

TRENTON POTTERIES

Newsletter of the
Potteries of Trenton Society



Lenox China Easy Guide to Dating Dinnerware Patterns

Ellen Denker, Archivist for Lenox Brands

Lenox China has been making dinnerware as a standard product since 1906. Founded as the Ceramic Art Company in 1889, the little pottery on Prince and Mead Streets in Trenton made fine ivory-colored porcelain vases and specialty wares, such as dainty tea sets, that were exquisitely decorated by hand. Following the buying trends that were current in the United States after 1900, the company turned its attention more and more to dinnerware. The earliest plates were similar to the company's art wares in that they were carefully hand painted with beautiful women, charming putti, and a variety of flowers and fish. By 1906, when the company's name was changed to Lenox, Frank Graham Holmes, chief designer from 1905 until his death in 1954, was creating a myriad of historical and contemporary designs for Lenox dinnerware.

In the earliest days of making dinnerware, patterns were custom designed for a single client and some were made in a limited number of sets. The first *named pattern* was "The Virginian," a quaint design in the Colonial Revival style that was introduced in 1910 and available through china dealers across the United States as a stock pattern. "The Virginian" was followed by "Mt. Vernon," "Tuxedo" (still in the product line), "Meadowbrook," "Mandarin," "Ming," and many, many more. Usually the backstamp on a stock pattern will include the pattern's name, which makes it relatively easy to match replacements. More difficult are those

sets that were sold through designated retailers. If the backstamp includes the retailer's name, that pattern may be slightly different from the same pattern name sold by another retailer. For example, Tiffany's version of "Coronado" (Figure 2) may be slightly different from Marshall, Field's version of "Coronado." This little quirk of marketing was good for a retailer's business. A homemaker who needed to order replacements had to go back to the source of her Lenox china in order to insure that her new china matched her original china exactly.

Despite all the stock patterns that Lenox made available, Holmes continued to design custom-ordered dinnerware as well—patterns that were produced so rarely that they were never named. Through the years there were hundreds of *unnamed patterns* and most were created using the costliest decorating processes, including colored backgrounds, raised gold paste-work, wide etched gold borders, and delicate hand painting. Although they have no names, these patterns can be closely dated using the company's code, a combination of letter and number that is found on the bottom of the piece. If you have Lenox china without a pattern name in the backstamp, look for the little gold numbers and letters painted near the foot rim (Figure 1). The first set of numbers refers to the shape; each shape had a distinct number to identify it. The shape number is followed

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The Potteries of Trenton Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of Trenton's ceramic past. Officers: President—Patricia Madrigal; Treasurer—Amy Earls; Secretary—Christy Morganstein. Board: Ellen Denker, Barbara Goldberg, Richard Hunter, William Liebeknecht, Molly Merlino, George Müller, Brenda Springsted. Newsletter Editor: Patricia Madrigal

Dating Lenox Dinnerware Patterns

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by a slash, which separates it from the pattern code.

The pattern code is on the right side of the slash and is made up of a letter, a number, and sometimes another single letter. The first letter and number form the date code. The letter that follows the whole string usually designates a color (examples: R=red; B=blue; G=green) because many of these patterns could be special ordered with different ground colors. That is, the same border decoration could be put over a red, blue, or green background. Named patterns also had date codes assigned to them. For example, the code for "Autumn" is S-1; the pattern was introduced in 1919.

Lenox's date code system runs through the alphabet twice. During the late 1940s the company decided to streamline production by eliminating hundreds of patterns. Those that were kept in the product line and all that were introduced later were given pattern names. The date-code system was gradually abandoned after 1950.

Shown below is the table of dating codes. A letter in combination with a number from 1 to 299 designates a pattern introduced in a year during the first alphabet series beginning in 1904 and ending with 1925. A letter in combination with a number from 300 to 500 designates a pattern introduced in a year during the second alphabet series

beginning in 1926 and ending in 1950. The letters I, N, Q, and U were not included in either alphabet series.

