
Early Potters in Greenbush

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Research conducted during the past few years has documented the presence of active potters in Greenbush, across the Hudson River from Albany, in the late 18th century. The Town of Greenbush was created in 1792, one year after Rensselaer was set apart from Albany County. In 1812 the eastern part of Greenbush was incorporated into the newly formed Town of Sand Lake, and in 1855 the remaining portion of Greenbush was divided into two new towns, North Greenbush and Clinton. The latter was soon named East Greenbush. The part of Greenbush lying along the Hudson River opposite Albany was settled in the early 17th century. In the late 18th century, the community of Bath was established in Greenbush, opposite the north end of the City of Albany. Bath constituted the western terminus of the Eastern Union Turnpike, which was constructed in 1802 eastward through Sand Lake and Berlin over the Taconic Mountains to Williamstown, Massachusetts. Bath was originally so-named because of mineral springs and baths located there, but these declined and the community became a small but active commercial center. Bath-on-the-Hudson (thus named to distinguish it from Bath, Steuben County) was incorporated as a village in 1874, and along with the

communities of East Albany and Greenbush to the south, became the present City of Rensselaer in 1897.

Earthenware clay is abundant in the hillside running from the east of Bath, north along the Hudson River to the City of Troy. While it has not been positively documented, the existence of this readily available clay may have led either Amerindian or 17th century Dutch potters, brick or tile makers, to operate kilns at Greenbush at some early undetermined date. Two 17th and 18th century references to the Dutch name “Calenbacker” refer to locations in Greenbush, prompting a careful analysis of the possible origins and meaning of this name.

“**B**acker” is clearly translated into the word “baker;” earlier translations linking this word to a person’s back are erroneous. The origin of “cale” is less clear, though it appears to have been derived from one of two Dutch words. The first, “caal,” meant bare, lean, poor, bald, lacking, or wanting, but used in combination with “baker” seems to lack meaning. The other possible origin of “cale” (or “kale” as it is sometimes spelled) is the Dutch word for clay, “kley.” With the insertion of an epenthetic vowel “e” (found in Dutch names such as “Watervliet,” when that vowel is pronounced but not spelled out), “kley—e—backer” could easily be read as “kalebacker,” meaning clay-baker or potter. After in-depth discussion of possible origins of this name with Charles Gehring, Translator of Dutch Colonial Manuscripts for the New York State Library, we are in agreement that “clay-baker” is the most logical translation of “calebacker.” Dr. Gehring also suggests there is a slight possibility that the name was derived from “kalk backer,” which meant “lime baker.” The fact that this Dutch name was used in referring to various tribes of Indians in New York State indicates that it was meant to refer to a certain type of occupation of some Indians, not a particular Indian as had been previously suggested.

The word first appears in an April 30, 1640, account by the Dutch traveller David Peterson de Vries, when he referred to a Mohawk sachem he encountered at Tappan as “diese Kallebacker noemde.”¹ The 1857 translation of this as “a very mean fellow” seems highly questionable today. The name appears four times in Berthold Fernow’s translation of New York’s so-called Colonial Manuscripts in documents dating between 1660 and 1664 dealing with the Wappinger and Esopus Indians.² One of these refers to the “common

Wappings, or as they are usually called the ‘Cale backers’ . . .”³ Fernow translated this name as “barebacks,” but Van Laer, in marginal pencil comments on his copy of Volume 13 of the *Documents*, noted that “barebacks” was a “mistranslation of Dutch ‘Calebackers.’”

The name is first used locally in a circa 1653 petition of Elmerhuysen Cleyn to the Patroon, asking for relief from damages done by weather and Indians to his crops planted in Greenbush.⁴ Cleyn referred to his not having access to “Calenbacker’s land across the kill because of the high water of 1648 had destroyed the bridge.” In addition he stated that he had set off this land with palisades “both sideways against the Greenen Bos [Greenbush] and further along the river to the desolate house.” In another place he states that the “Calenbacker’s land” was “largely seeded,” but that birds had eaten his grain and the land “brought forth weeds” instead. It is fairly clear that “Calenbacker’s land” refers to an island in the Hudson River opposite Albany and close to the Greenbush shore, usually known as Van Rensselaer’s Island. Cleyn’s petition indicates that Indians had inhabited the island previous to his farming there, and July 9, 1658, Court testimony in Albany mentions a man accused of taking a “small cask of brandy from the Fort [Albany] to the Indians’ house on the island directly opposite.”⁵ The island appears on two circa 1756 British maps, one in the “Crown Collection” and the other owned by the Huntington Library, and is still labeled in the mid-18th century as “Kale backer’s Island.”⁶ One might logically assume that this island had been inhabited by Mahican Indians in the 17th century, and that these Indians were known as “calebackers” because they had in fact been Amerindin potters.

