

History of Small Towns in West Virginia: Newell and the Legacy of Fiestaaware

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Educational Objectives

- Participants will receive a brief overview of the history of Newell, West Virginia.
- Participants will recognize three significant landmarks in Newell, West Virginia.
- Participants will identify the cultural impact of the Fiesta Tableware Company on Newell, West Virginia.

Newell is an unincorporated community in northern Hancock County, West Virginia, in the Grant District. Situated along the Upper Ohio Valley portion of the Ohio River, Newell borders East Liverpool, Ohio, and lies just 10 miles from the county seat of New Cumberland, West Virginia. The population has slowly declined over the years, dropping from 2,032 in 1980 to 1,203 in 2020.

Spanning only 0.9 square miles, Newell is often described as a town where “if you blink, you might just miss it.” Despite its size, Newell is known as “the mother of pottery manufacturing,” and is home to the world-famous Fiesta Tableware Company.



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History of Newell

Newell was settled during Lord Dunmore's War from May to October 1774. After the United States gained independence in 1776, settlers cleared the forests, making the land into fertile farmland.

In 1800, Hugh Pugh, a man from New Jersey, acquired a 400-acre tract in what is now northern Hancock County, including the present-day communities of Newell, Congo, Chester and New Manchester and named the area Pughtown. Among its early settlers was John Newell, a talented entrepreneur who operated two pottery kilns along Tubs Run. He produced yellowware—heavy-bodied utilitarian ware, such as mixing bowls, crocks, storage vessels—so named because of the yellow coloring in the clay (Waight, 1957). John Newell passed away in 1884, leaving behind seven children, including Hugh Newell.

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Hugh Newell was a well-known farmer and prominent Republican. In 1859, he married Alizan Marks. Together, they had six children between 1860 and 1869: Mary, J. Bently, Alice, Frank, Samuel and George. The Newell family operated two large farms and ran a successful ferry terminal that helped connect Newell to East Liverpool, Ohio.

In 1891, a group of businesspeople from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, led by William F. Loyd, sought land for a large rolling mill or factory. They purchased property from the Newell and Wells families, but their plans were halted due to the economic downturn of the early 1890s.

In October 1902, the North American Manufacturing Company, led by Louis Aaron, president of the Homer Laughlin China Company, purchased 428 acres of that land for \$75,000 to mechanize and expand its operations. Development followed rapidly. The Newell Bridge opened in 1905, sparking a construction boom that drew Italian, Austrian, and Slavic-speaking immigrant workers from countries such as Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. These workers sought opportunities and contributed significantly to the town's early development (Martin, 2015). By the end of 1907, Newell was officially established, with 130 homes and a population of 700.

News of Newell's growth spread quickly, attracting additional factories and helping it become "the most distinctive pottery city in America" by 1912–1913.

Newell's factories included: The Homer Laughlin China Company, 30 kilns; The Homer Laughlin China Company, 16 kilns; Edwin M. Knowles China Company, 14 kilns; Kenilworth Tile Co.; Specialty Porcelain Works; Kenilworth Brick Co.; Newell Clay-Forming Novelty Co.; Birch Machine Co.; Newell Grinding & Pulverizing Co.; New Water & Power Co.; Newell Street Railway Co. (North American Manufacturing Company, pg. 5, 1912-1913).

In 1923, Homer Laughlin built a revolutionary pottery plant utilizing a tunnel kiln that

distributed heat evenly—resulting in higher-quality products. Between 1924 and 1927, under general manager William E. Wells, the company was expanded, boosting employment and production. In 1929, the East Liverpool operations closed, focusing all efforts on Newell.

The 1930s marked the introduction of the iconic Fiestaaware, designed by Frederick Hurten Rhead in 1936 to "brighten up tables and lives" during the Great Depression (West Virginia Economic Development, 2023).

From the 1950s to 1990s, competition from low-cost imports increased. The company shifted toward commercial dinnerware, launching the Best China hotel line in 1959. Despite challenges, commercial sales eventually outpaced retail. In the 1980s, Homer Laughlin became an environmental leader by introducing lead-free glazes. In 1986, it reintroduced Fiesta with modern materials and colors.

Leadership eventually passed to the fourth generation of the Wells family. Joe Wells III and later his sister Liz McIlvain, who became the company's first female president in 2012, helped modernize operations. In 2020, the company rebranded as The Fiesta Tableware Company, focusing exclusively on home dinnerware.

