

# Granite City, Illinois

In kitchens across America, one can find granite-ware pans and dishes made with porcelain on steel using a technique which originated in Granite City, Illinois. This industrial city, neighboring St. Louis, has been home to a variety of factories and businesses over the past century, and is still home to many descendants of the immigrants who kept those factories humming.

The rich soil along the Mississippi River supported Native American civilizations for millennia, followed by Anglo-American farmers during the 1800s. The growth of St. Louis spurred the development of other communities in the area since settlers could easily travel to the city to obtain supplies and readily sell their produce. The Granite City area was known as Six Mile during the 1800s, since it was six miles away from St. Louis on the opposite side of the Mississippi River.

Frederick G. and William Niedringhaus had been operating a successful ironworks company in St. Louis since 1866. On a visit to Europe, William learned of a process whereby metal could be coated with enamel to resist rust, and in 1878 patented a process to embed colored patterns in the enamel. The brothers' pattern resembled granite, with two colors marbled together. The Niedringhaus brothers decided to purchase less expensive land across the river from St. Louis for their factory and employee housing. They laid out a company town called Granite City and required their employees to live in the town they created near the factory. Houses were purchased with Niedringhaus mortgages, but unlike other company towns of the time, the city government was left up to the residents.

Granite City was a boom town by the start of the 20th century. American Steel, Marble Lead Works and other industries sprang up. The Niedringhaus family gave free tracts of land for churches and parks, paved the sidewalks and advertised their livable city in Europe. Workers poured in from Wales, Hungary, Mexico, Armenia, Poland, Greece, Germany and Italy. As late as 1946, a quarter of Granite City's residents were foreign born.

The Granite Ware plant prospered until the 1950s when stainless steel and pyrex cookware replaced iron-based utensils. Other factories experienced similar declines, and the city's fortune rose and fell with the changes. As of 2008, several large manufacturing corporations operate in Granite City, including steel, food and clothing companies. The working-class neighborhoods are well-kept and thriving, and the downtown has been revitalized with art and music studios. Unlike many of America's industrial towns, Granite City is still alive and well.

## Source(s):

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