

History of Jacksonville



On March 10, 1825, nearly 2 years after Jacksonville had been chosen as the newly created Morgan County Seat, county surveyor Johnston Shelton began the public square lay out over 5 acres in the center of the new town. Unlike the simple block style of other courthouse squares throughout the country, Jacksonville's public square layout was more complex, combining features found elsewhere. Using the "Four-Block Square" layout, Jacksonville streets 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 in the mid-1820's, 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.

The first courthouse, a frame building set on log blocks built in 1826 in the square's northwest quadrant for about \$450, burned on December 6, 1827, to be replaced with a \$4,000 brick building in 1829 in the southwest quadrant of Central Park. The first buildings on the square's west side were a row of small frame houses. At that time there were no large shops on the public square, but several small, log stores. In time, these buildings gave way to frame structures, which also quickly became too small and insecure and were replaced by more substantial brick structures. John Wilkinson, a local developer, constructed the first in 1828 on the square's southeast corner, where the present Hoffman Building now stands. Cornelius Hook built a brick building on the south and one on the north side of the square. The M. V. Ayers & Co. bank building was erected on the north half of the square's west side in 1831-2, (now The Farmers State Bank and Trust Co. site.) In surrounding residential areas, a more refined community began to evolve with better dwellings, accurately defined streets and permanent walkways in lieu of mud sidewalks.

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, the Illinois Conference Female Academy, later MacMurray College, was created in 1846. Methodists began





religious training in 1822, followed by Baptists from the south in 1823, Presbyterians in 1827, the Christian Church in 1831, the state's first Episcopal church in 1832, and Congregationalists in 1833 with Lutherans and Catholics 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.

In 1834, with a population of 1,800, Jacksonville was one of the state's largest towns. By 1840, predominantly 1 and 1½-story frame buildings bordered the square, housing a variety of businesses, including T. D. Eames' dry goods store, Philip Price's jewelry store and R. Hockenull'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.

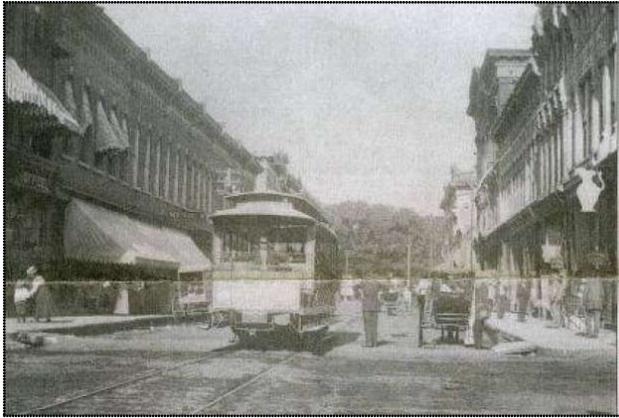
Starting in 1843, cigar making became a major industry in Jacksonville, growing to 13 factories, 130 employees and 200,000 cigars produced weekly by 1905. Among the first trades to unionize in the early 1900s, one of the largest was the McCarthy Gebert Co., which eventually moved to what was later known as the Emporium Building on East State Street.

Jacksonville (Capps) Woolen Mills, a custom carding mill established in 1839, became another big industry, expanding 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.

1860 lithographs by L. Gast Bros., St. Louis, show most buildings on the south half of the west side having side gable roofs, common prior to the Civil War, especially in the Eastern US. The prints also illustrate a thriving central business district with several residential structures plus 2 and 3-story buildings, many of brick, around the square's perimeter housing diverse merchants: Rosenhaupt's New York Store; Henry Rice's Temple of Fashion; Sam Hamilton's Bakery and Confections; Myers and Knollenberg Cigars & Tobacco; Hockenull, King & Elliott Bank; Campbell's Photographic Gallery; Stege Iron & Hardware; Union Hall (old Congregational Church); St. Louis Branch Wholesale Liquor; the recently built Strawn's Opera House; D. H. Hamilton Boots & Shoes; Johnson & Richard Stoves; First National Bank; Hatch Drugs; Philadelphia Dry Goods; Stevenson & Tomphins Stoves and Hardware; Ayers Banking House; J. W. Gallneth Tin Shop; Hamilton's Bakery; King & Dewey Dry Goods; Dobyms & Co. Boots and Shoes; Catlin Books; The Jacksonville Store; a hotel; F. G. Farrell's Bank; F. T. Gilett Queensware and a clothing store.

The 1868 Jacksonville City Directory lists over 200 businesses, with most found in the downtown area and many in the upper floors of buildings. These businesses included 3 implement dealers, 5 barbers, 4 dentists, 8 druggists, 5 jewelers, 21 grocers, 4 printers, 16 lawyers, 1 architect, 2 gunsmiths, 10 dress makers and millineries, 12 boot and shoe makers, 4 hotels, and 7 carriage and wagon manufacturers. Many more businesses clustered around the square, which included an additional 3 restaurants, 2 tobacco shops, 4 photographers, 2 harness makers, 5 furniture dealers, 8 insurance agents, 15 dry goods





stores, 2 real estate agents, 3 banks, 8 clothiers and hat shops, 2 stationers/bookstores, and 3 bakeries.

