

De Witt Street Pottery Waster Dump Excavation

During construction of a new County Courthouse building in Portage in 2017, backhoes uncovered a large later of pottery sherds about ten feet below the sidewalk. Fortunately, local history enthusiast Tom Kerl was able to get permission collect pieces for a short time, but after a short time the construction crew decided that allowing him into an active construction site was not a good idea and asked him to leave. Fortunately, in that time he managed to save 57 choice examples of mostly decorated pottery from the Farrar family potteries – a virtual treasure trove of information.

The first and most important thing the dump revealed was the exact location of the pottery which was previously unknown. With that information were able to find the property deeds for the pottery. The sherds also greatly expanded our understanding of the types of wares produced. There are six variations of incised stamps, thirteen are of them marked “I. N. FARRAR & Co.”, five shards marked “SPRAGUE & RUSSELL / PORTAGE, WIS.”, and two stamped “SPRAGUE RUSSELL & CO.” One is marked “PORTAGE CITY” with no name. In 1854 Portage City was changed to Portage and in the 1860 both names were being used.

Another interesting discovery was that I.N. Farrar fragments were intermixed with other stamped pieces. Isaac’s pottery was made at his pottery on Conant Street, begging the question of why he was pumping waste at the De Witt Street site.

Articles on history of the two Portage Potteries is available on this website.¹





Figure 1 Crock stamped "PORTAGE, WIS" (note that it is not "PORTAGE CITY"). The name stamp and two-gallon capacity stamp are highlighted with cobalt. Part of the decoration is visible.



Figure 2 Four-gallon crock stamped "SPRAGUE RUSSELL & Co / PORTAGE CITY / 4". Although no decoration is visible it probably was decorated.



Figure 3 Stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co.".



Figure 4 Six-gallon butter churn stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 6" with the tip of the flower decoration visible.



Figure 5 Unknown form, possibly a crock. Stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 5" with cobalt highlighting.



Figure 6 Unknown form. Note the poor-quality clay used for this piece, making it brittle and subject to glaze loss.



Figure 7 Unknown form and size. There is a splash of cobalt visible.



Figure 8 Three-gallon jar or crock stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 3" without cobalt highlighting.

Figure 9 No photo available. This is a placeholder only.



Figure 10 Bowl or milk pan. The rim and inside are glazed as well as the lower portion of the exterior, leaving a 1" band of unglazed area below the rim. This may have been done to allow stacking during firing. It was probably not unstamped or decorated.



Figure 11 Unknown form and stamp. Note the unusually dark glaze which is the same inside and out.



Figure 12 Butter churn, probably 5- or 6-gallon capacity with a dark manganese glaze inside. Most of the pieces had the same glaze inside and out but some had the darker interior glaze that mimics the Albany glaze inside salt glazed stoneware.



Figure 13 Crock, probably 2- or 3-gallon capacity.



Figure 14 Jug of unknown size stamped "PORTAGE CITY".



Figure 15 Ear handle on a crock.

