

Survey and Research Report on the R. F. Outen Pottery



[Click Here To See Film Of R. F. Outen At Work.](#)

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as the R. F. Outen Pottery is located at 430 Jefferson Street, Matthews, North Carolina.

2. Name and address of the current owner of the property:

Frank Outen
4000 Forest Lawn Drive
Matthews, NC 28105

3. Representative photographs of the property. This report contains representative photographs of the property.

4. A map depicting the location of the property.

1) The R. F. Outen Pottery is a rare surviving example of a workshop and pottery that produced utilitarian earthenware and stoneware for local use from local clays. This type of industry was common in the Piedmont of North Carolina in the nineteenth century but nearly disappeared as the twentieth century progressed.

2) The R. F. Outen Pottery is important for its association with Rufus F. Outen (1905-1983), one of the last traditionally-trained potters in North Carolina who continued to produce utilitarian ware in the second half of the twentieth century.

3) The R. F. Outen Pottery is significant as a rare surviving example of a twentieth-century workshop and kiln in Mecklenburg County.

4) The R. F. Outen Pottery is the most complete artifact of the pottery industry in Matthews, a town which was a significant producer of pottery for much of the twentieth century.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: The Commission judges that the physical description included in this report demonstrates that the property known as the R. F. Outen Pottery meets this criterion.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply for automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes a designated "historic landmark". The current appraised value of the R. F. Outen Pottery is \$137,000.

10. This report finds that the kiln, interior and exterior of the workshop building, and approximately 1.119 acres of land associated with the R. F. Outen Pottery should be included in landmark designation of the property.

Date of preparation of this report: December 1, 2011

Prepared by: Stewart Gray



Rufus Outen turning in 1968 at the R. F. Outen Pottery Company.

Pottery has been made for millennia in North Carolina. Members of the Catawba Nation made pottery during the Woodland Period. With European settlement, the Piedmont with its abundant clay became the center of pottery production in North Carolina. Lead-glazed earthenware, a relatively fragile and potentially toxic ware, dominated the early North Carolina pottery trade, much of it produced by the Moravians. Only one early-19th-century Mecklenburg County pottery has been documented. William Goodwin recorded an indenture for his apprentice, seven year old Matthew Ormand, in 1802. (Perry: 3, 15)

During the nineteenth century stoneware largely replaced earthenware in North Carolina. Stoneware is vitrified (takes on a very hard, inert, glass-like state) and is thus stronger, more durable, and not porous. Stoneware requires a higher temperature fire (around 2,400 degrees Fahrenheit versus 1,800 for earthenware.) And whereas the clay required for earthenware could be found close to the surface, stoneware clay required deeper excavations. The earliest stoneware in North Carolina was imported from England and New England. But stoneware began to be produced in large numbers in North Carolina during the first half of the nineteenth century. Early North Carolina stoneware is divided into salt glaze and alkaline glaze. Salt glazing requires that salt be poured into the kiln when the kiln has reached its highest temperatures. The extreme heat vaporizes the salt which fuses with the clay forming a hard glaze. Salt glaze production dominated the eastern part of the state (where salt was more abundant) and was concentrated in Moore and Randolph counties. In the Catawba Valley near Vale, Daniel Seagle began producing alkaline glazed pottery in the 1830s. This glaze is made up of wood ash, water, and clay and is applied to the pottery before being fired. Alkaline glazed stoneware dominated the state from Charlotte to the west. Salt or Alkaline glazed, the production of the pottery was virtually the same. Clay was dug by hand. It had to be ground to a usable consistency, which was done with an animal (horse, mule, or oxen) powered mill. The pottery would then be turned on a foot powered wheel, a skill acquired after years of practice that often involved an apprenticeship. The pottery was fired in a groundhog kiln, which was a long low kiln partially dug into the ground. The groundhog kilns replaced the earlier beehive kilns used for earthenware. This locally made stoneware was an invaluable product in the 19th century. In the Piedmont of North Carolina there were no practical or available alternatives to the jars, jugs, crocks, pots and pitchers produced by the local potters. (Perry: 6, 7-8, 14)

