

Portage – Conant Street Pottery

1861 to 1863

The Moses Farrar family founded the first pottery on De Witt Street in late 1859. About a year later, in September 1860 the Wisconsin State Register reported that the partnership of Farrar was dissolved and that the pottery had reorganized as Russell Sprague & Co. along with new partners Case and Hanchett. The new firm planned to expand the operation significantly and rented additional building space at the De Witt Street site. However, it did not explain why Isaac Farrar left the firm. Nine months later the reason became apparent when on June 15, 1861 the Wisconsin State Register Portage reported that Isaac Farrar had recently started another pottery on Conant Street that was “now ready to meet the heavy demands for Stone Ware”.

*Another Pottery. Messrs. Farrar & Co. have recently established a new Pottery in the buildings formerly occupied by S. S. Johnson, on Conant Street, and are now ready to meet the heavy demands for the Stone Ware. The institution is in running order, and they are now turning out jugs and things to kill (sell). These gentlemen are industrious and experienced workmen and should command the patronage of dealers in this kind of ware-not for their industry alone. But their determination to run a good institution of this kind in our city. **Portage City Record** June 15, 1861*

According to the 1860 census, Silas S. Johnson was a merchant living in the 4th ward on Conant Street. Conant Street runs through the 4th Ward for only three blocks, from Cass to Wisconsin Street. Two of those blocks appeared to be residential at the time. There is a building that looks like a store on the northeast corner of Mac and Conant pictured on the 1868 lithograph that could have been Silas’s store. (Figure 1) The 1860 Census shows that the residence of Isaac and Charles was two house entries away suggesting that they were in close to the pottery.

Nine months later the Wisconsin State Register published a report that provided an update. Farrar’s new pottery had overcome some initial glaze problems and was turning out fine quality pottery.

*Portage Pottery. Messrs. Farrar & Co., proprietors of this concern, are now turning out some of the finest pottery ware ever manufactured in the State. After expending much time and trouble they have at last succeeded in making their glazing. All Wisconsin dealers should apply themselves with their stock from this manufactory, as they can do so on the most reasonable terms. It is a “home” institution, and as such should command the patronage of Wisconsin dealers. **Wisconsin State Register** Aug. 9, 1862*

No other newspaper accounts about this pottery have been found yet. Based on the number of stamped I.N. FARRAR marked pottery or shards that survived, it appears that produced a large amount of pottery in Portage. None of the marked pieces have the Portage city name stamped on them (Figure 2).

