimbursed for “boarding” at a local hotel or residence. Most were paid only for “turning,” but I suspect Fenton used the term to include tasks beyond mere heavy work but not necessarily forming vessels at the potter's wheel. On occasion some were paid for “setting” or “firing” the kiln. Fenton also frequently used these potters to perform work on his home and farm. Appendix 1 lists eighteen of them.

The well-traveled potter Eleazer Orcutt (1796–1855), who also worked in Whately and Ashfield, Massachusetts, was a renowned kiln expert and may have been involved in the construction and firing of Fenton's stoneware kiln.²² He is not mentioned in the pottery ledger but he may have visited or worked in St. Johnsbury prior to 1854.

The ledger reveals a number of interesting and sometimes unexplained details connecting the pottery operation that are not documented elsewhere. Two entries in 1854 refer to installing a new shaft and repairs to the clay mill. A June 3, 1854, entry lists an expense of \$21.25 to hire a wagon and driver to transport Leander Fenton to Troy, New York, and back, nearly a full day's ride each way. Troy was a pottery town but the reason for this trip is not known nor easily surmised.

Entries for the sale of Fenton's products sometimes reveal the locations of the buyers, usually communities in northern New Hampshire and northeastern Vermont. Pottery was delivered by wagon to small-town country stores and other merchants such as beverage makers. Sometimes the potter bartered for merchandise, as revealed in a March 1, 1858, letter to Leander from F. & H. Keyes of Newbury, Vermont, said to have the largest general store in the upper Connecticut River valley.²³

He also supplied merchants in Manchester, New Hampshire, some distance to the southeast. This market opened to Fenton following the

close of the Craft family's stoneware pottery in Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1852. In a June 16, 1855, letter written from Nashua to his wife Lucy, in the Fenton family papers at the Bennington Museum, Leander mentions that business is very "hard" selling stoneware to Nashua merchants.

The first page of the ledger contains two very significant "receipts," i.e., recipes or formulas, for glazes, presumably for use in the stoneware kiln. Two "Rockingham glazes" contain red lead, manganese, slip clay, and "stone clay." The receipt called "Buleing" shows how much starch, salt, slip clay, and manganese should be mixed with cobalt to create a liquid used to decorate blue-decorated stoneware.

A curiosity is that on November 19, 1854, Fenton purchased 400 pounds of "Jersey clay" from Lambert Hastings, a local cattle merchant and drover, for \$400. Why a person with such an occupation was dealing in imported stoneware clay remains a mystery.

THE POTTERY SITE

The site of the Fenton pottery was likely chosen by Richard W. Fenton because a small stream flowing east into the Passumpsic River could be dammed and used for water power to turn the wheel and grind the clay. Much of his mill dam survives today but the former mill pond was drained and is now merely a shallow wetland. The actual pottery site remained untouched until an ice house, since demolished, was constructed on the site in the 1930s.²⁴ Today some rusty metal piping, a low concrete foundation, and some rebuilt sections of the dam are the last remnants of the ice house. The most detailed description of the former pottery site is found in reminiscences of Ralph Sulloway in the *St. Johnsbury Caledonian* of April 22, 1903.

On the left side of the railroad track is the old pottery factory. It would take more than one glance to see this, and as viewed from the road nothing but a heap of stones seem to be in sight. Viewed closer the stones turn into bricks and take the form of an oven. Though the oven is somewhat sunken into the ground the fire arch can be plainly seen, while on the top a few broken pieces of earthenware jars remain. Very near, beside a small brook, is what seems to have been the store room or workshop, for here a large amount of broken earthen ware lies strewn upon a mound. In some of the larger pieces the graceful curves can be seen, while the hardness of the material testifies to the good workmanship of the finished article. Fifty feet above, up a steep bank, was evidently a small pond, from which the power to run the mill was possibly obtained. Here is a well defined small pond with the dam on the edge of the hill. . . . This pottery has long since been abandoned as none of the buildings remain though the sunken hole of the cellar, where the dwelling house stood, is still visible between the track and the road near the railroad crossing.²⁵

*House and pottery of
Richard W. Fenton, c.
1850, mounted
photographic print,
collection 1989.34,
courtesy Bennington
Museum.*



The Fenton homestead site cannot be identified today. The red-painted house,²⁶ barns, and connected outbuildings are seen in two circa 1850 photographic prints in the collection of the Bennington Museum. The pottery with two apparent kilns can be seen at the rear of the dwelling in the background. This Fenton Family Papers, obtained by gift and purchase from one or more of Richard W. Fenton's descendants, including his granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall, also contains ninth-plate daguerreotypes of Richard and Leander Fenton dating to the 1840s.

