IN DECEMBER 1899, W. Edwin Wells, general manager of the Homer Laughlin China Company in East Liverpool, mused over a letter from Clinton Pierce Case, domestic crockery buyer for F. W. Woolworth in New York City. Anxious to lessen his store’s dependence on foreign manufacturers, Case wanted to build a relationship with a “good American house,” a reliable pottery providing “good goods and plenty of them at fair prices.” Wells (1863–1931) recognized the tremendous potential of dime stores, and he responded by urging Case to visit his factory after the midwinter show of the Associated Glass & Pottery Manufacturers in Pittsburgh. What transpired that January may never be known, as neither potter nor buyer discussed the meeting in subsequent correspondence. One thing is definite: the two men possessed complementary agendas. Wells understood that Case had enormous cash resources at his disposal and knew that few American potteries could meet his demands for quality, quantity, and price. By early 1900, the pottery manager and the dime store buyer were on the way to establishing an alliance that would profit both of their firms into the middle of the twentieth century.¹

Wells’s tenure as Homer Laughlin’s general manager (1899–1930) and his pursuit of the Woolworth account coincided with major transformations in American retailing that affected the pottery industry. By coordinating the flow of household goods through the economy, chain stores enabled shoppers of modest incomes to participate in consumer society. Urban tea stores like the Great
Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company (A&P) gave away pottery and glassware, and dime stores or five-and-tens sold inexpensive tableware, catering to the tastes of a wide range of consumers, from farmwives to mill girls. Together, these distributors made pottery acquisition into an unintimidating process, figuring prominently in the “democratization of things.”

As the retailing revolution unfolded, East Liverpool potteries elbowed each other for business with mass merchandisers, which promised to liberate them from an unpromising future of contention with crockery importers over slim wedges of the jobbing trade. Firms unable to fill large orders at the right prices fell to the wayside, but volume-oriented potteries achieved prominence in the premium and dime store trade. Wells’s courtship of Case fit into this highly successful corporate strategy. Proud to serve budget-conscious consumers, he gave a populist twist to a queenly phrase, emblazoning the motto, “Makers of American Pottery for the American People,” on the company’s promotional literature. If Old World factories looked up the social ladder and back in time for authentication, let it be. Wells found much to admire in the American present. He enjoyed hustling for a share of the vast profits to be made by doing business with mass merchandisers. At his retirement in 1930, Homer Laughlin China Company was the world’s largest pottery; its most important customer was Woolworth, the world’s leading five-and-ten.

As Wells pushed Homer Laughlin to the forefront of the mass market, the imperative of determining what shoppers wanted forced him to revamp longstanding practices for imagining consumers. In this transition, the efforts of Wells to evaluate those practices and to institute new ones proved crucial. Making goods for tea stores like the A&P and five-and-tens like Woolworth tested the mettle of the pottery industry’s established style referees, china decorators who had been trained in Staffordshire to read middlebrow and highbrow tastes. Unwillingly, these men handed the mantle of artistic authority over to consumer liaisons better attuned to popular culture. The new fashion intermediaries included well-traveled factory salesmen and decalcomania importers. At Homer Laughlin, the jobber-turned-salesman George Washington Clarke fully saw his responsibility as involving the study of consumer tastes in faraway places. By the early twentieth century, decalcomania manufacturers acted as surrogate art directors for the East Liverpool potteries. Decal man Rudolph Gaertner, an energetic German ceramist who operated an all-around design office in New York City, provided stylistic recommendations. However, the most important change in design and development came with the ascendancy of the chain store
crockery buyer as primary fashion intermediary. As Wells collaborated on new products with Case and his successor, William F. Newberry, he helped to create inexpensive ceramics that pleased millions of American consumers, providing Woolworth's shoppers with "beauty for a dime."  

Makers of American Pottery for the American People

When the United States Potters' Association held its 1889 convention, prescient managers were alive to the fact that their industry's fate rested in the mass market. Although foreign factories made 95 percent of the ceramics purchased by "the rich," association president Thomas Maddock happily reported that American firms produced most of the pottery used by "the poor and middle classes." Since the centennial, USPA potters in Trenton, New Jersey, had waged a persistent but fruitless war against New York importers for control of the large middlebrow market on the East Coast. More successfully, USPA firms in the new "crockery city" of East Liverpool, Ohio, penetrated two major markets with their cheap, decorated goods: the vast Far West, which completion of the transcontinental railroad had opened, and the low-end East Coast market, which had expanded incrementally with urbanization. By 1889, Trenton's moment as a white-ware center had passed; East Liverpool moved to take its place. "Poor indeed" was the American home that did not own some tableware from the Crockery City.  

When Wells joined Homer Laughlin as bookkeeper that year, the company had struggled for more than a decade to make "the greatest amount of the best ware at the lowest cost" in a tiny, technologically unsophisticated factory. Founded in 1871 as Laughlin Brothers, the pottery became a sole proprietorship in 1877, when Homer purchased Shakespeare's interest. Among the sixteen East Liverpool firms in the USPA, Homer Laughlin ranked sixth in size, as classified by kiln capacity (a long-standing measure of a pottery's productive potential). Encouraged by awards at the 1876 fair, founder Laughlin picked up the gauntlet for aesthetic reform, both within the USPA and in his pottery. Taking inspiration from the Ohio River valley's sublime beauty, his china decorators embellished products with "purely American subjects" in an effort to turn copycat potters on their heads and to overturn the design traditions that encouraged the worship of European styles. At a time when most American factories still labeled their wares with the British seal (a royal lion, a unicorn, and a coat of arms), Laughlin expressed his patriotism with a unique eagle-and-lion trademark.  

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BEAUTY FOR A DIME • 91
Buyers before placing their orders should see the New Shape "Shakespeare," as it is without doubt the finest design ever offered to the American trade. It is having a large sale. I am now prepared to supply to the trade, car-load lots in bulk, which saves the usual cost of packages, and reduces breakage to a minimum. I have special facilities for safely packing in bulk, being the only White Ware Manufacturer in East Liverpool owning a railroad siding at my own works. Price lists, discounts, etc., furnished applicants.

Very respectfully yours.

Homer Laughlin’s lion and eagle logo. Designed in the 1870s, the image of the American eagle devouring the British lion (upper left) reflected Laughlin’s dreams for a prosperous United States pottery industry. Advertisement in *Pottery and Glassware Reporter*, April 22, 1886. Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Smithsonian Institution
If Laughlin's facilities were small, so were his markets. In terms of merchandising, most East Liverpool potteries, including Homer Laughlin, depended on middlemen or jobbers to buy, store, sell, and deliver products to retailers, often on credit. The potteries worked especially hard to build good relations with jobbers in expanding midwestern and western markets. During the late 1870s, T. Rigby & Company, the owner-operator of the Broadway Pottery Works, shipped his goods to jobbers in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin, which paid traveling salesmen to “drum up” business among storekeepers. These drummers toured the countryside by wagon and rail, armed with photographs and chromolithographs of dishes. After china mania midwived the craze for decorated pottery, many sold goods “by sample,” circulating from town to town with enormous sample trunks in tow.  

A pottery heavily tied to wholesalers could encounter problems on the design front. Put simply, the jobbing system eliminated the direct link to shopkeepers, who had direct links to consumers. To bridge this gap, factories hired their own salesmen to evaluate local trade conditions, push the lines to retailers, and keep the managers informed of changes in fashion and taste. The field letters of factory salesmen read like primitive market research reports. In 1888, the Homer Laughlin salesman James C. Shaw circulated through the Southwest, leaving Chicago in early March: “I am paving the way for a good fall trade all over Texas,” he enthusiastically wrote, “and I think we will have our share of it.” In Corsicana, Shaw “struck it lucky” when he found jobber W. M. Tatum unpacking crates from Wallace & Chetwynd. “I had the satisfaction of comparing wares,” Shaw reported on the moss rose decorations. “I always like to do so,” he stroked Laughlin’s ego, “as it does me good as I know we will always come to the top.” In San Antonio, the jobbers snubbed him: “I have tried hard to sell your goods in this place but could not succeed.” Wagner & Chaboh “would not buy at any price”; Newton & Weller were “pleased with the goods” from Wheeling Pottery; and the clerk at Riedel & Legler disdained all American ware. “I don’t like him,” Shaw reported, as “he has a bad look.” After having no success in Fort Worth (“The crockery men of this city seem to have a dislike for your ware”), Shaw looked forward to the trek into New Mexico and Colorado. Puffing up their company’s products, spying on competitors, reporting on truculent jobbers, negotiating orders, interpreting local tastes, and venturing opinions on designs: these tasks kept the salesman-cum-intermediary busy.  

