

# Berlin Potteries

1855 to about 1864

The first account of pottery manufacturing in Berlin was the following brief newspaper article in 1855.

*BERLIN NOVELTIES - The Berlin Courant notices a novel exhibition at that place. Messrs. Vail and Lewis are exhibiting the method of manufacturing pottery ware, having a domesticated bear for their motive power. The Courant also says that they have demonstrated the fact that Berlin clay is superior to any other clay in Northern Wisconsin, and that it will make cream colored brick, equal to that in our own city. (Milwaukee). The Weekly Wisconsin Sept. 5, 1855*



42-year-old potter Alson Vail moved with his family from Vienna, NY in 1855 to Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Alson had a brother who was still living in Vienna, NY at the time. Their father, Nathaniel Vail, was also a potter in Vienna who had passed away 5 years earlier. The Mr. Lewis mentioned in the announcement was probably the part-owner of a pottery in Racine. The bear was probably purchased from a Mr. Clough. Clough had created a traveling earthenware pottery on a boat that originated in Menasha and was moored in Oshkosh in 1855. Another experienced potter lived nearby in 1855. Henry Tolman had moved to Warren, Wisconsin which is 19 miles west of Berlin from Worcester, Mass where he had started what was said to be the first Terra Cotta pottery works in America in 1845. Henry and his 23-year-old son Charles are listed in the 1860 Census for Warren in

Waushara County, both with the occupation of "farmer". It was not uncommon for potters to farm during the growing season and to work as potters the rest of the year. The Tolman farm was located midway between the Berlin and Wautoma potteries. It seems more than coincidental that two potteries sprang up in 1855, the same year Henry moved there. No evidence was found that Tolman was involved with the startup or operation of either pottery, but between Tolman purchased one of the Berlin Potteries about five years later.

A city directory was published in 1858 which provides insights into pottery making in Berlin. It lists a pottery on Union Street near Pearl Street and proprietors Alson Vail and his brother Tracy. There is no mention of Mr. Lewis or the bear. Alson Vail apparently left the partnership soon after the directory was published since by 1959, he was living in Lacrosse and had started a pottery with a man named B.E. Brower. The Lacrosse pottery burned in 1860 and Alson Vail subsequently took up blacksmithing in Lacrosse for a time before moving to Iowa to pot.

In 1859 the Moses Farrar family lived in Berlin for a short time. When Farrar started a new pottery in

Portage later in 1859, a Portage newspaper announcement mentioned that the Farrar's were "*recently of Berlin*". There is no evidence that they potted in Berlin, but the potteries are probably what attracted them there.

The June 30, 1860, the Berlin Census Products of Industry Schedule shows Tracy Vail as the proprietor of a pottery. It lists the pottery as having \$400 in capital invested, 60 tons of clay on hand valued at \$60, 110 cords of wood valued at \$175, two potters, a horse for power and \$2,500 of revenue in the past twelve months. One of the two employees was probably Tracy's son, Alexander.

The 1860 Census Products of Industry schedule also shows a second, larger pottery operating in Berlin, this one run by Thekemas Sherwood. It lists capital invested of \$500, 150 tons of clay valued at \$150, 100 cords of wood valued at \$100, four employees and \$2,000 in revenue in the past twelve months. With four employees (compared to Vail's two) and more clay on hand it appears to be a larger operation. While its revenues are lower, it may have been in full production for less than twelve months. The location of the pottery is unknown. The business listings in the Census are on different pages suggesting two pottery sites. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that Sherwood simply purchased the Union Street pottery and the Census included both businesses during the transition. It is also possible that two potteries operated on a common campus.

The 1860 Berlin City Directory lists Thekemas Sherwood and his 18-year-old son William as potters living together. The 1858 City directory lists the Sherwood family as being in the dry goods business, suggesting that the pottery probably started in 1859.