In 1940 John E. Nelson, state director of vocational education, visited the site along with Dr. Arthur Fairbanks and Agnes Bullard Husband, exploring the concept that a pottery might be constructed to reuse the old site. He noted that a nearby clay bank used in the manufacture of earthenware had been "excavated to a considerable extent."²⁷ But since the demolition of the ice house the site has served no commercial purpose and has become overgrown with second-growth forest.



*Detail from 1858 Map of Caledonia
County by Henry Francis Walling,
showing the location of the Fenton
pottery (labeled "Stone Ware Factory")
just south of St. Johnsbury Center and
west of the railroad and Passumpsic
River.*

The Connecticut and Passumpsic Railroad extended its line north of St. Johnsbury village in 1856 and Leander Fenton granted them an easement through his property, permitting them to “construct a crossing over the brook near south end of garden from highway to pottery.” Commissioners appointed to appraise damages caused during the construction agreed that the railroad should pay Leander \$565 for crossing his property.²⁸ The pottery as well as the road, railroad, and stream are visible on a map from 1858.²⁹ Leander’s ledger reveals that in 1854 he conducted repairs on the “stone dam.”

FINAL DAYS OF THE FENTON POTTERY

The Fenton pottery burned during the night of November 5, 1859, while a kiln was firing. According to a contemporary newspaper account not only the buildings but “a large amount of burnt and unburnt ware was destroyed.” The loss was estimated at \$1,200.³⁰ While all published accounts state that all potting ceased because of the fire, the industrial schedule of the 1860 census indicates otherwise. Census information compiled that June includes a pottery owned by L. W. Fenton that has been “in operation 4 months.” In other words, Leander reopened the pottery that had burned the previous November the following March, probably utilizing the redware kiln. He had invested \$4,300, employed three men, and had “earthen ware” on hand valued at \$850.³¹

Leander must have produced simple redware for a while in a surviving kiln, which accounts for later visitors finding shards of brown-glazed earthenware on the surface of the site. In any case his rebuilt pottery was likely only in operation for a year or less. There are relatively few entries in his pottery ledger for 1860, but he did sell some earthenware flower pots, which may or may not have been produced following the fire. There were also a number of sales of fire bricks, probably from the remains of the former stoneware kiln. The 1860 census suggests that Leander closed the pottery that year, when his occupation was recorded as “Gentlemen.”³² He died in Burlington on December 29, 1864.³³ He was apparently on a visit there, possibly to see his friend, potter Franklin Wight, and his family.

There seems to have been a community interest in the first half of the twentieth century in wares produced by the Fenton pottery. “Several pieces of brown earthenware” from the site were on display along with other antiquities in the window of Lougee Brothers and Smythe’s store for the 1900 holiday season.³⁴ In 1916 Mrs. Susan H. Smith delivered a talk on collecting pottery that mentioned St. Johnsbury’s former pottery.³⁵ In 1922 a local newspaper commented that collectors “highly prize the Fenton pottery.”³⁶ At various times, including in 1924 and

1939, the Fairbanks Museum exhibited Fenton's redware and stoneware, both on loan and from their collection, in their Colonial Room.³⁷ Any historic ceramics remaining in their collection were transferred in 2010 to the St. Johnsbury History and Heritage Center.

EPILOGUE

St. Johnsbury had another earthenware pottery in the early 1800s, unrelated to and probably operating in competition with Richard W. Fenton's pottery. This pottery was established in 1815 by Rev. William Hutchinson (1794–1842) from Lyndeborough, New Hampshire, and operated at three locations in St. Johnsbury until Hutchinson removed to Bethlehem, New Hampshire, in 1827. This was surely the second pottery enumerated in Zadock Thompson's 1824 Vermont gazetteer.³⁸ This pottery, as well as potteries established in Quechee by his better-known brother, the inventor and engraver Ebenezer Hutchinson, have been investigated at length and are covered in an article published online.³⁹

Information contained in published secondary sources from the twentieth century on Vermont potteries, including town histories, and especially Lura Watkins's long-trusted *Early New England Potters and their Wares*, should not be accepted without examining, where possible, the original source materials these authors consulted, especially archival records. Early published local histories such as Edward Fairbanks's 1914 history of St. Johnsbury are more likely to be accurate. For potteries and other industries operating after 1860 other relevant sources can be studied, such as the Sanborn insurance maps and surveys and the R. G. Dun and Company credit ledgers. While admittedly time consuming, such an expanded research methodology could be applied to the study of Vermont industries other than potteries.

Appendix 1

WORKERS AT THE FENTON POTTERY⁴⁰

Edward Alonzo Crafts (1830–1872), a potter from Whately, Massachusetts, not far from Ashfield, was potting there circa 1850–1853 before spending a few years in St. Johnsbury working for the Fenton pottery.⁴¹

Henry Drew was employed by the pottery only in April and May of 1856.

