



## Our History

*A look back at how things got started.*

### Homer & Shakespeare Laughlin

Homer and Shakespeare Laughlin, two brothers from East Liverpool, Ohio, formed a partnership in 1871 to sell pottery ware, which was made in the factories located in their hometown. The pottery industry in East Liverpool had begun in the 1840's, manufacturing yellow ware from the rich deposits of local clay and utilizing the Ohio River to transport their products throughout the region. By 1870, public preference was shifting from the relatively crude yellow ware to a more sophisticated white ware that was being imported from England. Local potters saw the need for change and the East Liverpool City Council offered \$5,000 in seed money to someone who would build and operate a pottery for the production of white ware.

The Laughlin Brothers submitted a proposal which was accepted by the Council and a two-kiln plant was built on the banks of the Ohio River in 1873. The plant was built on land purchased from Benjamin Harker for \$300. Mr. Harker's pottery was located next door. The Laughlin Brothers quickly gained a reputation for quality and, in 1876, their white granite ware won an award at the United States Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. By 1877, Shakespeare, the younger brother, was ready to move on to pursue other interests. The business continued as an individual enterprise, Homer Laughlin China Works. The business continued to prosper through the 1880's and became one of the better-known manufacturers of ceramic dinnerware and toilet ware in the United States.

### The Wells & Aaron Families

In 1889, a young bookkeeper from Steubenville, Ohio, William Edwin Wells, answered a classified newspaper advertisement and was hired to manage the books of the growing establishment. In a very short time, Mr. Wells was managing the business and Mr. Laughlin was able to spend time traveling with his wife. By 1897, Homer Laughlin had decided to retire to California where his son had just graduated from Stanford University. He offered to sell the business to Mr. Wells and a financial partner, Louis I. Aaron of Pittsburgh. The sale was consummated on December 7, 1897.

With new ownership came accelerated growth. Within two years, a second plant was built in the East End of East Liverpool, expanding further to three East End plants by 1903. Key customers contributing to the company's rapid growth included the F. W. Woolworth Company, the country's fastest growing variety (5 & 10 cent) store chain, and the American Cereal Company of Chicago, who was packing oatmeal bowls in Mother's Oats boxes as fast as Homer Laughlin could produce them.



## **The Move to Newell, WV**

The partners saw the need for further expansion, but there was no more room at the East End location. In 1902, a tract of land on the opposite side of the Ohio River was purchased from the Newell family. A subsidiary company, the North American Manufacturing Company was formed to develop the town, which would become Newell, West Virginia. Building lots were laid out, a water and sewer system was installed, and electric power was secured. A suspension bridge was built across the Ohio River, connecting the new community with East Liverpool and a trolley line was built to transport pottery workers across the river. During 1905 and 1906, the company constructed plant #4, which at that time, was the largest pottery plant ever built in the entire world. Homer Laughlin now had a combined production capacity of 300,000 pieces of ware per day (10% of the U. S. production capacity). The company's headquarters were moved to the Newell location at the beginning of 1907.

## **The 1910's**

In 1911, Louis Aaron retired and was succeeded as president of Homer Laughlin by his son, Marcus Aaron. Rapid growth continued and, in 1914, plant #5 was opened with 16 additional kilns, giving the company a total of 78 ware kilns and 60 decorating kilns. In January 1917, W. E. Wells wrote to the Woolworth Company to recap their business for the year of 1916. He stated, "I think that I may safely say that this is the first time in history that the purchases of any one concern from any one pottery firm have reached the million (dollar) mark in one year". At an average price of 72 cents per dozen, that amounted to 16.7 million pieces of ware sold to one customer in one year.

## **The 1920's**

The early 1920's marked the beginning of the most revolutionary change that had ever hit the pottery industry. Until that time, a pottery's size was measured by the number of ware kilns that it possessed. Intermittent bottle kilns had a limited production capacity due to the length of time that it took to load the kiln, brick up the doorway, fire the kiln and bring it up to the desired temperature, fire the ware for the desired length of time, then cool the kiln, reopen the doorway and, after cooling, empty the kiln by hand. All of this required more than a week to fire a limited amount of ware. The only way that a pottery could increase its capacity was to build more kilns.