Traditional pottery of the North Carolina Piedmont began to decline with the approach of the 20th century. Cheap metal, glass, and other factory-made storage containers hurt the business of the local potters. In the Catawba Valley the Seagle family stopped producing alkaline-glazed pottery in 1892. In the east, the production of salt-glazed utilitarian pottery declined even as the craft of pottery was being revived. In the Seagrove area, outsiders who recognized the inherent beauty of the traditional pottery developed a new market for the pottery and encouraged a switch from the utilitarian work to the production of art pottery. (Zug: 16)

The Outen Family

Potters came into Union County, North Carolina from South Carolina in the mid-nineteenth century. Thomas Gay (1837-1909) arrived in Union County in the 1850s, and likely trained his brother-in-law Nimrod Broom (1842-1912). Broom in turn trained his son's brother-in-law, William Franklin Outen (1871-1947), whose family had moved to Union County from South Carolina around 1860. William F. Outen worked with Nimrod's son "Jug Jim" Broom (1869-1957) in Monroe making salt-glazed stoneware until around 1900. "Jug Jim" continued to operate a shop in Monroe until 1946 and was the last traditional potter in Union County. William F. Outen, moved to South Carolina in the early 1900s and established potteries in Lancaster and Catawba Junction (1915). Outen finally settled in Matthews, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina in 1922 where he established Matthews Pottery. (Zug: 66; Baldwin:139)

Matthews existed in a "ceramic no man's land" (Zug: 197) between the salt glazing tradition of the eastern part of the state and the alkaline glaze tradition of the Catawba Valley. His relative isolation in this "ceramic no man's land" may help explain why William Outen moved away from the salt glaze tradition. It is well documented that North Carolina folk potters were adverse to change. Yet in Matthews it appears that William Outen abandoned the salt glaze and began to employ the Bristol glaze, a glaze developed in England in the first half of the 19th century that gave pottery a white or white-mottled finish. Unlike salt and alkaline, the Bristol glaze required commercially produced components. William Outen combined feldspar, whiting (calcium carbonate), ball clay (kaolinitic sedimentary clay), and zinc and tin oxides to produce his Bristol glaze. It is unclear why William

Outen switched from salt to the Bristol glaze, but it may have been to stay competitive with the factory-made pottery coming out of the North. The Kennedy family, traditional potters in Wilkesboro, adopted the Bristol glaze in the 1920s to compete with the white factory-made pottery coming out of Ohio. (Zug: 196 - 197)