Numbers

1-299

A - 1904
B - 1905
C - 1906
D - 1907
E - 1908
F - 1909
G - 1910
H - 1911
J - 1912
K - 1913
L - 1914
M - 1915
O - 1916
P - 1917
R - 1918
S - 1919
T - 1920
V - 1921
W - 1922
X - 1923
Y - 1924
- 1925

Numbers

300-500

A - 1926
B - 1927
C - 1928
D - 1929
E - 1930
F - 1931
G - 1932
H - 1933
J - 1934
K - 1935
L - 1936
M - 1937
O - 1938
P - 1939
R - 1940
S - 1941
T - 1942 to 1946*
V - 1947
W - 1948
X - 1950

*war years when Z very little new china was produced

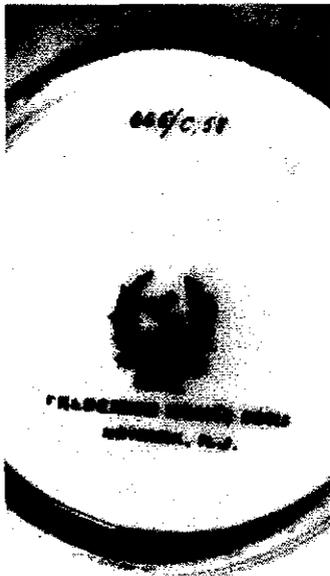
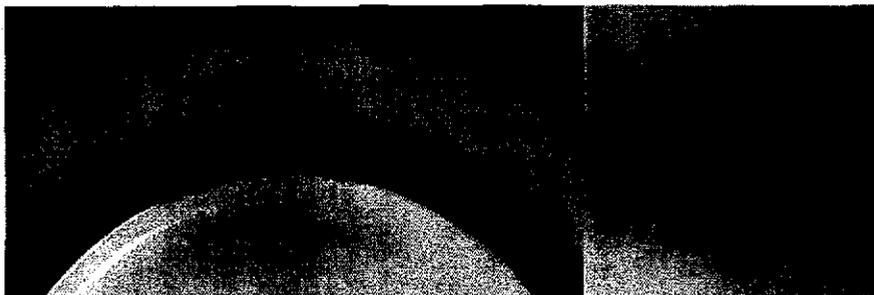


Figure 1: Backstamp and date mark from the saucer of pattern C-58. The number to the left of the slash refers to the shape, in this case, a saucer. The letter to the right of the slash indicates the pattern was introduced in 1906. Figure 3 shows the tea caddy in pattern C-58.

Figure 2: The Coronado pattern and backstamp.



Most of the coded patterns were eliminated from the company's repertoire in 1947 when production was streamlined. Those that remained in the line were named.

There are a few exceptions—patterns that were introduced and assigned numbers during the time that the system was passing out of use. Their assigned date code does not follow the system outlined above. These patterns also have names. The following pattern codes and names are the exceptions:

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Dating Lenox Dinnerware Patterns

W-331 Pine, 1951
 W-341 Cattail, 1951
 X-302 Starlight, 1952
 X-303 Olympia, 1952
 X-304 Roselyn, 1952
 X-407 West Wind, 1953
 X-421 Athenia Coupe, 1953
 X-444 Caribbee, 1954
 X-445 Kingsley, 1954
 X-446 Trio, 1954
 X-516 Princess, 1954
 X-559 Glendale, 1955
 A-500 Wyndcrest, 1956
 A-501 Alaris, 1956
 A-557 Jewel, 1957
 A-558 Chalet, 1957
 C-512 Charmaine, 1957

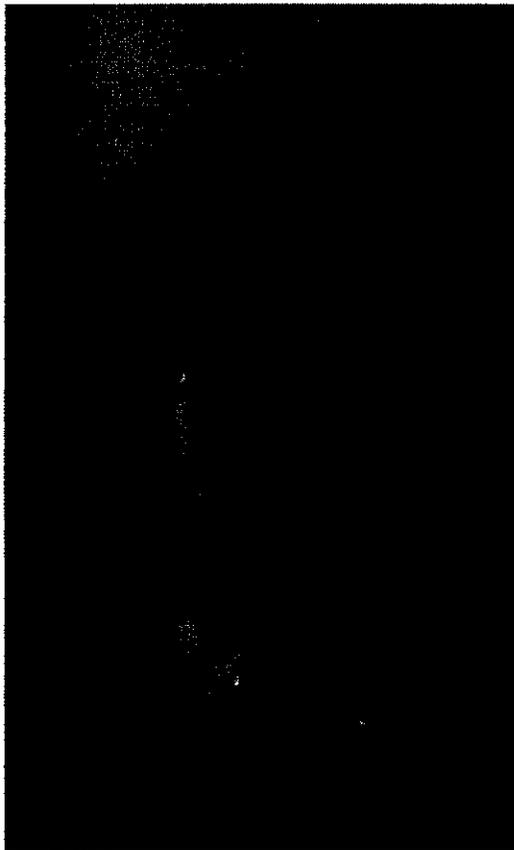


Figure 3. Tea caddy in pattern C-58, Lenox China, introduced in 1906. See Figure 1 for backstamp and date mark.

