

IN THE SOURLANDS

Redware Potteries in the Sourlands

By Caroline Katmann

As anyone familiar with the Sourland region knows, it is not easy to traipse through the woods here. Even so, five brave souls headed out recently on a mild November afternoon in search of the elusive site of the Morgan-Housman Pottery, ca. 1800-1880, where tile and earthenware were manufactured from the diabase clays of the Sourlands. Armed with clippers of various sizes, we plunged into the multiflora rose and Japanese barberry-laden woods, guided by GPS and the archaeological expertise of Dr. Richard Hunter.

Richard Hunter is founder and President of Hunter Research, a historical and archaeological consulting firm based in Trenton. He has worked as an archaeological and historic preservation consultant in the Middle Atlantic region since 1977, serving on the New Jersey Historic Sites Review Board and as Co-President of Preservation New Jersey, Chair of the Hopewell Township Historic Preservation Commission and Chair of the Trenton Downtown Association. Dr. Hunter is currently a trustee of the Trenton Museum Society and the Hopewell Valley Historical Society and also serves as a Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commissioner.

In addition to Dr. Hunter and his wife, Nancy Hunter, our intrepid group consisted of three representatives from the Sourland Conservancy – the executive director, a trustee and a contributing member.

This was the second Sourland Conservancy expedition to a pottery site in the Sourlands led by Dr. Hunter– the Boozer site on Long Hill Road was the first, followed by the recent November hike to the Morgan-Housman site on Montgomery Road. Both are located on county land but private property must be traversed in order to access the sites. What remains of the kilns and buildings that made up the potteries is easily missed by the untrained eye but just as easily identified by Dr. Hunter. Slightly mounded areas turned out to be kilns that had fallen in on themselves and were now covered by soil, leaf litter, bushes and small trees. After kicking away some of the soil, foundation stones and redware bricks appeared in abundance, giving away the true identity of the earthy mounds.

Dr. Hunter recently spoke about the redware pottery industry on Sourland Mountain at the Sourland Conservancy's "Train Station Series" – an annual series of presentations on various Sourland Mountain-inspired topics. Dr. Hunter's research identifies three pottery sites in the Sourlands: Morgan-Housman Pottery, ca. 1800-1880; Boozer Pottery, ca. 1845-1862; and Kintner-Conover Pottery, ca. 1850-1862. All three of these sites are located at the top of the diabase ridge of the Sourlands, surprisingly far from marketing opportunities and transportation! It seems that proximity to clay deposits and fuel (the growth of the redware industry paralleled the development of the lumber industry in the area) was the determining factor governing the locations of the sites, according to Dr. Hunter.

Here are some interesting facts about the Sourland Mountain redware industry, gleaned from Dr. Hunter's research:

- Each pottery site contained three elements: workshop, kilns, and potter's residence.
- Employees lived close by. Middle and lower class whites were the dominant socioeconomic group behind the Sourland Mountain potteries, however, it is reasonable to assume that many black laborers and woodchoppers were employed by the potteries.
- The products of the Sourland potteries were mostly utilitarian and imitative in style. There is no indication of innovative products or production techniques at these potteries. Items such as tiles, drainpipes, bricks, and household and farm vessels were made here.
- The demise of the Sourland Mountain redware industry was brought about by the dominance of the Trenton potteries in the late 1800s and the depletion of the labor force by the Union draft for the Civil War.

Those of us who visited the Boozer and Morgan-Housman potteries emerged from the woods with rekindled appreciation for the Sourlands and its fascinating history and unique character. Although the shards of pottery and pieces of brick uncovered at these pottery sites are of little artistic or monetary value, the interest and excitement they generate about this special place is priceless! One wonders: Should the pottery sites be subjected to future field surveys and excavations? Should signs be posted identifying the locations of the potteries? Should trails be built to allow easier public access to sites like these in the Sourlands? Would the creation of a Sourland Mountain visitor center and museum be a worthwhile project to undertake?

We would love to know what you think about these questions. Caroline Katmann is the Executive Director of the Sourland Conservancy. She can be reached at director@sourland.org.

Read more about the redware potteries of the Sourlands:

Domestic Pottery of the Northeastern United States, 1625-1850, edited by Sarah Peabody Turnbaugh. *Chapter 13: The Demise of Traditional Pottery Manufacture on Sourland Mountain, NJ, during the Industrial Revolution* by Richard Hunter. Academic Press, Inc. 1985.

New Jersey's Sourland Mountain, by T.J. Luce. Sourland Planning Council. 2001.

The Sourland Conservancy is the only organization dedicated solely to the protection of the ecology, historic resources and special character of the Sourland Mountain region. The Conservancy's website is www.sourland.org.

