

Henry Kern Pottery

New Berlin – 1850 to the 1860's

Henry Kern (47) purchased a 40-acre parcel of land on May 1, 1850 in New Berlin Township, Waukesha County and immediately began making earthenware pottery. The 1850 Census dated September lists Henry and his wife Catherine (45) with children Catherine (15), Margaret (9), and Frederick (6). Henry listed his occupation as "Brown Earthen Maker".¹ He reported the value of his real estate to be \$100 which was probably the price he paid four months earlier for the lot. The birthplace of all the Henry Kern family members is listed as "Germany".

Henry was a member of a clan of pioneer settlers who came to New Berlin township beginning in the early 1840's. Twenty-one-year-old Jacob Kern was the first Kern family member on record to purchase land in New Berlin in February 1841. Lorenz Kern purchased land in Section 20 of the New Berlin township soon after that.²

By the time of the 1850 census there were several Kern families living in New Berlin.

- Jacob Kern (29) and wife Catherine (28), Abraham (4) and William (2).
- Lorenz (Lawrence) Kern (62) and wife Catherine (60), Abraham (31), Matilda (26), William (24).
- Henry Kern (47) and wife Catharine (45), Catharine (15), Margaret (9), Frederick (6).
- Ann Kern (52), born in England and living with Allent (sic) (14) presumably her son.
- Catharine Kern (19) living with the Streeter family.

When Henry Kern began making pottery there was great demand for containers needed by farmers. Settlers starting up farms found supplies of crocks, jugs, foods storage jars, milk pans and other farm essentials to be in short supply and expensive. A local producer could offer them at a lower cost so business was good. Small Wisconsin potters typically sold wares three ways. Most sold directly from the pottery site, retail or wholesale paid by cash or barter. Some had arrangements to sell through local merchants. Others sold from wagons that travelled through the area, mostly operated by individuals who bought wagonloads of pottery to resell. We found no record of how Henry Kern sold pottery.

Henry Kern's forty-acre parcel of land was located east of Woelker Road south of Coffee Road.³

The 1860 Census lists Henry living with his wife Catherine with no children, still with an occupation of "Potter". The value of his real estate is \$150 plus personal property of \$150. In this census the place of birth listed for both him and Catharine is more specific - Hesse-Darmstadt (Germany). No other area residents list "potter" as their occupation, suggesting that his operation was small. Most sole proprietor potters needed help of some type, so most hired and trained one or more men or boys to work with them.⁴

The business of making and selling earthenware on a small scale for a living provided not much more than sustenance for pioneer families in Wisconsin. It was not a way to get rich. Most rural potters supplemented their income by farming. Henry owned forty acres of land so that seems likely.

How long into the 1860's Henry continued making pottery is not known. By the end of the Civil War there was increased competition from lower cost, lighter and more durable products made of tin, wood,

or glass being distributed by rail and sold by local retail merchants. This made it increasingly difficult for small potters to make a living. The 1870 census lists 67-year-old Henry Kern as a “huckster” (a traveling salesman).⁵

Just one example of Kern pottery is known to us. It is an earthenware colander or straining bowl that was donated to the Waukesha County Historical Society in 1929 by a descendant of Henry and Catherine (figure 1). The clay body is a deep red/orange, and the glaze is dark. This provides a clue that could help identify other Kern pottery. Small pottery makers produced small volumes of product, enough to supply farmers in the immediate area, so any similar earthenware pots found in New Berlin would be Kern pottery suspects.



Figure 1 This is the only piece of Henry Kern earthenware known to us. Earthenware colander or straining bowl glazed on the inside only with a dark brown lead glaze and pierced with holes when the clay was wet. The rim is flattened and then turned down. There are discoloration/mineral deposits from use. It was donated to Waukesha Historical Society Museum by Mrs. Robert S. Witte, (maiden name Rose Kern, presumably a descendant of Henry) on 5/4/1929. Object 1648. 4.3" tall by 13" diameter.

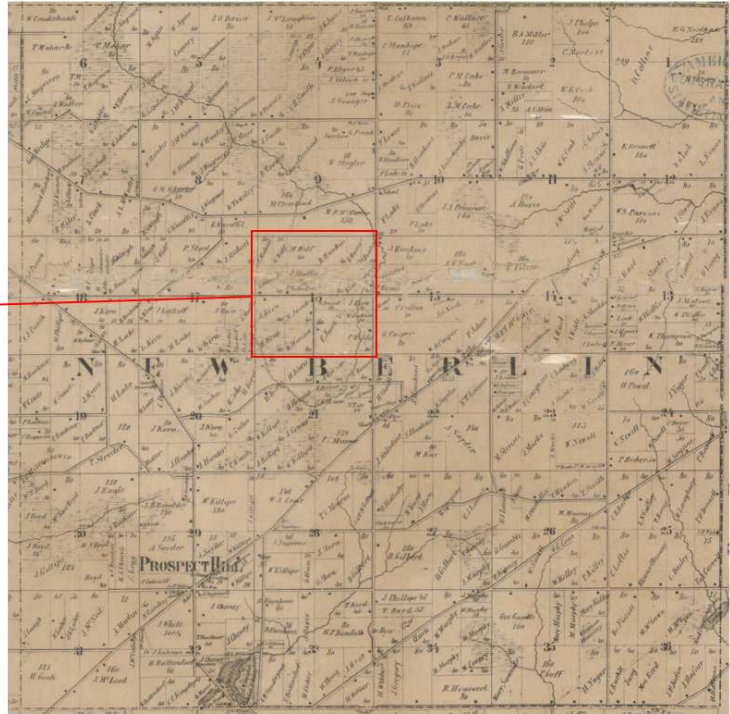
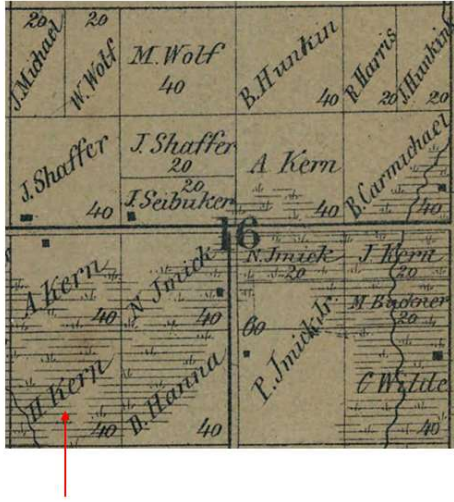


Figure 1859 plat map of New Berlin Township in Waukesha County showing the location of Henry Kern's 40 acre of land where the pottery was located. This map shows that Lorenz, Jacob and A. Kern also owned properties in central and eastern New Berlin, some owning more than one parcel.

¹ 1850 Census

² Waukesha County Register of Deeds for New Berlin Township, Quarter Sec. 20

³ 1859 Map of the County of Waukesha Wisconsin: from surveys under the direction of H. F. Walling / published by M.H. Tyler ; engraved, printed, colored & mounted at H.F. Walling's map establishment. UWM libraries <https://collections.lib.uwm.edu/digital/collection/agdm/id/104>

⁴ 1860 Census

⁵ 1870 Census