Summary:

Hundreds of Lenox china patterns have been introduced over the past century. Yet, dating the range of production of a particular pattern is easy. For *named patterns*, simply log on to www.Lenox.com. From the main screen, the topic "Discontinued Patterns" links immediately to a screen that asks for the pattern name in question. After the name is entered the page displays the date range of the pattern. Readers without a computer can call Lenox's Customer Service toll-free number (800-635-3669) for production information of the named patterns.

For *unnamed patterns*, use the dating-code guide above to determine the date the pattern was first made. Because all Lenox china patterns were available on request up until the production shift in 1947, it is not possible to determine the date that any particular unnamed pattern was last made. Thus, the date range of patterns in the unnamed group is routinely terminated with 1947. However, the backstamp of an unnamed pattern can provide some broad information on the dating of a particular piece or set. The standard Lenox backstamp for much of the 20th century (1906-1989) was a wreath enclosing the letter L with the name LENOX below (Figures 1 and 2). In 1930, the phrase "MADE IN U.S.A." was added beneath the company's name and continued to be used thereafter. In 1989, Lenox introduced the backstamp currently in use (Figure 4). It was designed by well-known Princeton, New Jersey architect Michael Graves.



Figure 4: The Lenox backstamp designed by Michael Graves and introduced in 1989.

Robertson Art Tile Company, Morrisville, Pennsylvania 1890-1982

Scott L. Anderson

Figure 1: An 1890 photograph of the G.W. Robertson, Chelsea Ceramic Art Tile Co., Morrisville, PA. One of the men standing outside the pottery is probably George Robertson. His brother, Hugh, may also be there. The name was later changed to Robertson Art Tile Co.

Why should POTS be interested in a Pennsylvania tile factory? Even though the tileworks for the Robertson Art Tile Co. was located in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, the business was incorporated in New Jersey, with offices in Trenton until the 1950s. Also, it was founded by a member of the well-known Robertson family of potters.

In 1890, the famous Chelsea

Keramic Art Works near Boston had closed. For more than 20 years it had been operated by James Robertson and his three sons, George, Alexander and Hugh. George went to Low Art Tile Works in 1878 and James died 2 years later. When Alexander left for California in 1884, that meant Hugh was alone at Chelsea. Six years later George and Hugh went to Trenton, presumably because of its reputation



Robertson Art Tile

as the center of the pottery industry. They eventually found their way to Morrisville and built a new tile factory. However, Hugh left the following year to re-open the Chelsea plant, which later became Dedham. George was left to open his new business, naming it for his family's Chelsea factory.

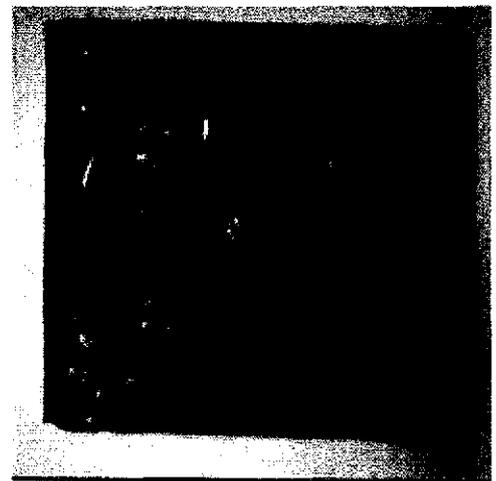
Another important link is with the Forst family. A.D. Forst was associated with the First Mechanics Bank, located in the Forst-Richey Building (formerly on the southwest corner of Warren and State Streets) near his family's wholesale grocery business. According to Everett Townsend's history of the company, Forst purchased a portion of George W. Robertson's stock to pay off debts George accumulated in startup up production.

Typical of the Trenton potteries at the time, Forst and his investors formed a partnership with Robertson whereby they would run the business and George would oversee production. They also insisted on a name change to avoid confusion with the new Chelsea plant. Thus, the new tileworks in Morrisville became the Robertson Art Tile Company.

