

Berlin Potteries 1855 to about 1864

Information about the potteries in Berlin has some gaps, especially ownership chronology. Berlin earthenware is not stamped but looks similar to Whitewater ware which has caused misattribution by collectors for years. No sherds have been found at the one known site in Berlin, but there is enough compelling evidence to attribute pottery to the Berlin manufacturers.

The Union Street Pottery

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



Figure 1 Rim finishes on Berlin cream pots and crocks are simple square or round in shape, while Whitewater rims are tooled and intricately shaped. The biggest difference is the density of Berlin's clay. Berlin pottery is far heavier and is more durable than Whitewater.

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).¹

42-year-old potter Alson Vail moved with his family from Vienna, NY in 1855 to Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Alson's brother Tracey was still living in Vienna, NY at the time. Their father, Nathaniel Vail, was also a potter in Vienna, had passed away five years earlier. The Mr. Lewis mentioned in the announcement was probably the part-owner of a pottery in Racine.² 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 1855.³

Another experienced potter lived nearby in 1855. Henry Tolman had moved to Warren, Wisconsin which is 19 miles west of Berlin from Worcester, Massachusetts where he had started what was said to be the first Terra Cotta pottery works in America in 1845 (see Figure 9). 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".⁴ 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 that both started in 1855. It seems more than coincidental that two potteries sprang up in 1855, the same year Henry moved there, but no evidence was found that Tolman was involved with the startup or

operation of either pottery, but Tolman purchased one of the Berlin Potteries about five years later.



Figure 2 Besides unique practice of marking capacity in Roman Numerals, the Union Street pottery used a distinctive flower with drooping leaves and a loop at the base of the flower.

A city directory published in 1858 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 1858, 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 1869/70 He was potting in Moingona, Iowa.⁵

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 the Union Street 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.



Figure 3 The decoration found on the largest number of surviving examples of Berlin pottery has a loop at the stem, drooping leaves, and Roman Numeral capacities, except for 4- and 5- gallon pieces are marked with digits. A best guess is that pottery with this decoration was made at the Union Street Pottery for two reasons. First, there are ovoid shaped cream pots that are more typical of pottery made in the 1850's. Also, the Vail's operated the pottery longer, from 1855 until it closed in the early 1860's. While the Sherwood Pottery was larger, it had a shorter life (1850-186?). The decorator of the pieces above was probably Tracy Vail since it was a two-man operation.

We found no record of when the Union Street Pottery closed. Tracy's son Alexander registered for the Civil War draft in Berlin in June 1863, listing "potter" as his occupation, but it does not say which pottery he worked for, so he could have been working at the Sherwood Pottery if the Vail Pottery was closed by then. Tracy Vail passed away between 1860 and 1870 (exact date unknown) and his widow Lucy and her children remained in Berlin. It is possible that the Union Street Pottery was still running in 1863 but it is also possible that the Union Street Pottery closed in 1860 and was purchased by Sherwood.

The Sherwood Pottery

The 1860 Census Products of Industry schedule lists a second, larger pottery operating in Berlin, this one run by Thekemas Sherwood, a 48-year-old New York native. Thekemas Sherwood and his 18-year-old son William are listed as potters living together. The 1858 Berlin City directory lists the Sherwood family as being in the dry goods business, suggesting that the pottery probably started in 1859.

The 1860 Census Products of Industry schedule lists Sherwood's Pottery as having 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 two at Vail's Union Street Pottery) and more clay on hand, it appears to be a larger operation. While its revenues are lower, it may not have been operating a full year when the Census was taken in June.

The location of the Sherwood 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.



Figure 4 Bachelder salt-glazed crock with the unusual Roman Numeral capacity. In 1860 Charles Tolman was living with Carlton Bachelder. Charles probably also worked for his father when he bought the Sherwood Pottery in the early 1860's.

"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 Sherwood Pottery.

We found no record of a closing date for the Sherwood Pottery. In 1863 Cole & Hunter bought the

The 1860 Berlin Census lists former Whitewater potter George Mounford. Mounford moved to Whitewater in 1849 from Staffordshire at the urging of his brother Thomas who worked for Cole at the Fremont Street Pottery in Whitewater. Mounford probably worked at the Sherwood Pottery.

Sometime between 1860 and 1863 Tolman purchased one of the Berlin potteries, probably the Sherwood Pottery, then in July 1863 Tolman sold the pottery to Daniel Cole and William Hunter. 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

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. The 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 from 1859 to 1868. Henry Tolman was potting in Eldora Iowa, and the Sherwood's went to Cedar Falls Iowa.



Figure 5 These Berlin piece appear to have been decorated by a different decorator than those in Figure 1, suggesting that they could be products of the Sherwood/Tolman/Cole & Hunter Pottery.



Figure 6 These are also the work a different potter from those in Figure 1. We have seen the rooster tail motif only on jugs as of the date of this article. It is possible that these are products of the Sherwood/Tolman/Cole & Hunter Pottery.