Meanwhile, George Washington Clarke, the proprietor of a wholesale crockery house in Denver that imported English and German china, had joined the
Homer Laughlin roster of jobbers, becoming the “man of the hour” for his genius in consumer mediation. From his first order in 1889, Clarke displayed talents peculiarly suited to the pottery’s aspirations as ceramics conquistador of the West. He was flashy, abrupt, resourceful, artistic, and in the right place at the right time. Once sales confirmed his suspicions that Homer Laughlin goods were just the thing, Clarke successfully lobbied to become the firm’s exclusive western representative. In many respects, his jobber’s experience enabled him to extract market data more effectively than could china decorators or factory salesmen. In his Denver warehouse, Clarke watched country storekeepers handle goods, listened to their praise, and tolerated their “kicks.” When these small-town retailers resisted his sales pitches, the crackerjack salesman heeded the fine points of their condemnations—Homer Laughlin toilet sets had glazes that crazed, its tea sets lacked the handsome motifs like those of Knowles, Taylor & Knowles—and passed them on. More than Shaw, Clarke—by virtue of talent, savvy, and experience—knew how to translate kicks into proposals for technically viable, artistically appealing, and commercially successful products. In the mid-1890s, Clarke pondered the notion of introducing a new shape geared to the western trade, including the burgeoning California market. He designed just such a line, named Golden Gate after the strait connecting the Pacific Ocean to San Francisco Bay. Although details of the design transaction remain unknown, Clarke’s design appeared in the 1896 Homer Laughlin catalogue. Within a year, he received an appointment as the pottery’s sales director.9

Even when he supervised factory salesmen, Clarke continued to value hands-on experience and spent much of his own time drumming up business in boomtowns and port cities, from Chicago to San Francisco. These stints on the road kept his sales skills in top form. On a typical stopover, Clarke traversed a business district to notify retailers of his arrival, laid out samples in a commercial suite at a hotel, and showered visitors with orations on Homer Laughlin’s wonderful chinaware. Sometimes his rooms adjoined those of other pottery salesman, so that customers drifted among them while mulling over selections. Clarke enjoyed friendly shouting matches with rival crockery men, boasting about his products while sneaking glimpses at their goods. If a customer ultimately favored the man next door, Clarke wasted little time on self-pity and instead calculated the dollars lost and the reasons why.10

Just as important as drumming up sales, Clarke scrutinized towns and their inhabitants, studying private and public spaces to advance his understanding of consumption habits. He was a polished taste detective. As a known quantity in
some circuits, Clarke enjoyed private spaces and personal pleasures that were
off limits to ordinary salesmen. Dining at clients’ homes, he took note of the
interior decorating styles, including any distinctive choices in pressed glass,
table linens, floor coverings, and furniture that expressed local tastes. Even the
smallest details—violets in window boxes, green ribbons on bodices, patterns on
silverware—clued Clarke into fads that could be harnessed to puff up goods and
design new lines. If women liked purple blossoms in their front gardens, they
might look favorably on pottery covered with similar flowers. If men wore scar­
let neckties, they might buy fancy shaving mugs decorated with bright red de­
cals. To Clarke, the consummate salesman, no feature of the material world
lacked significance: every piece of minutiae evinced some aspect of taste; every
habit could be interpreted and translated into a motif with commercial value.11

As he canvassed the marketplace, Clarke set down his observations in daily
letters to Laughlin and Wells. This correspondence reveals much about the
information corridors in the retail crockery business, for documents like these
were the primary conduits through which data about consumers’ desires reached
manufacturers. In these shorthand messages, Clarke referred cryptically to stip­
pled gold bands or to lily of the valley motifs, and the managers knew how these
patterns looked, how they were priced, and who in East Liverpool made them.
When he reported that consumers in Salt Lake City found Homer Laughlin’s
teacup in the St. Denis shape too large and that Montanans considered the firm’s
Catalina toilet set inferior to competitors’ designs, his bosses in Ohio got the mes­
sage. Clarke’s letters demonstrate how the consumer feedback loop, essential to
design and innovation, operated in the pottery business.12

Just how much Clarke’s letters influenced the appearance of Homer Laugh­
lin lines depended on several factors, including the probable size of a customer’s
orders. More and more, Laughlin and Wells exercised managerial prerogative to
limit their pottery’s output, exerting restraint in dealing with small-time retail­
ers and jobbers. When one jobber in San Francisco asked Clarke for plates with
a “scroll rather than a sprig design . . . not unlike no. 412, but much smaller,”
managers refused. Even with a batch production setup, it would be sheer folly
“to get up new designs every month or so, or to get up every design that cus­
tomers may happen to think they fancy!” Orders for relatively unique embell­
ishments increasingly fell under the purview of china decorators like Trenton’s
Jesse Dean, a specialist in niche markets. Yet none of this implies managerial
insensitivity to the marketplace. If “every customer on the books” in Montana
demanded simple patterns or if the most important jobber in California repeat-
edly asked for toilet sets in “good strong colors,” Laughlin and Wells did their best to respond. The trick to surviving in the competitive 1890s entailed learning when to say yes and when to say no to requests for design variation.¹³

Yet by the fin de siècle decade, the Homer Laughlin product portfolio and its design and development strategies started to assume their modern contours. Like manufacturers of pressed glass, western potters discovered that a “mine of wealth” awaited “prospectors” with the right “dynamite.” Blasting middlemen out, potteries could dig deep into the mass market and realize significant profits. When Clarke secured orders from Marshall Field & Company, his bosses bent over backward to accommodate Chicago’s leading department store. As American glass factories had discovered, prestige came with the Field’s account. The store’s china department was so stupendous that Philadelphia’s John Wanamaker sent spies to take notes. The Field account also signaled a major triumph against New York crockery men, who had so long dominated the department store trade. This victory was peculiar to the West however; on the East Coast, the powerful propaganda machines of importers like L. Straus & Sons had prejudiced retail buyers against American wares. Homer Laughlin and other East Liverpool firms searched for a different entry point into the mass market; some chose to expand their client base in the premium, or scheme, goods trade, with its enormous orders from gift-giving businesses.¹⁴

The gift scheme dated to the 1870s, when tea stores like the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company pioneered the practice of giving away premiums with their products. These stores sold pantry goods at elevated prices and, to encourage shoppers to return, issued coupons or tickets, which consumers collected and then redeemed for household goods. Aware that women comprised nine-tenths of their customers, managers looked for giveaways with feminine appeal. By the early 1880s, “every red front tea store in the country” brimmed with cheap cutlery, pictures, and kitchen gadgets, as well as glassware and crockery, which women most favored.¹⁵

Tea stores publicized their gift system with chromolithographic advertising cards, which women collected, talked about in their parlors, and pasted in enormous keepsake scrapbooks. Trade cards targeted local audiences through racial, ethnic, and class references and biases. In the textile city of Lowell, J. Buckley’s Acme Tea Company appealed to the racial prejudices of working-class consumers with pictures of an African American farmer in embarrassing situations. In New York City, the A&P targeted middle-class women by using American Colonial Revival motifs depicting elegant living. The backs of the cards featured
descriptions of the tea store's products, prices, and gifts. Through trade card advertising, tea stores trained consumers to expect more from retailers than staple items. Premiums became a much-anticipated element of the shopping experience.16

The scheme-ware business took off during the 1890s, when consumers suffering from the economic depression welcomed the prospect of getting small household goods for "nothing." The success of tea stores with ceramic giveaways led other businesses to opt for cheap, showy, and durable pottery as enticements. By 1901, consumers who bought soap, baking powder, cigars, cereal, newspapers, theater and music hall tickets, shoes, books, and beer could anticipate receiving dishes with their purchases. Even that bastion of middle-class respectability, the Ladies' Home Journal, offered dinnerware premiums to subscribers. As they learned to take gifts for granted, shoppers grew impatient with stores that reneged on reliability, quality, and quantity. One coffee and tea dealer, Hartford's Lincoln, Seyms & Company, explained how the gift system
could backfire: "A woman comes into a retail store and buys a pound of our coffee, and she gets with it a cup and saucer. She comes in again and buys another and so on, until she has three cups and saucers. The next time she comes in the place, the dealer has ordered a different kind, and she can get no more of the first. You can see very readily how the woman would be annoyed, as she originally started in with the idea of getting a set to match." To avoid confrontations and ensure repeat purchases, tea stores had to secure dependable shipments of these premiums. Some large distributors integrated backward into pottery production. In 1901, the Larkin Soap Manufacturing Company, which used giveaways in the mail-order soap business, opened a pottery close to its Buffalo suds factory. With Larkin, women like Sarah M. Peters of Schuylkill Falls, Pennsyl-
vania, sponsored soap-selling parties and earned a chest and a sewing cabinet, which she picked up at the Philadelphia redemption center. However, most premium vendors had little time, interest, and capital to invest in manufacturing. They needed established potteries to make the small items—cups, saucers, bowls, shakers—that fit in food packages or on crowded store shelves. The pottery that secured the business of a large scheme customer like Chicago’s American Cereal Company, which packaged Quaker Oats, received substantial orders. Still, only the largest, most up-to-date factories could rise to the challenge of the fast and ruthless scheme-goods trade.¹⁷

The acknowledged leader in the scheme-goods business was the Sebring family, which personified the rags-to-riches myth of Horatio Alger’s novels. Inspired by consumers’ enthusiasm over giveaways in their small East Liverpool grocery store, the seven Sebring brothers—described by the Dun credit agency as “pushing sort of men”—switched to pottery manufacturing in 1887. To readers versed in crockery lingo, their trade journal advertisements for “bulk car lots” signaled a pledge to high volume, low prices, simple decorations, and quick deliveries—every scheme user’s dream. Premium vendors responded so enthusiastically that, by the Great War, the Sebrings controlled an empire of more than a dozen scheme factories. In part, the family’s unrivaled success stemmed from clan leader Frank A. Sebring’s refusal “to be anything but modern.” In his eyes, being a modern potter simply meant stretching the limits of the batch production system to meet the needs of the most up-to-date mass merchandisers.¹⁸

