In 2014 the Birmingham Museum of Art (BMA) acquired a large stoneware jug stamped “J Lehman” that was sculpted in the semblance of a fashionable African American man. Made by a German immigrant named John Lehman, who was likely residing in Randolph County, Alabama, at the time of its manufacture, this great vessel features the green alkaline glaze used by many nineteenth-century Alabama potters, but its decorative characteristics otherwise diverge from Alabama stoneware traditions of the time. Such divergence was not unusual for Lehman, whose works often stood outside the realm of utilitarian production and who cared at least as much about how his pieces looked as he did about how well they worked.

Lehman became well known among pottery scholars and collectors when a vessel much like the one collected by the BMA was acquired by Atlanta’s High Museum of Art in 1994. As of today, three of these figural vessels are known, all with Alabama histories, including one found in Florida by Antiques Roadshow in 2002. Although works made in the southern face jug tradition contained a pottery jug fashioned with a face on its surface, Lehman’s anthropomorphic figural jugs feature the torso as well as the head and are elaborately engineered. For instance, Lehman attached hollow arms to the bodies of these vessels, cleverly disguising necessary air holes as cuff links to preserve the pieces during the firing process.

The creation of such impressive figural vessels would have ensured Lehman’s place in history as an important potter; however, Lehman also made at least two other styles of decorated pots, both of which came to light in the late twentieth century. These are not fig-

German-born potter John Lehman produced elegant utilitarian pieces but has become most well-known for his highly original and expertly rendered figural vessels (left) and politically themed jars, like “Hurrah For Jefferson” (opposite page). (Above: High Museum of Art, Atlanta; opposite page: promised gift to the Birmingham Museum of Art from Joel and Karen Piassick; photos by M. Sean Pathasema)
ural in shape but are oval-shaped jars covered with politically themed decorations and a skillful use of sprig molding—small pieces of molded clay placed on a bigger vessel. One example appears in presidential jars, onto which Lehman embossed low-relief images of early American presidents; George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are on one jar, Jefferson and Andrew Jackson on the other. Both jars bear the initials “JL.” Another example, known among pottery scholars as a Revelation jar, displays a version of the Great Seal of the United States on one side and, on the other, a scene from Revelation Chapter 20 that includes an angel chaining the beast prior to casting him into the pit. One of the known Revelation jars is unsigned, but the other is inscribed with the words “John Lehman Maker of this Jar.” As these jars have been collected and examined over the past two decades, Lehman has become Alabama’s most celebrated historic potter for combining a variety of decorative techniques, unusual for the Deep South, with the region’s distinctive alkaline glaze.

Lehman’s work sets him apart from other Deep South potters because he made so many decorated wares when his primary source of income would have been in making utilitarian forms—such as churns, jugs, and jars—that fulfilled everyday needs. One clue to Lehman’s pride as a craftsman, and perhaps his appreciation of marketing, is the fact that he was one of the few potters in Randolph County who consistently marked his pottery with either his circular stamp or his initials. Lehman may have developed a reputation as a highly skilled potter by creating a portfolio of various vessel forms. An alkaline-glazed “Toby” pitcher, a much-copied British form shaped to look like a man in a tricorn hat, bears Lehman’s decorative look, even though it is unmarked. Also extant is a ring jug, a notoriously difficult style to make, stamped with the initials “JL.” However, art historians have not yet determined whether Lehman expended precious time and energy to make his spectacular, decorated vessels solely to express his opinions as an artist and citizen or whether these precise, elaborate works were commissioned by patrons.

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The story of a German immigrant who moved into rural Alabama and made occasional but fantastic decorated wares does not fit the usual narrative of early Alabama potters. Typically, frontier potters were born in the eastern states and came into Alabama from Georgia or the Carolinas, trained in the alkaline-glazing tradition. Some entered northern Alabama from the area bounded by the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers, bringing the salt-glazing tradition of the mid-Atlantic. Only in the Mobile area did European-born potters predominate. Utilitarian forms with little or no decoration constituted the normal repertoire of early Alabama potters.