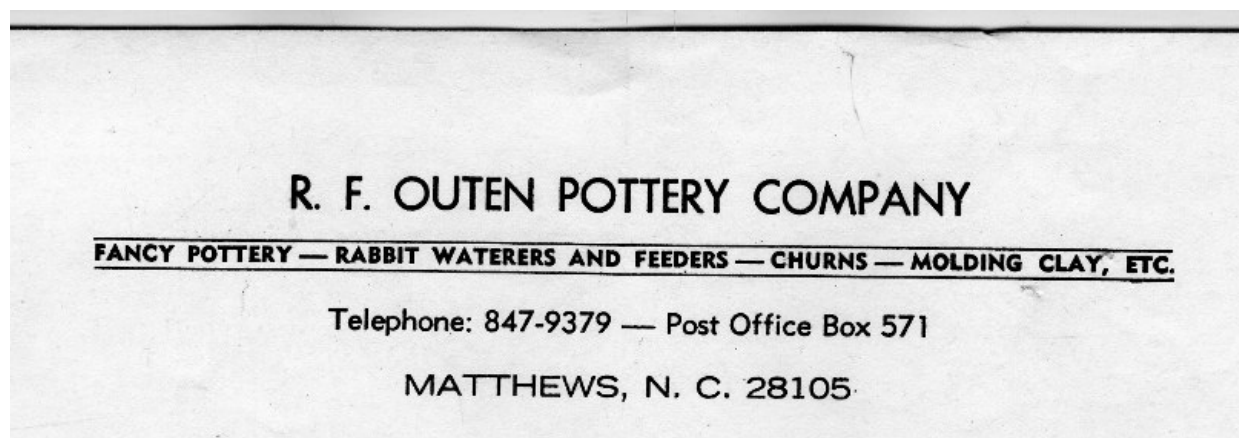
Rufus Franklin Outen



Rufus Outen, wife Louise and daughter Doris ca. 1930 at the Matthews Pottery

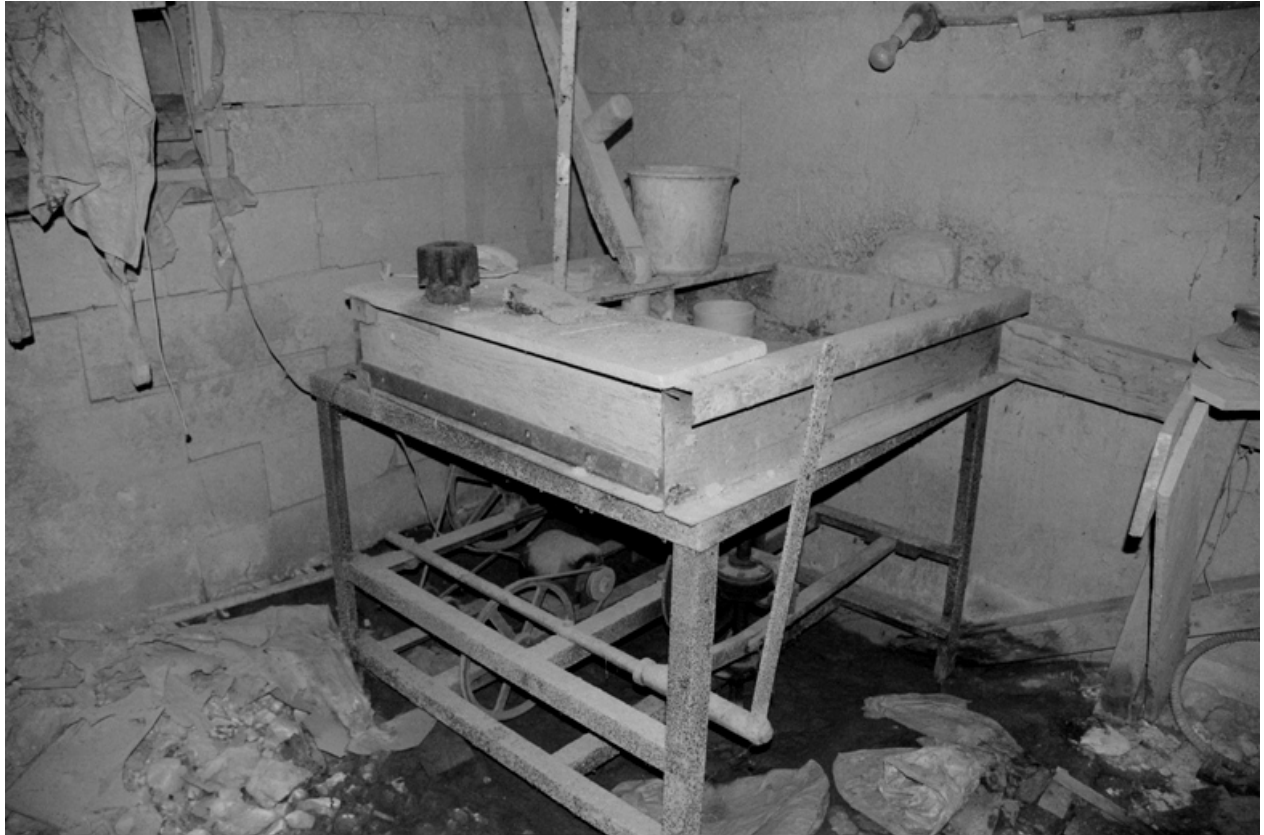
William Outen's son, Rufus Franklin Outen was born in 1905 and learned the traditional pottery trade from his father and from his uncle "Jug Jim" Broom. Rufus Outen probably worked in his father's potteries from an early age and certainly labored in the Matthews Pottery. Perhaps to establish himself as a potter, Rufus Outen moved to Marion Virginia in 1929 to work in a pottery there. His timing was

