

Franz Schwanthaler Milwaukee and Hartford 1850 - 1854

Franz or 'Frank' Schwanthaler is known today not by his pottery production in Milwaukee or near Hartford, Wisconsin, but rather by an archaic implement in the collections of the Wisconsin Historical Society. The object today may be unique in state pottery history, for it was based upon a traditional craft in the German states.



Figure 1 Quern found in Milwaukee. A dowel inserted into the small offset hole to rotate the upper portion. The processed liquid glaze poured out around the outer perimeter into a pan under the quern. In the collection of Wisconsin State Historical Society.



Figure 2 Wood peg used to force glazing material (glaze formulas typically included lead, clay and water) through the center hole. This peg was found with the mill. In the collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Franz Schwanthaler settled into Milwaukee's 2nd Ward by 1850. An immigrant potter from Austria, 34, married to Catherine, 27, born in Switzerland, with young sons Lewis (4) born in Switzerland, and Frank (8/12) born in Wisconsin. Johan Wolfe, 20, a Bavarian potter boarded with them.¹ His pottery location is given as "Third" street in 1851² and "Third bet. Walnut and Sherman" in 1854.³

Schwanthaler apparently relocated from Milwaukee to Hartford in about 1854 and died soon after, leaving behind a two-piece granite glazing mill or quern for grinding local mineral ores and salts into glazing compounds. Local ores appear in waste or workshop debris in southwest Wisconsin where lead, zinc and copper ores appeared in shallow crevice mines and could be had for the digging. But eastern Wisconsin is

buried in glacial till or debris preventing shafts to bedrock and minerals. Potters in eastern Wisconsin generally bought commercially available powdered red lead as a clear glazing compound, delivered like freight rather than dug from the ground which obviated the need for a stone glazing mill. The mill itself is a remarkable artifact and of course sparked some derisive commentary in its day:

Prehistoric Millstones.

Considerable interest has recently centered in a pair of supposed to-be prehistoric millstones, presented by Dr. Rice. Senator from the Waukesha district, to the Cabinet of The State Historical Society, and claimed to have been found in an ancient mound in the town of Hartford, Washington county. Many learned dissertations and theories concerning the origin of these stones and their deposition at the place where they are said to have been found, have been put forth by savants who are supposed to be most capable of rightly explaining such matters; but in this case their archaeological wisdom will not be likely to challenge unlimited confidence, in view of the subjoined letter from a Times subscriber, Dr. E. M. Rogers, of Hartford, to Assemblyman Shepard, of this county, which letter appears in the "State Journal" of Wednesday:

Hartford, Wis., Feb. 23, 1878.

Hon. John L. Shepard:

Dear Doctor: -- A matter of some interest has come to light here, that I must relate to you, as it is a matter of State interest. Enclosed you will find an article headed "Relics of Antiquity," which will explain itself.

The mill-stones claimed by Senator Rice to have been dug out of a mound in this town, is all a myth. The story of them, in short, is this:

In 1854, A German by the name of Schanddoller [sic], a potter by trade, imported them from Germany to this town, where he used them for the purpose of grinding clay to make his pottery with. He died in 1855 or 1856, and his pottery was abandoned, and the said mill-stones were left lying on the ground near where last used. Senator Rice sent his team to Morton here and took them to his home some two years ago, and now they are palmed off on the Historical Society as very ancient and prehistoric.

There is no mistake about the origin of the stones; but I may be mistaken about his knowing of their origin, but it does not seem possible but that he knew all about them.

*Yours truly,
E. M. Rogers⁴*

Aside from a factual error, (the intended use of the quern was to grind glazing compounds rather than clay), the letter is most revealing. Schwanthaler apparently was another largely invisible Wisconsin potter who set up in the 1850's, did not live to see his 40th birthday, and left a granite monument to traditionalism in this glaze mill.

References

- ¹ 1850 MSS Census, Milwaukee Co., Vol. 11. p. 323.
- ² Milwaukee City Directory, 1851, p. 137.
- ³ Col. Van Slyck's Milwaukee Directory, 1854, p. 230.
- ⁴ Sheboygan Times, March 2, 1878, p. 2/1.