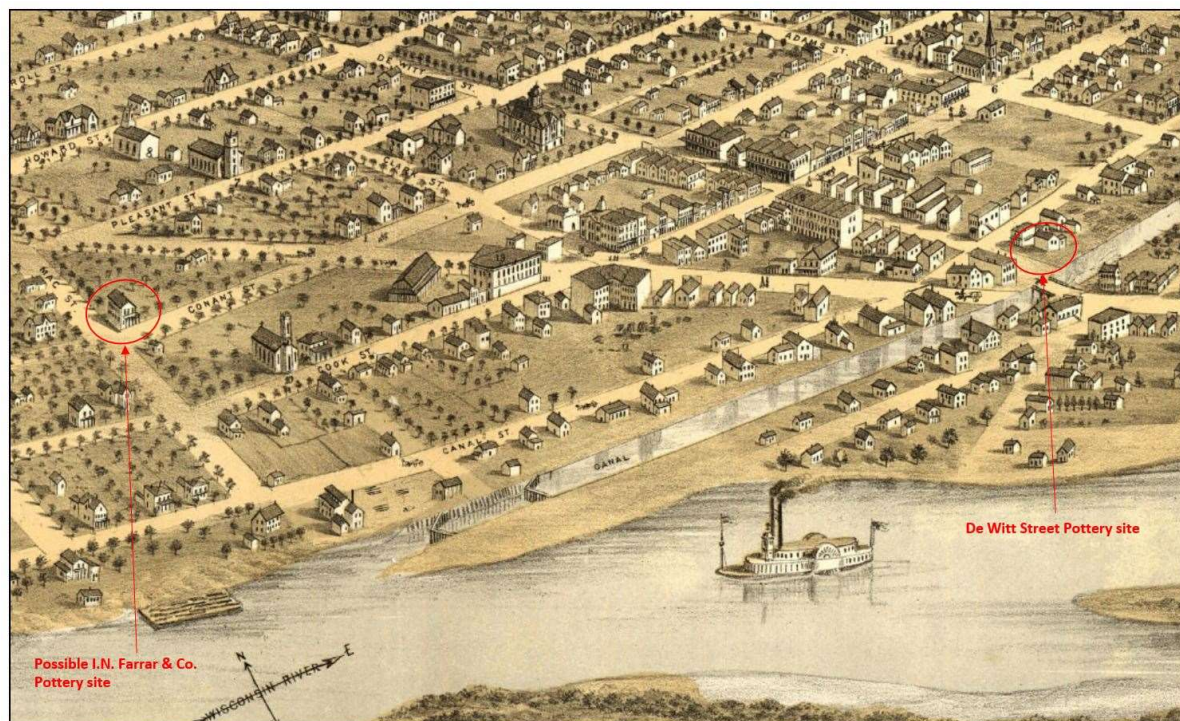


Figure 1 Pottery Locations - Isaac Farrar's new pottery was located just a few blocks from his original pottery. This image is from an 1866 Birdseye View of Portage. Several sherds stamped "I.N. FARRAR & CO." were found at the Dewitt Street site.

Evidence suggests cooperation between the two potteries. Some of the flower decorations appear to be painted by the same hand, probably by Isaac's father Moses. (Figure 3) The gallon capacity stamps on Isaac's wares are identical to those on the De Witt pottery pieces. A dozen I.N. Farrar & Co. stamped



Figure 2 Stamp "I.N. FARRAR & CO." over stamped "2". Lead-glazed earthenware. Farrar's stamps tend to be difficult to read due to the small font size and heavy glaze.

sherds were found intermixed with De Witt pottery sherds at the De Witt site. A July 25, 1860 newspaper account reported that pottery demand far exceeded the De Witt Street pottery's capacity and that orders were being placed far in advance of production. It's possible that two potteries shared resources or that they were somehow affiliated. Perhaps Isaac Farrar even produced pottery at the De Witt Street pottery in the nine months between the dissolution of his former and the startup of the new pottery.



Figure 3 Flower comparison. From left to right: "I.N. FARRAR & CO." (Portage), "MOSES FARRAR ST JOHNS CE" (Canada East), and "SPRAGUE RUSSELL & CO PORTAGE CITY". All were apparently painted by Moses Farrar.

It's not known who the "& CO" of the Farrar pottery was, but it's quite possible that it was Isaac's father, Moses. The 1860 Census showed that he had \$10,000 in assets while Isaac had \$250. While Isaac had the experience from the startup of the De Witt Street Pottery, at 24 years of age he probably lacked the experience to do it on his own, so he probably got help from his father. The flower decorations on Conant Street potter are strikingly similar to De Witt Street pieces and to the flower on a piece made by Moses while he was in Canada. It's likely that the artist for the Conant Street pottery was Moses.

A dozen stamped I.N. FARRAR & CO. sherds were found at the De Witt Street site. The identifiable forms are jar, churn, jug and crock. Farrar probably made a full range of typical forms like cream pots, bowls, pitchers as well as custom pieces. This raises the question of whether the I.N. Farrar & Co. stamped pieces found at the De Witt pottery site were made there or were made at Conant Street and dumped there. Either is possible.

One sherd signed I.N. FARRAR & Co. appears to be salt-glazed. Wisconsin's native clays lack the silica and alumina necessary to make salt-glazed stoneware so Farrar either amended the clay or imported it. According to the article *Potters Moses Farrar and Ebenezer L. Farrar and Their Relationship* by Jean-Pierre Dion, Moses made mostly salt-glazed wares but also earthenware when he was in Canada, so he had experience making both. Given that fact that only one salt-glazed piece has been found to-date suggests that production of salt-glazed stoneware was limited or experimental.

