

Portage – De Witt Street Pottery

1859 – 1863

Portage is a city located in central Wisconsin north west of Madison, the state capital. In 1673, Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet made the two-mile portage at this location from the Fox River to the Wisconsin River in their quest to reach the Mississippi River. “The Portage” as it came to be known became a major fur trading hub in the late 17th century. The U.S. government, recognizing the strategic location of Portage, built Fort Winnebago there in 1828. By the 1850’s, the city’s business district developed on a hill overlooking a canal. One of these businesses was a pottery established in Portage City in late 1859. The founders of this business included the Moses Farrar family and Charles Russell. Little was known about this pottery until recently when a construction project unearthed a shard dump at the site of the pottery. Further research revealed much more about the pottery and those who ran it.



Figure 1 November, 1859

The first record of the pottery was an announcement in the *Portage Record* in November, 1859. “Messrs. Farrar and Russell recently of Berlin (Wisconsin) and formerly of Burlington, Vt., have leased some premises and will proceed immediately in the manufacture of all kinds of Stone Ware, &c. A trial of the Portage clay has been made, and from the specimens manufactured from it is pronounced equal to the best ever discovered in this country. It is the purpose of Messrs. Farrar & Russell to enter into the business ... on an extensive scale.”

Isaac Newton Farrar was the eldest son of Moses Farrar. Isaac was born in Troy, NY and married Elizabeth (Lizzie) J Richmond of New York City in 1859 in Minnesota. At the time Isaac was 23 and Lizzie was 22 years old. The Russell mentioned in the announcement was 22-year-old Charles Powers Russell who was born in Burlington, Vermont. He was married to 20-year-old Helen Miranda Farrar, the second daughter of Moses Farrar. The two couples lived together in Portage City in the 4th Ward according to the 1860 US Census. Isaac and Charles listed their profession as “Stone Ware Mfr.”

Meanwhile, the 1860, Census shows that 50-year-old Moses was also living in Portage with his children Sally (age 25), Fred (age 19), Caroline (age 18), and Arthur (age 17). Moses and his sons Fred and Arthur are listed as “Stone W. Manuf.” Moses Farrar ran potteries in Burlington, Vermont and St. Johns, Quebec between 1840 and 1855. His activities are well documented by Jean-Pierre Dion in his article entitled *Potters Moses Farrar and Ebenezer L. Farrar and Their Relationship* published in 2017.

The Products of Industry schedule of the US Census for the year ended June 30, 1860 includes businesses with annual revenue of over \$500. The pottery of Farrar & Russell in Portage City is listed as “in business 4 months” but the exact date of the entry is not given. Presumably, the pottery commenced operation late in 1859. Their product is listed as “Stone Ware” with an \$800 capital investment and

assets of Clay (\$50) and Miscellaneous which was probably firewood, glaze and other items (\$50). They show 4 employees and one horse as their power source which would have been for grinding clay.

The 1859 *Portage Record* announcement indicates that Farrar and Russell were “recently of Berlin”, Wisconsin. The 1859 Berlin City Directory does not list either Farrar or Russell. There was at least one pottery in operation in Berlin at the time and another pottery just 20 miles away in Wautoma that was for sale about the same time. It’s possible that they considered buying one of these potteries or that they went to Berlin to learn more about pottery making in Wisconsin.

The 1857 Minnesota Territory Census shows that before going to Berlin Moses Farrar and his children were living in Winona, Minnesota. There was a John Russell listed as living with the Farrars but there was no mention of Charles Russell and it’s unknown if John was related to Charles.

During construction of a new County Courthouse building in Portage in 2017, a large pottery shard layer was discovered about 10’ below the sidewalk. Fortunately, local history enthusiast Tom Kerl was able to collect 57 select pieces before being told to leave the site. These shards reveal much about the types of wares produced. There are six variations of incised stamps, thirteen are of them marked “I. N. FARRAR & Co.” Five shards are marked “SPRAGUE & RUSSELL / PORTAGE, WIS.” and two are 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.



Figure 2 Some of the shards found at the pottery site. Many are marked or decorated with cobalt.

On September 1, 1860, L.W. Sprague, C.P. Russell and Orrin Case signed a five-year lease for Lot 6 in Block 253 from Chauncy Pettibone for \$175 per year for “making and selling stone ware”. The property included a building. Five days later the *Wisconsin State Register* reported that the partnership of Farrar & Russell was dissolved and that a new partnership called Russell Sprague & Co had been started with Case and Hanchett being the “& Co”. It appears that Lyman Sprague soon took a lead role in the firm since his name is listed first on all of the surviving pottery pieces.

Loyal W. Sprague was born in Vermont in 1837. He lived in Mower County Minnesota working as a merchant for the three years prior to coming to Portage City. The 1860 Census states that he was clerking for and living with E.F. Lewis, a prominent Portage City merchant. He was an owner/investor but not a potter. By 1870 Loyal was living in Whitewater Wisconsin working as a “Commercial Traveler” according to census records.

