

Dedham Pottery celebrates a centennial

Pottery reproductions very popular

1896-1996



by James D. Kaufman

Today, one hundred years after Hugh Cornwall Robertson moved his pottery to Dedham, the sale of Dedham Pottery-inspired products is a booming business.

A number of local retailers carry items ranging from reproductions of the pottery itself to refrigerator magnets and door mats with designs borrowed from original Dedham Pottery crackleware.

The reproduction business started 25 years ago in Concord, MA, in a kiln in Charlotte Starr's cellar. Ms. Starr's pottery hobby prompted her to attempt to fill some voids in her antique Dedham Pottery collection.

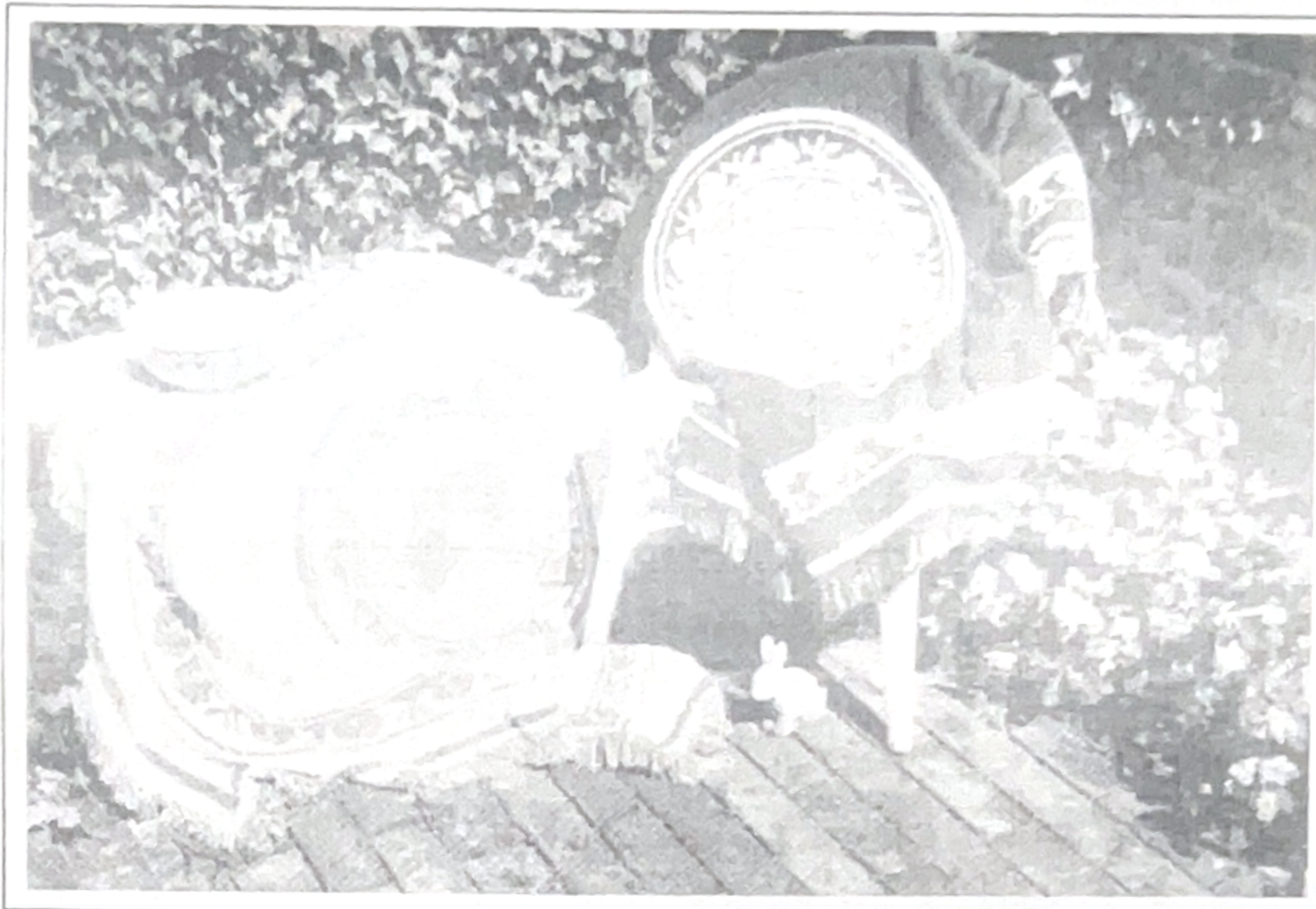
She was so successful that soon many friends were clamoring for her homemade copies of Dedham Pottery. The hobby became a business in 1977 when she incorporated The Potting Shed with her son Rob.

Today Rob Starr runs the business in West Concord, employing forty-five people, an enterprise many times the size of the original Dedham Pottery Company. The Potting Shed's pottery is carried in over 2,000 stores across the country. It looks very similar to the original pottery which was last made in Dedham in 1943. Like the antique pottery, the new pieces are handcrafted, each piece is painted by an artist.

One of the Potting Shed's first two retail outlets was the Dedham Women's Exchange, which continues to sell the Starr family's pottery. Dedham Pottery reproductions are very popular as gifts, according to Nancy Stuart of the Women's Exchange.