bad. With the onset of the Great Depression, Outen was forced to come back to the Matthews Pottery. After his return, the Matthews Pottery began to produce machine-stamped flower pots, while Rufus Outen continued to throw pots in the traditional manner. Rufus Outen continued to work at the Matthews Pottery until he opened R. F. Outen Pottery, around 1950. He built his shop on Jefferson Street on the edge of Matthews, next door to a home he constructed in 1947. Rufus Outen built a vaulted brick kiln with help from a mason named Long. The vault was formed with wood framing and was built with several layers of fire brick. The kiln featured six chimneys when built and was fed by fuel oil (heating oil or diesel fuel) and forced air. The process of perfecting the kiln involved trial and error. The burners, the air flow, the fuel flow, and the exhaust draft all had to be modified until the kiln functioned optimally. This process took years, and Rufus Outen's children recall that "months of work" were ruined as Outen tinkered with the kiln design. His patience paid off, and once the kiln was adjusted properly, Rufus Outen lost very few pots in the kiln for the rest of his career. (Interview, Outen, 9-8-11)



While the Matthews Pottery employed ten to fifteen workers, the Outen Pottery was a smaller business with Rufus Outen and one or two part-time helpers. Rufus Outen would make "selling trips," north as far as Wilkesboro, North Carolina and south as far as Greenville, South Carolina. On these selling trips, Outen would visit hardware stores and take orders for churns, crocks, rabbit watering bowls and feeders, pots and pitchers. When Outen had enough orders to fill the kiln, he would return home and begin turning the pieces. Rufus Outen was prolific. He specialized in stoneware churns, and it is claimed that he could turn 100 pieces a day. His nickname among some of the other potters was "Churn Turner." A reporter from the Charlotte News noted

that Outen had produced 300 churn lids the day of their visit. "I don't aim to set the world on fire," said Outen "I work as I like to." (Interview, Outen, 10-11-11; Gummerson, 12-16-68)



Rufus Outen's wheel



Rufus Outen shoveling dried clay into the hammer mill at his shop in 1968.

Clay was dug locally. Rufus Outen and his helpers would shovel the clay into the back of a truck and then unload it at the pottery. The clay needed to be free of rocks, and thus many clay deposits could not be used. The clay would be cleaned and worked by hand until it was ready to be fed into a pug mill. The pug mill extruded clay that was ready to work. At some point, Rufus Outen acquired a hammer mill to process the clay before it would go to the pug mill. A hammer mill could crush rocky deposits in the clay and thus make more clay usable. Before being used in the hammer mill the clay had to dry. A large shed was added to the rear of the workshop where the raw clay could be stored until it had properly dried. After being processed in the hammer mill, water was added to the dry clay and then fed into the pug mill. Once the clay was worked to an appropriate consistency, the helpers would make "balls" of clay that Rufus Outen would turn on a wheel. Once turned, the pieces, known as greenware, would be

carefully placed on drying shelves that literally filled the workshop. His family recalls that their father would turn pieces for approximately one month in order to produce enough pottery to fill the kiln. (Interviews, Outen, 9-8-11, 10-11-11)



Rufus Outen in 1968 with greenware ready to be loaded into the kiln. Pieces shown include a traditional churn and jug. Also shown are rabbit water bowls and feeders, spittoons, and decorative flower pots. Outen is holding a earthenware cooker.



Hammer mill on right. Pug mill center.