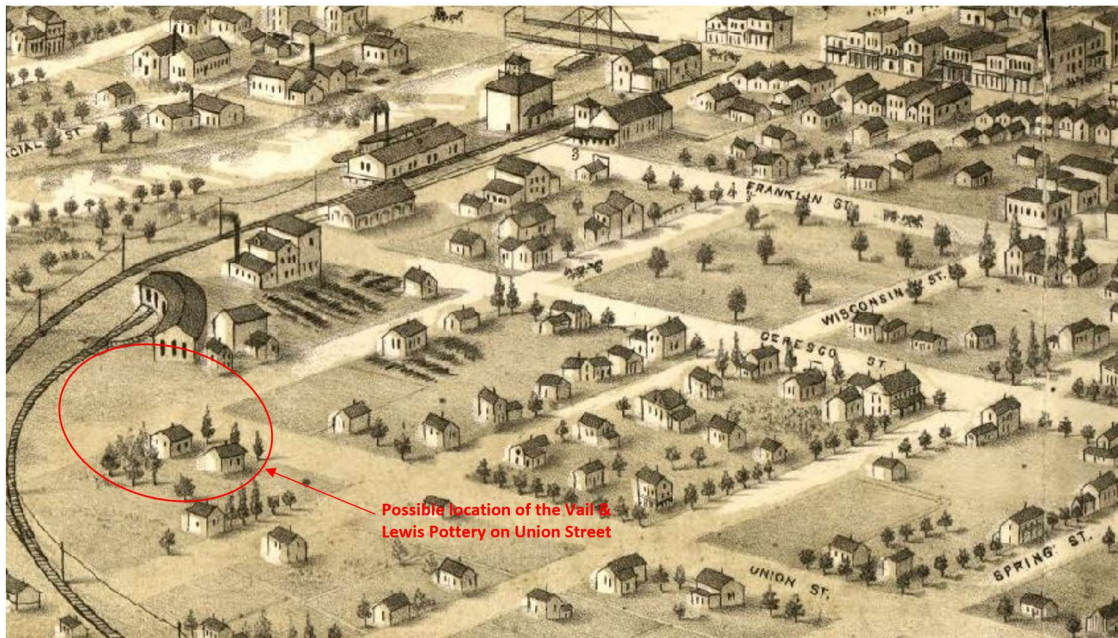


Figure 1 This 1867 Birdseye View shows no kiln on Union Street near Pearl Street or elsewhere in the City, suggesting that both Potteries were gone by then. The location of the Sherwood Pottery is unknown.

Another potter who appears in the 1860 Berlin Census is former Whitewater potter George Mounford. Mounford moved to Whitewater from Staffordshire at the urging of his brother Thomas who worked for

Cole at the Fremont Street Pottery in Whitewater starting in 1847. It is not known if Mounford worked for Vail or for Sherwood.



Figure 2 Bachelder salt-glazed crock with the unusual Roman Numeral capacity. In 1860 Charles Tolman was living with Carlton Bachelder.

Sometime between 1860 and 1863 Tolman purchased one of the Berlin potteries, probably the Sherwood Pottery. The July 30, 1863, edition of the Berlin Courant states that *the "pottery recently owned by Mr. Tolman was sold to Messrs. Cole & Hunter of Whitewater."* After the sale, the Tolman and Sherwood families moved to Iowa. William Sherwood married Henry Tolman's daughter Josephine in 1865 in Eldora Iowa and Henry Tolman started a pottery there.

The 1860 Menasha Census shows Charles Tolman living with Carlton Bachelder with the occupation of "Laborer". This is interesting because there are examples of Bachelder stoneware with Berlin-style flowers and Roman Numeral capacities. It is likely that Charles moved to Berlin when his father bought the pottery.

No record has been found to indicate when either pottery ceased operation. The last record found for both potteries was in 1863. Tracy's son Alexander registered for the draft in Berlin in June 1863, listing "potter" as his occupation. Tracy Vail passed away before 1870 (exact date unknown) and his widow Lucy and her children remained in Berlin. In 1863 Cole & Hunter bought the Tolman pottery and it seems unlikely they would have closed it right away, but we don't know how long it operated. The Civil war disrupted many businesses. An 1867 Birdseye View of Berlin does not show a kiln on Union Street or elsewhere in the City, so presumably both potteries had closed before then. There is no record of anyone with an occupation of potter in the 1869 Berlin City Directory. There are no Berlin City Directories available between 1858 and 1869.