Court minutes of Rensselaerswyck contain one 17th century reference to “Cale backer’s Kill.” At an “extraordinary session held in Fort Albany, Oct. 29, 1675,” Capt. Volkert Janse Dow was placed in command of the “little old fort, called Cralo, in the Greene Bosh, in which Dirk Teunise [Van Vechten] lives.” He was ordered to have palisades erected around the fort, and “if any of the inhabitants (from the house of Marte Cornelise to Cale backer’s Kill), refuse or decline to help do this,” to take them before the Magistrates.⁷ The house of Marte Cornelise has been identified as standing at that time near the mouth of the Moorderner Kill, north of the present Village of Castleton-on-Hudson, about six miles south of the fort. Van Laer thought that “Cale backer’s Kill” referred to Mill Creek, which empties into the Hudson about a mile north of Fort Crailo, but it seems unlikely that all the inhabitants north of this stream would have been exempt from the Magistrates’ order. The next principal east to

west flowing stream empties into the Hudson about three miles north of Crailo, near the present northern boundary of the City of Rensselaer. Clay deposits have been found in that stream bed and in the surrounding hills, and the site of a later pottery, probably Philip Karner's pottery of the 1760s, was along the south bank of this stream. Though this cannot be further documented, we can logically assume that this stream was the one called "Cale backer's Kill" in the late 17th century and possibly the site of an Amerindin pottery. The significance of actually locating a Mahican pottery site from this period cannot be understated, and this would justify a more exhaustive search of early historical records and professional archaeological investigation.

A structure located near the Hudson River along the south side of this small creek near the present northern limits of Rensselaer shows on a Map of the Manor of Rensselaerwyck, drawn by Jno. R. Bleecker in 1767. The original of this map was destroyed in the 1911 State Capitol fire, but one of two later printed versions of this map shows this structure with no identifying number alongside it. By studying numbers assigned to nearby structures by the process of elimination, this appears to have been numbered "56," identified on one of the printed versions of the map as "the Pottebacker."⁸ There is no evidence that later structures were erected on this site, and the land seems today to be relatively undisturbed. The soil consists of a coarse yellowish gray clay, but no sherds of pottery or related artifacts were discovered in a cursory examination of the site conducted in the spring of 1986. The remnants of old carriage roads belonging to the former William P. Van Rensselaer estate atop the nearby hill, known as "Forbes Manor" and erected in 1839 under the direction of landscape architect Andrew J. Downing, are still visible and do not appear to have greatly altered the original terrain.⁹ The site in general, and these "winding gravelled roads" in particular, are most clearly depicted on an 1853 Map and Profile of the Line of the Troy and Greenbush Railroad.¹⁰ The site is reached by driving and/or walking north of the City of Rensselaer along the right-of-way of the still surviving railroad.

The Albany city records contain an agreement made on November 15, 1768, between the Mayor, Aldermen, and Commonality of Albany and Stephen Van Rensselaer. The Patroon had applied to the English government for exclusive rights of ferryage across the Hudson River in the area of his Manor of Rensselaerswyck, and

while he never received these Letters Patent, he agreed that if these rights were granted, that the City of Albany would be permitted, for a nominal sum, to operate ferries directly opposite the city to Greenbush. The area where the city could operate ferries was bounded, on the west side of the river, on the north by “the mouth of a certain creek commonly known by the name of De Vysele Kill, southward to the house belonging to Hutchin Holland on the south of the City limits.”¹¹ On the east side of the river the city’s rights would have extended “about two miles from the place . . . where Philip Carner the Pot Baker now lives down the River to the house where the Widow Rebecca Lommus now lives . . .” The house of Hutchin Holland was the Van Rensselaer mansion known as Cherry Hill, and the home of Rebecca Lommus was in the Fort Crailo neighborhood of Greenbush. We assume that “De Vysele Kill” was probably some corruption of the “Fossen” or Fox or Third Kill, which then emptied into the Hudson near the foot of Clinton Avenue. This would place the house of Philip Carner opposite the north end of the then corporate limits of the City of Albany, somewhere in the later community known as Bath.

