



## Downtown & Jacksonville History

Morgan County, named for Revolutionary War hero Gen. Daniel Morgan, was established in 1823. On March 10, 1825, nearly 2 years after Jacksonville had been chosen as the newly created county Seat, county surveyor Johnston Shelton began the public square layout over 5 acres in the center of the new town, which was a 160-acre tract. The State Road that ran from Springfield to the Illinois River, ran through the middle of the new town square and was named State Street. A street was then laid out running north and south to the center of the public square, Main Street. With these two streets as base lines, the town was laid out into square blocks of 180'-9" on each side, with blocks being divided into three lots of equal size.

More complex than most courthouse squares found throughout the United States, the type of square layout that evolved in Jacksonville is known as the "Four-Block Square." It features streets that ran along all four sides of the square with two other streets, State and Main, centered between both north-south and east-west directions. These 60-foot wide streets were used as base lines with the town laid into square blocks of 180'-9" on each side, divided into 3 equal lots with other 40-foot wide streets and 20-foot wide alleys running at right angles to each other throughout.

When the town site was selected, the only building in the area was a log cabin owned by Alexander Cox (a hatter by trade), located near the present Trinity Episcopal Church. Thomas Carson bought the cabin for use as the town's first tavern/inn, later relocating to the northeast corner of the square, then to the southeast corner of the square near the later site of the Congregational Church, where it may have served as the town's first jail. Thomas' wife was Mother Carson, a successful midwife credited with over 3,000 births of early residents. Jacksonville's first merchants in 1825 were Joseph Fairfield and George Hackett, with George Rearick following. More settlers began arriving, primarily from Kentucky, in the years that followed.

A row of small frame houses were the first buildings on the west side of the public square. The first courthouse, a frame building set on log blocks, was built in 1826 on the northwest corner of the public square's park at a cost of about \$450. This structure burned on December 6, 1827, and was replaced in 1829 with one of the first brick buildings in the county for \$4,000 on the southwest corner of the central park.

While there were no large stores, those constructed of logs quickly gave way to more substantial frame buildings, which also became too small and insecure for growing commercial interests. Eventually stronger brick structures replaced these frame buildings. John Wilkinson built the first in 1828 on the southeast corner of East State Street and the square, followed by Cornelius Hook on both the south and north sides of the square.

From the start, Jacksonville attracted church leaders and educators, including William





Jennings Bryan and Rev. William Henry Milburn. In 1829, the "Yale Band" founded Illinois College west of downtown and, just east of the business district and later the first free public high school in Illinois. The Illinois Conference Female Academy, later MacMurray College, was formed in 1846. Methodists began religious training in 1822, followed by Baptists from the south in 1823, Presbyterians in 1827, the Christian Church in 1831, and the state's first Episcopal Parrish in 1832. The first Congregational Church stood on the east side of the square by 1833

with Lutherans and Catholics established their presence soon after. At one time, 4 different denominations occupied churches on the intersecting corners of Church and State Streets, creating worldwide notoriety for the anomaly.

Businesses thrived and the square soon had substantial brick structures, like the early M. V. Ayers & Co. Bank in 1831 on the northwest side of the square. In 1832, David B. Ayers built a drug store on the north half of the west side of the square. By 1834, Jacksonville was one of the state's largest towns with 1,800 people and had the first Executive Mansion in Illinois for Gov. Joseph Duncan. Jacksonville residents were politically active and many came into leadership roles in both state government and the Civil War.

Larger businesses, Jacksonville (Capps) Woolen Mills, a custom carding mill established in 1839, found Jacksonville's economic climate and transportation access as fertile as its farmland. Located northwest of downtown, they expanded into spinning, weaving, and finished cloth, evolving into Indian blanket production (later supplying Buffalo Bill Cody) and then men's clothing, including Civil War and World War I uniforms.

Predominantly 1 and 1½-story log/frame buildings bordered the square by 1840, housing a variety of businesses, including T. D. Eames' dry goods store, Philip Price's jewelry store and R. Hockenhull's building. Two or three long 1-story frame structures occupied the Strawn Opera House site and the only brick building was part of Metal's and Fell's Dry Goods Store. Among the 16 stores on the square, the city-owned 2-story wood frame Market House (northwest corner opposite the courthouse) hosted farmers markets and public meetings.

In 1843, cigar making began in Jacksonville, growing to a major industry and was among the first trades to unionize in the early 1900s, with 13 factories, 130 employees and 200,000 cigars produced weekly by 1905. One of the largest was the McCarthy Gebert Co., which eventually moved to what was later named the Emporium Building on East State Street. The Northern Cross Railroad that had passed through the square along State Street since 1840, was re-routed in 1849. About then, John Lathrop planted dozens of elm seedlings in the square, in time becoming a large shade canopy and the city's moniker "The Elm City."

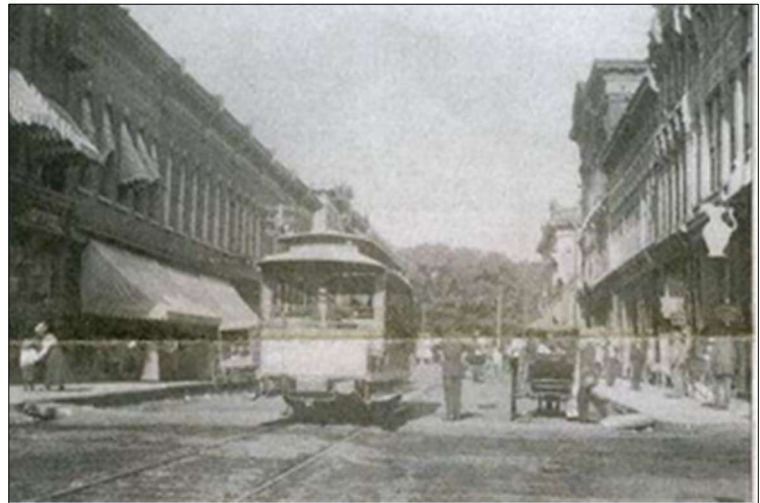
Both medical and entertainment industries began to thrive downtown. Dr. Greene Vardiman Black, the father of modern dentistry, began his Jacksonville practice downtown in 1864. By 1868, the Jacksonville City Directory lists over 200 businesses, with most found in the downtown area and many in the upper floors of buildings. The Strawn Opera House on the

