

Brower & Vail Pottery La Crosse 1859 - 1860

Very little is known about this short-lived pottery. No pottery or sherds have been found and very little is known about B. E. Brower. What we do know is the location of the pottery, when it burned, and quite a bit about Brower's partner, Alson Vail.



Figure 1 1859 Map of La Crosse showing the pottery buildings on the river.

The pottery was located on the east bank of the Mississippi just south of Mississippi Street a block away from the Gund Brewery. Two buildings are shown on a rare and highly detailed 1859 Plat Map of the City of La Crosse.¹ The bank is steep, and the buildings appear to be built into the hillside. This land would have been tricky to build on but inexpensive to buy.

We found an entry for a "B.E. Brower" in the 1850 Census in Lebanon, Ohio in Warren County working for a merchant as a clerk, then 42 years old. Another Census entry in 1855 found him living on the north side of La Crosse, with no occupation given. Apparently, Mr. Brower had no potting experience.²

Alson Vail on the other hand had extensive potting background. He came to La Crosse in 1858 from Berlin, Wisconsin where he and his brother started a pottery. Before that he potted in New York. In 1842 he was living in Oneida, New York working as a potter. His father Nathaniel was also a potter there. Alson had the knowledge to build and operate the new pottery.³

The pottery operated for just a short time. In August a notice appeared in an Appleton newspaper about the burning of the pottery at 2 am on Wednesday, August 8, 1860.⁴

The pottery of B. E. Brower, in the South part of La Crosse, with all his stock and machinery, was destroyed by fire Wednesday morning, at two o'clock. Estimated loss \$3,000, of which \$800 was covered by insurance.

The 1860 Census for La Crosse lists Alson Vail as working as a blacksmith and living with his wife Caroline. This is interesting because the Census is as of June 30 of the year, indicating he had already left the pottery more than a month before it burned.

We did not find further records of Brower and Alson Vail moved to Iowa to pot. In 1870 he is listed in the Census as "works in pottery" in the township of Marcy in Boone County, north of Des Moines.⁵ He later moved to Rochester, New York and worked as a peddler until his death sometime after 1880.

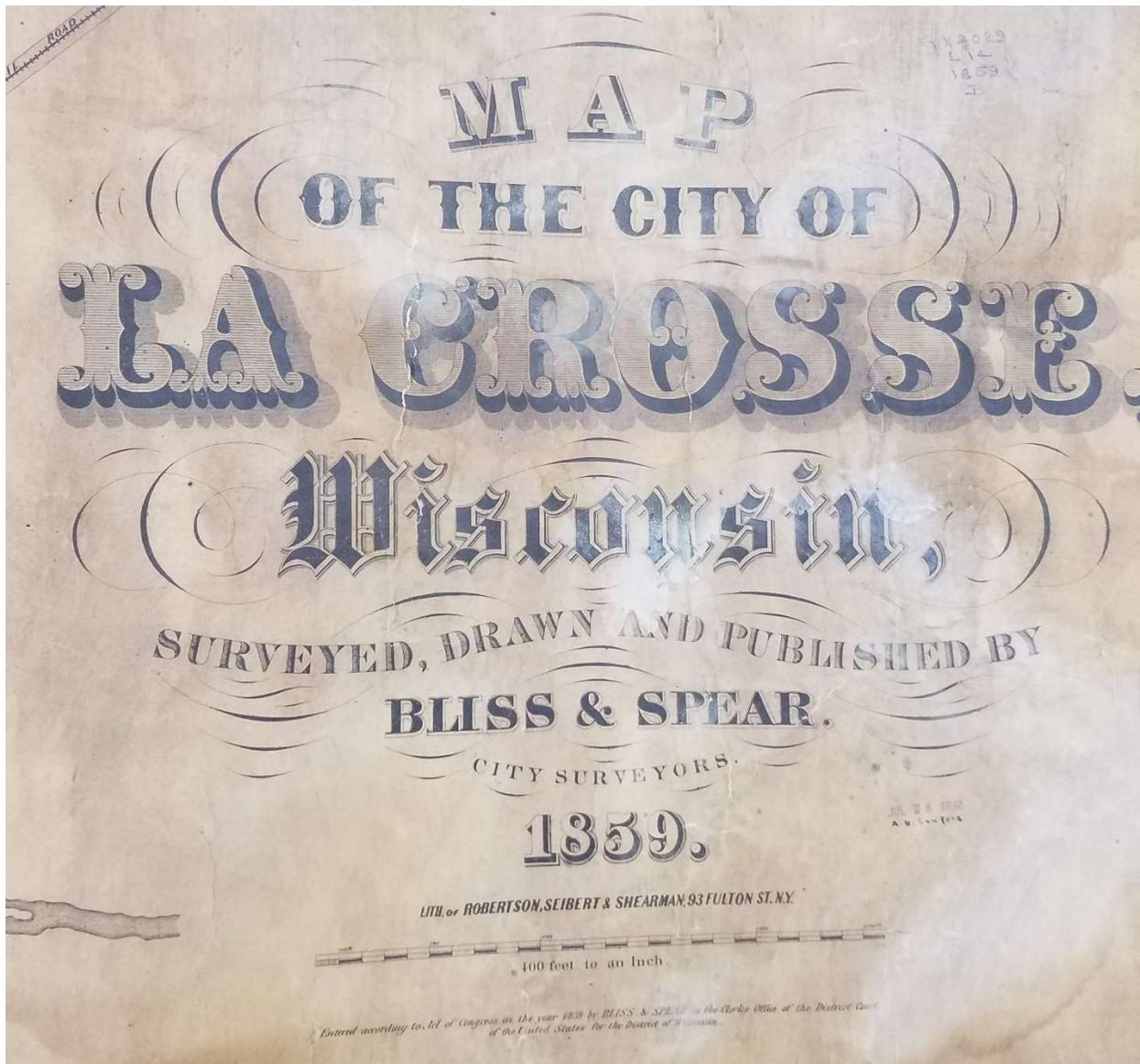


Figure 2 1859 Map publisher.

¹ Map of the City of La Crosse Wisconsin Surveyed, Drawn and Published by Bliss and Spear City Surveyors, 1859. From the Wisconsin Historical Society collection.

² U.S. Census 1850 Lebanon, Warren County Ohio and 1855 Census for La Crosse Wisconsin.

³ madfromclay.org *Berlin Potteries 1855 to about 1864*

⁴ Appleton Motor Aug. 10, 1860

⁵ U.S. Census 1870 Marcy, Boone County Iowa