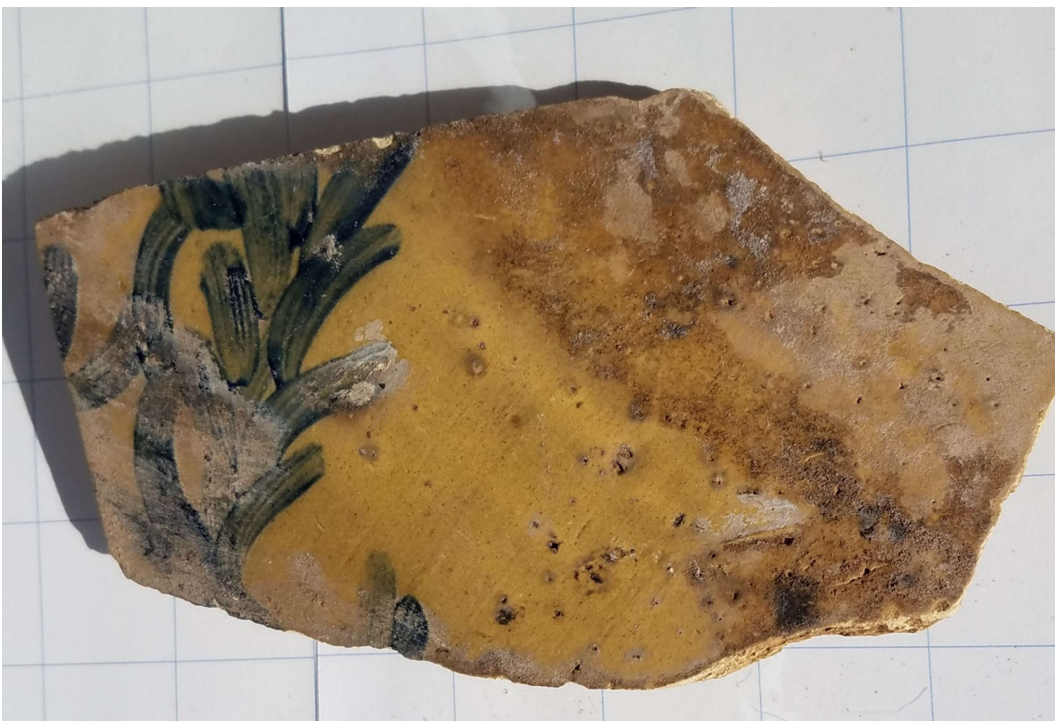


Figure 16 The decoration on this piece is non-standard for Portage pottery. See figure 57 for a similar example.



Figure 17 This is the typical Moses Farrar flower.



Figure 18 Fragment from a butter churn.



Figure 19 This is a good example of the standard Farrar flower decoration.



Figure 20 Two-gallon crock stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 2". Unusually bright yellow decoration for an Isaac Farrar piece.



Figure 21 Crock or cream pot stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co."



Figure 22 Unknown size and form stamped "SPRAGUE & RUSSELL". The PORTAGE CITY portion of the stamp is not visible if it was on the piece. The stamp is highlighted with cobalt.



Figure 23 Unknown form and size with ear handle.



Figure 24 Part of a cobalt flower is visible. It was glazed in an inverted position since the glaze drips upward inside and out. The interior glaze looks darker the glaze on the outside. The edge view shows that the clay was porous and of poor quality.



Figure 25 Small part of a cobalt flower.

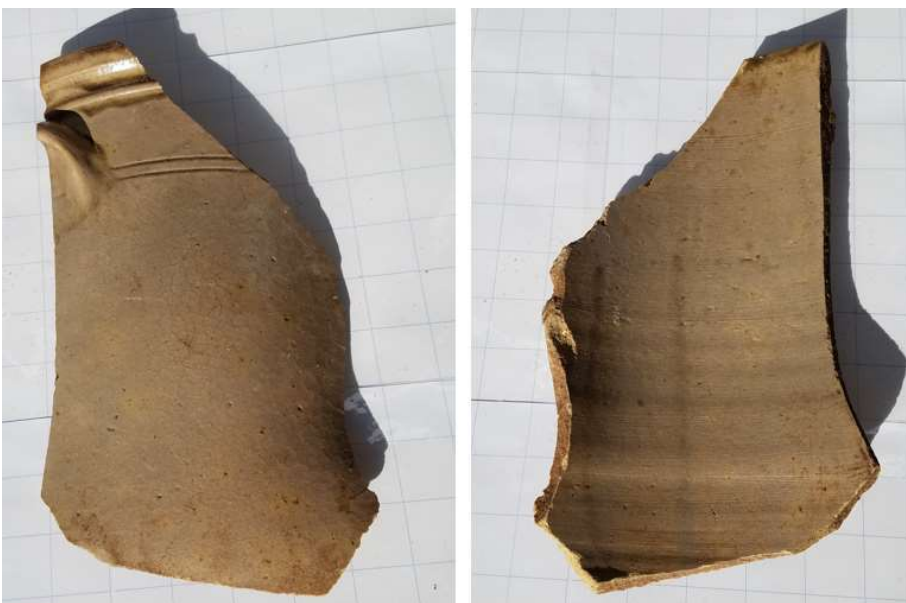


Figure 26 The glaze color is unusually grey in color resembling salt-glazed stoneware. The shard is slightly mis-shaped.



