

## The China Syndrome



Written by Molly English



**Town of clay:** Tom Hunter of the Onondaga Historical Association checks out the display of made-from-clay Syracuse China, which put the Salt City on the map for 140 years. **MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO**

On the fifth floor of the Onondaga Historical Association sit the hopes, dreams and livelihoods of scores of Central New Yorkers. Thousands of pieces of Syracuse China now occupy 30 display cases—with many thousands more in storage—in an exhibit that will resonate with just as many Syracusans.

Until the exhibit is ready for regular viewing, the OHA is making it available at two preview events Wednesday, March 24, and Friday, March 26, from 5 to 8 p.m. both days. The evenings include hors d'oeuvres, refreshments and a tour of the fifth-floor display area. The exhibit is a natural for the OHA, charged with the mission of preserving and displaying Onondaga County's past.



**Plum assignment:** The employees-only Blue Plum line of Syracuse China gets star treatment at the Onondaga Historical Association’s display of the Salt City’s legacy. **MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO**

“Syracuse China is such a huge part of local history,” noted OHA executive director Gregg Tripoli. “It was a company that was active here for almost 140 years and advertised itself as the ambassador from Syracuse to the world at large; and it really was, in many ways.”

Negotiations to acquire the china from Ohio-based Libbey Glass—which purchased and ultimately shut down Syracuse China a year ago—only took three months, but it’s been nearly a year since the goods arrived in six tractor trailers to Montgomery Street where it has been catalogued and prepped for display. “We had our research center up there {on the fifth floor},” said Tom Hunter, assistant director/curator of collections, “so we had to make plans to receive this spatially.” The research center moved to the second floor.

When you check out the exhibit at the OHA, you’ll find the 30 cabinets, also acquired from Syracuse China, with the goods arranged chronologically. Hundreds of crocks and earthenware containers sit atop each cabinet, while below the history of Syracuse China plays out from the beginning, in 1841, when W.H. Farrar started a small pottery business in the town of Geddes. Seventeen years later he moved the business to

Lyncourt, where the Onondaga Pottery Company eventually became Syracuse China.

“We started organizing the exhibit the way that Syracuse China historians had set it up,” Tripoli said, “and then it morphed into what we thought people would like to see. It’s been hard to choose because there is so much in the collection.” So it’s a bit of the greatest hits of Syracuse China, that includes Adelaide Robineau’s work, large plates depicting scenes of winter by Grandma Moses and the floral and avian designs of Harry Aitken.

Nearly every Syracusan knows or is related to someone who worked at Syracuse China, which manufactured spittoons, chamber pots, daily tableware, commemorative plates, railroad and airline china, and fine china that came close to replicating the delicacy of that made in England and France. Former employees will immediately recognize the Blue Plum design, now among the most collectible of Syracuse China creations because it was available only to workers at holiday time; it was never sold. Knowing its sentimental value, OHA staff has decked out an entire dining room table in the stunning deep blue china.

“It’s been our intention to share the collection with the community, especially since the community had such an emotional attachment to Syracuse China,” Tripoli explained. “But also because it’s a very unique way for us to be able to show history, not only local history but American history as well: the transition in the tastes and trends and styles of America over the past 140 years in a medium that is not only exceptionally beautiful but something very practical and something that people can relate to and that we use on a daily basis.”

After this week’s previews of the Syracuse China, it will become part of what Tripoli and Hunter are calling “back-room tours,” led by a docent. “We are transforming the museum from permanent exhibits to more of a revolving space, not only because we have more to see than we once did but we’ll be able to bring more out to view. This will allow people to see our iconic exhibits, but just not all at once.”

Which is all the more reason to check out the Syracuse China exhibit this week, before it becomes part of a rotated display. Tickets cost \$30 and you must reserve your space for the preview events by call 428-1864, Ext. 312.