We know relatively little of Philip Carner himself. The surname is Palatine German in origin and is often spelled Karner or Kerner. Philip is believed to have been born circa 1730, either in Germany or the mid-Hudson valley. He was living in this area as early as 1759, when he and wife Maria “Kemerin” appear as sponsors at a baptism in records of the Albany Dutch Reformed Church.¹² Philip was the father of at least ten children, and when he died circa 1800 on his farm located at the eastern boundary of Greenbush, he was survived by a second wife, Margaretha (Coons).

Philip Carner was definitely associated with an existing stone building located in Bath approximately where Carner’s house is described as being located in the Albany City records of 1768 mentioned above. This one and a half story pitched roof stone structure has served both commercial and residential purposes since its purported construction circa 1743. Its stone walls are quite thick, and its timbers are hand-hewn and very large. It contains a secret passageway and a sub-basement and typifies very early, possibly mid-18th century, construction. Standing on the northwest corner of the present Broadway and Tracey Streets in the City of Rensselaer, it appears prominently marked as a “stone house” on a Map of the Line between Hon.

Stephen Van Rensselaer and the Hon. John I. Van Rensselaer, dating from the mid-19th century, found in the Cherry Hill Papers in the New York State Library. The structure was known to have been used as a tannery in the early 1800s, and in fact is referred to as a “tan yard” in a Greenbush road survey of 1799.¹³ A recent excavation to the south and rear of the structure, conducted by the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, uncovered fragments of leather as well as sherds of stoneware and related kiln furniture. These sherds and kiln furniture date from the mid-1800s and would not have been related to Carner’s pottery.

The tannery at this location appears to have been first operated by John W. Woods (1752-1830), who removed from Marlboro, Massachusetts, to Bath by 1790. John was in business with his son, James W. Woods (1773-1845). James Woods married (or took as his mistress) Elizabeth Carner (1776-1854), daughter of the potter Philip Carner. When James Woods drew his will in 1832, he provided for his “wife Elizabeth Carner” and his “only daughter, Sally.”¹⁴ Although no land transactions filed in Rensselaer County record such a transfer, the property apparently passed from Philip Carner to his son-in-law’s father, John W. Woods, sometime during the 1780s.



Philip Carner House located at Broadway and Tracey Streets, Rensselaer, New York.

Philip Carner removed to a location along the eastern boundary of the Town of Greenbush, leasing a 189-acre farm from Stephen Van Rensselaer in 1791. Philip was living here before this lease was

drawn, for he appears at this location on a 1787 tax list for Rensselaerwyck District, his personal and real property each having been assessed at one pound.¹⁵ This farm was bisected by the eastern line of Greenbush, the eastern portion lying in the area known as "Middletown." Philip's house clearly shows on the north side of the highway in the Van Rensselaer Manor survey of 1791, but appears on the south side of the same road on a "Map of Hoosack old and New Road" drawn circa 1790 by Peter J. Bishop, Jr.¹⁶ This discrepancy cannot be explained. Carner's land extended westward from Sand Lake (now known as Crystal Lake) and is located in the present Town of Sand Lake, near the present Averill Park High School. His house seems to have stood near a brick dwelling used now as a store and home by the Perrault family and erected sometime in the early 1800s by Gilbert Westfall. A house inhabited by Westfall, and possibly formerly Philip Carner's, appears on the north side of the highway on the 1802 Map of the Eastern Union Turnpike at "8½ miles" from the Ferry at Bath. Westfall is known to have constructed his home and other local structures from brick he manufactured from locally mined clay. A swamp to the rear of his house contains a clay base, but there is no documentation that Philip Carner produced pottery in his later years at this location. Not knowing precisely where to look for a possible kiln site, excavation here is not practical at present. When Philip Carner drew his will in 1799, he bequeathed the greater part of his real estate to his wife, Margaret, with a portion to his eldest son, Philip.

