



Oswald Counsell Stephens was known as ‘the father of New Zealand pottery’ for his work in establishing the craft. Born in Dunedin on 11 December 1896 to John Jefferson Counsell Stephens, a solicitor, and Mary, nee Duke,, he was educated at Otago Boys High School,

Otago University, graduating MSc with first class honours in inorganic chemistry in 1923. The following year he married Kathleen Ailsa Ewing.

His interest in ceramics began when he became a chemist with NZ Insulators Ltd at Temuka in 1924. They were having problems with clays used for insulators and Oswald Stephens installed a laboratory to test the clays. He then explored the South Island find better ones, and learned 'a good deal about the peculiarities of clay.

In 1932 he lost his job because of the Depression, and began teaching science at King Edward Technical College in Dunedin. He thought pottery would be 'a perfect craft to teach children' and offered to introduce classes, but the idea was turned down. He then decided to explore the possibilities of by himself. Like other pioneer potters he had to construct his own equipment, making a wheel out of sewing machine parts and a glaze spray booth out of a gramophone turntable. He imported a small electric furnace and the best clays from Britain Norway and France.

It took him five years to produce the first pot he was pleased with. From then on, the quality of his work was recognised widely. In 1940 he was accepted as a member of the Otago Art Society. At the Otago Centennial Industries Fair in 1948 he had a bay of his own.

During these years Oswald and Ailsa Stephens had also been active in Dunedin theatre – she directed and he was an accomplished actor. In 1961 Oswald retired as a teacher but continued working as a potter, holding exhibitions, writing and teaching, and specializing in colours and textures. He prided himself on being able to produce any colour he was asked for, and built up a library of 2,380 glazes.

He died in Dunedin on 8 May 1980, survived by his wife and two children. He, and Ailsa, are buried in the Jewish Section of Dunedin's Southern Cemetery.