

George, Kenneth: Cole's Pottery ^[1]

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Kenneth George: Cole's Pottery

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 11/12/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

Kenneth George may be only 30 years old, but he has 10 generations of pottery making behind him. He and his grandmother operate the famous Cole's Pottery in Sanford. The first Cole potter moved to North Carolina from Staffordshire, England, in the 1750s. The Coles settled by the rich clay beds of Seagrove, 75 miles west of Raleigh, and have been turning and firing pots ever since. They helped make the Piedmont into one of America's centers for traditional, handmade pottery.

A no-nonsense craftsman with a wry sense of humor, George is a rather understated heir to the state's first family of handmade pottery. "I just hope we stay busy," he told me when I asked about his aspirations for the shop's future.

We talked while George turned pots. I stood, transfixed, as he worked the air out of a piece of clay, as if he was kneading bread. Then he turned that clump of earth into a pitcher that shone brilliantly with a rough-hewn grace and simple elegance. Like all Cole pottery, his work renewed my faith that the plain truly can be exalted, the most ordinary parts of life made beautiful.

In Kenneth George's words:



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Granddaddy started this shop. He was actually my great-grandfather, and his name was A.R. Cole. He originally came from Randolph County, up around Seagrove. He moved down here to Sanford in about 19 and 34. He did pottery, and he Granddaddy had a little bit of help with him. He had like seven young'uns. Uncle Foister turned. Granny turned. Aunt Celia turned. Aunt Hazel -- granny's younger sister -- sold pottery. Aunt Celia had a brother Winford -- he didn't have but one Uncle Foister was probably the best potter that come out of granny's family. See this here? Anybody that picks up this piece of pottery, they know who made it: Uncle Foister. He made it when he was working here with granddaddy. Uncle Fo

George showed me the pug mill where he grinds clay, mixing it and screening out sticks and roots.

They have clay here in Sanford, but it's good about only for brick. That's the reason the Coles settled in Seagrove originally. They had a vein of clay up there that was good for making pottery. But now, people don't even use hand-dug clay an We still do it the old fashioned way. This clay comes from Johnston County, down around Smithfield. We have it hauled up by the dump truck load. I probably grind about once a month, a little more than a ton every time I do it.

This clay as more elasticity to it. When you're turning it, it stretches better. That's the difference between this clay and that old commercial clay.

We walked past great pails of glaze colors, hundreds of drying pots, and kilns that fire his pots to 2,200 degrees.

All their glazes were their own glazes. Back years ago, that was the way. That's the reason everybody always said potters were so secretive. Granddaddy was liable to spend no telling how much time and money on trying to figure out a color Well, now everybody and his brother are a chemist. They come in and say, "Oh, we know what's in that color just from looking at it." They may know, but they don't know as much as they think they know.

These tubs here have our glazes in them. You got the ingredients of what goes into the colors -- feldspar, zinc, red iron oxide, black copper oxide, cobalt oxide, a whole lot more -- and you just mix them like cake mix. Most potters now don't d In the early 1930s, on into the '50s, you were going from salt-glazed pottery to more artsy pottery, more for decoration. Most of those old salt-glazed pots were grayish-looking urns, like crocks, butter churns, jars, canister-type things. That wa You could still use the new pottery to cook in, but you could also set it up to look at. Granddaddy went through that transition. All the Coles did. The actual making of the pottery hasn't changed much. You just get more of a defined shape now

I asked him how he became a potter.

Mama would bring me and my sister out and we'd mess with the clay like anybody, just piddling, making little animal things. We turned a little bit on the wheel, but it wasn't much. When I was probably 14 or 15, mama started bringing me out on Saturdays to help granny. I just unloaded kilns, put stuff on racks, waited on customers, things like that. When I got my driver's license, then I come out after school. I wasn't re

I never really thought I'd ever learn to make something. It took a long time for me to learn how to make a piece. Who taught me mostly was my granny. Granny grew up making pottery. She has been turning pottery for over 60 years.

All I done, I would watch granny turn, and Aunt Celia turn. I stood and watched for hours. I mean, I'm talking hours and hours. Then I would get on the wheel and I'd try it.

If I got to a point and I was like, "I can't make this do this," one of them would walk over and say, "Try this and try that." But it's not something where somebody can really teach you. You just have to learn that by yourself with your hands: With Most potters aren't going to tell you everything no how. They'll tell you enough to satisfy your asking, but that's about it. Queer people, they really are. Most of the older ones are anyway.

Not the 30 year olds, of course?

Uh-uh, the 30 year olds aren't like that.

David Cecelski is the Whichard Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities, East Carolina University.

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