Little is known about Orrin Case and what role he played in the operation of pottery. He was listed in the 1860 Census as “Manufacturing Stone Ware” originally from New York. He may have been a potter or an investor.

Asahel Hanchett had recently lived in the town of Hanchettville in Dane County which was so named because of Asahel’s success in bringing important businesses to the town. After he left the town was renamed Marshall after another influential resident who founded the Marshall & Ilsley Bank. Asahel was an investor and not a potter.

One reason for adding new partners was that they needed capital to expand the operation. A month earlier, on July 25th 1860, the *Portage City Register* reported that their capacity was \$125 worth of pottery per week but Farrar & Russell estimated that they could sell 10 times that amount if they had the capacity. The Portage City Record article of September 5th said that the new Russell & Sprague pottery planned to manufacture at least \$1,000 worth of ware per week.



Figure 3 Six variations of stamps used by the De Witt Street pottery. Differences probably indicate changes in ownership or roles in the operation of the pottery – quite a few for a business that lasted only about four years. Pots marked “PORTAGE CITY” with no names are probably from after Russel left the firm in 1863.

Newspaper accounts did not explain why Isaac Farrar left the business. However, nine months later he had opened a new pottery on Conant Street. See the article about this pottery titled *Portage – I.N. Farrar & Co.*

It is interesting that Moses Farrar apparently was not a principal of the pottery even though he was almost certainly the master pottery who provided the know-how necessary to start up a pottery from scratch. Moses had 15 years of experience in St. John, Canada, and in Vermont. Given their young ages, Isaac Farrar and Charles Russell probably had little or no experience and certainly not the knowledge needed to start a pottery on their own. Loyal Sprague had no potting experience. Perhaps Moses wanted to pass the torch to Isaac and train his three sons in the pottery business.

The 57 shards and another 20 surviving intact examples of Portage pottery documented by the authors as of 2018 reveal much about the Portage pottery products. Almost all specimens are lead-glazed earthenware made from cream-colored local clay characteristic of the eastern part of Wisconsin. Southwestern Wisconsin clay was red in color.



Figure 4 The flower on the left is from a jug made in Canada (1852-54). The flower on the right is typical of the decorations on Portage pottery. They appear to have been made by the same hand, probably Moses Farrar.

Sizes of Portage pottery capacities range from two to six gallon and forms identified so far include butter churn, jug, jar, cream pot, crock, bottle and a bowl. Known intact examples also include a bottle and a pitcher. It appears that the pottery produced common utilitarian wares intended for a wide range of applications. It appears that most Portage pottery pieces were signed. However, most potteries of the time made bowls and small items that they did not bother to sign. The Portage pottery probably did so as well. Most Portage pottery pieces have a clear lead glaze with Manganese undertones or brown glaze. Sometimes a brown lead/manganese glaze was used on the inside which resembles the Albany glaze used on salt-glazed stoneware. Occasionally a darker glaze was used on the exterior. 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 which bears a striking resemblance to the flower on a jug inscribed MOSES FARRAR / ST. JOHNS CE / 1. Moses probably decorated both pieces.

It is not known exactly when the pottery ceased operations. Charles Russell registered in June 1863 in Winona, Minnesota, listing “clerk” as his occupation so he had left the business by then. The *History of Columbia County* reports that on August 31, 1864 “the old pottery” burned in Portage, implying that the pottery had ceased operating before that date. The best guess is that the pottery closed in 1863 after about four years of operation.

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.

The obituary of Isaac N. Farrar indicates 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.