In the early 1920's, continuous firing tunnel kilns were introduced to the industry. These kilns maintained their full firing temperatures constantly while cars entered one end, one after another and, three days later, fired ware exited the other end of the kiln. This was a revolutionary change in production time and the potteries with the financial resources rushed to build these new kilns. Firms without the resources would soon wither and die.

In 1923, Homer Laughlin announced that they would build yet another new plant, this time with tunnel kilns. Plant #6 fired its first kiln in 1924. At about this same time, the intermittent kilns at plants 4 & 5 were replaced with tunnel kilns. In 1927, plant #7, equal in size to plant 6, was opened. It was decided that it would not be practical to remodel the old



plants in the East End and they were phased out in favor of the largest Laughlin plant yet. Plant #8 opened in December 1929 with 800 employees in that plant alone. Initially, all of plant #8 production was allocated to make ware for Woolworth's. Total capacity was now equal to 160 upright kilns.

### **The 1930's & 1940's**

Almost coincidental with the opening of the last great Newell plant was the retirement of W. E. Wells in January 1930. He was replaced as general manager by his eldest son, Joseph M. Wells, Sr. The company had hired Frederick Hurten Rhead as design director in 1927, a post which he would hold until his death in 1942. Rhead's 15 year reign proved to be the most prolific period of new product introductions in the company's history. Rhead designed Virginia Rose as well as the several Eggshell shapes. Rhead's most famous accomplishment, however, was Fiesta. Marcus Aaron retired as president of the company in 1940 and was succeeded by his son, Marcus Lester Aaron. M. L. Aaron would serve as president for the next forty-eight years.

With Fiesta leading the way, The Homer Laughlin China Company continued to flourish until the onset of World War II. During the war years, much of the company's production was shifted to the production of china for our armed forces. After the war, production returned to normal and the company reached its peak production year in 1948. More than 3,000 workers were employed to produce over ten million dozen pieces of ware.

### **The 3rd Generation Reign from 1950's—1990's**

The 1950's saw a large increase in imported dinnerware which was produced in countries with very low labor costs. This competition took its toll on the American industry and many potteries did not survive the decade. Homer Laughlin's management decided to shift their emphasis from consumer dinnerware to commercial ware for the hotel and restaurant trade. 1959 saw the introduction of Homer Laughlin's "Best China" brand vitrified hotel china. J. M. Wells, Sr. retired at the end of that year, turning over the management of the company to the third generation of his family in the person of Joe Wells, Jr.

The sixties and seventies were difficult years for the American pottery industry, with low-cost imports carving out market share in the retail markets at the expense of domestic companies. Homer Laughlin's hotel ware was gradually becoming a prominent player in the foodservice china industry, eventually overtaking retail dinnerware in sales volume.

In the early eighties, the company began to produce lead-free china, something that would become very important as the country became more environmentally conscious. Using lead-free glazes and a vitrified china body, Fiesta was reintroduced in new and updated colors. As this new version of their most famous product was being launched, Joe Wells, Jr. retired in 1986 and was replaced as executive vice president by his son, Joe Wells III. At the end of 1988,



M. L. Aaron retired as company president and was succeeded by his son, Marcus (Pete) Aaron II. The company was now in the hands of the fourth generation of each family.

### **The 2000s**

As Fiesta began to flourish in the retail sector and Homer Laughlin was becoming a leading force in the foodservice china industry, the aging factories were undergoing many changes. State-of-the-art computerized kilns were installed throughout plants 6, 7 and 8. Much-needed new forming and glazing equipment was installed and a self-contained "plant within a plant" was built at Plant #8. Homer Laughlin was preparing to enter the new millennium as the industry leader in both the foodservice and retail businesses.