From the depressed 1890s through the early 1900s, premium orders sustained many East Liverpool potteries. Scheme-ware distributors, caring little if their giveaways compared favorably to dishes actually purchased by the housewife, pressured scheme-ware factories to compromise quality in favor of high volume and low prices. Running at a frenzied pace, potteries expected flaws on some 25 to 40 percent of their output; decorating shops covered the ugliest of these defects with printed and filled motifs, gilding, airbrushing, and decalcomania. Horrified, some members of the USPA’s Art & Design Committee condemned scheme decorations as the epitome of “crudity, flashiness, and cheapness.”¹⁹

Judgments about quality and taste aside, the real problem with the scheme-ware business lay in the unpredictable shifts in demand. When importers captured the “great cereal schemes” for 1903, the USPA estimated a loss of a million dollars, or 7 percent of members’ annual sales. A year earlier, the Union Pacific Tea Company had deserted Homer Laughlin for a foreign supplier after
finding Laughlin's salad bowl prices a "trifle too high." Refusing to tolerate such erratic conditions, resourceful East Liverpool potters diversified their customer portfolios. Survival depended on strengthening ties to large regional jobbers and on building new accounts with scheme-ware users, department stores, mail-order houses, and five-and-tens. This strategy worked beautifully for Homer Laughlin. The fast-moving scheme-ware business covered manufacturing costs; sales to other mass merchandisers provided profits.20

Mass retailers placed unprecedented demands on East Liverpool's quantity-production factories. Every day, the mail delivered messages from buyers demanding that managers give priority to their orders, and buyers for scheme ware were the most demanding. The representative of the American Cereal Company pressured managers at Homer Laughlin to ship him four thousand dozen decorated bowls a week for use in Quaker Oats promotions. The buyer for Union Pacific Tea Company commanded Wells to "fill . . . orders immediately" so the company could meet the demand for premiums, which it had created through "extensive advertising." Mail-order houses joined the chorus. P.A. Murkland, crockery and glass buyer for Sears, Roebuck & Company, begged Wells for a freight car of Pink Rose dinner sets to fill orders that poured in following a mail advertising campaign. Dime store men also chimed in. The assistant buyer at S. H. Kress & Company needed some showy loss leaders for the gala opening of his new store in Knoxville, Tennessee. Daily correspondence always brought new challenges as big crockery customers chanted, more, more, cheaper, cheaper.21

Pottery executives tackled changing market conditions in several ways, all characteristic of nineteenth-century batch manufacturers. Collectively, they continued to embrace associationism as a control mechanism. Through the USPA, proprietors attempted to regulate associationism as a control mechanism. Through the USPA, proprietors attempted to regulate markets and prices by negotiating for favorable shipping rates, bargaining with organized labor over wages, creating standard sizes and prices, and lobbying for higher tariffs. At the level of the firm, some coped by speeding up production, others by expanding old factories or building new ones—sometimes deserting East Liverpool for greener pastures. Between 1898 and 1903, more than a dozen companies constructed large, modern facilities in nearby Ohio towns: Carrollton, East Palestine, Lisbon, Minerva, Salem, Salineville, Sebring, and Wellsville. The expanded pottery district included towns in western Pennsylvania and the panhandle of West Virginia. Between 1901 and 1914, more than two-thirds of American tableware would come from these factories.22
Starting in the late 1890s, managers at Homer Laughlin aggressively pursued many of these firm-level tactics. Laughlin and Wells incorporated the Homer Laughlin China Company in 1896; a year later, the Pittsburgh investor Louis I. Aaron (1840–1919) and his sons, Marcus (1869–1954) and Charles I. (1872–1947), bought a large block of stock. Wells became general manager in 1899, Laughlin gradually withdrew his capital to invest in Los Angeles real estate, and the Aarons assumed top slots. The new executives began refurbishing old facilities and erecting new plants in Crockery City’s growth area, the East End, so that Homer Laughlin became America’s largest pottery manufacturer in 1901. Next, Wells and the Aarons pooled their capital, incorporating a Homer Laughlin subsidiary, North American Manufacturing Company (NAMC), whose wholly owned companies built the town of Newell, West Virginia, across the Ohio River from East Liverpool. At Newell, NAMC constructed a village for workers and factories for Homer Laughlin and the Edwin M. Knowles China Company, another firm partially owned by the Aarons. A suspension bridge across the Ohio River and streetcar lines operated by NAMC firms connected Newell to East Liverpool. Completed in 1906, Homer Laughlin’s Newell facility, Plant No. 4, was reputed to be the most up-to-date pottery in the world.23

In 1899, the general manager, Wells, made his first important executive decision about design, hiring Arthur Mountford (1850–1917) as the firm’s full-time art director. Mountford’s impressive credentials included a Staffordshire apprenticeship, training at the Hanley School of Art, and experience in English and American factories. After arriving in Trenton in 1888, Mountford had worked as chief decorator for Burroughs & Mountford’s Eagle Pottery, operated by his brother. New Jersey ceramists revered Mountford as an Old World craftsman who knew all the secrets of the china-decorating trade. Mountford expected a high degree of autonomy at Homer Laughlin, as befit his ability and experience, but he soon discovered that the reality was otherwise. Wells solicited the art director’s opinions on products, authorized him to supervise modelers and decorators, and charged him with procuring decals from Staffordshire. However, when Wells established a new design committee to oversee the creation of shapes and decorations, the members included managers like Clarke but not Mountford. Times had changed, and pottery executives expected practical men to listen and obey.24

Soon after Mountford’s arrival, conflict broke out between the new art director and salesman extraordinaire Clarke. Clarke’s achievements in building up the western trade had earned him a seat of honor at the firm. With a flair for design,
Clarke loved nothing better than to plan new shapes and patterns and to share those ideas. The salesman's aesthetic excursions infuriated Mountford, who saw them as threats to his artisanal authority and to the entire Staffordshire system. He refused to cooperate with Wells and the design committee, adopting an especially obdurate posture toward Clarke. The sales chief retaliated; he characterized Mountford as a ne'er-do-well, subjecting the art director to ridicule in letters to Wells. If the Englishman lacked inspiration, contended Clarke, he should “spend some afternoon in Pittsburgh,” browsing through the shopping district. There, he would find stores filled with “a number of most excellent treatments by Tatler,” one of Trenton’s leading china decorators, “including a sort of yellow pansy, which he should be able to reproduce.” Wells came to share Clarke’s irritation with the art director: “I have been after him constantly for three weeks” to create a new rose wreath motif, and he “finally started to work on it!” Cognizant of the rarity of practical men like Mountford, Wells tolerated him for his technical expertise. Hostilities continued to rage for years. Clarke eventually rose to a vice presidency at Homer Laughlin, but Mountford left in 1909, accepting a position with the small Edwin Bennett Pottery in Baltimore. Clarke’s rise, Mountford’s fall: representing flip sides of a coin, these men’s fortunes underscored larger transformations in an industry in flux. 25

Welcome to the Five-and-Ten

As mass retailers bought more and more Homer Laughlin products, men who spent their days in offices far from East Liverpool extended their reach into design practice. Unlike Mountford, these men knew little about the inner workings of dust-filled potteries. In many respects, they shared Clarke’s experience and outlook. Their apprenticeships had been served in the stockrooms of country stores, at the counters of urban emporiums, and on the road with sample trunks. These men were the specialized agents of the nation’s new shopkeepers, and the subject of their expertise was the American consumer.