By 1885, more impressive commercial buildings were going up around the square, where most town business was concentrated. On the north side, Messrs. Dayton & Adams and Hatfield, Price & Chambers each built substantial 3-story brick structures that towered over humbler neighbors. The square's west side boasted a block of 3-story brick structures housing 7 different businesses. A fine brick building owned and occupied by Well & Bros. overlooked surrounding stores. A handsome brick commercial block, the era's finest on the square, was nearing completion near Strawn's Opera House. Many buildings were of Italianate commercial design, with arched windows, bracketed cornices and flat, built up roofs. Similarly styled brick structures also began to appear on streets off the square. Other important early buildings included the eclectic 2½-story YMCA on West Morgan (1880), the

Dunlap House on West State (1858, replaced by the Dunlap Hotel in 1925), and the Gothic Revival Centenary Methodist Church to the east. Several 1 and 2-story Greek Revival, Italianate and, in the late 19th Century, Queen Anne Style houses were being completed in the area. The Street Railway Company began running electric trolley cars in 1892, with the Hook Company operating the public transportation system until, among other reasons, improved automobiles later made 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.)

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. That book featured photographs of each side of the square, of which many depicted buildings survive today in varying degrees of originality.

Several National Register Listed structures lie within the Jacksonville Main Street District, enhancing the central business district's character. The Second Empire Style Courthouse, completed in 1868 for \$204,000, remains largely unchanged today. The Jacksonville Public Library, a Neoclassical 2½-story structure of Cleveland sandstone, was completed in 1903 with a \$40,000 Andrew Carnegie grant. The Jacksonville Labor Temple, built by volunteer union labor in 1904, is the oldest building of its kind in the country. The Farmers State Bank and Trust Co. in the former Ayers National Bank building, an 8-story Neoclassical style structure modeled after "modern" skyscrapers of the day and completed in 1912 for \$250,000, was Jacksonville's first steel-frame construction and believed to be oldest site continuously affiliated with banking in Illinois.

The medical field also thrived in early Jacksonville. After serving as a Union Scout in the Civil War, Dr. Greene Vardiman Black, practiced from 1864-90 on the North Side of the Square, later dubbed the "father of modern dentistry" for developing the belt driven drill





and innovations for silver fillings. Dr. Alonzo H. Kenniebrew, a black surgeon began his practice in 1909 at 323 West Morgan with 1 assistant. By the end of his practice in 1930, he had a 33-room facility with laboratories, 2 operating rooms, 7 nurses, 3 surgeons, and 8 associate surgeons, and had a patient survival rate of more than 99%, earning a spot in the Jacksonville Hall of Fame.

Urban Renewal brought the most significant changes to downtown Jacksonville in 1974, creating a walking mall that relocated most parking behind remaining structures after demolishing over 60 structures to allow for the plan that included modern, 1-story buildings of little architectural style. East-west traffic and direct north-south Plaza access were eliminated when four “quadrant” buildings were built in former right-of-ways. Steel and brick canopies, owned by the City, were attached to the façades of the square’s perimeter buildings in an attempt to modernize and unify the appearance of the buildings. The result actually damaged the local economy, with outlying road

development, state highway rerouting and limited downtown access driving many retailers to other Jacksonville locations over the years.

In 1999, a group of volunteers formed Jacksonville Main Street, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to downtown rejuvenation. Jacksonville Main Street’s mission is to enhance the perception, quality of life and long-term economic health of the entire Jacksonville community through a coordinated and sustained effort to revitalize the city’s downtown district. As one of over 50 Illinois Main Street communities, the local program follows the National Main Street Center’s Four Point Approach, incorporating a comprehensive revitalization strategy to encourage economic development within the context of historic preservation through the work of four active committees in the areas of design, organization, promotion and economic restructuring. Since 1980, Main Street has emerged nationally as a major force in downtown revitalization. With local funding as its sole source of revenue, Jacksonville Main Street receives technical assistance from the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Illinois Department of Economic Opportunity, the Illinois Lieutenant Governor’s Office and other resources to provide support to business and property owners that ultimately benefits the economic health of the entire region. 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 that contribute to its continued growth and development.

- Excerpts reprinted from Chas. Kirchner’s “*Jacksonville Main Street District Intensive Architectural & Historical Survey*,” 2002

The Jacksonville Main Street District covers 133 acres, bounded on the north by Lafayette Avenue/Washington Street, Clay Avenue on the east, Beecher Avenue on the south and Church Street on the west. The District, located in the approximate center of the city on land platted between 1825 and 1868, abuts Jacksonville’s Historic District. The area is primarily commercial with some public and religious uses and residential properties interspersed throughout toward the periphery. The commercial structures are generally flat-roofed, 1-3 story brick buildings ranging in style from Italianate to Modern, built from the mid 1800’s to the early 1900’s, with façade alterations occurring throughout the 20th century. Churches are typically of Gothic Revival style while residences predominantly exhibit Greek Revival, Italianate and Queen Anne era components.