The next step for the stoneware was the glaze. In the early years of his business, like his father, Rufus Outen concocted and used a Bristol glaze. In his workshop Rufus Outen built a motorized mixing vat to mix the glaze ingredients. Sometime in the late 1950s, Rufus Outen began to use Albany Slip, a commercially produced glazing compound that gave pottery a deep brown color. Rufus Outen's son, Frank Outen, believes that his father switched because the Albany Slip was simple to use and the finish was popular with the customers. Albany slip came in a bag and was simply mixed in a trough. Each piece would be dipped in the trough to coat the greenware with the glazing compound. The pottery would then be set on temporary shelving to dry, and the workshop would largely fill-up with the glaze-coated-greenware. Once dry, the pieces would be loaded into the kiln. Filling the kiln was an art. Rufus Outen knew exactly where different pieces should be located in the kiln. The temperatures in the kiln varied, and different pieces needed different firing temperatures. The fragile greenware had to be stacked one piece on top of the other. Once the

kiln was filled, Rufus Outen would seal the kiln doors with mortared brick. The firing would begin early in the morning and last a full day. The cool down would last several days. (Chasanoff; Interviews, Outen, 9-8-11, 10-11-11)



Rufus Outen churn glazed with Albany slip.

When the kiln had cooled enough, it would be unloaded directly into the delivery truck. Packing the truck with the finished pieces was planned so that the pieces for the first delivery would be at the top of the load, and the deliverables for the final stop would be at the bottom of the load. For deliveries, Outen would use the same truck that he used to haul clay. A layer of straw was laid on the truck bed, and pieces were set in the straw. Layers of straw were added to cushion the pieces from each other. The entire contents from the kiln would be loaded into a single truckload. A longtime smoker, Outen once lost a load of pottery, as well as a 1960 Chevrolet flatbed truck, in a fire when one of his discarded cigarette butts landed in the dry straw during a delivery trip. (Interviews, Outen, 9-8-11, 10-11-11)

In the 19th century, North Carolina was full of local potteries, but during the 20th century traditional pottery nearly vanished. For most of Rufus Outen's career, he was an anachronism. Most traditional pottery in North Carolina ceased by the end of World War II, just when Rufus Outen was establishing his own pottery in Matthews. Yet Outen found a way to make a living. According to all accounts, he worked very hard. In a 1968 interview Outen is quoted:

It's hard work. But I wouldn't want to do anything else. There is something very satisfying about it. You can be nervous and worried when you start, but it melts away as you work. You use mind and muscles. (Gummerson, 12-16-68)

Outen also adapted to the market. His sales trips through North and South Carolina dictated what he produced. Perhaps the collapse of traditional utilitarian pottery left him a niche to fill. Perhaps the rural economies where he sold continued to demand the utilitarian pottery, such as churns, that he continued to produce. Outen also turned nontraditional items demanded by the market. These included rabbit watering bowls, heavy glazed bowls with sloping side that would allow frozen water to rise up and not crack the vessel. Outen also produced, in addition to stoneware, earthenware strawberry planters, decorative pots and pitchers, and cooking vessels. Outen was quoted as saying "I like making something useful." (Gummerson, 12-16-68) Outen did not toil in obscurity. His exceptionalism was recognized in the 1960s. Local TV personality Betty Feezer featured Outen on her show, and filmed him performing his trade. Also in the 1960s, Outen taught pottery at Winthrop College. (Interviews, Outen, 9-8-11, 10-11-11)

Rufus Outen was also responsible for keeping traditional pottery alive in South Carolina. Outen and Horace Ratteree acquired a pottery in Bethune, Kershaw County, South Carolina in 1959 from Guy Daugherty who had operated it since 1945. Outen and Ratteree hired Otto Brown, a fifth generation potter from Georgia, to turn ware for them. The shop produced mostly un-glazed garden ware, but it also produced stoneware jugs and churns. The South Carolina pottery employed an oil-burning kiln like the kiln at the R. F. Outen Pottery. Outen and Ratteree sold the pottery around 1962. (Baldwin: 142)

