

*Main Street elevation of the Bodell house at the corner of Main and Roanoke streets, Blacksburg. The house was owned by David N. Bodell during part of the late 19th century.*

*(from Donna Dunay et al., Blacksburg — Understanding a Virginia Town: Town Architecture [Penn Washington, 1986], p. 136).*

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# “Thou art the Potter”\*

## A History of Bodell Pottery

Dorothy H. Bodell

During the last part of the nineteenth century, a small family enterprise, the Bodell Pottery, was located in Blacksburg, Virginia. The stoneware pottery was molded, fired, and merchandised by David N. Bodell and his two sons, Worth and Ed.<sup>1</sup>

The history of this family and their potting enterprise began with David Neuss/Neutz Bodell (b. 1810), who traveled with his parents and siblings down the Great Wagon Road from Pennsylvania through Maryland to the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The family settled in New Market, Virginia, around 1820.<sup>2</sup>

When David’s older sister Elizabeth married Jacob Kipps<sup>3</sup> from the nearby town of Strasburg (aka Pot Town) and made plans to remove to Mercer County in far southwest Virginia (now West Virginia), David decided to go along. He was young and ready to see new places and things.

It is not known exactly where the Kippses and David lived after their move, but it was not far from the town of Pocahontas, where the family had their pictures made<sup>4</sup> and purchased needed supplies. While they were living in Mercer County, Jacob Kipps taught David the potting trade<sup>5</sup> that Jacob evidently had learned while living in Pot Town.

David married Sophronia Harris of Giles County in 1843; they had a large family of six girls and three boys.<sup>6</sup> The sons were George Worthington, called Worth (b. 1852); William Edgar David, called Ed (b. 1858); and the youngest child, James Knox (b. 1860), who left Blacksburg at an early age, never to return.

The family moved to Blacksburg in 1859, just before the start of the Civil War.<sup>7</sup> They lived in a large brick house on the corner of Main and Roanoke streets.<sup>8</sup> The house had been built by Ed Amiss, but was referred to as the Bodells’ brick mansion<sup>9</sup> because it was so

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\* from the hymn “Have Thine Own Way, Lord!” by Adelaide A. Pollard.



*Blacksburg's Main Street, looking northwest. The Bodell house is in the right foreground. (from Donna Dunay et al., Blacksburg — Understanding a Virginia Town: Town Architecture [Penn Washington, 1986], p. 136).*

large and made of brick, an unusual material for a small town such as Blacksburg. David Bodell operated his first Blacksburg pottery in this building since it was their first home in Blacksburg.

Sometime later, the family moved a couple of blocks up the street into a house located at present-day 202 East Roanoke Street.<sup>10</sup> At a later time the Bodell family moved to a house on the corner of Jackson and Water (now Draper) streets. Their potting sheds were located behind the house<sup>11</sup> next to Stroubles Creek, which ran at the edge of the property. At the back of the property was an old mill where grain was milled. Today that property still exists but with a new facade. Several apartments are inside the building known as “Old Mill Apartments,” and businesses are located at street level.

The kiln where the pottery was fired was located at the site occupied today by the Armory.<sup>12</sup> The kiln was fired by wood hauled by horse and wagon from outlying areas around Blacksburg.

In a newspaper interview in 1957<sup>13</sup>, Ed Bodell (age 99) reported that the clay used to make their pottery “came from the land where the Virginian Tunnel was laid.” The clay was hauled to town by horse and wagon. It was then sifted and water from the creek added to make a workable mixture. Next, the clay was put on a potter’s wheel and formed into many shapes. “I made everything that could be made with clay — from milk vessels to vases. We made small jugs which were given to the Sunday School children to use as money banks. Everything was hand molded.”

In the same interview, Ed said that each vessel was made by hand. “The left hand was put inside and the right hand was outside” to shape the vessel. Any shape could be made this way. Ed also said, “The wheel was turned by kicking a foot pedal. It took 300 kicks to make a crock. I know because I counted them.”



Photographs by Don Poole, Shawsville, Virginia.