Because Lehman’s experience did not fit this model, art historians wondered how such a talented potter ended up serving a small market in rural Alabama and where he was trained in the distinctive combination of style and skills exhibited in his work. However, despite the understandable interest in Lehman’s work, information about his life story has been difficult to ascertain. Unfortunately, as a working-class craftsman, Lehman left few historical documents. Because the name John Lehman was very common both in Europe and the United States, it has been difficult to distinguish which records refer to the Alabama potter. Until recently, relatively few historic records were digitized and accessible for research. However, the limited information that was available led to the understanding that John Lehman was a German-born potter living in Randolph County, Alabama, in 1860, 1870, and 1880. (Although this was the home to which Lehman always returned, it was common for tradesmen such as potters to travel to find work.) In 1860 he was in the household of an older potter, Wiley Taylor, for whom he probably worked. Lehman married Taylor’s daughter Mary, and the couple started a family during the Civil War, having their first child, also named Mary, in 1861 or 1862. The couple’s eleventh and final child was born in 1883. Because family tradition holds that Lehman’s son Frederick was referred to as “junior,” historians suspected for some time that John Lehman’s middle name was Frederick. Lehman family oral history also maintains that he died in southern Georgia from injuries received while being robbed. Research eventually revealed that the family lore was partly correct. Lehman was in Georgia, as was the whole family, but he did not die from a violent encounter.

Luckily, in the past ten years, this quest has been aided greatly by the expansion of the Internet, the digitization of primary historical records, and an increase in access to genealogical websites and search engines. Recently, new information regarding his movements, Confederate service, and naturalization have put a little more flesh on Lehman’s bones. Historic city directories have recently been added to searchable databases, revealing a “John Lehman” listed as a potter in Gardner’s New Orleans City Directory for 1860 and 1861. According to this publication, Lehman lived at the corner of Cadiz and Laurel Streets in Jefferson City, which is south of Tulane University in the Garden District near the Mississippi River levee. While in New Orleans, Lehman worked with two other immigrants: Irishman Michael Joseph Deady, who later moved to Baldwin County, Alabama, and William Virgin, whose family remained potters in New Orleans for decades. If this is the same Lehman, he must have left for Alabama by 1860, after the 1861 directory’s compilation but before its publication, because John Lehman was recorded in Randolph County, Alabama, on July 17, 1860.

Randolph County, Alabama, in 1860 was a community divided over the prospect of secession. The area had relatively few slaves, and some citizens, such as local lawyer and potter Cicero Hudson, considered themselves Union men. However, once hostilities began, the Hudsons and others sent their sons, brothers, and fathers to fight for the Confederacy. Whatever John Lehman may have thought about secession, he too donned Confederate gray, as shown by Mary Taylor Lehman’s April 1897 application for pension, fifteen years after her husband’s death, which identified her husband as a private in the Confederate Army who served under a Captain Hines and General Johnson. This has led some to believe that he may have spent time with the famous Capt. Thomas Hines and Gen. A. R. “Stovepipe” Johnson, both of whom led daring raids into Union-occupied territory. It is romantic to think that Lehman may have accompanied the daring Hines who, aside from his raids, helped Gen. John Hunt Morgan escape from a Yankee jail. But this association seems unlikely; Confederate records document Lehman as a “conscript,” or draftee, making bedpans for hospitals in Russell County, Alabama, in 1864.

A search of the now-digitized records of the Confederate Citizens File from the National Archives shows that Lehman was detailed to make pottery for military hospitals. It also presents an unflattering picture of Confederate efficiency. In August 22, 1864, contractor John D. Nance was introduced by letter to medical purveyor and surgeon W. H. Prioleau to suggest that he could supply bedpans for Confederate hospitals. On September 12, 1864, Nance requested that the military assign John Lehman the job of making two thousand bedpans in a six-month period. Nance’s letter read, in part:
Lehman, a bilingual Confederate familiar with the Ohio Valley, would likely have been a great asset to the Confederacy, perhaps even to the notorious Captain Hines, before he became “unfit for field service.”

“Dr. Sr. I will furnish you the two thousand (2000) Bed Pans at two dollars ($2.00) a pce [sic] and will commence on these as soon as I can get the turner of whom I send you a description last [sic] He is an experienced potter a German by birth but up to the business is man assigned to light duty not fit for field servis [sic] and can safely say he would be worth more to the Confederacy than in any other place.”