Life for the Workers

Life for Newell's pottery workers mirrored broader patterns described in *Smokestacks in the Hills* by historian Lou Martin, who chronicled the experiences of West Virginia's rural-industrial labor force. Many of Newell's early residents, especially Italian, Slavic, and Austrian immigrants, traded farm work for factory jobs, finding employment in the region's booming ceramics industry. These jobs offered steady wages but came with long hours, physical strain and occupational hazards like heat and dust exposure. Families often lived near the plant, with women contributing through informal labor and children sometimes leaving school early to work.



Despite hardships, these workers helped forge a resilient, tightly knit community rooted in shared labor and cultural traditions. Their legacy continues today, not just in the colorful ceramics that made Newell famous, but also in the continued pride of a town built by the hardworking hands of immigrants.

4-H Fiestaware: A West Virginia Collaboration

In the early 1990s, the Homer Laughlin China Company partnered with West Virginia 4-H to create a line of 4-H branded Fiesta products, including plates, cups, mugs and serving dishes. According to retired Extension agent Brenda Pruett, Jeff Orndorff, a state 4-H specialist for 28 years, led the project, with the 4-H organization covering the initial production costs. Although the exact launch year is unclear, green plates are believed to have been the first items produced.

As inventory began to outweigh profits, Ohio County Extension agent Lewis Honaker and Taylor County Extension agent Jenny Murray, who now serves as associate program leader for 4-H Youth Development, played key roles in managing and selling the remaining stock. Proceeds from the sales supported 4-H project books and educational materials.

While the 4-H branded Fiesta line is no longer in production, the West Virginia Association of 4-H Agents retains the rights to the design. Collectors may still find pieces through secondhand sources such as eBay, Facebook Marketplace, or local Extension offices.

The Impact of the Fiesta Tableware Company

As Newell's largest employer, the Homer Laughlin China Co., now the Fiesta Tableware Co., was central to the town's growth throughout the 20th century. It provided stable jobs, helped form a close-knit community and gave Newell national recognition through the popularity of its colorful and collectible tableware. Generations

of families worked at the plant, creating strong community ties. Tourism and retail grew alongside Fiesta's collector culture. The company's ability to evolve helped Newell endure the decline of the American pottery industry and remain economically viable.

Significant Landmarks

Newell, West Virginia, may be small, but it is rich in history and home to several remarkable landmarks that reflect its cultural and industrial heritage. These sites not only tell the story of the town's development but also highlight the deep connection between the community and its pottery roots. From the lively days of Laurel Hollow Park to the enduring legacy of the Fiesta Factory and historic elegance of the Wells House, each landmark offers a glimpse into the unique character and legacy of Newell.

Laurel Hollow Park

Laurel Hollow Park, established in 1905 after the Newell Bridge and streetcar were lines were built, quickly became a popular recreation site. With picnic areas, swings, benches and live music, the park attracted crowds from both sides of the river. In 1906, a dam was built to create a lake, and by 1907, the park featured the region's first open-air theater. It later expanded into a full zoo and amusement area, housing a variety of animals, including monkeys, seals and polar bears. One mischievous monkey named Polly was known to steal handbags.

However, the park began to decline after the death of its champion, George Washington Clarke, in 1913. By 1914, the animals had been removed and the zoo was closed. Over the years, the once-bustling park was abandoned, becoming overgrown and falling into disrepair, leaving behind only traces of its former grandeur.

Since 2008, restoration efforts led by the Newell Community Improvement Coalition have been underway to preserve the park's legacy.



The Fiesta Factory

A symbol of Newell's pottery legacy, the Fiesta factory produces the beloved tableware known across the country. The factory grounds still feature several historic buildings dating back to the early 20th century, where the original products were crafted during the Great Depression. These brick structures, with their tall kilns and industrial character, offer a visual connection to Newell's manufacturing past and stand as enduring symbols of the town's heritage.

It hosts an annual tent sale that draws thousands of collectors and tourists eager to find rare colors and discounted pieces. The event is a major economic and cultural event for the community, offering a glimpse into the artistry and tradition behind Fiesta.

The Wells House

Built by the influential Wells family, the Wells House is a stately architectural landmark that represents Newell's industrial success and prosperity in the early 1900s. It serves as a reminder of the family's vital role in establishing the Homer Laughlin China Company in Newell. Today, the house remains a beloved historical and cultural treasure within the community.

Discussion Questions:

- Did you ever buy any of the 4-H Fiesta Ware? Do you still have it? Do you plan to pass it on to your children?

- Laurel Hollow Park was once a vibrant recreational spot but eventually declined. What do you think communities can do to preserve or revitalize historic landmarks like this?
- Share where you grew up. What is the historical significance of your hometown?

Visit the Fiesta factory at 672 Fiesta Drive, Newell, WV 26505. Explore more of Newell's history by visiting: <http://www.laurelhollowpark.net/>

Resources

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