The Bodells made all kinds of vessels: crocks of different sizes, jugs (images 1 and 2, p. 21), bowls (image 13, p. 21; image 21, p. 23) pitchers, canning jars (images 15 and 17, p. 21), vases, water pipes (image 12) to use in spring houses, and, in 1893, drainpipes to carry water beneath the streets of Blacksburg. The drainpipe project was not very successful, and the contract was canceled by the town fathers during one of the two terms Ed Bodell served as mayor of Blacksburg.<sup>14</sup>

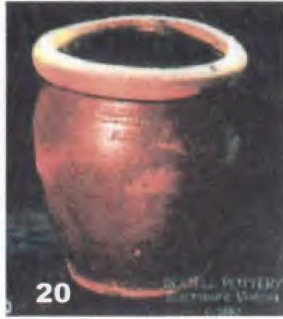
After the molded object was dried, it was fired in a kiln and glazed.<sup>15</sup> The long process of firing in the kiln took at least three days: to heat the kiln, keep it hot for several hours, and then cool it down to remove the pottery. Because this heating was so exacting, odd shapes and distortions sometimes resulted (images 18 and 20, p. 23). Many of the Bodell crocks are not perfectly shaped. This firing process was labor intensive and required constant attention day and night.<sup>16</sup>

The Bodells used at least two different glazes to waterproof their vessels and add decoration. One glaze used lead (image 4, p. 21)<sup>17</sup>, which was not very stable and is now illegal to use. Another glaze was salt, which was much cheaper and easier to use. Handfuls of salt were thrown into the hot kiln where it vaporized and coated the vessel (images 1, 6, 9, 10, p. 21). The resulting colors could be gray, brown, white, or buff and were characterized by a slightly rough orange-peel texture.<sup>18</sup> Many of the extant pieces are of this type. Their glazes and markings were not fancy because the Bodells made them for everyday utilitarian use.

Two examples of unsuccessful cobalt-blue decorations remain in the author's collection (images 16 and 24). The cobalt paint cost more money, took more time to use, and depended on the potter's artistic talents, none of which the Bodells seemed to have had.

Only one known whimsy piece has survived (shown in two views: images 22 and 23F); it is redware decorated with a slip (a liquid glaze) and Sgraffito. The piece is signed David Bodell and contains the date "188—" and "Blacksburg, Va." The tree of life and a heart are also scratched into the glaze.

Not many of the Bodell pottery pieces were ever marked, except for the crocks, which were marked with a broken circle (Logos 1, 2, 3, p. 23) around the quantity mark. Some pieces have survived with the name "Bodell" and "Blacksburg, Va." stamped under the crock mark.



Photographs by Don Poole, Shawsville, Va.



Logo 1



Logo 2

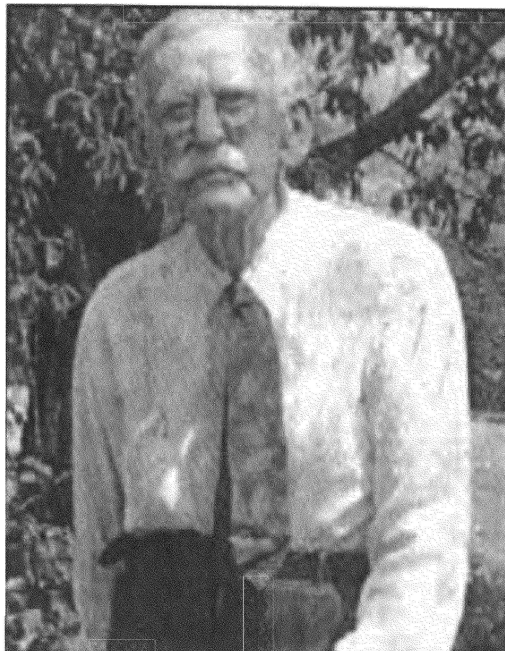


Logo 3



Logo 4

Samples of the logos used by the Bodell potters. Photographs by Don Poole, Shawsville, Virginia



*Ed Bodell, circa 1956.*

After David's death, some pots were marked with "G.W. Bodell and Bro., Blacksburg, Va." (Logo 4, p. 23).

In the 1957 interview, Ed stated, "Some of the pottery was sold locally and some was hauled to Floyd, to West Virginia, and elsewhere."<sup>19</sup>

David Bodell also had a general merchandise store on Main Street, where he and his sons worked. Later, when machine-made stoneware caused the prices to drop, Mr. [Ed] Bodell worked in a store owned by his father. The store — which sold canned goods, candies, etc. and boasted a soda fountain — was located where Louise's Dress Shop was in 1957.<sup>20</sup> (Now, in 2005, it is the site of the "Underground Pub.") Very little pottery was made during this time, but they did not stop potting entirely.