Below: Outen in his workshop in 1975



The process of producing traditional pottery is hard work. Around 1975 Rufus Outen fired his last batch of pottery. He continued to produce and sell pottery clay, with his clients including the art departments of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System. After retiring, he began to make deliveries for the Matthews Pottery and hunted clay deposits for the Matthews Pottery and for brick manufactures. In 1976 his wife Louise died. In 1983 he remarried, but later that year died from pneumonia. (Interviews, Outen, 9-8-11, 10-11-11)

Architectural Description

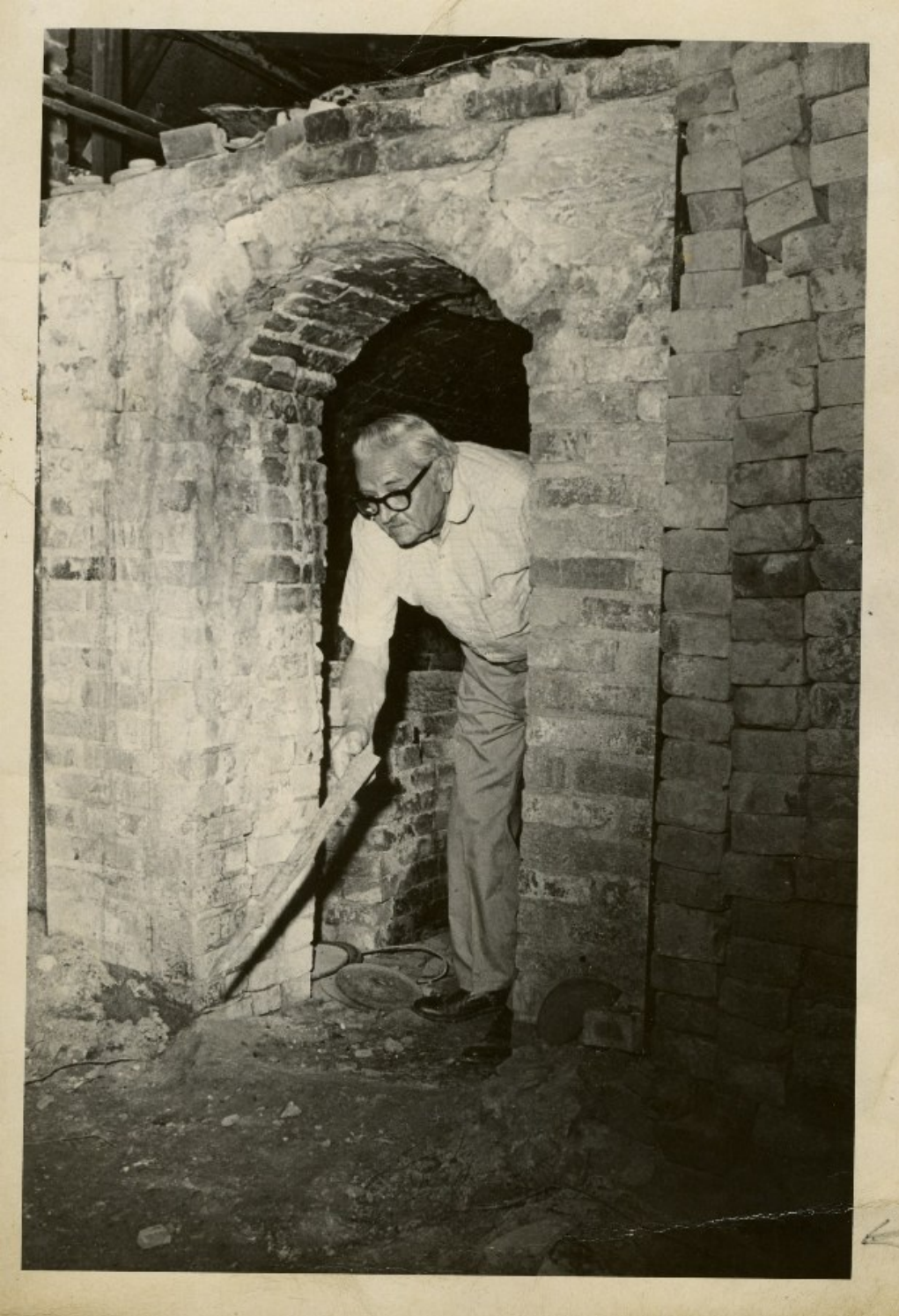


The R. F. Outen Pottery consists of a one-story workshop with extensive shed additions and a detached brick kiln. The buildings are set in a line that runs north-south, and are located on a roughly triangular-shaped 1.47 acre parcel. The pottery is located in the Town of Matthews, but the location at the end of a dead-end residential street retains a distinctly rural character.



Kiln in 1968

The brick kiln is essentially a barrel vault. Segmental-arch door openings are located on the north and south elevations. The door openings were bricked-in each time the kiln was loaded and fired.



Rufus Outen in the kiln in 1975

The kiln originally featured six square brick chimneys, five of which have survived. A framework of steel angle bolted into the brick walls

and connected by threaded steel rods reinforces the structure. The interiors of the kiln and chimneys was laid with high-temperature fire brick, with common brick on the exterior. The kiln is protected by wood-framed shed roof. The roof and wood framing were completely replaced sometime after 2007. The top of the vault is parged with a coating of mortar or other masonry compound. This may indicate that the kiln was once exposed to the elements. The center of the barrel vault is now sagging, but it is unclear if this is long term condition or due to recent deterioration.



The kiln is no longer functioning. It was heated by four separate fuel oil burners located in the kiln along the east wall. The piping for the burners pass through small, low, and evenly spaced arched openings in the east elevation. Piping includes copper fuel lines and larger iron pipes that channeled forced air to the burners. A blower apparatus located on the north elevation is still extant. A two thousand gallon fuel oil tank was once located to the south of the kiln. Fuel was