A week later, Nance wrote Prioleau again, because he had not heard from him regarding Lehman. On October 1, 1864, Lehman was assigned to the medical office, but a long period of inactivity followed. Finally, on March 29, 1865, Lehman was assigned to Nance in Russell County, Alabama. Soon thereafter, on March 31, an invoice was presented for payment of $76 for 38 bed pans. It seems unlikely that Lehman made the full order of bedpans, given Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865.

The fact that Lehman was considered unfit for field service but able to make pottery is intriguing. Pottery making required the use of both hands and arms, one good leg to kick the treadle powering the potter’s wheel, and another decent leg to brace the body while kicking. Perhaps Lehman was recovering from some lingering camp-borne intestinal complaint, or perhaps he was the beneficiary of political influence. Whatever the reason, Lehman ended his war years at the potter’s wheel instead of the firing line.

After the war, Lehman was again listed as “potter” in Gardner’s New Orleans City Directory for 1866 and 1867, which means he was probably working in the Crescent City in 1865 and 1866, when the directories were compiled. It makes perfect sense that he would seek gainful employment in a familiar environment during the trying years after the war. It also means that he was probably in New Orleans for the race riot of July 30, 1866, one of several violent protests against Reconstruction. At this time, Joseph Fortune Meyer (1848–1931)—who would later help establish the Newcomb College pottery program and also mentor George Ohr, who became known as the Mad Potter of Biloxi and whose decorative ceramic creations are greatly valued today—was working in close proximity to the Virgin family pottery with his father, Francois Antoine Meyer. The Meyers had been driven from their pottery on the Mississippi Coast by the 1860 hurricane. Speculation exists over the possibility that Meyer, Lehman, and Virgin worked together and that this conjunction led them, and later Ohr (who worked at Virgin Pottery in 1882), to such ceramic experimentation.

Materials in the Alabama Department of Archives and History’s 1867 “Oath of Loyalty” registry for Randolph County offer additional insight into Lehman’s life prior to the 1860s. The Reconstruction Act of 1867 required that military officers in the former Confederate states register all adult male citizens who had taken the loyalty oath. This book contains the names of Randolph County potters alongside the
name of a "John D. Lehman." Besides the unexpected middle initial, the record stated that he was naturalized in Daviess County, Kentucky, in 1859. Kentucky documents reveal that Lehman had first declared his intent to become a citizen on September 30, 1852, in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. The Indiana record of his declaration represented the beginning of the two-step naturalization process required at the time. One declared his or her intent to become a US citizen after residing in the United States for at least two years, then waited at least three years to renounce past allegiances and actually be naturalized.

On September 30, 1852, in Tippecanoe County, Indiana, Lehman swore he was aged "29 years...born in the Dukedom of Baden in Germany that he emigrated from Rotterdam in the year 1847 and that he arrived in...the city of New York in the state of New York on the fourth day of June 1847. ...it is bona fide his intention to become a citizen of the United States of America." Then almost seven years later, on April 14, 1859, in Daviess County, Kentucky, the record states "that during that time he had behaved as a man of good moral character. ...To the principles of the Constitution of the United States and...was therefore ordered that the said John David Lehman...be a citizen of the United States of America." Given the fact that John and Mary's firstborn son was also named John David Lehman, it is likely that the John D. Lehman of the Randolph County 1867 Oath Register is the potter. John Lehman must have traveled from Kentucky down the Mississippi River to New Orleans in time to be included in the 1860 city directory. He then went to Alabama in 1860 and joined the Confederate Army there. Lehman, a bilingual Confederate familiar with the Ohio Valley, would likely have been a great asset to the Confederacy, perhaps even to the notorious Captain Hines, before he became "unfit for field service."

Lehman could have been a trained potter when he came to the United States. If not, he would have had ample opportunity to train in shops from New York, Pennsylvania, the Midwest, and New Orleans. Sprig-molded decoration was a technique known in the Midwest, as was the use of presidential images and the Great Seal of the United States.

As an ex-Confederate, Lehman was probably a Democrat. His Jefferson-Jackson and Washington-Jefferson jars certainly look like stoneware advertisements for the Democratic Party, featuring sprig-molded likenesses of these iconic presidents. These great presidential jars would have provided visual expression to any political gathering such as the Fourth of July or perhaps Jackson Day (January 8th), an important holiday commemorating the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans. These jars might also have served as a centerpiece for a celebration of the nation's centennial in 1876.