David Bodell died in 1890. In his will, he left the pottery and all his property to his son Worth, who was charged to "take care of the family."<sup>21</sup> By that time the family consisted of Worth's brother Ed and several unmarried sisters. Worth was not an astute businessman, and the business did not prosper under his ownership. One of the spe

cialty items in Worth's store was machine-made stoneware<sup>22</sup>; several existing pieces are of very high quality.

Small amounts of pottery were still being made by Worth and Ed until about the 1920s, when Ed left the store to become a painter. He painted many of the homes in Blacksburg and also painted buildings for Dr. Julian A. Burruss, president of Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute.<sup>23</sup>

Worth is also remembered for making brooms and selling them to local customers. When he died in 1938,<sup>24</sup> the Bodell property was sold, and the potting sheds behind his house on Jackson Street were razed during construction of the Armory. His house was razed in the late 1940s.

Ed Bodell died on March 1, 1959, at the age of 101.<sup>25</sup> With his death, a small family enterprise ended. It remains as a memory preserved in the few pieces owned by family and serious collectors of this long-ago Blacksburg craft.

## Endnotes

1. *Montgomery News Messenger*, May 30, 1957, section D, p. 4.
2. Census records, 1820, 1830, Shenandoah County, Virginia. Tax Records, Shenandoah County, Virginia. Census shows George Bodell, the father of David Bodell.
3. Marriage records, Shenandoah County, Virginia.
4. Family pictures in possession of Dale Bodell Waters of Mechanicsburg, Virginia.
5. Harvey L. Price, "Outlines of Montgomery County Families" (n.p., 1940); in Special Collections, Virginia Tech Libraries. The Kipps family may be found in volume one of the four volumes.
6. Census records, 1860, Montgomery County, Virginia. Obituary, *Montgomery News Messenger*, March 5, 1959, section B, p. 5.
7. Census records, 1860, Montgomery County, Virginia.
8. Donna Dunay et al., *Blacksburg — Understanding a Virginia Town: Town Architecture* (Penn Washington, 1986), p. 136; also see "Old Blacksburg Building is Being Razed," *Radford News Journal*, August 7, 1941; *Roanoke Times*, August 10, 1941.
9. Rosanna Croy Dawson, "The Year of 1893 in the Life of Rosanna Croy Dawson of Blacksburg, Virginia," compiled by D.P. Pack in April 1980 (unpublished booklet), p. 29: "Mond Oct 2 — Edd Cook moved in Bodells brick mansion."
10. In 1939 Mrs. S. A. Wingard wrote a brief unpublished history of Blacksburg that can be found in Special Collections, Virginia Tech Libraries: "History of Blacksburg," p. 7.

11. "The kitchen of this house was located in the basement. A natural spring had been enclosed in a concrete basin and the house had running water." Memories of Donald Bodell.
12. *Montgomery News Messenger*, May 30, 1957, section D, p. 4.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Council Minutes 1877–1895, pages 182, 186, 187, 204. The minutes are located in the office of the clerk of Blacksburg, Virginia. Ed Bodell served two one-year terms as Mayor of Blacksburg, beginning on July 1, 1893, and July 1, 1895.
15. *Montgomery News Messenger*, May 30, 1957, section D, p. 4.
16. Jeannette Lasansky, *Central Pennsylvania Redware Pottery, 1780–1904*, published by Union County Oral Traditions Project, Courthouse, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, 1979 (distributed by Pennsylvania State University Press, 215 Wagner Building, University Park, Penna.).
17. The 1870 Virginia Industry 9th Census (Virginia Tech Microfilm HA682U5, roll 15) shows that David Bodell purchased a large amount of lead for use in his pottery business.
18. Lasansky, *Redware Pottery*.
19. *Montgomery News Messenger*, May 30, 1957, section D, p. 4.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Will of David Bodell, Montgomery County Courthouse records.
22. Letterhead showing that stoneware was a specialty item in the Bodell store, in the possession of Dale Bodell Waters, Mechanicsburg, Virginia.
23. Ledger of Ed Bodell, showing that he had painted certain persons' houses, and several pages showing places painted for Dr. Burruss at the college.
24. Gravestone in Westview Cemetery, Blacksburg, Virginia.
25. Obituary, *Montgomery News Messenger*, March 5, 1959, section B, p. 5.