She says that "the occasional pieces are more popular than the dinnerware," and that "pottery with the rabbit pattern is in the greatest demand." The pottery "is often given ... as a remembrance of Dedham to guests from out of town." In fact, she said, "a piece is on its way to Ireland right now with a woman who visited Dedham."

The original Dedham Pottery Company sold pri-



The Dedham Historical Society's Dedham Pottery Afghan echoes the engaging colors and classic traditional design of the popular antique Dedhamware.

marily dinnerware. While it produced several small rabbit-shaped pieces such as paperweights, card holders, knife rests, and flower-holders, these were a minor sideline to sales of tableware.

Local retailers suggest that today this scenario has been reversed.

There has been a proliferation of figural items from the makers of Dedham Pottery reproductions. Although these new forms display blue painted images on a crackleware piece of pottery, they are not what the old Dedham Pottery business sold.

But today's buyers are not concerned with this fact.

Jim and Mary Norton own Norton's Hallmark store at the Dedham Mall and have carried the Potting Shed's pottery for ten years. Mary reports that "the pottery is a good selling item" and that "most of the reproduction pieces are purchased as a gift", while some are "bought for themselves by avid collectors."

She also mentions that often "the adult children of collectors will buy the newest creation from the Potting Shed as a gift for their parent."

Figural pieces and accessory items like candleholders and pitchers are popular, as well.

Roman Jewelers Hallmark store at the Dedham Plaza also carries the Potting Shed's reproductions. The store's inven-

tory of the pottery is extensive, including some hard-to-find discontinued pieces. Ken Roman says that his experience shows that accessory pieces "such as fruit bowls, canister sets, candlesticks, and soap dishes sell better than the dinnerware."

He attributes this trend to the high cost of assembling an entire dinner setting. The store also stocks hand-made Dedham Pottery-like pins and earrings which sell rapidly.

His store is the town's only retailer of Dedham Pottery reproductions to occupy cyberspace. This shop has a home page on the Internet which markets its merchandise nationwide.

Ken Roman invites all fans of the Potting Shed's products to visit in November for a "decorate your own Christmas ornament" day. The folks from the Potting Shed bring unpainted ornaments for customers to hand paint. They then send the pieces to West Concord for firing, and return them to the customer by Christmas.

This event is quite popular and a great way to personalize your ornaments.

Many visitors to Dedham from other towns or states visit the Dedham Historical Society Museum in the Square. There, along with other artifacts, they may view the Society's large collection of antique Dedham Pottery.

The gift shop sells a range

of related items. Plates (\$14.70) with original Dedham Pottery designs are popular, as are the 67" by 46" cotton afghans (\$50.00), which feature the Dedham Pottery rabbit.

The Historical Society also sells note cards, Christmas ornaments, and even original paintings, all with a Dedham Pottery theme.

Dale's Card Shop in Dedham Square may be stocked with the widest array of Dedham Pottery-related products. This store sells locally knitted sweaters with the rabbit design, as well as tote bags, aprons, flags, pot holders, napkins, and door mats. Also available are refrigerator magnets depicting a Dedham Pottery vase filled with flowers, and even some original oil paintings, as well as some shards of the antique pottery showing unusual designs. Dale's features Nash Pottery reproductions.

Ken and Barbara Nashawaty own the Nash Pottery which has been producing reproduction pottery since 1980.

Like the Starrs in Concord, the Nashs mark their products distinctively to eliminate confusion with the antique pieces. Their handcrafted work is much loved by collectors.

Similar to the experience at other local shops, Dale's owner Dale MacLean reports that "people buy the odd pieces

more than table service."

MacLean has also commissioned Nash Pottery to produce unique, limited edition pottery reproductions. His special Christmas plates and those with Dedham's Fairbanks House image are perennial hot sellers. Many of his customers are not antique collectors but serious buyers of the new limited edition pieces.

Although the original Dedham Pottery Company closed for business in 1943, the spirit of its product still resonates. The making of new reproduction pieces seems to be expanding. Ironically, the reproductions may already exceed the number of the surviving antique pieces, and eventually the plethora of reproduction shapes and images will certainly surpass the limited scope of the small original business.

Though not as expensive, it may soon become as difficult to assemble a complete representation of the various reproduction pieces as it is of the original.

All Dedham Pottery-related products seem to find a warm welcome, and are, without doubt, quite popular with Dedham's residents and visitors. The first one hundred years since Dedham Pottery came to town has witnessed an uninterrupted affection for the images the Pottery created.

Ed. note: James D. Kaufman publishes "The Dedham Pottery Collectors Society Newsletter" from his Dedham home. He is the volunteer curator for The Historical Society's antique Dedham Pottery collection. He authored an article on Dedham Pottery in the April, 1996 issue of the "Early American Life" magazine.

Kaufman is interested in hearing from anyone with any historic information or knowledge of Dedham Pottery, or from any relatives of past employees of the Pottery. He says confidentiality is always strictly respected when requested. He may be contacted at 248 Highland St., Dedham MA 02026; phone (800) 283-8070.