Honesty Farnam was employed by the pottery only in April of 1857 only.

Francis Leander Fenton, son of Leander and Lucy Fenton, born in 1832, is listed as a laborer at the pottery in 1850 and was paid for turning until the fire of 1859, as evidenced by his father's pottery ledger. He then left St. Johnsbury and in 1860 is found in Chelsea, Massachusetts. He worked for a short time for the Peoria Pottery in Illinois before entering Civil War service and then removed to Boston, where his occupation is given as a clerk, agent, and finally in 1880 as a fire brick manufacturer. Francis has not been located after 1885.

James A. Gregg (1834–after 1880), from Acworth, New Hampshire, a master potter decorator, began working at the Norton stoneware pottery in Bennington as a young man. By 1860 he had moved to Fort Edward, New York, worked for a while in Peoria, Illinois, but by 1870 was working in Ellenville, New York. Some time after 1870 he returned to Bennington, where he is listed in 1880 as a saloon keeper. He has not been located after 1883. He is mentioned a few times in the ledger.

Robert B. Haggerty (c. 1839–1884) was employed by the pottery between 1854 and 1855. A native of Maine, Haggerty's residence was Fairfax, Vermont, a pottery community, in 1858, but by 1863 he had moved to St. Albans and by 1870 to nearby Georgia. He died in Amsterdam, New York. Always watchful of his finances, Leander Fenton deducted 50 cents from Haggerty's wages on November 11, 1854, for "breaking cogg[ling] wheel."

Thomas Harrington was employed by the pottery only in 1858.

John Hill (1834–??), possibly the son of Moses Hill of St. Johnsbury, is listed there in the 1850 census. He was employed by the pottery between 1855 and 1857.

Martin Leezer, born in Canada, was listed in Colchester, Vermont, in 1863 as a potter, probably working at the Woodworth/Sulls Pottery in Burlington. He was paid for turning work by Fenton in 1857. A Martin Laser (1822–1882) was a mechanic in York, Ontario, and may be the same person.

Arthur L. Morse (1818–1901), was a laborer found in the 1850 census in Peacham, Vermont, and from 1860 forward as a stone cutter in Concord, Vermont. He was paid by Fenton for turning work in 1857.

D. Morse, possibly a relative of Arthur, was employed by the pottery between 1854 and 1855.

L. or T. Nelson was employed by the pottery between 1855 and 1856 but does not appear to have done any turning.

Rufus Titus (c. 1838–after 1870), a laborer and resident of nearby Iras-

burg and various other places in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Canada, was employed by the pottery in 1856.

Dennis Tyrel/Tyrell was employed by the pottery between 1854 and 1855. This person cannot be identified.

Staats (States) Van Loon (1824–1904), from Athens, New York, was a pottery worker and sometimes owner in Ashfield, Massachusetts, between 1850 and 1856.⁴² He briefly worked at the Fenton pottery, where the ledger reveals that he was paid \$14.58 for turning ware and “setting kiln” in May 1854. His later years were spent in Cocksackie, New York, as a farmer.

Thomas Waterman (1805–1865) was living in Morgan, Vermont, in 1850 but was paid by Fenton for turning work in 1858. The 1860 census shows him, listed as a laborer, living near the Fenton residence and pottery. He then removed to Holland, Vermont, where he died.

William French Waterman (1838–1906), son of Thomas, was paid for turning work in 1858. He died in West Charleston, Orleans County, Vermont.

Amasa Wells (1819–1894), found in nearby Waterford in 1850, spent the later years of his life in Stowe, Vermont. He was paid for turning work in 1859.

NOTES

¹ John L. Scherer, *Art for the People: Decorated Stoneware from the Weitsman Collection* (Albany, NY: New York State Museum, 2015) 248–49.

² Lura Woodside Watkins, *Early New England Potters and Their Wares* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) 150–53.

³ Edward T. Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury, VT* (St. Johnsbury, VT: Cowles Press, 1914) 144; Anon., “Fire,” *St. Johnsbury (VT) Caledonian*, 12 November 1859.

⁴ Deed, Christopher Webber to Stephen Johnson, September 1, 1800, Cheshire County, NH, Registry of Deeds, Deed Book 35, Part 2, 399–401.

⁵ Watkins, *Early New England Potters and Their Wares*, 140.

⁶ Case files [related to estate proceedings heard in] Windsor Probate District, Vermont Superior Court, 1787–1900, Vermont State Archives and Records Administration (hereafter VSARA).

⁷ Deed, Nathaniel Edson to Richard W. Fenton, May 7, 1799, St. Johnsbury Town Clerk, Book 2, 66–67; Deed, Thomas Pierce to Richard W. Fenton, May 27, 1799, St. Johnsbury Town Clerk, Book 1, 402.