Figure 27 Figure 8 Three-gallon jar or crock stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 3" without cobalt highlighting.



Figure 28 Ear handle example with dark glaze drippage.



Figure 29 The two sherds at left may be from the same piece. They appear to be salt glazed. The glaze is clear, it has a distinct orange peel surface texture, the color is grey and there is a dark slip glaze inside. When viewed closely from the edge the clay has a less grainy surface than any of the other shards. Making salt glazed stoneware required imported clay or amending local clay, a kiln with ports to add salt and a higher firing temperature. These are the only pieces of salt glazed Portage City stoneware discovered to date.



Figure 30 Another view comparing the color of the salt-glazed sherd with an earthenware fragment.



Figure 31 Just the last few letters of the I. N. FARRAR & CO stamp is visible on this crock.



Figure 32 Fragment from a butter churn.



Figure 33 Another butter churn with the typical interior shelf for the lid.



Figure 34 Example of an ear handle on a crock.



Figure 35 Probably a butter churn with a dark interior manganese glaze. No stamp visible.



Figure 36 Ear handle from a crock or cream pot.

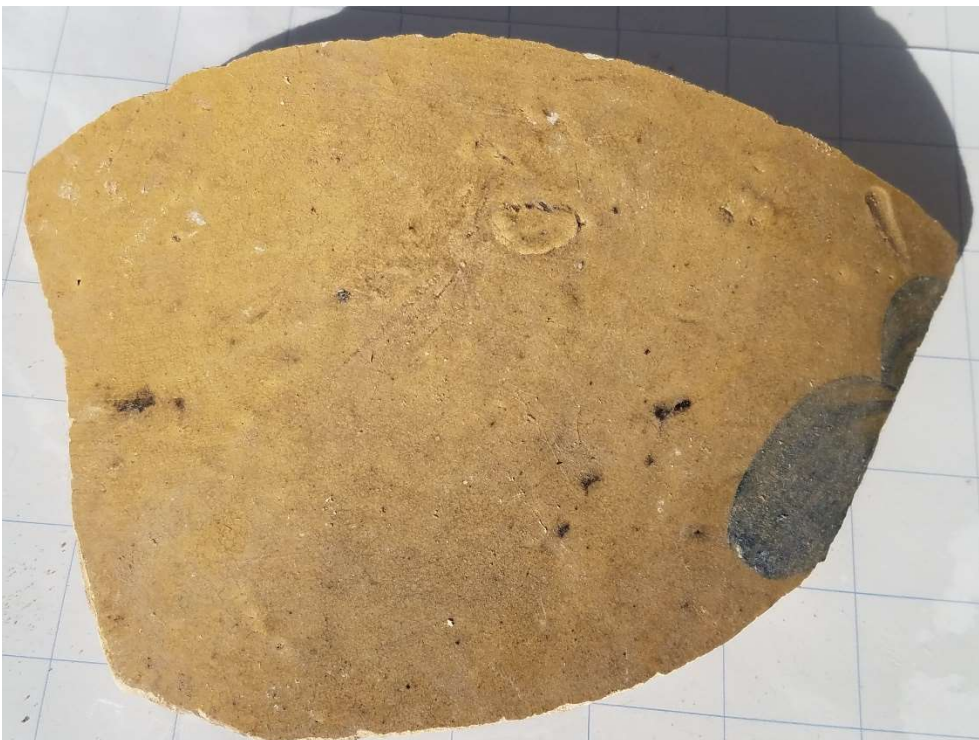


Figure 37 Fragment with a smart of the cobalt decoration visible.



Figure 38 Butter churn with an interior shelf for the lid.



Figure 39 Stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 3" with cobalt wash over the stamp.