John Carner, a younger brother of Philip Carner, was also an active potter in Greenbush in the late 18th century. John Carner was born circa 1735, according to one published account, in Germany.¹⁷ On August 12, 1759, he married Susannah "Hawk" (this name is an Anglicized version of the Palatine German surname "Haak" or "Hogg") at the Albany Dutch Reformed Church. John and Philip Carner probably both came to the area in the late 1750s. John died on September 14, 1801, and his wife on March 27, 1806. Both were interred in the first Lutheran Cemetery, located southwest of the current community of West Sand Lake. Gravestones marking their graves, recorded in the early 1900s, have since been destroyed by the land owners. John Carner is listed on the 1787 Rensselaerwyck District tax list as well as his son, Philip, known as Philip Carner "Junior" (the younger) to distinguish him from his older uncle, Philip Carner, the potter.

John Carner leased a 317.5-acre farm from the Patroon on September 21, 1790, in Greenbush. The land was bisected by a road since known as the Best Road and is located approximately four miles southwest of Bath, in the present Town of East Greenbush. In the New York State Library, the Greenbush Survey conducted by John E. Van Alen labels this the land of "JOHN KERNER—alias Pottebacker." The accompanying map shows John Carner's residence, which stood on the south side of Best Road into the 1930s, and also a small creek which traverses the land, known as the "Cherken Kill," "Tierken Kill," or Mill Creek. Clay deposits have reportedly been found beneath a swamp located on the original John Carner property.

A cursory examination of the property conducted by Warren Broderick, Patricia Barbanell, and Paul Huey in 1986, revealed sherds of lead-glazed red earthenware, which were found in the vegetable garden across the road, behind a house constructed in the early 1800s by John Carner Jr. This is the same dwelling shown along with a biographical sketch of the family in Sylvester's *History of Rensselaer County*, when (in 1881) it was owned by a grandson, John C. Carner.¹⁸ While it may be merely coincidental, when John Carner Jr. died in 1834, his inventory filed with Rensselaer County Surrogate's Court lists "2 earthen pots" valued at 50 cents.

There are no further records of kilns in Greenbush until 1806, when there is a strong possibility that George Lent operated a pottery at Bath for a brief period. He is known to have been living at Cornwall in 1800, and by 1810 was established in Troy. But records of the Albany Rural Cemetery state that his daughter, Nancy (Lent) Lewis, who died in 1886 at the age of 80 years, was born in "Bath, N.Y." If this information is correct, we may assume that George Lent worked here briefly as a potter before removing to Troy. No other documentation has been found to substantiate this, however.

Another short-lived pottery existed at Bath in 1861. The Albany City *Directory* for that year lists a Daniel Van Kleeck, potter, with a pottery on White Street and a residence on Seymour Street in Bath. This is the only year that Van Kleeck is listed as being in Bath, but that community was rarely covered in Albany directories. Daniel is found in the 1859 Albany *Directory* as a potter, living at 191 Elm Street. The *New York State Business Directory*, published the same year, lists the firm of "Van Kleeck and Riley" as doing business at some unspecified location in Albany. One may assume that the partners

were Daniel Van Kleeck and James Reiley, a potter from Lansingburgh and Troy, who cannot be located after 1871.

Little is known about Daniel Van Kleeck, but we assume he is the same Daniel Van Kleeck, who appears listed as a potter along with Wendall Van Kleeck in the 1856 directory for Portland, Maine. Van Kleeck's partner in Bath was a man with the surname Halm. A few (mostly undecorated) stoneware jugs have been located (one is in the MacArthur collection), bearing the impressed mark "Halm and Van Kleeck/Bath." Daniel's partner may have been George Halm, who later operated the Halm Art pottery in Sandy Hill (the present Hudson Falls) between 1877 and 1880. He is also probably the same George Halm found in directories in Rochester in 1844-1845 and possibly the "Halm" in the firm of "Brewer and Halm" who operated a pottery in Havana (the present Montour Falls) in 1853.¹⁹ Additional research may positively identify the movements and business ventures of George Halm.

No land records exist indicating that either Halm or Van Kleeck owned real property in Bath; therefore, they probably rented space there. The firm is not listed on the 1863 tax roll for the Town of Greenbush, the first available roll which could be consulted.²⁰ The exact location of their operation cannot be determined, but White Street (the present First Street) is the next north-south running street east of Broadway, where the old stone house of Philip Carner stands. Seymour Street ran parallel to White Street, two blocks to its east. The stoneware sherds and kiln furniture mentioned earlier, excavated behind the old Carner/Woods house, are contemporary with the vessels marked "Halm and Van Kleeck/Bath." These could have been dumped there following the closing or demolition of their 1861 pottery a few blocks to the east.

