

# Carolina Clay

Our famous pottery is grounded in historic tradition and rich soil.

by Karen House

Clay pots used to be essential items for our ancestors to survive hard winters. Crude crocks and jugs stored up molasses, butter, meats, beans, pickles and “medicinal” beverages such as brandy and wine. Sturdy earthenware baking dishes, colanders and tableware helped cooks prepare hot meals and transport food. Indeed, the production of pots was so critical that the Confederacy reportedly exempted potters from military duty during the Civil War.

The full history of North Carolina pottery boasts a rich heritage grounded in the pre-historic pottery of Native Americans. Catawba and Cherokee Indians molded thick pots here 2,000 or 3,000 years ago. Later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, German, English and Scotch-Irish immigrants showed off their own diverse techniques to North Carolinian potters, who blended them into their own work. Throughout the centuries, styles across the state have included the Moravians’ red earthenware, Piedmont saltglazes, Catawba Valley ash glaze and individually conceived Mountain ware. Family names connected to the craft in the Randolph and Moore county areas include Craven, Chriscoe, Cole, Luck, McNeill, Owen and Teague. Jacques and Juliana Busbee of Raleigh were instrumental in supporting what became known as the Jugtown pottery style of this region in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At one point there were more than 200 potteries just in central North Carolina’s Seagrove area alone. Making utilitarian pottery declined as refrigeration and mass production methods become commonplace, but the craft lasted longer here than in other states. Northerners, who industrialized more quickly, began using glass and metal containers sooner. Pottery’s strong roots and North Carolinians’ respect for folk art traditions emboldened potters to pass down their skills mano to mano, one generation to the next.

Today, the state’s excellent clay continues to fire potters’ imaginations. No longer a survival tool, pottery is now a modern art form. Admirers finger smooth plates with swirling, decorative glazes, while serious collectors squint at elegant teapots and debate market value.

## The North Carolina Pottery Center

In Seagrove, about 10 miles south of Asheboro, the North Carolina Pottery Center preserves and celebrates the state’s ceramics heritage. Permanent exhibits feature more than 200 pieces of pottery, old and new, with artifacts and photographs that reveal the craft’s diversity, economics and changing technology. Changing theme exhibits explore specific historic traditions and display contemporary studio works. The center’s spacious, attractive buildings amid a grove of oak trees also house educational programs. Staffers hand out free Seagrove maps to help newcomers locate the more than 90 potters there.



*The North Carolina Pottery Center in Seagrove showcases more than 200 pieces of pottery that trace the craft's evolution.*

Visitors leave with a worldly appreciation as well. “There’s a section that shows the universality of pottery,” says Joanna Ruth Marsland, executive director of the center. “For example, we have ancient Chinese and Turkish pieces. No matter where you are in the world, you’re going to find pottery.”

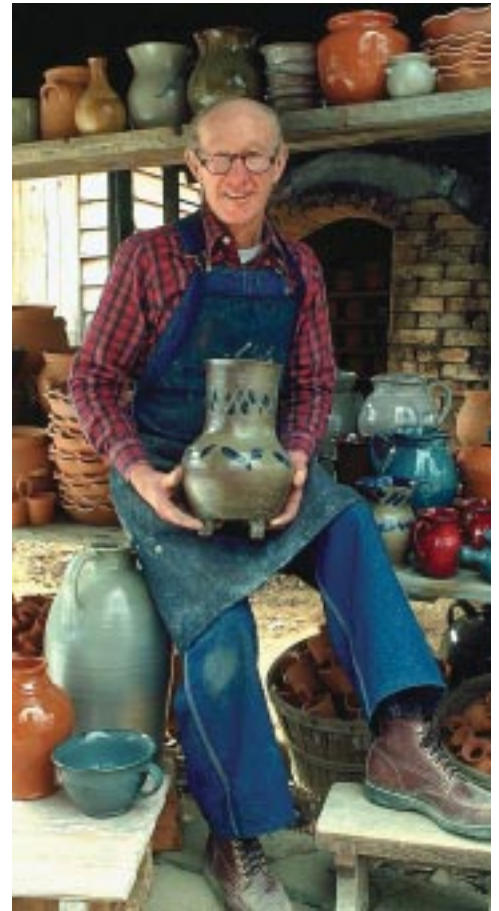
The private, not-for-profit institution opened to the public in 1998, 10 years after a group first began raising money. The center’s fourth annual auction is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, April 26. Entitled “Going, Going, Gone to Pots,” the event’s live auction will feature more than 60 pots, and a silent auction offers more than 120 pots. Ticket cost is \$35 and includes lunch. Tickets may be purchased in advance or at the door. Margaret Maron, mystery novelist and author of “Uncommon Clay,” is mistress of ceremonies. Attendees can meet the potters who created auction items, and proceeds bolster the center’s operating budget. “It’s an entertaining day with wonderful food and beautiful pots, and helps us with our educational programming,” says Marsland.