By 1900, a plethora of home furnishings, accessories, and equipment poured out of the nation’s batch production factories and workshops: furniture, carpets, draperies, lamps, stoves, bric-a-brac, glassware, pottery, and more. Wherever shoppers looked, they found retail stores overflowing with enticing goods: specialty shops, general stores, home furnishings emporiums, hardware stores, department stores, gift tea stores, and dime stores. Among these retailers, five-and-tens like Woolworth most effectively extended consumer society to within
the reach of the lower classes. Adapting many of the cost-cutting principles perfected by the railroads and the steel industry, the dime store pioneer Frank W. Woolworth so reduced retail prices for ordinary nonperishable housewares that even factory workers with modest earnings could indulge in a few luxuries. With a mass audience in mind, he eliminated the wholesaler, eschewed the extension of credit, carried nothing that sold for more than a dime, tagged all his goods with fixed, nonnegotiable prices, and embraced a location-is-everything strategy. Refusing to do business in small communities, Woolworth opened stores on the “Main Streets” of good-sized cities, choosing sites with the densest sidewalk traffic. By the turn of the century, Woolworth’s five-and-tens counted among urban America’s landmark retailing institutions.26

With good reason, early twentieth-century observers noted that five-and-tens owed their livelihoods to “the woman with a shawl”—the recent immigrant who had not yet been Americanized. When crockery buyer Clinton Pierce Case contacted Wells in 1899, Woolworth already operated more than fifty “strictly 5 & 10 cent stores” in carefully selected urban locations in the industrial belt that spread across the New England and Mid-Atlantic states. In Pennsylvania alone, one of the nation’s leading industrial states, the chain owned stores in all the major cities and market towns: Allentown, Bethlehem, Harrisburg, Lancaster, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Reading. New York City’s first Woolworth’s opened in 1896 at 259 Sixth Avenue, close to elite department stores like B. Altman, Stern Brothers, and Bonwit Teller, but rarely attracted “upper crusters” searching for bargains. Primarily, it drew shoppers from the swarms of working people who labored nearby or who walked across town to run errands. “Foreigners as a class go to the cheaper class department store and to the 5 and 10 cent stores for everything,” sniffed a trade journalist in Hardware Age. “These stores demand cash and if it were not for their foreign trade, they could not exist in most communities.”27

Woolworth’s investment in the rising tide of urbanization augured well for a volume-oriented pottery. The urban character of five-and-tens appealed to Wells, who, like Frank Woolworth, fixed his eyes on the pocketbooks of penny-wise working people. The European immigrants and rural Americans who populated the nation’s growing cities were a ready market for inexpensive household goods. After witnessing tea stores introducing china and glass to “thousands of families who might not otherwise have discovered these luxuries,” Wells suspected that dime stores might extend pottery consumption to even greater numbers of people. Indeed, the five-and-ten’s facade seemed to call out to the “shawl
The busiest Woolworth store in the country, 1911. This five-and-ten operated in the shadow of the U.S. Steel works in Homestead, Pennsylvania, and stocked Homer Laughlin's inexpensive pottery. Homer Laughlin China Company

trade.” Bearing the founder's name, bright red-and-gold signs—once used exclusively by tea stores—hung across display windows filled with judiciously arranged merchandise. Unlike department store display artists, who mounted theatrical, thematic, and surreal exhibits aimed to stimulate shoppers' fantasies, Woolworth window dressers created tidy, repetitive arrangements that emphasized their store's affinity with quantity production and the real accessibility of abundance. While department stores tempted and intimated, dime stores beckoned and delivered. Created for eye-level viewing, a Woolworth window encouraged pedestrians to stop, look, study the goods, think about the clearly marked prices, and go inside, where beautiful and affordable goods abounded. Among all the products in the dime store, crockery had the visual and symbolic properties that made it ideal for window displays. To the shawl trade, no objects better epitomized American respectability than pretty dishes, the things that ladies kept in their china cabinets. 28

At the time that Case contacted Wells, retailing operated both as an institution for coordinating the flow of goods through the economy and as a vehicle for imagining consumers. Charged with interpreting demand, retail buyers had to
distinguish the solid components of taste, such as quality intolerance and decorative preference, from its ephemeral elements, including whims for odd colors. Before the advent of formal market research, buyers used their wits to develop an understanding of consumers’ material desires. If they were to stock goods that would sell quickly on tight margins, Woolworth buyers had to understand Woolworth shoppers. They took this responsibility seriously, for the five-and-ten’s survival and their own fortunes hinged on their success in distinguishing fast-selling goods from potential duds.

The store’s first crockery buyer, Case, enlarged his knowledge of dime store shoppers in several ways. First and foremost, he assimilated a good deal from his urban environment, much as Clarke had studied his western circuit. At 280 Broadway, Woolworth’s executive offices stood in the heart of New York’s major commercial district, where fashion was the name of the game. On Frank Woolworth’s orders, people-watching became mandatory among buyers. Like other New Yorkers, Case loved to window-shop, and he often spent hours roaming Manhattan’s retailing districts. Pretending to be an ordinary consumer, he studied the sumptuous windows on Ladies’ Mile, where large department stores like Lord & Taylor vied for women’s dollars. Out of the corner of his eye, Case sized up passersby as they looked. When crowds gathered around an especially “live” window, he joined the hordes, scrutinizing the dress, manners, and accents of people as they ogled the goods. Inside the Woolworth stores on Third Avenue in New York and on Fulton Street in Brooklyn, he studied shoppers as they browsed, handled the merchandise, mulled over choices, and finally bought the goods. He listened to shoppers’ remarks about a store’s layout, appearance, and stock. No detail seemed insignificant. Based on his observations, Case formulated a partial vision of Woolworth shoppers’ preferences in his mind’s eye. He drew on these fragmentary images when collaborating with manufacturers to design new products.29

To further his knowledge of consumers, Case also relied on feedback from Woolworth store managers, who understood the tastes of their communities. Woolworth often selected store managers from among local Anglo-American residents, who, in turn, hired salesgirls fluent in the appropriate foreign language as well as English. While ethnicity may have been a stumbling block in some instances, French Canadians in Lowell and Slavs in Pittsburgh learned to feel at ease with their Woolworth managers. Local shoppers trusted him to provide reliable merchandise, from wooden spoons to woolen kerchiefs, that would not break, wear out, or go out of style too soon. In his daily routine, a Woolworth
manager scanned the selling floor, watching consumers handle, talk about, and buy goods. He listened to shoppers' concerns about prettiness, pricing, and performance, even if it meant working through a translator or using pantomime. Keeping communications channels open helped a manager to select products for Case's seasonal circulars and to conduct market research for the New York office. When planning new pottery lines, Case sent factory samples to store managers, who solicited customers' opinions on these patterns-in-progress. Involving consumers in the development process furthered goodwill, although such consultations occurred only a few times a year. More typically, managers shared market data with Case in routine letters to New York. When a particular line of Homer Laughlin china tickled shoppers' fancies, the manager in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, reported that the pattern was "going some" or "selling great." If consumers complained about a shape, form, or decoration, managers also passed this on, by letter or in person.30

Case encouraged managers to visit Woolworth headquarters, finding time in his busy schedule to meet with them. Throughout the year, Case kept abreast of regional and local variations in taste by studying stores' monthly sales reports and manufacturers' shipping statistics so that, when a local manager appeared at the door, Case already knew much about that store's crockery department. Case pressed the manager to elaborate on letters and statistical summaries and encouraged him to handle samples and to speculate on how his customers might receive the new lines. Over the course of an hour's chat, Case artfully extracted a wealth of information about shoppers' preferences for colors, shapes, and decorations. Although the mechanisms had not changed since Clarke's heyday, the responsibility for imagining consumers had passed to the crockery buyer and, in part, to his assistants, the store managers.31

Committed to giving consumers the "most at least cost," dime store buyers like Woolworth's Case looked for products that met strict criteria. Whether dishes, dolls, or dust mops, a store's stock had to be of good quality, to sell at a price lower than the competition's, and to make a profit. By no means did buyers purchase shoddy products to foist on unwitting customers, for indignant shoppers, disappointed with "bargains," would take their cash to competing five-and-tens, hardware stores, or speciality shops. "Customers will not bring goods back when they are not just right," explained one dime store crockery man in 1914, and "we simply lose trade when we put these goods out." Neither could buyers impose highbrow tastes on the purchasing public. None lasted in Woolworth's organization by trying to remake shoppers in the images of socialites from Park Avenue.
or suburbanites from New Jersey. Without question, crockery buyers brought their own aesthetic values to bear on their product choices, but decades of experience in mulling over the tastes of different groups and distant places modulated those preferences. In the dime store trade, the permeable boundaries between manufacturers, retailers, and consumers allowed the voices of potential pottery purchasers to resound in Homer Laughlin offices and factories. Consumers, in essence, spoke through the mouths of Woolworth's crockery buyers, the pottery industry's latest fashion intermediaries.32

Decal Aesthetics

Rudy is here. Now we can get some new patterns!
—Pottery managers' chant, East Liverpool

Like other big-time crockery buyers, Case realized that pottery covered with inexpensive decal decorations offered the best avenue to satisfying the tastes of "the poorer classes," who frequented five-and-tens during the early twentieth century. If china mania had stimulated technical change and the rise of one-step pottery decorations in the 1880s, the end result was the adoption of decalcomania as an alternative to the more labor-intensive process of printing and filling in. Perfected by English ceramists during the 1890s, decals soon appeared on most East Liverpool products. Bold, colorful, and eye-catching, decal pottery looked beautiful in the Woolworth window displays, designed to lure pedestrians, bicyclists, and trolley riders into the store.33

The heightened demand for decals had major ramifications for design practice and the definition of aesthetic skill within the American pottery industry. During the 1900s, some potteries tried to produce decalcomania only to discover, like Trenton decorators before them, that decal manufacturing required knowledge beyond their purview. They turned to decal importers like Palm, Fechteler & Company, Palm Brothers, and Rudolph Gaertner to obtain sheets of decals from specialty printers overseas. Little by little, decal men like "Rudy" Gaertner assumed the technical and artistic responsibilities once shouldered by practical Staffordshire men like Jesse Dean and Arthur Mountford. "Our decal manufacturers," reported the USPA's Art & Design Committee, "have taken the position of art directors to our potteries." Crockery buyers, in particular, appreciated the decal man's enthusiasm as a welcome respite from the sometimes sluggish East Liverpool potteries. When J. J. Parkhurst of Kress asked Gaertner to create some
conventional border patterns,” the decal man quickly responded. When Case pressed Wells for a “new bright pattern” of small flowers to replace the fading “extreme fashion of large flowers,” Gaertner speedily provided decals with miniature blossoms in brilliant colors. To pottery managers and crockery buyers, Gaertner was an embellishing wizard whose time had arrived.34