south side of the square hosted many famous visitors in the 1860-70s, including Mark Twain, Buffalo Bill, and Edwin Booth, brother of John Wilkes Booth.

The Second Empire-styled County Courthouse, completed in 1868 on West State Street, also added to the attractive character of the central business area. In the 1870s, the square, now boasting many three-story brick buildings around its perimeter, had its first beautification with iron fencing to keep livestock out of the center park area. Later, a bandstand replaced the iron fountain in the middle of the park until it was relocated to Nichols Park as the "Monkey House" when the tax-funded Civil War Monument was dedicated in 1920 in the heart of the park.

By 1885, more impressive two- and three-story brick buildings, built in the Italianate commercial style with arched windows, bracketed cornices, and flat, built-up roofs, towered over their humbler neighbors. Earlier brick buildings from the mid-18th century often had side gable roofs or a hip roof. A more refined, permanent community evolved around Jacksonville's public square surrounded by better residential dwellings, accurately defined streets, and permanent sidewalks.

Horse-drawn trolleys provided public transportation in the late 1800s. The Street Railway Company began running electric trolley cars in 1892, with the Hook Company operating the system until improved automobiles later helped to make trolleys obsolete. The tracks crisscrossed the city, passing into the Central Park area under steel arches at major north-south and east-west entrances. The arches, constructed in the late 1890s and designed to mimic arches in Springfield, were electrified for lighting, a feature that reportedly spooked horses which contributed to their decline in public favor. (They were removed by 1912, after conjunction of the Ayers National Bank forced removal of one on West State Street.)



W. E. Sullivan, founder of the Eli Bridge Company, introduced the "Big Eli" Ferris wheel on the square in 1900, and relocated his company to Jacksonville in 1919. (They remain the world's oldest Ferris wheel and amusement ride manufacturer.) Also in the early 1900s, Dr. Alonzo Kenniebrew, the first black physician to found and operate a surgical hospital, had the New Home Sanitarium on West Morgan Street.

By the 1903 publication of Fred H. Thomas' *Jacksonville, the Beautiful City*, the town's population had grown to 15,000 and significant development around the square and beyond had occurred, with many structures of the Italianate style. That book featured photographs of each side of the square, of which many depicted buildings survive today in varying degrees of originality and are included in the National Register Downtown Historic District. The Jacksonville Public Library (201 West College Ave.), a Beaux Arts style 2½-story Cleveland sandstone structure, was completed in 1903 with a \$40,000 Andrew Carnegie grant. The Jacksonville Labor Temple (228 South Mauvaisterre) was built by volunteer union labor in 1904 and is also listed on the Illinois Historic Register. The Farmers State Bank and Trust Co., formerly the Ayers National Bank building (200 West State St.), an eight-story Renaissance Revival structure modeled after "modern" skyscrapers of the day,

was completed in 1912 at a cost of \$250,000. It was Jacksonville's first steel-frame construction and noted as the state's oldest site continuously affiliated with banking.

In the 1950s, Jacksonville made a huge stride for economic development by installing a water pipeline to ensure constant supply, further underscoring the city's commitment to business and industrial growth.

Downtown Jacksonville was like most small towns until the 1970s: a thriving central business district filled with shops, eateries, hotels, banks, and theaters. But as the national trend of strip malls, big-box retailers, and interstate highways hit Central Illinois, downtown Jacksonville felt the effects of competition and pressure to change.

The push for modernization, including walking malls and storefront slipcovers culminated in 1974 with Urban Renewal bringing the most significant changes to downtown. Main access points to Jacksonville's Square were diverted to one-way side streets that sent traffic away and east-west traffic was eliminated when four obtrusive "quadrant" buildings were built in former right-of-ways, which were sold to private parties. Over 60 historic structures that once faced the park and lined the side streets of downtown were razed to allow for contemporary, one-story buildings of little architectural style. City-owned brick and steel canopies were attached to façades of the square's remaining privately-owned perimeter buildings in an attempt to unify and "update" the appearance.

Instead of boosting business, the Urban Renewal walking mall did the opposite: inconvenient driving conditions frustrated motorists; shoppers disliked being forced to park behind buildings and being unable to see storefronts; the loss of visibility, access, attention, and sales dismayed merchants; and as businesses and residents left downtown in droves, owners saw property values plummet.



Downtown's once dense landscape was barren with empty lots and vacant buildings. City officials struggled to help, but without owning the land where streets once were, options were limited, as were funds to rectify problems. As the economic climate and physical appearance declined, many saw Jacksonville Main Street, with its comprehensive volunteer-driven grass-roots method of facing challenges, as the last, best hope for developing consensus and a solution.

After nearly a quarter-century of encouragement, many of the ill effects of Urban Renewal have been reversed. Now viewed as a vital part of our community, downtown Jacksonville is improving, with several new businesses and expansions, increased public and private partnerships, numerous rehabilitation projects and enhanced promotional events contribute to its continued growth and development.

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