

Menomonie Pottery Bailey and Beil 1879 - 1881

Identifying Wisconsin earthenware potteries can be challenging, and some are easily missed, especially when they are small and short-lived. If a pottery existed between census years, if no city directories were published or the potter did not identify their occupation as “potter” in the city directories the researcher is hindered. Discovery is also stymied if no newspaper accounts turn up, the potter’s wares were unmarked, and family descendants have no clue that their ancestor was a potter. Undoubtedly many Wisconsin Potteries came and went without a trace. Fortunately, the Menomonie Pottery was not one of them. In fact, quite the opposite. Its short existence coincided with the 1880 census, the local newspaper published notices about the business, and most fortuitously, two rare glass plate negative photographs showing interior views of the pottery have survived.

During construction of a new Main Street bridge in August 1878 in the City of Menomonie, Wisconsin, a worker found a vein of fine clay. Ludwig Beil, an experienced German potter who lived nearby, examined the clay, and decided to try making pottery from it with the intention of starting a pottery. In May 1879 a newspaper article indicated he had tested the clay by turning 600 flowerpots, and that his partner, Mr. S. J. Bailey planned to build a kiln to fire the pots.¹

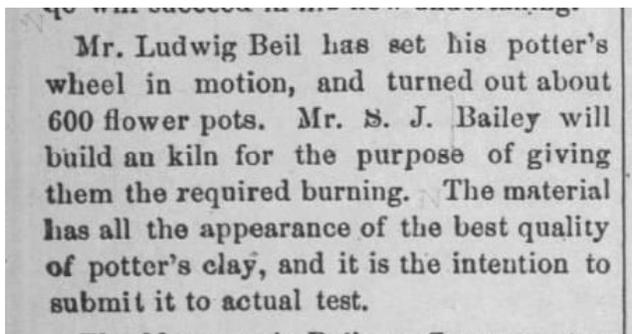


Figure 1 Beil tested the clay by turning 600 flowerpots.

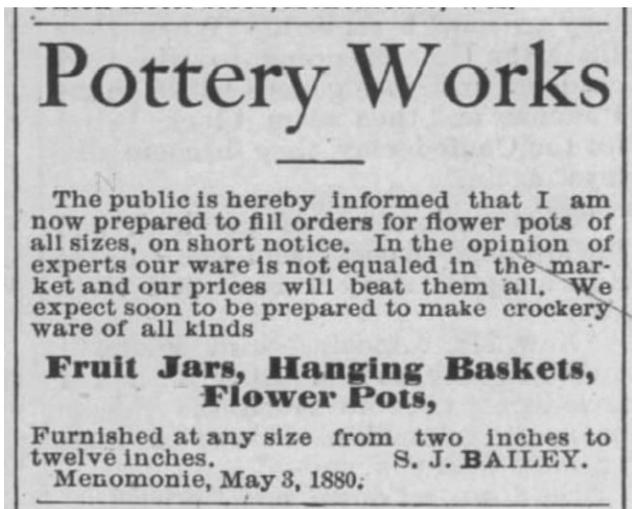


Figure 2 Announcement about the new pottery.

Menomonie is a city located in Dunn County located 23 miles east of Eau Claire (not to be confused with Menomonee, Michigan located north of Green Bay).

In 1880 Ludwig Beil is listed in the Census as a 48-year-old potter originally from Prussia, living with his 37-year-old wife Wilhelmina (Millie) and 13-year-old-daughter Emilie. He was a brick-maker by trade just before starting the pottery. His partner, Stewart J. Baily was a “brick mason” according to the 1880 Census. He was born in Indiana and was 41 years old. He had a wife, Amanda (29) and son Harry (14). His brother Daniel was also listed as a brickmaker.²

In May 1880, Stewart Bailey announced in a newspaper ad that the new pottery was open and prepared to sell “crockery ware” (earthenware). The initial offering was “Fruit Jars, Hanging Baskets, Flower Pots, Furnished at any size from two inches to twelve inches” but they expected soon to make crockery ware of all kinds. Wisconsin clays are not suitable for making stoneware so unglazed flower pots was a sensible starting point.³

A few days later another announcement appeared in the newspaper. It states that Mr. Bailey “has received an order for two thousand flower pots from J. H. Knapp and Capt. Tainter, and the gardeners pronounce them much tougher and more durable than those usually brought to this market.”⁴

The pottery was located at Bailey’s gravel pit which was below and nearly opposite the residence of N. Burch, a prominent Menomonie resident. We have not yet identified the exact location of the pottery based on this description.



Figure 3 This remarkable photograph shows Ludwig Beil standing at the potter's wheel with his hands muddied with clay. His left foot is on a wood brake that controls the speed of the large cast-iron fly wheel. He is in the process of turning a large, wide-mouthed vessel with an unusual shape. His straw Boater's hat rests upon a small pitcher that appears to have a white glaze. Two large cakes of clay are stacked on the table to the left of the crock, ready to be turned. His young helper is preparing another cake of clay. The frame building is not insulated, suggesting pottery was not thrown in winter. This photo is from a collection of 178 4"x5" glass negatives donated to the Wisconsin State Historical Society, mostly taken by Henry Knapp (1851 – 1932) in 1880 or 1881.



Figure 4 Unglazed earthenware pottery drying in the warehouse. At the right are bowls stacked many high. To the right are stacks of dome-style covers, large quantities of handled shoulder jugs stacked on their sides, jars (probably what the advertisement refers to as “fruit jars”) and straight-sided crocks. The warehouse appears to be of generous size. Photo is from a 4”x5” glass negative now in the collection of the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Here is a link to our catalog description of the collection. <https://search.library.wisc.edu/catalog/999464689202121>

The pottery operated a very short time - less than two years. An article in March, 1882 reported that Stewart Bailey was having trouble guarding his property at the “*burnt pottery factory against the depredations of mischeivous urchins who persist in breaking down the remaining walls and carrying off whatever is valuable.*”⁵ That means the factory was probably destroyed in 1881 or early 1882 after less than two years of operation.

We have not yet identified any surviving pottery that we can attribute to the Bailey and Beil Pottery. Beil apparently did not mark his products, but with the clues about the forms made by the pottery from the photo in Figure 5 we are optimistic that examples will be identified in the future.

¹ *Dunn County News* August 17, 1878

² U.S. Census 1880

³ *Dunn County News* May 3, 1880

⁴ *Dunn County News* May 8, 1880

⁵ *Dunn County News* March 18, 1882