



North Carolina  
Archaeological Society

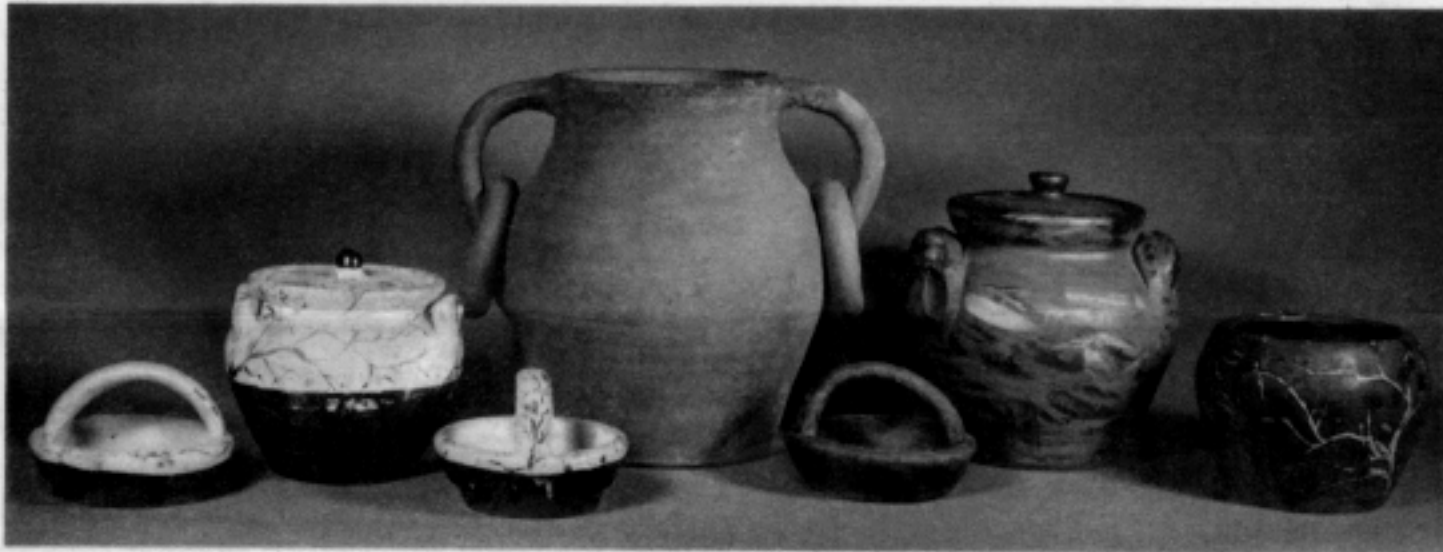
Newsletter

109 East Jones Street, Raleigh, N.C. 27601-2807

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## Obscure Davie County Pottery Raises Many Questions

Stephen C. Compton



Hear the words Seagrove or Catawba Valley when the matter of North Carolina pottery comes up, and you think you know something about the topic. Add to that what you know about the ordered Moravian potters and those of Wilkes, Buncombe, and Alamance counties and still you think you have a reasonable acquaintance with the potters, their wares, and their techniques.

As an avid collector and student of North Carolina pottery with a measured degree of knowledge of the major potters and their vicinities, I was stumped when in a roadside Fancy Gap, Virginia, antique shop I turned up an earthenware jar to find inscribed on its bottom, W. F. James Farmington, N.C. Inquiries to other collectors and a search of the literature related to the state's ceramic traditions supplied little help. "Never heard of him," said some. "I think he was the last of the Moravian potters," said one. "Oh yeah, that's Potter Bill from Farmington." Now I was onto something.

My curiosity led to a search for more and more information about the enigmatic potter. As it turns out, Farmington is in Davie County, Potter Bill was born in 1851, and his potter father, William A. James (b. ca.

1819), learned the trade about 1840. Of Welsh ancestry, migrating by way of Bucks County, Pennsylvania through Currituck County, North Carolina to the "Little Currituck" area of Davie County, the Jameses were variously weavers, farmers, and constables, but apparently, never potters before William A. James.

A nonagenarian Farmington resident has identified the site of the James kiln and pottery. Three other senior residents have confirmed its general vicinity. Its purported location is presently under pasture grasses at a location north of Farmington on the east side of Farmington Road. Once the location of a schoolhouse and store as well, the pottery site is found in what came to be known as Davie County's Jamestown. As a child, one resident recalls picking up broken pipe bowls by the dilapidated kiln. A subterranean cave-like pit extending under the roadbed is remembered as well. One observer says the ruined kiln was made of brick; another says fieldstone. Clay was mined north of Farmington along Turners Creek near the Yadkin County line ("made a hole big enough to put a barn in") and at a location on a farm west of the pottery.