While the iconography of the presidential jars may be a bit mysterious, that of the Revelation jars seems to be more specific. In 2003 scholar Samuel J. Hardman recognized that the angel with the beast depicted on Lehman's jars was an
Lehman’s jars seem to celebrate the apparent redeemers’ efforts to end Reconstruction and (they hoped) usher in, like the scene depicted from Revelation, a “New Jerusalem.”

illustration of Revelation Chapter 20. In a self-published monograph, Hardman interpreted the religious symbolism of the Revelation jars in the context of Reconstruction. He went on to suggest that Lehman’s tall African American figural jugs were meant to be corrupt Republican legislators dressed as “pirates.”

As if to prove Hardman’s analysis, an 1872 article from the Augusta Chronicle contains analogies of both the Apocalypse and piratical behavior. “The Plunder Of Eleven States By The Republican Party. Speech of Hon. Daniel W. Voorhees” states that the Reconstruction government “had no parallel in the annals of all the nations and the ages of mankind until the ascendancy of the Republican party and its inauguration of state governments in the South. Now all seven vials of the Apocalypse have been opened on that great and beautiful but unhappy region.” In reference to the state of Georgia, the article continues: “[T]he pirate and the bandit have not been worse or blacker in their spheres than the Republican Legislature and the Republican Governor of whom I am speaking were in theirs.”

Many southern newspapers throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction period referenced the Apocalypse and the Book of Revelation. For example, one Macon newspaper headline of November 10, 1874, read: “By Telegraph, The Elections, The Tidal Wave Sweeping On, In Sight of the Happy Land of Canaan, The Democratic Ship Seaworthy and Bravely Floating, Resurgam Written on her Pennant, Immense Gains All over the country, The Beast Vanquished, The Radical Dragon Flayed.” This proclamation expressed the joy the 1874 election returns evoked in southern Democrats, who believed that their final redemption of power would take one more election cycle to fully put an end to Reconstruction. Lehman’s jars seem to celebrate the apparent redeemers’ efforts to end Reconstruction and (they hoped) usher in, like the scene depicted from Revelation, a “New Jerusalem.” However, it is unclear whether these represent the potter’s personal beliefs, the commissions of patrons, or simply sentiments that would help sell his wares.

Despite his posthumous fame, John Lehman was not famous during his lifetime, and he left a sketchy historical record. That record reflects a journeyman potter of modest socioeconomic status moving about for work and sending money home. Lehman and his family were not poor, but they were far from rich. In 1870 Lehman and his young family listed their assets on the Census of Agriculture for Randolph County. They owned twenty acres of improved land and sixty of woodland. Their farm was worth $150, and their farming implements worth $10. They had one horse, one milk cow, another cow or bull, and five pigs, totaling $200 worth of livestock. They produced 130 bushels of “Indian Corn,” 40 bushels of oats, a half bale of cotton, 40 bushels of sweet potatoes, and 40 pounds of butter. Their homemade agricultural products were worth $50 and slaughtered livestock worth $100. By 1880 these agricultural products were worth $200.
From there Lehman apparently ventured out as a journeyman potter, living away from his family in order to provide for it. Lehman apparently worked from time to time in Georgia and paid a poll tax in Dougherty County, Georgia, during the period of 1870–1873. His assessment on 1883 tax rolls while in Stockton, Clinch County, Georgia, stated the worth of his whole property at $500, based upon the value of his animal stock. As a comparison, a local pottery owner named Shimuel Timmerman owned $3,510 of “whole property” from various holdings.

On Tuesday, September 11, 1883, the Columbus, Georgia, Daily Enquirer Sun yielded this sad notice: “John Lehman, of Stockton, who was employed in the jug factory in Albany, died Tuesday night of congestion of the brain. He leaves eleven children.” This means that Lehman died the week before, on September 4, of what may have been a stroke.

The legacy of Lehman is the mystery of his decorated jars and his well-made utilitarian forms that are also highly prized by collectors and museums. Additionally, it seems likely that Lehman may have introduced the notion of figural vessels into Alabama, as later Randolph County potters such as J. L. Matthews, Jesse Weathers, and members of the Boggs family sculpted likenesses of people and animals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As more Lehman pieces are found and more historical records are digitized, the search for John Lehman will continue.