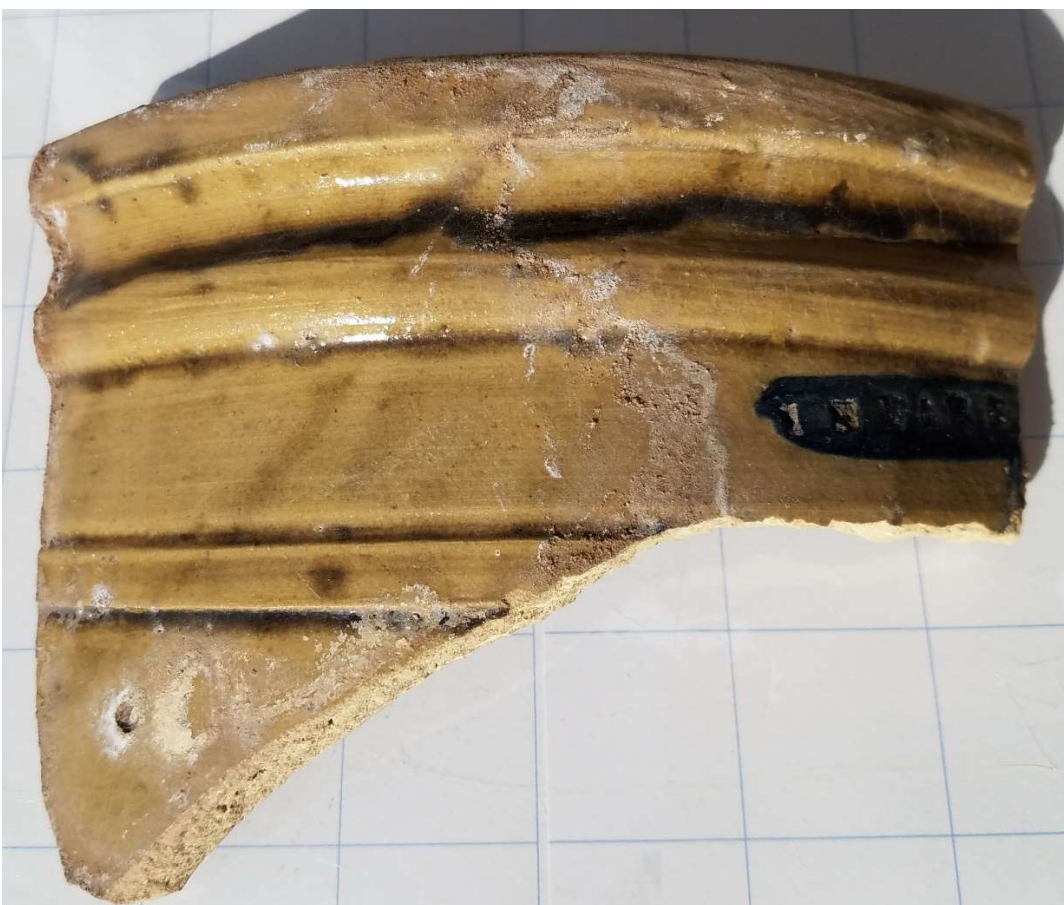


Figure 40 Stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co." with cobalt wash over the stamp.



Figure 41 Crock or cream pot.



Figure 42 Crock or cream pot.



Figure 43 Ear handle example from a crock or cream pot.

