

Buried Treasure Found at the Trenton City Museum

By Brenda Springsted

During the summer of 2012, the Trenton City Museum exhibited a sampling of plaster molds created by well-known designers, Isaac Broome, William W. Gallimore, Charles R. Owen, and Fred Wilde for the Trent Tile Company.

During the late 19th century, Trent Tile was such a success that it spawned many imitators both locally with Providential and Mueller tiles and farther afield with Beaver Falls (PA) tiles. In 1882, Trent Tile, then known as the Harris Manufacturing Company, was formed to create a patented porcelain spinning ring for industrial weaving machines. Alfred Lawshe had acquired the patent from Mr. Evans of Taunton and hoped to produce the rings commercially. During the first year, as the company was experimenting to perfect the specialized porcelain rings, they also developed a new type of relief tile as an alternate source of income. The 'alto-relievo' style tile was given a special finish, (industry-named 'Trent finished') by gently sandblasting the glazed tiles. The company quickly became a major tile maker, initially with ceramic insets for parlor stoves. They had contracts with 18 regional stove companies by September of 1883

The first Trent tiles were designed in house and then under the artistic direction of Isaac Broome from 1883-1885. Always restless, Broome left to start another company. Most famous for his Baseball Vase and presidential busts for the 1876 Centennial in Philadelphia, Broome has been associated with Washington Pottery, Beaver Falls and his own Providential Tile Works. Two of his molds of cherubs, part of his "seasons" panels, one signed with a "B" and the other with "Broome," were displayed as part of the exhibit.

The artistic direction then went to William W. Gallimore, respected ceramic designer, who, having lost his right arm, shifted his talents to creating and designing busts and tiles. The museum has one signed mold but the cherub tiles are also presumed to be Gallimore's. One mold by Charles R. Owen attests to his designing for Trent as a consultant, if not as an employee. Ruth Winterbotham of Chicago and Wisconsin also designed for Trent. Fred Wilde may have worked for Trent early in his career as some of the vases, perfume bottles and pitcher molds strongly resemble his style and one is signed "FRED."

In 1904, at the St Louis World's Fair, the Trenton Potteries Company used Trent tiles in their exhibit of monumental vases and bathroom fixtures. When the Trent Tile Company received a special gold medal for their display, it had already been shipping large orders all over the world. Alfred Lawshe published a Catalog of Trent Tile patterns in 1905, including the tiles used in the ceramic altar at Trinity Episcopal Church on West State Street.

The old Trent Tile factory, abandoned in 1930 upon the demise of the company, was purchased by the Wenczel Tile Company and, in 1981 as part of a factory expansion, tile molds were found in a hidden sealed room beneath the factory floor. When the floor was breached, the contractor found a small room with built-in shelves. on these shelves were row upon row of tile molds --for fireplaces, for architectural detail, and a few for perfume bottles, pitchers and vases. The Wenczel Company salvaged a number of these plaster molds and in 1984, Wenczel marketing manager Joe Hannawacker donated the molds to the museum, on behalf of the Wenczel Company.

The museum is honored to house the tile molds, a major decorative art resource, so much a part of the nation's architectural history. if you know of tile work in any local or regional home or church that might come from Trent Tile do let the museum know.