Between 1901 and his death in 1932, Gaertner—affectionately nicknamed by East Liverpool potters as the “decorative father confessor”—played a pivotal role in design and innovation at Homer Laughlin. An engineer by training, Gaertner, who became America’s leading supplier of decals for ceramics, also fancied himself a gentleman, so he felt at ease straddling the gap between technology and art. Born in Prague to a potting family, Gaertner received his degree from the Institute of Technology at Carlsbad in 1893. He apprenticed in German and French china works, managed his family’s porcelain factory, and in 1896 joined Frank Schroeder & Company, a German manufacturer of ceramic decorating supplies and a pioneer in decal printing. Five years later, Gaertner traveled to the United States as Schroeder’s New York sales agent. Within a year, the ambitious immigrant had established his own importing firm, incorporated in 1905 as R. Gaertner & Company. His personal tastes extended to impeccably tailored suits, a handsome office on West Broadway, lunches at the Manhattan Club, and evenings at the Metropolitan Opera. A complicated and colorful personality, Gaertner specialized in supplying decals to the five-and-tens and scheme-goods users, which absorbed 50 to 80 percent of the pottery made in the East Liverpool district. In 1908 alone, Gaertner and his small staff of artists designed a hundred or so new mass-market decals.35

For any one Woolworth decoration, Wells, Case, and Gaertner often engaged in a months’ long exchange of letters, telegrams, watercolor sketches, decal samples, and artifacts. The process went something like this. Once Wells and Case decided that Woolworth needed a new pattern, they contacted Gaertner, who mobilized his firm. In his office, staff artists first painted watercolor sketches, drawing inspiration from such design sources as wallpaper fragments, printed textiles, and English china. If Wells and Case liked these sketches, Gaertner began the time-consuming process of procuring sample decals from abroad. Choosing a printer was determined by the look that the design required: English firms such the Universal Transfer Company in Hanley used “dust printing” methods, which were appropriate for brilliant colors and detailed designs; German firms like George Nitzke & Company excelled in wet printing, which suited simpler patterns and quantity print runs. When the decal proofs arrived, Wells
consulted his decorating department chief, a technical expert who suggested production-enhancing alterations. Next, Case evaluated the decal’s likely market appeal. Finally, Gaertner telegraphed his printer with instructions on modifying the pattern. So the decorative turnstile revolved, stopping only when Wells and Case deemed the new Woolworth pattern just right.  

Without question, dime store dishes differed recognizably from both the more costly department store lines and the cheaper scheme goods. In many respects, the patterns were the twentieth-century ceramic equivalents of the ornamentation on nineteenth-century machine-made furniture. Stylistically related to costly handcrafted cabinetry, these inexpensive furnishings were distinguished as a group by their simplified decoration. Similarly, the Woolworth pottery patterns—colorful bouquets, neoclassical festoons, and chromatic bands—harked back to motifs painted on highbrow porcelain; but here, too, taste and technology fused to endow these inexpensive dishes with an identifiable aesthetic. Decal printing suited highly refined pictorial representation impossible to achieve at comparable cost with painting, giving dime store pottery a distinctive look of its own.  

Neither the new way of designing products, which privileged decal suppliers and retail buyers over china decorators, nor the decalcomania aesthetic lacked critics. The managing director of Baltimore’s Bennett Pottery, Henry Brunt, condemned dime store and premium wares: “Made in the most slipshod manner,” these vulgar goods constituted a “menace to art.” Like Mountford (whom he would hire in 1909), the opinionated Brunt belonged to a dying breed of practical Staffordshire men. He lamented the demise of the apprenticeship system and longed for a revival of decorations like Jesse Dean’s fancy gold work. During the early 1890s, Brunt’s elegant porcelains had won judges’ hearts at the World’s Columbian Exposition, earning awards for Bennett. Boasting of his accomplishments at the Chicago fair, Brunt hoped that others might follow in his footsteps and focus on highbrow lines.  

By the time Brunt penned his 1907 diatribe, the high-end market lay beyond the reach of most American potters and china decorators, whose rising labor and materials costs prohibited fancy goods production. For supervisory jobs in decorating departments, managers routinely passed over practical potters in favor of American-born men like E. Samuel Hilton. More of a superintendent than a craftsman, Hilton, who worked for the Anchor Pottery Company in Trenton, even spoke the language of management. His identity and pride stemmed from his “capital stock,” that is, from executive ability, industry, economy, honesty, and
push, rather than from artisanal knowledge and craft skills. At Homer Laughlin, Edward L. Carson, a graduate of the Spring Garden Institute, one of Philadelphia’s trade schools, directed Wells’s decorating rooms. Carson’s education provided him with a minimum of technological know-how and a maximum of obedience to authority. Hilton, Carson, and factory men like them perfectly complemented decal importers like Gaertner. They adjusted his designs to accommodate particular technical conditions—nothing more, nothing less. While Brunt grumbled, perspicacious managers and crockery buyers, who foresaw bright futures in quantity production, pressed ahead with decal pottery, laboring to gratify rather than to judge mass-market tastes.39

**Back to the Five-and-Ten**

Following the Pittsburgh show every January, crockery men traveled to East Liverpool, where they visited the potteries and finalized the details of their annual contracts. At Homer Laughlin, year after year Wells rolled out the red carpet for dime store men, treating Case and other Woolworth executives, including treasurer Charles C. Griswold, to meals in the city’s best hotels and to tours of his factories. Wining and dining aside, the agenda included plenty of wheeling and dealing. The men spent countless hours in the pottery’s sample room, studying hundreds of samples laid out on tables. Shapes embellished with competing decals sat side by side for comparison. Here, the Woolworth buyer had a library of objects at his disposal, and he readily communicated the subtleties of his preferences to Wells. To those versed in material goods, an object was worth a thousand words; with artifact in hand, Case could elaborate on details impossible to deal with in letters. This leaf had too much yellow; that rose, too little pink. This gold band looked too thick; that gold filigree, too fussy. The conversations first revolved around decoration—and then volume and price. In their deliberations, the men considered sales statistics for the previous year’s patterns, allowing consumer choice to dictate the fate of shapes and decorations. In absentia, dime store shoppers exerted a powerful influence over both merchant and manufacturer during these big midwinter meetings.40

Case wanted distinctive motifs that consumers would recognize as Woolworth designs, motifs that might resemble, but that could not be identical to, those sold by other five-and-tens. If consumers wanted matching dishes, they could complete their set only by returning to a Woolworth store. In this way, the five-and-ten encouraged shawl ladies to emulate Anglo-American habits by purchasing
dishes that matched. Whether or not dime store consumers followed these prescriptions may never be known. Those who wanted to be “American” probably did, while others remained happy with a mix of designs. Unlike middlebrow shoppers, who might use elaborate European services to impress dinner guests, married working-class and farm women bought five-and-ten dishes to serve food in pantries and kitchens. These people ate, rather than dined. Single wage-earning women who lived in boarding houses, hotel rooms, or small tenements cheered up their tiny abodes with inexpensive dime store ceramics. Unfettered by a middlebrow taste culture that mandated the acquisition and display of extensive tableware sets, Woolworth shoppers may have stocked their cupboards with goods in a variety of decorations, shapes, and forms. Stylistic variety was integral to working women’s tastes—and to the homely dime store aesthetic.

While the imperative of divining and satisfying Woolworth shoppers shaped their decisions and actions, Wells and Case’s task of obliging the purchasing public remained a difficult one. Consumers accustomed to quantity-production goods, such as packaged cereal and soap, anticipated the same level of dependability from their household accessories. Even rural women, who ordered pottery from mail-order houses, would not tolerate irregularities like off-color flow-

B E A U T Y  F O R  A  D I M E  •  I I I
ers, poorly applied gold trim, or crooked sprigs. "I know that you make due allowance for the fact that your customers must buy their crockery blind," Wells wrote to buyer P. A. Murkland at Sears, Roebuck & Company in 1911. "Women are inclined to be a little exacting about their tableware," he continued, and they "may sometimes return goods to you which . . . do not happen to be just as they expected." The refinement of the senses, a process whose origins sociologist Norbert Elias traces to early modern Europe, unfolded to embrace mass-market consumers. A host of factors, including the rise of mass merchandising itself, contributed to this "civilizing process." Like Sears customers, Woolworth shoppers refused to lower their standards, rejecting pottery that deviated from certain norms.41