Both Berlin potteries made lead glazed, wheel turned wares for farm and home use. Most of the surviving larger-sized pots are decorated with manganese flowers and Roman Numeral capacities. Known forms include jugs, butter pots, jars, butter churns, and cream pots but they probably also made other undecorated utilitarian wares like milk pans, pitchers, bottles, flowerpots, etc. The local clay source is unknown. Neither pottery signed their wares, but they have a distinctive and easily recognizable style.

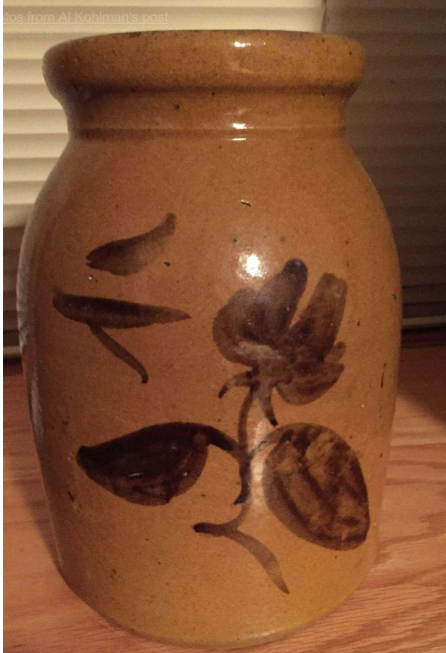
There are many examples of pottery attributed to the Berlin potteries. While they look a bit like Whitewater pottery there are distinct differences. Berlin pots are much heavier and more durable than Whitewater pottery. All Whitewater pottery was made from the same clay deposits and is light, porous

and very brittle. No Berlin-style sherds have been found in Whitewater. The rim finish, glaze, and decoration of Whitewater pottery is very different from Berlin pots.

The authors know of no sherds have been found at the Pearl Street pottery site, or anywhere in Berlin for that matter to prove the attribution. Further investigation is needed. The two Berlin potteries produced many thousands of gallons of pottery and it is inconceivable that potteries of this size could operate for almost ten years and leave no surviving pottery examples behind. Berlin pottery is regularly found in the central part of the state.

The Charles Tolman connection with the Bachelder pottery helps attribute Berlin pottery. Two- and three-gallon Berlin pots are mostly marked with Roman Numeral capacities painted with manganese – an unusual practice. Some Bachelder pots also have Roman Numerals and Charles Tolman worked at both the Bachelder and Berlin potteries.

Because of the complicated succession of potters, I suggest a timeline for the different operators to make it clear to the reader. We should do this for several of the potteries where there are complicated partnership successions. I also thought that Mounford came to Berlin at the time Cole & Hunter bought the pottery but I guess this blows that theory.



*Figure 3 One gallon earthenware jar. The "1" capacity mark was also used on jars as small as half gallon and quart capacities. Most potters did not bother decorating smaller pieces.*



*Figure 4 Two-gallon earthenware Berlin crock. Most two- and three-gallon pots are usually marked with Roman Numerals to the left of the flowers, but there are exceptions.*



*Figure 5 Note the difference in the flower - no loop at the base and different flower and leaves. Clearly a different artist and possibly a different pottery from Figures 4 & 5.*



*Figure 6 This piece has a well drawn "2" and the flower differs from the typical Berlin flowers like those in Figures 4 & 5. Sherood would have used a different decoration than the Vail pottery.*



Figure 7 The most abundant decoration style has a loop at the stem, drooping leaves, and Roman Numeral capacities. Capacities drawn in standard numerals are rare except all 4- and 5- gallon pieces are marked this way. This style may be from the Vail Pottery.



*Figure 8 These appear to be painted by a different decorator than those in figure 7. Could these be products of the Sherwood/Tolman/Cole & Hunter Pottery?*