By 2002, ownership of the company was shared by third, fourth and fifth generation members of the Wells and Aaron families and others. Many of the shareholders were scattered throughout the country and had little involvement with the business. In an effort to consolidate resources and provide improved direction for the company, Joe Wells III, together with his sisters, Jean Wicks and Elizabeth McIlvain, purchased the interests of the other stockholders. In June 2002, Joe Wells III was elected president and chief executive officer. After serving for a decade, Joe stepped down and his sister Liz McIlvain took over as president in 2012. Her position marks the first woman president in the company's history, as well as the first time the presidency was passed between siblings instead of from father to son.

Since the reorganization, the company has experienced continued growth and is poised to move forward with the Wells Family's pledge to continue producing quality, American made china and provide jobs for potters of the Ohio Valley.

### **A New Direction**

In 2020, The Homer Laughlin China Company took a bold step and returned to its roots, focusing solely on manufacturing dinnerware for the home. The foodservice divisions and brand names of The Homer Laughlin China Company (HLC) and the Hall China Company were acquired by Steelite International. The Homer Laughlin China Company was renamed and will henceforth be known as The Fiesta® Tableware Company. The Fiesta® Tableware Company continues to operate in Newell, WV, as a retail-only tabletop and giftware manufacturer. In addition to the Fiesta brand, The Fiesta Tableware Company also manufactures and sells other tableware designs, previously only available to the foodservice marketplace, to the retail market and home chefs.

### **A Closer Look at FIESTA**

FIESTA, America's favorite dinnerware, was introduced by The Homer Laughlin China Company with great fanfare at the Pittsburgh China & Glass Show in January 1936. FIESTA was the creation of Frederick Hurten Rhead, a second-generation Stoke-on-Trent potter who had become Homer Laughlin's design director in 1927. The collection



was an immediate hit with the public and, by its second year of production, more than one million pieces were produced.

The original five colors were Red, Yellow, Cobalt Blue, Green and Ivory. Turquoise was added early in 1937. The shapes of FIESTA were created in an Art Deco style with concentric circles highlighting the bright colors. The first six colors were produced through the 1930's and 40's until a change in fashion direction dictated a change to a softer palette of pastel colors at the beginning of the 1950's.

Color trends moved back to brighter colors in the early 1960's and FIESTA moved with the trend. By the late 60's earth tones were in vogue and the dinnerware industry turned in that direction. Popularity of these colors proved to be short-lived and sales began to fall. At the end of 1972, FIESTA was retired after 37 years of production.

The retired dinnerware line soon became popular with collectors, especially those who had childhood memories of this brightly colored dinnerware. As years passed, the value of the original FIESTA colors and pieces grew as more people became avid collectors.

In 1985, officials of Bloomingdale's, the prestigious retailer in New York City, approached Homer Laughlin about reproducing a dinnerware line from the past. Soon the two companies agreed that FIESTA had the greatest chance for commercial success. In early 1986, Bloomingdale's introduced a new line of FIESTA® with a new color palette and with improvements to the body and glaze. Homer Laughlin was the country's leading producer of restaurant china and it was determined that the new FIESTA should be made of the same durable, restaurant-quality china body as the company's other products. The ceramic glaze would be lead-free, a comparatively new innovation in the china industry.

This new version of FIESTA was an instant success and a new generation of consumers became converts to FIESTA's popularity. Over the next twenty years, new colors have been introduced and FIESTA has become a trendsetter of color for the housewares industry. In the eighty-five years since FIESTA® was first produced, there have been a total of 54 colors in the line.

Today, The Fiesta Tableware Company introduces one new color each year and FIESTA has become the leading dinnerware brand in casual tabletop, as well as a consistent leader in bridal registries across America. All the while, collectors have continued to add to the dinnerware to which they were first introduced by their mothers and grandmothers. Today, FIESTA® dinnerware is the most collected dinnerware in the history of the tabletop industry with well over one half billion pieces produced.