A discerning lot, Woolworth's customers possessed notions about "good goods" that had jelled long before they entered the five-and-ten. Indeed, a large part of a local managers' job entailed selecting the right stock from the range of decal options—sprays of "small roses and lily of [the] valley," borders with "small,
neat gold lace,” sprigs of pink hawthorn, clusters of “rambler roses, leaves, and small flowers,” lustrous bands in green and gold, and classical festoons in gold—listed on the annual circulars provided by the New York buyer. A Woolworth store serving a predominately Slavic community offered different items than did five-and-tens with Italian, German, or Irish customers. Regardless of ethnicity, consumers—who might have endured irregularities from printed and filled-in decorations during the 1880s—expected symmetry and consistency in decal patterns by the 1900s. After women in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, scoffed at a Homer Laughlin line decorated with a particular pink floral decal, Woolworth’s manager J. U. Troy explained to the home office why this ten-cent pattern did “not sell”: the “shade of the rose” was often very brown or “very, very pale.” Troy, like other Woolworth managers, abhorred being obliged to discount imperfect items because his profits accrued on such close margins. Case laid the problem on the pottery’s doorstep, and Wells begged for mercy on technical grounds. Declaring pink the “most treacherous color” in the potter’s palette, he argued that “things . . . unexplainable and almost unbelievable” could happen to “large pink patterns in the kilns.” An unsympathetic Case responded that few of the women who shopped at Woolworth’s 189 stores appreciated “brick-colored pinks” and fewer still enjoyed seeing “three different” shades of a single color “on one plate.” Woolworth shoppers wanted tried-and-true colors, and Case insisted that Wells fix his pink problem. In the same year, the crockery buyer refused some pickle, baking, and bone dishes in old-fashioned shapes, even at a special discount, on the grounds that “the ladies” would not buy these items “simply because they are cheap.” Case would have been foolish to act otherwise, for success in the five-and-ten business depending on satisfying ladies’ desires.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Case had established a model for dime store pottery purchasing that extended beyond procurement. He and Wells spoke the same language and thought about business in much the same way. Low prices, high volume, rapid delivery, and novel decoration; both men understood these concepts. As the two allies collaborated on patterns, they took their signals from culture and competition. This method of imagining consumers worked splendidly, contributing to the rapid growth of Homer Laughlin. In 1892, the pottery had operated one factory employing 124 workers; by 1910, the company ran four factories in Ohio and West Virginia with 1,800 workers. Gross sales increased more than twelvecfold during the century’s first decade: in 1898, sales totaled less than $200,000; in 1910, $2.5 million. The fate of
Homer Laughlin seemed to be inexorably linked with that of Woolworth; but the next decade tested the tie between the pottery and dime store, as both firms coped with major shakeups.\textsuperscript{43}

**Tempest in the Teapot**

Much as a thunderbolt out of the clear sky, comes the Kress store, opened but little more than thirty days ago. Their manager, Mr. Champion, tells me they have already sold practically a car of crockery, that he has an order for a second car, and that every indication points to their selling five or six cars a year!

—George Washington Clarke to W. Edwin Wells, 1911

In December 1911, Clarke displayed more than his usual flamboyance in writing to Wells from Arizona. S. H. Kress & Company, the southern-based dime store, had just opened a new store in Tucson, creating a quite a stir. At a moment when most five-and-tens converted existing buildings into stores, president Samuel H. Kress had established a corporate architectural department expressly for the purpose of giving his 5-10-25-cent stores a dignified look. When a Kress building appeared on Main Street, its shiny yellow brick facade did indeed glint like a thunderbolt. When Tucson’s Kress opened, consumers showed their confidence in mass retailing by shopping in their Sunday best. Not all Tucsonians welcomed “the advent of the Kress stores”; at least one china-shop owner wallowed in deep depression. “Clothed in sackcloth and ashes,” Clarke reported, “no more pathetic a figure than Mr. W. J. Corbett, who may be said to fairly exude dejection at every pore, can possibly be imagined.” To this shopkeeper, Kress’s opening portended the “passing of any possible profit in the crockery business.” All told, the consumer exodus to Kress so dejected retailers that Clarke described Tucson, potterywise, as “the city of the unburied dead.”\textsuperscript{44}

Clarke’s account of the Tucson incident anchored Wells and Homer Laughlin ever more firmly to the five-and-ten trade, in which mass retailers like Woolworth and Kress promised endless orders. Such tales also propelled scheme-ware potteries—threatened by a new mass-market entrant, cheap Japanese porcelain—into action. They decided to take advantage of the plight of retailers like the Tucsonians to create new markets for giveaway pottery. Scheme-ware potters transformed the gift idea into a cure-all for china stores, hardware stores, furniture stores, flour mills, and bakeries suffering from slumping sales (plate 1).\textsuperscript{45}

As firms like the West End Pottery Company, which ran a six-kiln factory in
East Liverpool, orchestrated the premium trade’s face-lift, they suddenly discovered consumers’ needs and desires. What women wanted became a major talking point in the West End’s marketing strategies. Behind closed doors, potters had long acknowledged their market’s feminine character. At the apex of the china-collecting craze of the 1880s, the USPA’s Art & Design Committee had encouraged paintresses to submit designs to its exhibitions in the hope of tapping into women’s aesthetic sensibilities. In 1890, the Baltimore potter D. F. Haynes acknowledged the “very great improvements in the taste of the public, particularly the female portion of the community, who buy the crockery.” More recently, Wells in 1908 testified at congressional tariff hearings that “women buy the pottery.” The difference with premium potters of the 1910s lay in their deliberate use of gender to lure new customers into the scheme-ware business. “Show me a woman who takes pride in her home and who doesn’t love to have nice dishes,” the West End’s chief salesmen wrote in its 1910 catalogue. A woman “will go out of her way in order to deal with a merchant who is giving away dishes as a premium for quantity or cash purchases.” Harry A. Epstein, a retailer in Berlin, Wisconsin, became a believer. Every May, he used a fail-safe formula to lure farm-wives to his anniversary sale. He ordered some inexpensive “pretty plates,” advertised these giveaways, and watched the “women folks” march his way. “Offer a dish to a lady free,” Epstein explained, and “she will walk to town to get it.” Women’s tastes became a weapon wielded by scheme potters against cheap imports and, in turn, by small retailers against mass merchandisers.46

Meanwhile, Wells channeled most of his energy into resolving a different kind of problem. Homer Laughlin experienced its first major upheaval of the decade following the gigantic Woolworth merger of 1911, in which the firm absorbed six major East Coast competitors. By January 1912, the new F. W. Woolworth & Company controlled more than six hundred five-and-tens in the United States, Canada, and England. In 1910, Woolworth, F. F. Kirby, and S. H. Knox & Company accounted for less than 30 percent of Homer Laughlin’s total sales. Two years later, sales to the enlarged Woolworth expanded to 36 percent; by 1916, to 40 percent. In 1916, Woolworth sold $87 million worth of goods; that year, the chain bought $1 million in crockery from Wells alone. Homer Laughlin, with seventy-eight kilns, made most of the nation’s dime store pottery; its biggest competitor was the W. S. George Pottery Company, a thirty-two-kiln firm established in 1911 by china decorator William Shaw George, in East Palestine, Ohio.47

These five years had wrought considerable changes at the dime store’s main offices. With considerable fanfare in 1913, Frank Woolworth moved his com-
pany into the newly constructed Woolworth Building, a thirty-five-story Gothic Revival tower at the corner of Broadway and Park Place. Fittingly nicknamed the Cathedral of Commerce, the world's largest skyscraper was built with $13 million in nickels and dimes. The firm's structure soon became more hierarchical and bureaucratic. The number of buyers expanded from ten to nineteen, many of them midlevel managers from the ranks of the consolidation firms. Responsible for selecting specific lines of merchandise in each of the six hundred five-and-tens, these men now relied on inspectors to study stores, redefining their own jobs more narrowly around specific product categories. When Case accepted a promotion to top management in 1915, William F. Newberry, formerly with F. F. Kirby & Company of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, succeeded him as the American crockery buyer.48

In Newell, Wells took pleasure from Newberry's appointment; the two men already knew each other, as the buyer had stocked Kirby's crockery departments with Homer Laughlin's products. (The son of a train master for the Pennsylvania Railroad, Newberry grew up in Scranton, one of three brothers who pursued retailing careers. His handsome sibling, Charles, joined Woolworth as its sheet music buyer; later, this dashing ladies' man joined a third brother to form the J. J. Newberry Company, a small competitor.) William Newberry suited the specialized position of pottery and glassware buyer very well. Passionate about dishes, he knew that women endowed pottery with special meaning. His enthusiasm, expertise, and stylish vision dovetailed perfectly with Frank Woolworth's postmerger strategy for refurbishing his stores and reaching out to middle-class shoppers. If the dime store were to expand upmarket, buyers must select items that had middlebrow appeal and looked attractive in windows. To Newberry, there was no better choice for head-turning displays than crockery, stacked tall in geometric formations that suggested order, utility, and abundance. Under his auspices, Woolworth's crockery departments would gain a reputation among middle-class consumers as the place to go for good-looking everyday dishes.49

