



Bringing Edgefield's

Glory To Right

By Anastasia Howard

They waited under centuries of earth to share their stories. Every stoneware pot, wood-fired jug, porcelain plate or piece thereof, was brimming with tales of their link to Edgefield, SC. Rescued from the ravages of time, they found their voice and home, again.

Stephen Ferrell's stories flow like history set free. Dried clay casts a pale gray on his busy hands. Fact after fact, as if for rhythmic effect, he slams damp clay to his working slab then presses it deeply with the ball of his hand. He splits it in two. A piece at a time, he throws them down again. "Can't have air bubbles," he says. He rolls and presses the two mounds into one. "Air bubbles cause weak spots," he admits. So, he pounds away.

Air bubbles to this lifelong potter are like voids in history. It's only a matter of time before they take their toll on what man made. His foot gets to kickin'. His potter's wheel gets to spinnin'. Wet hands begin to mold. Minutes later, the jug's lip is formed. The hallmark Edgefield throat is pressed. Sets it aside. From nature art is born again.

Resident potter that he is, Steve maneuvers the cramped Old Edgefield Pottery museum with ease. He weaves his way around the stoneware antiques, maps, African face jars and 150-year-old photos that line walls, tables, cases and shelves of this working museum. Picks up an old shard of plate and makes you wonder what the magic's all about. He squints at you. Just to be sure you're listening. Smile creeps into his blue eyes. Piece of a grin curls up under his bushy gray beard. He'll tell you.

The magic's in his journey to excavate, study and reproduce art as it was done centuries ago. It's in the legacy that in this small slip of a Southern town an American art form was born. His sparkle is in knowing how, without science to lead the way, the area's natural bounty of kaolin, sand and feldspar fueled the tradition of Edgefield's alkaline-glazed stoneware. His passion comes from 40 years of dusting off what the earth reclaimed. The magic's in all the slaves, their owners and earth it took to make something from nothing.

From fine dust in plastic baggies, to fragments of earth and art, Steve cherishes every raw, fired, painted and intact find that reflects Native American, African, English and Colonial ancestry. For some visitors it is the rare opportunity to touch a treasure. For others, it is finding the creative freedom Edgefield slaves made real.

Nations intersected in this South Carolina corner during the 1800s. Chinese practices for making porcelain glazes, English methods for production and African slave labor took on tangible forms. Half-gallon to 40-gallon vessels were turned, coiled and fired for pickling, salting meats, storing lard and molasses.



Steve's expertise on Edgefield pottery, evident in his reproductions, has served collectors, historians and curators from around the country.

Many potters learned their skills under the watchful eyes of the local families that owned five large pottery production companies here. Bearing the company emblem or that of a client merchant, the fine work would hitch a wagon ride to neighboring towns. In harder times, the potters hitched rides as well. Taking their talents to the likes of Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana and even Texas.

For some, though, neither the road, nor freedom stretched that far. They were the contained makers of containers. But their marks on this world have traveled well beyond the boundaries they dared not cross. Standing front and center is Dave the Potter, a slave and master craftsman

whose pots are acclaimed as the most impressive specimens of Edgefield pottery.

Steve believes Dave completed nearly 100,000 vessels in his lifespan. The most collectible being the estimated one hundred 25- to 40-gallon vessels on which he wrote his name and verse. This literate slave, in his own way, did travel beyond the boundaries of Edgefield. A skill others would surely hush, Dave flaunted boldly. "I wonder where is all my relations... Friendship to all and every nation."

"Dave's Pots" are among traveling and private collections, and permanent exhibits owned by the Smithsonian, the Boston Museum, the McKissick and the State museums in Columbia, and the Charleston Museum. According to Steve, who proudly displays his own collection of Dave's Pots at Old Edgefield Pottery, one of the last of Dave's pots to sell went for \$90,000.

Steve's expertise on Edgefield pottery has served collectors, historians and curators from around the country. His personal research, reproductions, published articles and exhibits have focused a whole new light on Old Edgefield. His 1993 visit to the Oval Office to present a personalized piece of pottery to President George Bush is among the highlights of his state and national invitations to lecture, and his studies at Furman University and the Museum School of Art in Greenville, SC.

"I knew I was the one person in the world suited for this job," says this experimental archaeologist. "I have come 90 percent of the way to discovering what it was like," he adds, referring to the trial and error potters endured to master their craft. And with a faraway stare, you can sense him wondering if the 10 percent left to discover will bring the joy of completion, or the temptation to make the journey last another 40 years.

If You Go...
Old Edgefield Pottery
230 Simkins St.
Edgefield, SC 29824
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