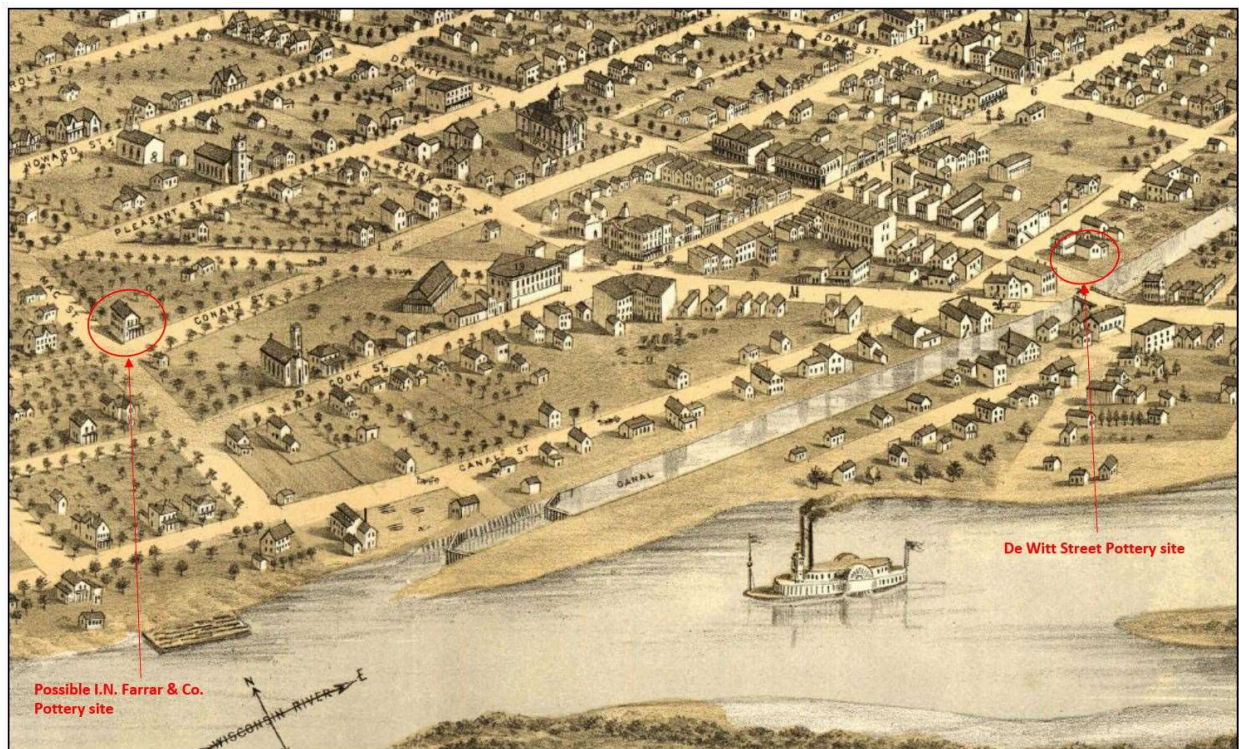


Figure 5 The De Witt Street pottery was located near the canal, at the site of the current courthouse.



Figure 6 Two gallon advertising jug custom made for merchant E.F. Lewis. It is stamped "MADE FOR E.F. LEWIS / WHOLESALE & RETAIL / DRUGGIST AND GROCER, / PORTAGE WIS." Loyal Sprague worked for Mr. Lewis and lived in his household in 1860 according to Census records. Jug is from the collection of Henry Hecker.



Figure 7 - Bottle marked "SPRAGUE RUSSELL & CO." It closely resembles bottles made in England that were often used for ink. The outward flared lip facilitated pouring.



Figure 8 One-and-a-half gallon pitcher stamped "PORTAGE CITY". The proprietor was probably omitted because there are at least four exant pieces that are stamped this way. It was probably made after Charles Russel left the firm in 1863.



Figure 9 Quart Table Beer found near the De Witt Street site. It was made for B.A. Atwell in Madison.



Figure 10 Five-gallon Cream Pot stamped "SPRAGUE & RUSSELL & CO PORTAGE CITY 5". The interior glaze is a darker color, presumably to mimic the Albany slip used on salt-glazed stoneware.



Figure 11 Number stamps used by the De Witt Street pottery are the same as those used by the Conant Street Pottery.



Figure 12 Jugs stamped "FARRAR RUSSELL & CO PORTAGE CITY" (left) and "FARRAR & RUSSELL PORTAGE CITY" (right). These are from the earliest period of operation, before Isaac Farrar spun off his new pottery.



Figure 3 Two-Gallon Syrup Jug stamped "SPRAGUE RUSSELL & CO PORTAGE CITY".

References

Milwaukee Daily News November 17, 1859 – the article mentions the announcement of a new pottery in Portage published in the *Portage Record* newspaper.

Dion, Jean-Pierre *Potters Moses Farrar and Ebenezer L. Farrar and Their Relationship* published in *Ceramics* magazine in 2017 pp 7-17

US Federal Census for Burlington County, City of Crittenden, Vermont 1850 for Charles Russell

US Federal Census for Columbia County, Portage City, Wisconsin 1860

US Federal Census for Columbia County, City of Portage, Wisconsin 1860, Schedule 5 of the Products of Industry survey

Columbia County Register of Deeds property records for Block 253, lot 6

US Federal Civil War Draft Registrations Records 1863

US Federal Territorial and State Censuses for Olmsted County, City of Eyota, Minnesota Portage City 1857, 1870 and 1880

US Federal Census for Adams County, City of Quincy, Illinois 1880

Western Historical Company *History of Columbia County*, published in 1880, page 647 mentions the burning of the Portage pottery.

Quincy Whig newspaper Obituary for Isaac N Farrar published Aug 9, 1889 in Quincy, Illinois

Minnesota Cemetery Inscription Index for Select Counties