In a two-decade business collaboration that matured into a warm friendship, Newberry and Wells slowly reenvisioned Homer Laughlin's dime store pottery to reflect the new emphasis on middle-class taste. Like Case before him, Newberry ordered goods from several East Liverpool factories, buying his best items from Homer Laughlin. When he searched for pottery with "prestige," Wells shouldered much of the burden for decorative development. Soon, the buyer showed his fussy side: "Now as you well know, deterioration in the decorations will hurt the business very quickly." The aesthetic high priest, Gaertner, often
served as mediator between the dime store's crockery buyer and the pottery's general manager. "I explained," Gaertner wrote to Wells in 1913, the impossibility of putting "borders with gold" on festooned plates without accommodating "the demands of the decal girls for higher wages" and pushing the retail price beyond the ten-cent limit. Wells and Gaertner saw Woolworth's quality campaign as a double-edged sword. Both men's firms enjoyed the increased business, but both recognized that Woolworth had them in an economic squeeze. "If it is necessary to give Woolworth's better and more costly patterns every year," Gaertner complained, "it will not be possible for us to stand the difference!"50

Yet times were good. At the start of the twentieth century, American potters controlled a lion's share of the United States market, and the Great War dropped more business in their laps as production at European factories slowed. Between 1910 and 1920, ceramic imports from Germany declined from $3.5 million to $995,000 a year; imports from war-torn France, from $1.5 million to $666,000. Customers who had once scoffed at American ceramics hammered on the doors of East Liverpool's factories. Homer Laughlin sales skyrocketed, as department stores like New York's Bloomingdale Brothers and Gimbel Brothers searched for new supplies of high-quality dinnerware. To replace supplies of low-end European china, Sears also expanded its orders to Homer Laughlin. By 1919, rural consumers flipping through the Sears catalogue found more than two dozen dinner sets, in Violet Spray, Pink Rose, and other Homer Laughlin patterns. Sales to department stores and mail-order houses, Wells later revealed, accounted for all of the pottery's profits between 1916 and 1920.51

High-volume mass merchandisers also reevaluated their crockery policies. During the war, Brooklyn soap maker Kirkman & Sons, which promoted Borax with pottery premiums, terminated gift giving. At Woolworth, Newberry patiently watched potters cope with circumstances beyond their control: the virtual collapse of the railroads, the union's insistence on wage increases in response to soaring inflation, and scarcities of raw materials, fuel, and decalcomania. In 1915, Gaertner responded to wartime difficulties in getting decals by opening his own print shop in Mount Vernon, New York, and showing Newberry several lines, including a blue bird pattern, featuring American-made decals. Thinking these novelties would "be an attraction" among fashion-conscious customers at his "larger stores," Newberry approved the new lines, but soon afterward Gaertner encountered wartime shortages of paper, colors, and lithographers, which delayed the print shop's startup. The next year, Wells turned down Woolworth's orders for seasonal items, including Passover plates sold during the "Jewish
Easter" on the Lower East Side, because Homer Laughlin found it impossible to obtain the necessary decals. Unable to get his crockery orders filled, Newberry more and more turned to stocking his departments with pressed glass, whose manufacturers suffered fewer bottlenecks. The Great War cut a deep wound in the Homer Laughlin–Woolworth relationship. In 1916, Woolworth accounted for 40 percent of the pottery's gross sales, measured in dollars. By 1917, the percentage dropped to 35 percent; by 1920, to 20 percent.52

Although the war redefined Homer Laughlin's relationship to five-and-tens, it more generally gave a big boost to the sales, profits, and egos of American pottery manufacturers, setting a confident tone for the Jazz Age. By one estimate, American factories made 90 percent of the pottery distributed in the United States between 1918 and 1920. Looking forward to a bright future, USPA managers channeled their earnings into new technologies and capital improvements. A new generation of Sebrings, bearing the family's torch for modernity, established a model of technical innovation that other potters, including Homer Laughlin, would follow in the 1920s. To retain their share of the diminishing scheme-ware trade, Frank A. Sebring and his son, Charles Leigh Sebring, took dramatic measures to cut production costs, installing labor-saving equipment and hiring a ceramics chemist to test inexpensive American raw materials. Most notably, the chemist successfully experimented with ball clays, cheap clays not often used because of impurities that gave products an off-white color. At Homer Laughlin, managers fiddled with technical matters as well; but in the immediate postwar years, Wells's greatest concern lay, not with production, but with marketing.53

During the Great War, buyers visiting the Homer Laughlin factories boldly vented their opinions about the potters' facilities in East Liverpool and Newell. They lambasted Wells: nowhere else had they seen such shoddy hotels, factories, and sample rooms; Old World managers knew how to court visiting customers in style. Warming to their topic, buyers became increasingly vocal. One veteran dealer, Pittsburgh's Louis Reizenstein, boasted to the USPA about his sixty business trips across the Atlantic Ocean. Crockery men loved nothing more than to travel abroad and revel in luxury, and Wells knew that after reconstruction, buyers from Bloomingdale, Gimbel Brothers, Butler Brothers, and Sears would flock to the Continent for café au lait, chocolates, and crockery—unless he took drastic measures to prevent such a mass exodus.54

Although weary of the jeering, Wells nevertheless took buyers' descriptions of foreign showrooms to heart. Determined to retain wartime market shares,
Wells, who had accumulated a fortune during the boom, reinvested his profits in a fabulous Renaissance Revival display room that he opened to the trade in early 1922. Located above the factory's executive offices, the 50-foot-by-150-foot showroom, appointed with plaster moldings, oak display counters, stained-glass windows, leather chairs, wall tapestries, Oriental carpets, and mulberry-colored velvet draperies, exuded the posh atmosphere of an exclusive men's club. A gilt-framed portrait of Wells hung in a place of honor. Even when visiting buyers in New York City or enjoying some golf on the nearby links, the general manager presided over his fiefdom like a Medici prince, making sure that order presided. In effect, Wells had sized up the desires of Eurocentric crockery men, creating an environment that fulfilled their expectations. Impressed, the *Pottery, Glass, and Brass Salesman* devoted a feature to the display room, comparing it to a smaller version at Lenox China in Trenton. The Renaissance-style showroom testified to Wells's marketing abilities, which would meet new challenges during the final decade of his career.55

Any Color, as Long as It's Yellow

During the 1920s, the tremendous growth of chain stores dealing in groceries, drugs, clothing, and 5-and-10-cent merchandise encouraged observers to nickname the decade the chain store age. The unbridled expansion of grocers such as A&P and First National, which together operated more than 18,000 stores by 1930, most often drew criticism from the champions of rugged individualism, community spirit, and entrepreneurial capitalism. More pertinent to this story were five-and-tens, which expanded in number and continued to sell the goods that consumers needed to construct personal identity and convert empty living spaces into homes. The number of Woolworth stores alone increased by more than 50 percent, from 1,111 to 1,881; sales more than doubled, from $141 million to $289 million. At this gargantuan chain, shoppers found costume jewelry, cosmetics, and perfume for bodily adornment; little trinkets to give friends and loved ones on special occasions; and bric-a-brac like pottery, glass, doilies, and plastic ornaments that enlivened china cabinets, dresser tops, and kitchen tables. Among the many affordable products for home and family, Woolworth dishes with pretty floral decals mattered immeasurably to consumers making statements about self, ethnicity, and class.56

By 1923, sales from Homer Laughlin to Woolworth had rebounded from their wartime slump and accounted for 33 percent of the pottery's business.
Newberry's position in this revived relationship allowed him to wield more power than ever before, and he used it without hesitation. "The only thing that will help us out," he apprised Wells in May 1923, "is more merchandise." To be sure, Newberry's chant for "more" echoed the words of Case, who had begged Wells for "good goods and plenty of them" many years before; yet the context of accelerated competition among five-and-tens set Newberry's command apart from his predecessor's appeal. Although Woolworth dwarfed other limited-price variety stores like the Detroit-based S. S. Kresge & Company, these other chains gained market shares in particular regions of the country. For example, west of the Mississippi River, Woolworth stores lost crockery sales to Kresge, which had purchased Michigan's Mount Clemens Pottery Company in 1920. Mount Clemens's unbelievably cheap dishes came out of tunnel kilns, continuous-flow ovens that enhanced volume to levels previously unimaginable. As Newberry implored Wells to "find a way to give us an increased output which will put our stores in shape to meet the full demand," he suspected that Kresge's managers had discovered something good. He wanted Homer Laughlin to jump on this technological bandwagon, no matter what feats it entailed. Unknown to Newberry, the pottery's board of directors had already authorized the construction of a new facility, Plant No. 6, equipped with tunnel kilns. For Wells, second-guessing powerful buyers had long been part and parcel of doing business in the mass market.57

Next, Newberry broached design matters and addressed again the prewar subject of the "prestige" factor. Hoping to make his department into the five-and-ten's greatest attraction, the crockery man envisioned up-to-date dish sections filled with stylish lines that window dressers would choose for enticing, electrically illuminated displays. Planning for spring 1926 sales, Newberry in late 1925 asked Wells to replace two older patterns, dating from 1917 and 1922, with an entirely new decoration "appropriate for our business." This coincided with Wells's designs for giving the Homer Laughlin repertoire a face-lift. Anticipating a line with wallop, Wells authorized laboratory experiments on colored clays and glazes, which laid the groundwork for Woolworth's best-selling crockery line of the 1920s: Yellowstone dinnerware.58