Despite its desperate beginnings, Robertson Art Tile survived almost 100 continuous years, producing millions of square feet of ceramic tile. Robertson was purported to be the king of white wall tile, but also produced colorful decorative tiles designed by famous ceramic artists such as Fred Wilde (1900-1903), Herman Mueller (1903-1908) and Leon Solon (1920s and 1930s). George Robertson had returned to Massachusetts by 1895, mourning the death of his son in an accident at the plant. In 1893, Robertson Tile had affiliated with the

Associated Tile Manufacturers, a relationship which lasted until 1915 or later. For a brief three years (1903-1906), Robertson was part of the National Tile Company. By the time Mueller left in 1908 to open his own company, the business was firmly established. It has survived the hard times of 1893, the Spanish-American War and the economic panic of 1907-08. The ceramic tile business steadily grew, even through World War I and into the 1920s, leading to a major expansion of its factory in 1929, just before the stock market crash. My family talks about the people lined up at my grandfather's door waiting for a job, but the plant never closed and no one was laid off. In fact, the 1930s following the Great Depression proved a very active period. When the government ordered the company to cease tile production during World War II, Robertson added the abrasives division and began making grinding wheels. The board of directors changed the name to Robertson Manufacturing Company. After the war, the building boom arrived and tile was in production again. For various reasons, the Board decided to sell the company in 1967 to American Manufacturing, who later sold it to Clarke Corporation, who led it into bankruptcy in 1982. The tileworks still stands (although occupied by a tenant who shows little interest in its former use), which speaks to this little-known tile company's endurance. Most people remember Robertson as a "family" business that was a good place to work and a cornerstone of Morrisville for just short of

Figure 2: A Robertson tile dating to c. 1900.



Robertson Art Tile

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100 years.

Robertson's tile-making process often set industry standards. James Robertson brought the dust-pressed method of tile making with him from England. Hugh developed a non-crackle glaze. But it was Robertson Tile that was the first tile manufacturer to guarantee against crazing in 1934. They were also the first to design ceramic tile for use in swimming pools; the first installation was in Old Point Comfort, Virginia circa 1905. In 1954, Robertson was the first tile company to use the single-fire method, which saved time and money. It was also instrumental in forming the Tile Council of America (1944), which later erected a laboratory and research center in Trenton. They were also one of the first tile companies to set up an on-site research lab for quality control. Its customers knew that Robertson made only the best products. Robertson Art Tile was an innovator that changed with the times.

It is one thing to collect ceramic tile.

It is yet another to find them in their original setting. However, this is not always possible. We are very lucky, as collectors, to know how any particular tile was used. As early as 1906 Robertson tile was installed in the

Trenton Turkish and Russian Bath on

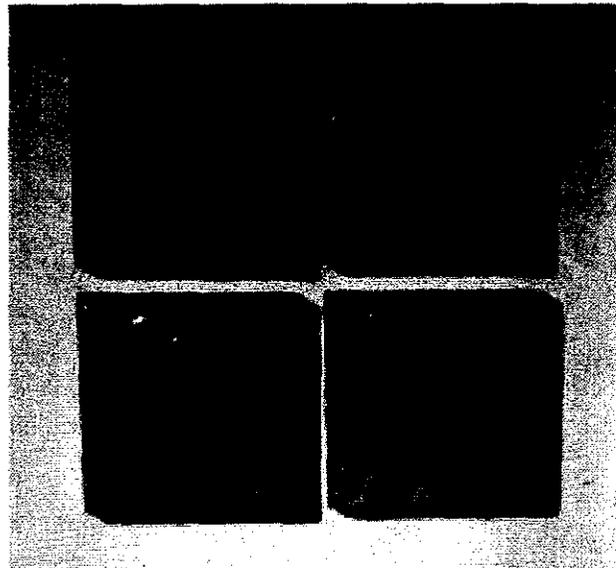


Figure 3: Robertson tiles from a fireplace installation, c. 1900.