**North Carolina Pottery Center:** Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$1 for students (K-12). Call (336) 873-8430 or visit [www.ncpotterycenter.com](http://www.ncpotterycenter.com). Seagrove is about 10 miles south of Asheboro.

### The Mint Museum, Charlotte

In Charlotte, the Mint Museum lays claim to the state’s largest collection of historic pottery. Its Bridges Gallery is newly dedicated to ongoing displays of North Carolina pieces. Currently displayed is “Clear, Bright and Beautiful,” which refers to colorful wares made between 1920-1950 for a market economy. New pieces and gallery themes rotate every six months.

The museum is also showing legendary Catawba Valley potter Burlon Craig’s pieces, including milk crocks, birdhouses and the monkey jugs that made him famous. Used to hold whiskey during Prohibition, the jugs sported scary faces to keep small children from prying open their contents. Craig is credited for having helped keep traditional pottery alive in the Catawba Valley by mentoring new potters in its methods.



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**Mark Peters' wood-fired teapot (above) will be auctioned at the North Carolina Pottery Center on April 26. During prohibition, jugs similar to this one (below) held whiskey and featured scary faces to keep children away. An apron-clad Seagrove potter (above right) displays a tall, decorative pot.**



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***This dish from Randolph County dates to 1780-1800.***

Burlon Craig lived in Vale (Lincoln County) and died last year at the age of 88. Considered one of America's great folk potters, his work is also part of the Smithsonian Institute's collection.

**The Mint Museum of Art:** Open Tuesday through Sunday. Admission is \$6 adults, \$5 seniors, \$3 ages 6 – 17 and free for members and 5 and under. Tuesday evenings are free. Call (704) 337-2000 or visit [www.mintmuseum.org](http://www.mintmuseum.org).

### **Southern Highland Craft Guild**

Just outside Asheville, the Folk Art Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway, showcases pottery among its traditional and contemporary crafts, with changing exhibitions in three galleries. The Folk Art Center is operated by the Southern Highland Craft Guild, which represents more than 700 craftspeople in nine southeastern states including North Carolina. From April through December, visitors watch demonstrations and attend free educational events. The center's annual "Clay Day" features ceramic artists demonstrating wheel throwing and coil building. Many participatory events are geared toward children who, like other visitors, like to dig their hands into cold clay. This year's Clay Day, set for June 7, highlights Raku pots.

**Folk Art Center:** Open daily, except on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day. Hours: January through March, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; April through December, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Call (828) 298-7928 or visit [www.southernhighlandguild.org](http://www.southernhighlandguild.org).

### **Catawba Valley Pottery Festival, March 22**

Pottery identification, children's programs, demonstrations, sales and the exhibit "Catawba and Cherokee Pottery Traditions" are scheduled for the Catawba Valley Pottery Festival in Hickory on Saturday, March 22. More than 80 antique dealers and potters are expected. The event, a fundraiser for the Catawba County Historical Association and North Carolina Pottery Center, will be held at the Hickory Metro Convention Center. Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$5 for adults and \$2 for children 12 and under.

A special preview party Friday evening, March 21, offers early buying, food and entertainment. Tickets are \$30. Call (828) 322-3943 or visit [www.catawbahistory.org](http://www.catawbahistory.org). You can also e-mail the Catawba County Historical Association at [inquiry@catawbahistory.org](mailto:inquiry@catawbahistory.org).

### **Sanford Pottery Festival, May 2-4**

The Sanford Pottery Festival is planning to showcase the work of more than 150 potters. Scheduled May 2-4, the event features pottery sales, exhibits, appraisals and demonstrations, along with food, special children's activities and concerts. Fifty other artisans and crafters will also be exhibiting at the festival, sponsored in part by Central EMC, the region's Touchstone Energy cooperative. Last year the event attracted nearly 20,000 visitors. It will be held at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center in Sanford, about 35 minutes southwest of Raleigh. Hours: Saturday 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission is \$6, and covers both Saturday and Sunday. Children under age 6 get in free. Discounts for groups of 15 or more. Free parking. Friday night is a special preview, with \$10 admission. Call (919) 775-9100 or visit [www.sanfordpottery.com](http://www.sanfordpottery.com).



***Visitors examine Turkish pieces at a special event at the North Carolina Pottery Center.***

*"No matter where you are in the world, you are going to find pottery."*

*Joanna Ruth Marsland*