⁸ See for example, Ralph Sulloway, “Early St. Johnsbury,” *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, 22 April 1903, 7; John Ramsay, *American Potters and Pottery* (Boston, MA: Hale, Cushman & Flint, 1929), 203.

⁹ Anon., “Possible Revival of Pioneer Industry,” *St. Johnsbury, VT, Caledonian Record*, 4 November 4 1940, 1

¹⁰ Horatio Roberts, “Old Time St. Johnsbury,” *St. Johnsbury (VT) Republican*, 13 March 1901, 2.

¹¹ *Samuel French vs. R. W. Fenton and State vs. R. W. Fenton*, Caledonia County [VT] Court [including Supreme Court], Record Books, Volume 5, 479–80, 563, VSARA; also Caledonia County Court, Case Files, 1817–1818, VSARA.

¹² E. P. Walton, comp., *Records of the Governor and Council of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier, VT: Stream Press of J. and J. M. Poland, 1878), 233–34.

¹³ Roberts, “Old Time St. Johnsbury,” 2.

- ¹⁴ Watkins, *Early New England Potters and their Wares*, 152.
- ¹⁵ Anon., "Frederick Hancock," *Bennington (VT) Evening Banner*, 5 November 1903, 1.
- ¹⁶ Products of Industry, United States Federal Census, for Year Ending June 2, 1850 (microfilm copy at Vermont State Library, Barre).
- ¹⁷ *Auction Catalog*, Crocker Farm (Sparks, MD), 25 October 2014, Lot #162.
- ¹⁸ Anon., "The Fenton Pottery," 85th-anniversary broadside, Passumpsic Savings Bank, collection of St. Johnsbury History and Heritage Center.
- ¹⁹ *Auction Highlights*, Crocker Farm, 20 May 2006, Lot #87, www.crockerfarm.com/highlights/2006-05-20/.
- ²⁰ Albert G. Chadwick, comp., *Soldiers' Record of the Town of St. Johnsbury, Vermont, in the War of the Rebellion, 1861–5*. (St. Johnsbury, VT: C. M. Stone & Co, 1883) 25–26.
- ²¹ Anon., "Show Collection of Fenton Pottery Once Made Here," *Caledonian Record*, 30 October 1954, 1, 5.
- ²² Watkins, *Early New England Potters and Their Wares*, 152–53.
- ²³ Fenton Family Papers, Collection 2005.141.29, Bennington Museum, Bennington, VT.
- ²⁴ "Possible Revival of Pioneer Industry."
- ²⁵ Sulloway, "Early St. Johnsbury," 7.
- ²⁶ Fairbanks, *The Town of St. Johnsbury*, 144.
- ²⁷ "Possible Revival of Pioneer Industry."
- ²⁸ Easement, Leander Fenton to Connecticut and Passumpsic Railroad Company, 7 July 1856, St. Johnsbury Town Clerk, Deed Book 15, 584.
- ²⁹ Henry Francis Walling, *Map of Caledonia County, Vermont* (New York: H. F. Walling's Map Establishment, 1858).
- ³⁰ Anon., "Fire."
- ³¹ Products of Industry, United States Federal Census, for Year Ending June 1, 1860 (microfilm copy at Vermont State Library).
- ³² Population Schedule, United States Federal Census for 1860, Town of St. Johnsbury, Caledonia County, [VT], 204.
- ³³ "Deaths," *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, 13 January 1865.
- ³⁴ Anon., "Christmas at the Stores," *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, 19 December 1900, 1.
- ³⁵ Anon., "Closing Program," *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, 5 August 1916.
- ³⁶ Anon., "Fenton Pottery at St. Johnsbury," *St. Johnsbury (VT) Republican*, 15 August 1922, 1.
- ³⁷ Anon., "Fenton Pottery on Exhibit at Museum," *St. Johnsbury Republican*, 7 August 1924.
- ³⁸ Zadock Thompson, *A Gazetteer of the State of Vermont* (Montpelier, VT: E. P. Walton and the author, 1824), 250.
- ³⁹ Warren F. Broderick, *The Hutchinson Family and their Vermont Redware Potteries*, Woodstock History Center: www.woodstockhistorycenter.org/articles/2024/4/29/the-hutchinson-family-and-their-vermont-redware-potteries?rq=pottery.
- ⁴⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, information about these people is found in Leander Fenton's pottery ledger at the Bennington Museum and various census records and city and county directories.
- ⁴¹ James Monroe Crafts, *The Crafts Family: A Genealogical and Biographical History of the Descendants of Griffin and Alice Craft, of Roxbury, Mass., 1630–1890* (published by the author, 1893), 467.
- ⁴² Henry A. Baldwin, *The Stoneware Potters of Ashfield, Massachusetts, 1845 to 1856* (Ashfield, MA: Ashfield Historical Society, 2001), 9.