The impetus for the venture into colored ceramics came from two sources: consumers and competition. Before the Great War, the quintessential Woolworth shopper had been a "woman with a shawl," who browsed through five-and-tens for inexpensive chinaware for her room or tenement kitchen. During the 1920s, the dime store's crockery departments bustled with middle-class
consumers looking for dining accessories. Several factors accounted for the infiltration of middlebrow taste. The expansion of factory and office jobs for working-class women and nativist intolerance of Southern and Eastern Europeans contributed to perceptions of a servant shortage. Concurrently, Prohibition affected cooking, dining, and drinking practices. In many upper- and middle-class households, the unavailability of both alcohol and suitable servants circumscribed menus and made impossible the preparation of French dishes requiring wine, sherry, or other liquor. Urbanization and the growth in apartment living confronted women with limited cabinet space for hundred-piece dinner services, including precious heirlooms. Without good domestic help, the right ingredients, and enough storage space, homemakers reevaluated consumption habits inherited from their grandmothers, reconfiguring their visions of the ideal meal and the perfect dining ensemble. Informal dining and easy eating came into vogue; and middle-class women learned to appreciate Woolworth’s open-stock crockery department, which provided fashionable, carefree table settings with little investment of time and money. Like previous generations of Woolworth shoppers, middlebrows could buy dishes one by one, picking and choosing the number of plates, bowls, and serving items they needed at a fraction of department store prices.59

Wells also scrutinized his competitors, paying special attention to his long-
time rival, the Sebring Pottery Company. Modifying their scheme-ware expertise to suit the consumer boom, the Sebrings honed in on credit sales during the early 1920s. The “chronically dead broke” family in need of new dishes suddenly had a slightly larger array of options: buy Homer Laughlin ware piece by piece at Woolworth or get a Sebring dinner set as a premium, a trade-in, or an installment purchase. Furthermore, in 1923, Charles Leigh Sebring took advantage of his firm’s wartime ball-clay experiments, introducing creamy clay bodies and glazes that softened the appearance of bright decal patterns. Consumers relished this warm look, especially on the Barbara Jean shape, introduced in 1923 and copied by rivals “almost line for line.” Sebring’s yellow palette resonated with scheme-ware customers, who appreciated the way golden dishes harmonized with different woods, fabrics, and paints. The Golden Maize line reached a wide audience through grocery stores, which used it as a premium to stimulate sales of Chef Coffee. The Royal Ivory porcelain line found ready customers among retailers like Atlanta’s Myers-Miller Furniture Company, which devised trade-in deals similar to General Motors’ strategy that encouraged car owners to move up. Shoppers at Myers-Miller turned in their “old, cracked, faded, out-of-date dinnerware” and received a $5 discount on a Royal Ivory set costing $39.95. Aware of Sebring’s success with yellow dishes, Wells pressed his laboratory to speed up its experiments on colored clays and glazes. Other East Liverpool potters also scrambled to design yellows that would “knock your eyes out.” Giving a ceramics twist to Henry Ford’s famous phrase, East Liverpool potters joked that any color, “as long as it is yellow,” would sell. 60

As Homer Laughlin’s chemist experimented in the fall of 1925, Wells and Newberry jointly conceptualized the aesthetic details of Woolworth’s Yellowstone line. At a moment when market researchers started to quantify purchasing patterns for other home furnishings manufacturers, these men still drew on personal experience to profile the potential consumer for the new line. Again and again, Wells and Newberry debated the intricacies of color, shape, decoration, quality, utility, and price. In daily letters, they speculated about possible audience reactions to tiny changes, from the angles of the octagonal edge to the positioning of decal decorations. These two collaborators fully understood, expected, and appreciated the uncertainties inherent in product design and development for the mass market. 61

Wells and Newberry took their initial hints on household taste from store managers and pottery competitors, but they needed better data to fuel the product’s takeoff, turning to experts inside and outside the developmental firms. Dur-
ing Yellowstone’s genesis, data never flowed smoothly and steadily along a well-maintained path between Woolworth’s headquarters and Homer Laughlin’s front office. Instead, it trickled, gurgled, sputtered, and bubbled through the two companies in all directions. Both Wells and Newberry had nurtured private coteries of taste trustees, and each routinely solicited these fashion intermediaries’ opinions on shapes, decorations, colors, and other variables. Newberry’s decorative darlings still included local managers, who enthusiastically responded to Yellowstone prototypes, invariably hazarding that the new product would “stimulate . . . business.” Crockery buyers from other stores who saw samples in Newberry’s office also sang Yellowstone’s praises, predicting a “strong drift” toward the line among Woolworth’s consumers in 1926.62

By the mid-1920s, Gaertner functioned as Homer Laughlin’s proxy art director, and Wells tapped the information banks of his favorite fashion intermediary for the Yellowstone project. The decal man collaborated on the decorations, and he provided samples of English pottery as models for the octagonal shape. Most important, Gaertner networked in New York’s home furnishings trade on behalf of Wells and Newberry, seeking counsel on domestic decorating trends from big-city merchants like Ovington Brothers, a large china and glass importer. At the Ovington warehouse, he solicited the opinions of one MacIntosh, perhaps “the best-posted buyer of high-grade china and earthenware in the world.” MacIntosh confirmed Wells’s suspicions that few American consumers cared for bright, bold, modernist designs—for “jazz in color.”63

Yellowstone emerged as a conservative product well suited to the tastes of Woolworth’s customers. The line was modernistic, rather than modern. Its color was offbeat, not startling. Its shape was different, not shocking. In short, Yellowstone took possession of the stylistic middle ground acceptable to the dime store’s broadening spectrum of shoppers. The new product added a tad of distinction to Woolworth’s crockery department yet provided Homer Laughlin with real reductions in manufacturing costs. The color disguised the slight imperfections that could earmark white goods as off-quality; a large percentage of Yellowstone production, hence, was best-of-kiln and sold at first-quality prices.64

In early 1926, Newberry held a preliminary sale of decorated Yellowstone ware at Store No. 1000, Woolworth’s flagship, which sat in the heart of Manhattan’s fashionable shopping district at Fifth Avenue and Fortieth Street, across from the New York Public Library. The store attracted consumers from all backgrounds, who made it into one of the most prosperous five-and-tens in the coun-
One Miss Williams from the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency summarized it all: “Woolworth’s is Coney Island on Fifth Avenue.” Noisy, crowded, and “smaller than any other stores in town,” the midtown Woolworth attracted bargain-hunting women from Park Avenue and Tenth Avenue who “consider a trip to the 10 cent store good fun.” Upper-class owners of Pierce Arrows and Cadillacs who visited this “Woolies” bought low-priced dishes for “country places and everyday use.” From the perspective of Newberry, there was no better venue than Store No. 1000 for market testing a new product. He reported to Wells that the first decal design was a “big hit,” the next “was better,” and the third proved to be “the pattern.” “People bought everything,” Newberry exclaimed. “Every customer who came in wanted . . . to make up a dinner set.” Like other successful dime store lines, Yellowstone stimulated shoppers’ senses and encouraged impulse buying; in short, this ware sold itself. Anticipating immense orders, Wells
converted his new tunnel kiln facility, Plant No. 6, to Yellowstone production. If reading consumers as they shopped was good enough for Newberry at Woolworth, it certainly was good enough for Wells and Homer Laughlin. 65

Wells spent most of his career encouraging shawl women to participate in American consumer culture, and he did this by producing household accessories that retailers gave away or sold cheaply. Rather than packaging respectability with the idea of uplifting tastes, Wells and like-minded managers such as Frank A. Sebring modified middle-class aesthetics to suit working people’s needs. However, they soon discovered that premium and dime store dishes had enormous appeal among other groups. Victorian dining customs trickled downward; informal eating habits, upward. The same was true for styles. By the interwar years, the shopper who carried a “Woolworth’s pocketbook” was recognized for her “Tiffany tastes,” and vice versa. Potteries in the East Liverpool district, and their cohorts in mass retailing, facilitated the exchange between middlebrow and lowbrow culture. 66

Creating tableware that attracted, delighted, and satisfied mass-market shoppers entailed the refinement of the design and development practices inherited from Staffordshire potteries. By the twentieth century, many English practical men seemed out of touch with American tastes, which ranged across a broad spectrum. As producers searched for ways to communicate with shoppers, they brought new fashion intermediaries into the fold. This transformation is indicative of the growing complexity of the production and distribution system, wherein cutting-edge batch producers vied for profitable orders from expanding retailers. In this competition, volume mattered, but the right looks mattered too. To get tastes in focus, pottery managers came to depend on crockery men, whose success in “buying right” hinged on knowing the customers. 67

By the late 1920s, the pottery and glass industries entered a new phase in design and development. Crockery buyers continued to loom large in aesthetic interpretation, but smart pottery managers recognized they needed an edge. Yellowstone’s reception demonstrated that Woolworth stores could attract customers from all walks of life and that doing so was profitable. Indeed, as the five-and-ten reached up the social ladder, it redefined “the masses” to include the middle class. Back at the factory, Wells came to believe that it would be ever more difficult to find design solutions within the existing decalcomania framework. Ultimately, pressures from mass merchandisers forced Homer Laughlin to make dramatic changes to its design practice.