(continued on next page)





All signed and reliably attributed wares observed to date are earthenware. Many are unglazed. Some have a lead-fluxed glass glaze on their interiors. One example is covered inside and out with a glaze reminiscent of the Catawba Valley alkalines, but may be a lead glaze containing darkening oxides. One large jar is covered with an opaque, medium-brown glaze which may contain clay slip. Unglazed pieces were frequently painted by Farmington resident, Mattie Bahnson.

In form, the James work is varied, reflecting the market needs of the time: distinctive, two-handled jars of various sizes with loose, hanging rings in each handle; lidded storage jars; handled baskets; flower vases, with and without handles; and smoking pipes (Potter Bill James also ran a tobacco factory and general store). Late in his life during a demonstration to high school students, Potter Bill showed his skill at making rundlets and jugs as well.

Unlike traditional eastern Piedmont turners whose potting skills date back through multiple American

generations, perhaps even to European generations before them, and the long-standing ceramic traditions of the Moravians, the Jameses appear to have acquired the skill, first William Alexander, not as the progeny of earlier potters, but from an unknown teacher, and then the son, William Franklin, from his father.

What would cause a young farmer to learn the pottery trade? Who was his teacher? Oral tradition has it that Henry (Heinrich) Schaffner, of Salem, took the young James as an

apprentice. William Alexander James, born about 1819, was a resident of Surry County in 1840 which could put him in the vicinity of Salem during Schaffner's term as master potter. By 1850, he is a potter in Davie County. It was not uncommon for Moravian apprentices to set out from their stints in training to set up their own shops and kilns. Randolph County's Mount Shepherd site included at least one former Salem apprentice, Philip Jacob Meyer. If not Schaffner, is it possible that another earthenware potter in the locale took James on as an assistant and from him he learned the requisite skills to set up his own pottery in Davie County?

A search of extant state, county, and private records has failed to reveal the answers to these questions. A study of the vessel forms, glazes, and techniques chosen by the James potters as observed in extant examples may shed some light on the origins of their skills. The most conclusive answers may yet lie as remains of a long-collapsed kiln arch or shards of pots and pipes under the sod of a Davie County cattle farm.

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## 1996 North Carolina State Fair Archaeology Exhibit

Come and visit our booth at the 1996 North Carolina State Fair in the Kerr Scott building during October 18-27. The display this year will be on the USS *Huron* Historic Shipwreck Preserve.



# 1996 Annual Fall Meeting North Carolina Archaeological Society

Saturday, September 28, 1996

University of North Carolina

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

10:00 am - 4:00 pm

The General Public is Encouraged to Attend  
All Meeting Events are Free of Charge

## Slide Lecture on Paleoindians

Dr. Albert C. Goodyear (South Carolina Institute of Archaeology) will speak on "Early Human Settlement in the Carolinas" focusing on Paleoindian sites dating as early as 10,000 B.C.

## Artifact Identification Workshops

Three different hands-on workshops/ training sessions will be offered on identifying archaeological materials:

- Prehistoric Projectile Points
- Prehistoric Pottery
- 18th-19th Century Euro-American Pottery

## Campus Attractions

Participants are also invited to visit the Campus Visitor Center (located in Morehead Planetarium), Morehead Planetarium, the Ackland Art Museum, and the North Carolina Historical Collection and Gallery in Wilson Library.

## Demonstrations

Hands-on demonstrations will allow attendees to view archaeology on both the Internet and CD-ROM.

## Exhibits

Archaeological exhibits on view will include a poster display on North Carolina archaeology, and materials from various artifact collections.

## Accommodations

Overnight accommodations can be had at the following motels, among others in town:

- Carolina Inn 919-933-2001
- Hampton Inn 919-968-3000
- Holiday Inn 919-929-2171
- Red Roof Inn 919-489-9421

(See insert page for schedule and map.)

## NCAS Newsletter Publication Schedule

All NCAS members are encouraged to submit articles and news items to Dee Nelms, Associate Editor, for inclusion in the *Newsletter*. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

Spring Issue      March 31  
Summer Issue    June 30

Fall Issue        September 30  
Winter Issue     December 31

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