originally gravity fed. Rufus Outen added a small pump, scavenged from a refrigeration system, to improve fuel delivery.



The workshop is a front-gabled masonry block building. The building is three bay wide, with a doorway centered in the facade. The doorway and window openings are topped with wood lintels. The door and windows are covered with plywood. The gable is covered with siding. The low-pitched roof is covered with asphalt shingles. A power meter is attached to the facade to the right of the doorway.

The east elevation is four bays wide and contains four window openings. Originally the window openings contained a single two-vertical-light sash but are now covered with metal panels. The entire width of the east elevation is sheltered by a low-slope shed addition. The shed roof is supported by eight posts. The posts are a mix of rough-sawn and round timbers. The shed addition shelters building materials and various pieces of pottery equipment including a potter's wheel attached to an early automobile transmission.



Pottery wheel attached to automobile transmission.

The west elevation is four bays wide and is partially below grade. The west elevation is sheltered by a shed addition with a low-slope 5-V metal roof, supported by a row of sawn posts. The shed additions shelters pottery moulds. The asphalt-shingle roof over the principal section of the workshop building is pierced west of the center ridge by a brick flue.



The rear elevation is partially below grade. Five wall openings on the rear elevation served as windows and doors that allow for light and as pass-throughs for materials. The masonry wall is topped with a wooden gable. A large, tall freestanding shed was built adjacent to the rear elevation. The metal shed roof is supported by three rows of round treated poles. Once Rufus Outen acquired a hammer mill to process the clay, the rear shed was needed to shelter piles of clay as they dried to a proper consistency.



The interior of the building has a high degree of integrity. The interior features a dirt floor and contains much of the equipment that was used

when the pottery was in operation. This equipment includes: pug mills, hammer mill, potter's wheel, work table, glaze mixing vat, and glazing vat.

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