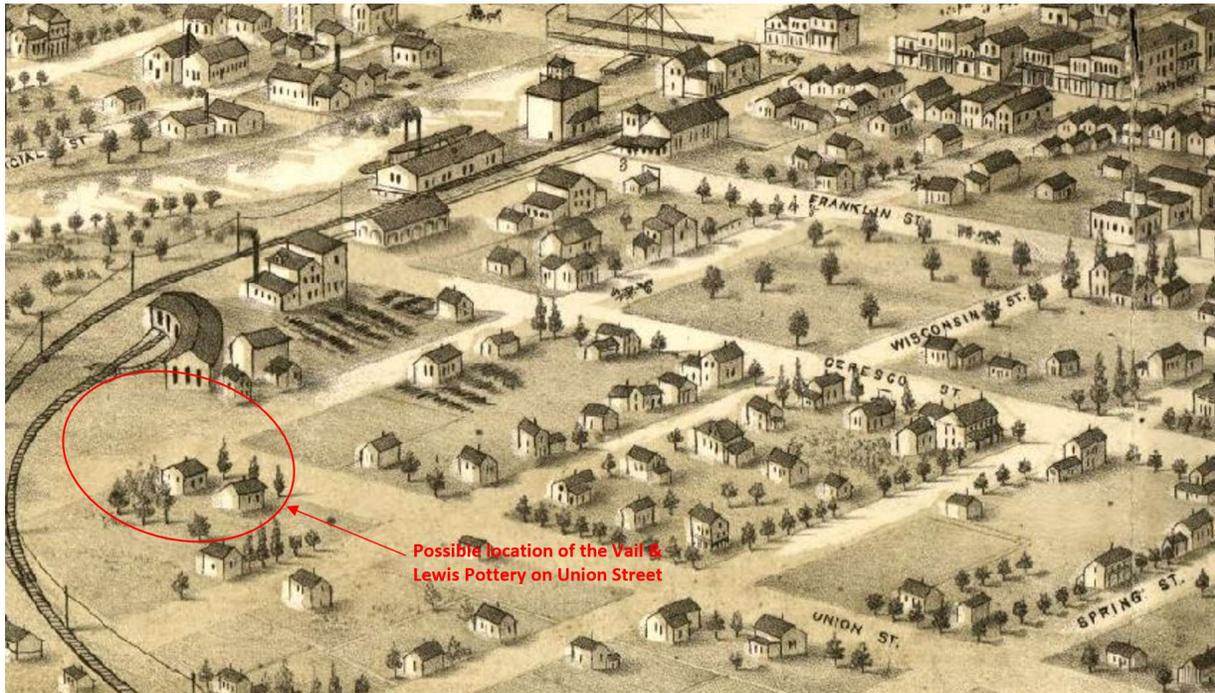


Figure 7 This 1867 Birdseye View of Berlin shows no kiln on Union Street near Pearl Street or elsewhere in the city, suggesting that both potteries were gone by then. The location of the Sherwood Pottery is unknown.⁶

About Earthenware from Berlin

Both Berlin potteries made lead glazed, wheel-turned earthenware 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 (crocks), jars, butter churns, and cream pots but they probably also made other undecorated utilitarian wares like milk pans, pitchers, bottles, flowerpots, etc. The location of the local clay source is unknown. Neither pottery signed their wares, but they have a distinctive and easily recognizable style of decoration, glaze, and clay body.

There are many extant 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 that made pottery that is light, porous, and very brittle – very different from Berlin pottery. No Berlin-style sherds have been found in Whitewater amongst the many sherds recovered from either of the two sites that are from the time period. The rim finish, glaze, and decoration of Whitewater pottery is quite different from Berlin pots.

The authors are not aware of any sherds that have been found at the Pearl Street pottery site, or anywhere in Berlin for that matter, despite a walking examination of the site. The exact location of the pottery is not known, and there are some large industrial buildings in the area that may be covering the

site and sherds. Most likely, there are sherds on the site, but below grade. It's very likely that some will be found eventually.

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. Collectors have found jugs, jars, cream pots etc. in about a fifty-mile radius of Berlin, e.g., Ripon, Plover, Appleton, and Stevens Point. While circumstantial, the location provides provenance when found in original settings and cannot be ignored. No specific information has surfaced to date on the Berlin potters' method of distribution, but earthenware makers of this time period typically relied on sales at the factory site, local wholesale dealers and simple wagon transportation to nearby farms and households. No Berlin-style pieces have been found in the Whitewater area.

The Charles Tolman connection with the Bachelder pottery provides another clue that helps solidify our Berlin Pottery attribution. Two- and three-gallon Berlin pots are mostly marked with Roman Numeral capacities painted with manganese – a possibly unusual practice for US potteries. Some Bachelder pots also have painted Roman Numeral capacities, showing a connection between Bachelder and Berlin. Charles Tolman probably worked at both the Bachelder and Berlin potteries.



Figure 8 Berlin butter churn with original dasher cover. The capacity is marked with a digit instead of a Roman Numeral. This piece is probably from the Union Street Pottery.



Figure 9 The Tolman family made pottery in West Sterling, Massachusetts beginning in the 1830s. Boyden enlisted West Sterling potter, Henry Tolman, Jr., to make terra cotta architectural elements for him based upon his own designs. Boyden then used terra cotta in many of his building designs in Worcester. Many examples still exist today.

References

- ¹ George & Lewis Pottery, Caledonia, Racine County, 1850 Ingersol George & L.F. Lewis
- ² Menasha - *Traveling Pottery* article on www.madefromclay.org
- ³ US Census Population and Products of Industry Schedules for 1860 for Berlin, Waushara and Menasha
- ⁴ *The Berlin City Directory and Business Directory* 1858 Published by Smith, Du Moulin & Co. Milwaukee
- ⁵ 1867 Birdseye View of Berlin Wisconsin

-
- ¹ The Weekly Wisconsin Sept. 5, 1855
 - ² George & Lewis Pottery, Caledonia, Racine County, 1850 Ingersol George & L.F. Lewis
 - ³ Menasha - Traveling Pottery article on www.madefromclay.org
 - ⁴ US Census Population and Products of Industry Schedules for 1860 for Berlin, Waushara and Menasha
 - ⁵ *The Berlin City Directory and Business Directory* 1858 Published by Smith, Du Moulin & Co. Milwaukee
 - ⁶ 1867 Birdseye View of Berlin Wisconsin