Like the De Witt Street Pottery, Farrar's Conant Street pottery produced common utilitarian wares. They used just one stamp without the city name. Most surviving I.N. Farrar pottery pieces have a clear lead glaze with Manganese undertones or brown glaze that is indistinguishable from the glazes used at De Witt Street. However, some pieces have a darker brown glaze. (Figures 4 & 4a) The larger pieces often have a groove for a string tie below the rim and double lines at the shoulder. Larger pieces also tend to be decorated with cobalt. The most common decoration is a flower with unusually elongated center petals. This same flower appears on De Witt Street pottery and is very similar to the flower on a jug inscribed MOSES FARRAR / ST. JOHNS CE / 1. Moses probably decorated all three pieces. (Figure 3)

It is not known exactly when the I.N. Farrar & Co. pottery ceased operations. In June 1863 Isaac registered for the US Civil War Draft in Portage listing "potter" as his occupation, suggesting that the pottery was still in production at that time. Seven months later, in February 1864 a son (Charles) was

born to him in Lacrosse, Wisconsin. Based on these facts, it appears that the pottery closed between June 1863 and February 1864 after just two years of operation.

Isaac N. Farrar's obituary reported that he died at the age of 58 in Quincy, Illinois, on August 7, 1889, where he had lived since 1871. He was a well-liked and successful businessman who was working as an officer of the Cottrell Hardware Company when he passed away from heart-related problems. His wife Elizabeth and six children survived him.

Moses Farrar passed away on November 3, 1868, in Eyota, Minnesota and is buried at Oak Grove Cemetery according to the *Minnesota Cemetery Inscription Index*. It identifies Caroline and Charles & Helen M. Farrar Russell as surviving relatives.

For a history of the De Witt Street Pottery in Portage see the companion article on this site.

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References

1. Dion, Jean-Pierre *Potters Moses Farrar and Ebenezer L. Farrar and Their Relationship* published in the French language magazine *Ceramics* in 2017 pp 7-17.
2. *Portage City Record* May 18, 1864 page 3 column 1 announced the dissolution of the Farrar & Russell pottery.
3. US Federal Census for Burlington County, City of Crittenden, Vermont 1850 for Charles Russell.
4. US Federal Census for Columbia County, Portage City, Wisconsin 1860.
5. Columbia County Register of Deeds property records for Block 253, lot 6. A property rental agreement was signed 9/1/1860 for 5 years at \$175 per year for sale and Manufacture of stone ware. It was signed by C. P. Russell, Lyman W Sprague and Orin Case. The property was rented from Chauncy Pettibone.
6. US Federal Civil War Draft Registrations Records 1863.
7. US Federal Territorial and State Censuses for Olmsted County, City of Eyota, Minnesota Portage City 1857, 1870 and 1880.
8. US Federal Census for Adams County, City of Quincy, Illinois 1880.
9. *Quincy Whig* newspaper Obituary for Isaac N Farrar published Aug 9, 1889 in Quincy, Illinois. The obituary says he was 58 years old which is probably a misprint since it also says he was born in 1836, making him 53 at the time of his death in 1889. Other sources concur with the 1836 date of birth.
10. *Minnesota Cemetery Inscription Index* for Select Counties.
11. This article is an updated version of an article originally published in *Ceramag* edition 17 in February 2109 published by the *Revue de l'Association des collectionneurs de ceramique du Quebec*.



Figure 4 At left, a one-gallon Jug. Lead-glazed earthenware, marked "I.N. FARRAR & CO." The glaze is darker than most. The glaze dripping and sagging is often seen on I.N. Farrar pottery. At right, a lead-glazed earthenware, marked "I.N. FARRAR & CO." The glaze resembles Albany slip commonly used on the inside of salt-glazed stoneware.



Figure 5 Half-gallon jar marked "I.N. FARRAR & CO." Lead-glazed earthenware, 10" tall.



Figure 6 Five-gallon Butter Churn. Lead-glazed earthen ware stamped "I.N. FARRAR & CO." over stamped "5" in an unusual place on the rim. Most Farrar pottery is stamped below the rim. Like many pieces of Farrar pottery, the stamp is difficult to read.



Figure 7 Jug marked "I.N. FARRAR & CO." over stamped "2". The owner of the jug apparently added a wire mesh, probably over cloth, to protect it. The wire later rusted and was removed.