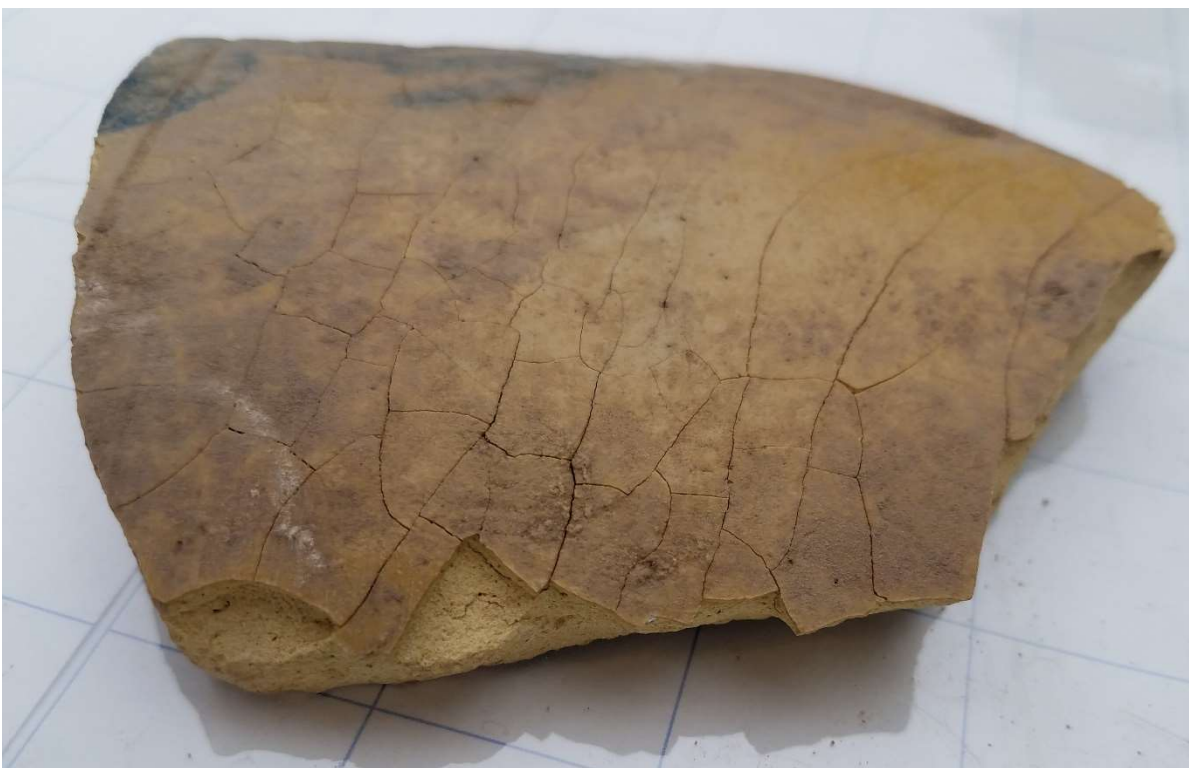


Figure 44 This piece failed because of very poor clay – almost brick quality in appearance. The piece self-destructed during firing.

