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JAHA plans exhibit on Swank pottery

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association is beginning a full-scale historical investigation into the Swank Pottery, a major Johnstown manufacturer of pottery in the 19th century. The project will culminate in an exhibit that will open at the Heritage Discovery Center in summer 2005.

“The stoneware manufactured by the Swank Pottery in the mid- to late 1800s is prized by collectors, but there’s a lot of confusion about the Swank company itself,” said Richard Burkert, executive director of JAHA. “Currently, basic facts aren’t known, like the chronology of the company and the level of production. In fact, we joke about titling the exhibit ‘Glazed and Confused.’”

An AmeriCorps volunteer, Donna Stromsdorfer, is spearheading the research into the Swank firm’s history, under the supervision of JAHA’s curator, Dan Ingram. Stromsdorfer is currently reviewing known historical collections with information on the Swank firm, and consulting public records such as census data, tax records and newspapers for more information.

The exhibit, which is planned for summer 2005, will include the results of the research and displays of the firm’s pottery. More than a dozen examples of pottery will come from JAHA’s permanent collection, and the rest will be borrowed from private collectors. A full-color exhibit catalog will also be produced, which will include photos of all pieces featured in the exhibit as well as a narrative of the historical research.

“We are asking anyone in the Johnstown area who has papers, photographs or other documentation about the Swank pottery to call us,” Stromsdorfer said. “We are also looking for pieces of Swank pottery to borrow for the exhibit.”

The project is being funded in part by grants from the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission, the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies, and the Penelec Fund for Greater Johnstown.

“Penelec is committed to helping improve the quality of life in this area, including the cultural offerings. That’s why we’re so pleased to be supporting JAHA in this initiative,” said Murphy Montler, area manager for Penelec.

Although much of the Swank Pottery’s history is unclear, certain facts are known. Three brothers, Josiah, Jacob and Hiram Swank, moved from Somerset County to Johnstown around 1856 to operate the Johnstown Pottery, which soon became the Swank Pottery. The Swank firm produced a wide range of salt glaze stoneware pottery, including very large pieces, in the mid- to late 19th century. The pottery, which was often hand decorated, was thrown in the firm’s earliest years, while later examples were molded. Together or separately, the brothers produced pottery that was signed “J & H Swank,” “Hiram Swank & Sons,” “J. Swank & Co.,” and “Swank & Brother.” Food storage jugs and crocks were among the main items produced, along with some children’s toys like coin banks.

In the 1850s, the firm was located on Market Street and was moved to Kernville by 1859; however, there may have been more pottery locations. As the advent of glass canning jars reduced the demand for food storage pottery, the firm evolved to become a major manufacturer of refractory materials including firebrick and other ceramics used by the steel industry. The Swank refractory business was in operation until the late 1980s.

“The Swank brothers were very important in the history of Johnstown’s business community – they were quite entrepreneurial,” Stromsdorfer said. In addition to the pottery business, the brothers owned a hotel and a tannery, and Jacob Swank later started a hardware firm and built the Swank building downtown to serve as its headquarters. The brothers were civic-minded as well, contributing to the establishment of the Vigilant Fire Company in Johnstown.

The exhibit will help JAHA toward its long-term goal of documenting and interpreting the arts and crafts traditions of the Johnstown area. It will occupy the second floor galleries of the Heritage Discovery Center, replacing “The Pattern Maker’s Art,” an exhibit of wooden foundry patterns that are part of JAHA’s permanent collection.

Anyone wishing to share information on the Swank Pottery is encouraged to call Donna Stromsdorfer at JAHA, (814) 539-1889.

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization dedicated to preserving and showcasing Johnstown’s unique history to the nation through high-quality educational, cultural and recreational experiences. JAHA owns and operates the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center, and produces the AmeriServ FolkFest, a 3-day free music and food festival held annually over Labor Day weekend; events commemorating the 1889 Johnstown flood; a spring lecture series; and a wide variety of additional cultural programming. The Wagner-Ritter House & Garden will open in 2005, and a Children’s Discovery Center is being planned. For more information on JAHA programs, museums and events, visit www.jaha.org.