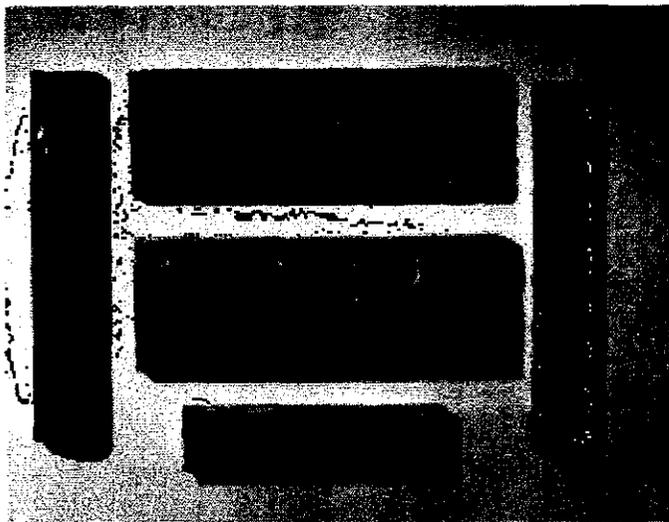
North Warren Street (no longer standing). Many Trenton swimming pools were lined with Robertson tile, including Jr. High School #3 on State and Parkside (Holland Middle School) and the Clinton Avenue and Cook Memorial YMCAs. In the 1950s, Robertson secured the tile contract for the Helene Fuld Hospital on New York Avenue. They also tiled the locker rooms at the Trenton Country Club. Although many of Trenton's Victorian homes have been demolished, their fireplaces were once surrounded by unique, decorative ceramic tiles from the Robertson plant. Numerous residences in Trenton still display Robertson tiles installed in their bathrooms during the 1920s and 1930s. It is certain there are many more installations to be discovered.

There it is – the Trenton connection.

Now, what is my interest in

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Figure 4: A selection of borders produced by Robertson Art Tile, c. 1900.



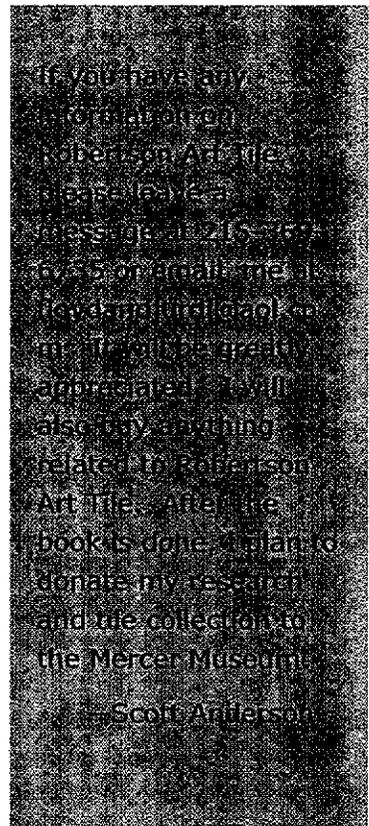
Robertson Art Tile

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Robertson Art Tile? Although my family is not descended from the Robertsons, they ran the tileworks for almost fifty years. My grandfather, Robert E. Anderson, Sr., was invited into the company in 1921 by Parry Forst. They had been roommates at Ohio State University, studying ceramic engineering. It was 32 years before my grandfather became president of the company, after Parry Forst passed away. My father, R.E. Anderson, Jr., joined the sales division in 1949 and became president in 1962. My uncle, C. Richard Anderson, joined the abrasives division in 1956. He is the surviving member of the Anderson family who worked in management at Robertson before it was sold to American Manufacturing in 1967.

When my father passed away in

2000, I tried to donate some photos and newspaper clippings about the Robertson Art Tile to the Mercer Museum. They had not heard of it and asked me to write a short history of the company. Even though I had worked a few years at the factory, I myself knew very little about the business and even less about the kinds of tiles produced before the 1950s. As I began to do the research, the idea for a book emerged. I also started buying tiles and related ephemera. When I learned that Morrisville is celebrating its bicentennial in 2004, it seemed the perfect deadline for publication. In the meantime, I continue trying to fill in the blanks of a company history whose significance has escaped our modern world.



If you have any information on Robertson Art Tile, please call me at 610-215-3877 or e-mail me at [redacted]. I would appreciate it if you also send any photos related to Robertson Art Tile. After the book is done, I plan to donate my research and the collection to the Mercer Museum.

— Scott Anderson

American Standard Factory in Hamilton Finds Buyer

The American Standard factory in Hamilton, which was closed in December of 2001, has been purchased by Preferred Real Estate Investments, Inc. of Conshohocken, Pennsylvania.

Built in 1924 by Thomas Maddock's Sons Company, the plant was sold to the Standard Sanitary Manufacturing Company in 1929. (Standard Sanitary later merged with the American Radiator Company, forming the company known today as American Standard.) When the factory was

built it was considered a state-of-art and modern facility; American Standard decided to close it because it was one of their oldest and smallest factories.

After demolishing a portion of the factory, thereby returning it to almost its original size, Preferred plans to convert the plant to office space. The remainder of the property, slightly over 100 acres, will be developed into townhouses, apartments and shops.

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Potteries of Trenton Society

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