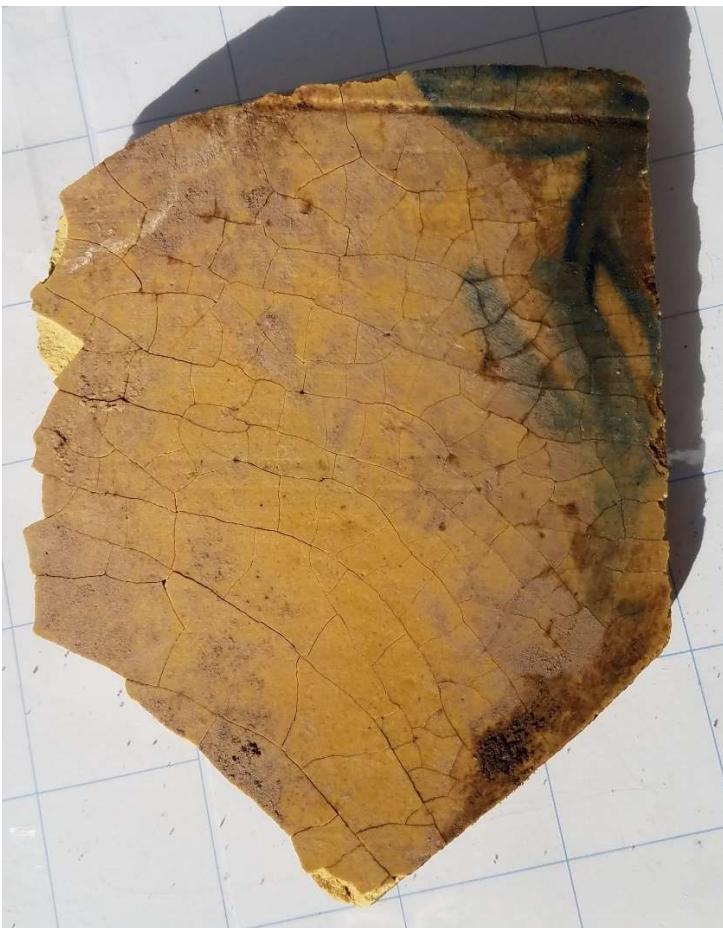


Figure 45 Part of the decoration is visible on this heavily crazed fragment.



Figure 46 Rim of a butter churn.



Figure 47 Partial ear handle from a crock or cream pot.



Figure 48 Rim of a from a crock or cream pot.



Figure 49 Another fragment has a dark interior glaze. Partial cobalt decoration



Figure 50 A round rim finish like this one is not typical for Portage pottery.



Figure 51 Partial ear handle.

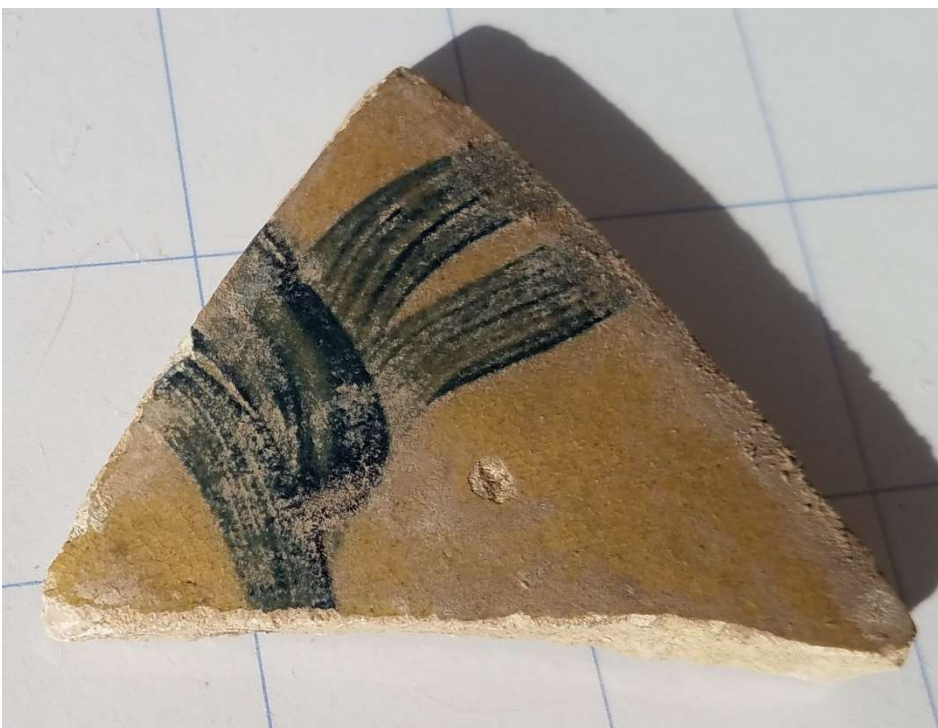


Figure 52 Partial cobalt flower decoration.



Figure 53 Stamped "I. N. FARRAR & Co. / 4"



Figure 54 Partial cobalt flower decoration.



Figure 55 Partial "...SELL" stamp on a butter churn with a dark interior decoration. Part of the dark interior glaze dripped down the exterior.



Figure 56 Partial stamp "SPRAGUE ... / POR..".



Figure 57 Part of a non-standard decoration.



Figure 58 Six-gallon crock stamped "SPRAGUE & RUSSELL / PORTAGE, WIS. / 6". Note that the capacity is scratched in.

¹ Madefromclay.org *Dewitt Street Pottery 1861 – 1863 and Contant Street Pottery 1859 - 1863*