If stoneware was actually manufactured at the Seymour Street location, Halm and Van Kleeck must have invested considerable time and money in the construction of a kiln and pottery suitable for stoneware production, which apparently lasted for only a year. The construction of a new stoneware factory at this location and especially at this late date seems highly unlikely, even with the discovery of archaeological evidence a few blocks away which may be linked to their pottery. Another plausible explanation of their pottery mark is that Halm and Van Kleeck did not actually manufacture their stoneware but purchased it from a larger, well-established pottery, which impressed it with the Bath mark. The vessels could have actually been produced at Fort Edward, West Troy, or Troy *for* the Bath firm. We must remember that Stephen Pepson's Albany stoneware pro-

duced between 1870 and 1890 was actually manufactured at Fort Edward.²¹ “Halm and Van Kleeck/Bath” vessels are substantial pieces of stoneware, which resemble those produced at larger, mechanized potteries of this period. This is only one of the many mysteries which still surround the potteries of Bath and Greenbush, which may have spanned two centuries. □

Notes

1. David Peterson de Vries, “Voyage from Holland to America A.D. 1632 to 1644,” translated by Henry C. Murphy, *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, Vol. III, 2nd series, Part I (New York: 1857), p. 98; also, de Vries, *Korte Historiae* (1911), pp. 242-243.

2. *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of New York State*, Vol. 13 (Albany: 1881), pp. 151, 167, 364, and 371.

3. “Colonial Documents” (“Colonial Manuscripts”), Vol. 10, Part 3, p. 211, New York State Archives and Records Administration.

4. Van Rensselaer Manor Papers, Box 34, folder 12, Manuscripts & Special Collections, New York State Library.

5. A. J. Van Laer (translator), *Minutes of the Court of Fort Orange and Beverwyck, 1657-1660* (Albany: 1923), vol. 2, p. 135.

6. Crown Collection of Photographs of American Maps, series 1, no. 1, Manuscripts & Special Collections, New York State Library (originals held by the Public Records Office, London); the map in the Henry Huntington Library, San Marino, California, appears to have been derived from the Crown Collection map.

7. A. J. Van Laer (translator), *Minutes of the Court of Albany, Rensselaerswyck and Schenectady, 1668-1680* (Albany: 1916-1932), vol. 2, pp. 39-40.

8. E. B. O’Callaghan, Ed., *The Documentary History of the State of New York* (Albany, 1850), vol. 3, contains this map opposite page 552. When it was again reproduced in N.B. Sylvester’s *History of Rensselaer County, N.Y.* (Philadelphia: 1881), opposite page 27, this unnumbered structure was omitted.

9. Andrew J. Downing, *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (New York: 1841) p. 51.

10. Department of Public Service, Projected Railroad Center Line (Right-of-Way) Maps, #71, New York State Archives and Records Administration.

11. Joel B. Munsell, Ed., *Collections on the History of Albany* (Albany: 1865), vol. 1, pp. 196-197. The original volume 8 of the Albany City Common Council Minutes, covering the years 1746-1772, was lost sometime after Munsell transcribed it.

12. The surname “Kemerin” (the “in” being a Dutch prefix indicating feminine gender) shown in two transcriptions of the original Dutch baptismal ledger, may indeed read “Kernerin” in the original. No known Palatine surname can be connected to “Kemer.”

13. Josephine Fraser, et. al., *Bath on the Hudson* (Rensselaer: 1974), pp. 10-15.

14. The entry in the records of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Wynantskill states that “Sara” was born on September 30, 1798, to James Woods and Elizabeth Carner, “ex concubitu illicito,” the sponsors being “Philip Carner and wife.”

15. New York State Treasurer, Assessment Tax Lists, 1788, #12, New York State Archives and Records Administration.

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16. Cherry Hill Papers, Manuscripts & Special Collections, New York State Library.
 17. Sylvester, *History of Rensselaer County*, p. 359.
 18. Sylvester, *History of Rensselaer County*, between pp. 358-359.
 19. William C. Ketchum, Jr., *Potters and Potteries of New York State, 1650-1900* (Syracuse: 1987), pp. 239-240, 324-328, 536.
 20. Tax Rolls, Rensselaer County Bureau of Finance.
 21. Ketchum, *Potters and Potteries of New York State*, pp. 164-165.