

History of Kewanee

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The founding of Kewanee in 1854 at its present location is the result of two separate developments: the establishment of the colony of Wethersfield and the building of a railroad-- and the failure of those two to come together.

Wethersfield was founded in 1836 by the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Conn. Led by Rev. Caleb Jewett Tenney of Wethersfield Congregational Church, the association was one of several Protestant organizations that established early colonies in Henry County (also Andover, 1835 and Geneseo, 1836). Col. Sylvester Blish and Elizur Goodrich, along with Andover founder Rev. Ithamar Pillsbury, were sent west in 1836 to purchase land and later that year Rev. Joseph Goodrich, John F. Willard and Henry G. Little came to lay out the village of Wethersfield. Settlers followed in 1837 and the village grew to about 500 by the early 1850's when the railroad was on its way.

In 1851 the Central Military Tract Railroad was chartered by the state to build a rail line from Aurora to Galesburg. It was decided that the route would bypass Wethersfield almost two miles to the north. The decision was based either on the adverse terrain immediately west of Wethersfield or the decision of the village not to give right-of-way or buy railroad bonds. Once the northern route was determined several Wethersfield entrepreneurs purchased land to the north of Wethersfield, gave right-of-way to the railroad, and when the location of a depot was determined laid out the beginnings of a city in 1854.

That new town would be located on land east of what would become Main Street that was owned by Col. Sylvester Blish and land west of the future Main Street owned by Matthew and John Potter. The Potter brothers built a house just north of what would be the corner of Main and Second Streets in 1850. The Potters apparently wanted to be farmers rather land developers and sold their 160 acres and purchased farmland in Wethersfield Township. (In 1903 when the owners at that time decided the Potter house was standing in the way of progress, it was given to the Daughters of the American Revolution who moved the building to its current location on Park Avenue where it is used as the DAR's chapter house.)

Two of the buyers of Potters' farm, George Morse and Silas Willard of Galesburg, acquired five acres south of the railroad line on what would be Main St. and in 1853 built the "Pioneer Store," which would be Kewanee's first store. Buyers of the other 155 acres of the Potters' farm included Capt. Sullivan Howard, Henry G. Little, Ralph A. Tenney, and Nelson Lay (all Wethersfielders except Lay who moved here from Wisconsin). Town lots were surveyed early in 1854 and a plat filed with the county on May 1, 1854.

The city's founders named their new town Berrien, after the chief engineer for the railroad. When he objected and recommended another name, Kewanee became the name of Wethersfield's neighbor to the north. "Kewanee" is believed to be the word used by Winnebago

Indians for “prairie chicken.” Berrien apparently saw many of the birds in the course of his work through this area.

A post office was established in 1854. The first postmaster was Col. Blish, one of Kewanee’s founders who also had been Wethersfield’s first postmaster. Col. Blish also donated the land for East Park (today Veterans Park) and old Kewanee Cemetery. The name of Kewanee was made official by an act of the Illinois state legislature on Feb. 14, 1855.

Kewanee practically sprang up overnight as many Wethersfielders literally picked up their homes and businesses and moved them one to two miles north. By 1860 there were about 1,500 people in Kewanee. Wethersfield’s development, meanwhile, was stunted by the loss of many of its leading citizens, including founders of the village. Wethersfield would remain a residential area and would eventually annex itself to Kewanee. In 1921 overwhelming votes in both Wethersfield and Kewanee approved the annexation. (While the cities merged in 1921, the two school districts remained separate. There are also two separate townships—Kewanee and Wethersfield.)

Kewanee grew steadily but gradually from 1860 to 1890. Economic activity was led by marketing and retailing for the farming community, brick-making, extensive coal-mining and a burgeoning steam boiler industry. The latter was pioneered by William Haxtun, who purchased a tiny company in 1875 and by 1890 employed 1000 persons in the Haxtun Steam Heating Co. In 1890 the population was 4,569.

Then in the 1890’s the city grew considerably after the Haxtun company split in 1892 into Western Tube Company and Kewanee Boiler. The 1900 census showed 8,382. The next major growth period and the last for Kewanee was the decade of World War I when virtually all Kewanee factories were busy with war work. The population climbed dramatically from 9,307 in 1910 to 16,026 in 1920. Annexation in 1911 of residential areas east, north, and west contributed to the growth spurt.

Kewanee’s population apparently peaked at 18,000 in 1921 with the annexation of Wethersfield. The 1920 census showed almost 2,000 for Wethersfield. Added to Kewanee’s 16,000 that gave the “new” Kewanee 18,000 people. After a small decline in 1930 to 17,093, Kewanee’s population held steady until 1950 when the census showed 16,821 Kewaneeans.

Following the 1958 removal of most of the operations at Walworth’s Kewanee Works (Western Tube sold to Walworth in 1917), the population began a decline that in 2010 had yet to be reversed. The 1960 and 1970 census reports each showed a loss of about 500. The 1980 decline was about 1,200 to a population of 14,500. In 1990 the drop was about 1,500 to a figure of 12,969, while in 2000 and 2010 the count held steady at 12,900. Kewanee Boiler remained in the city during the decline, but its employment level dropped steadily until the current owners Burnham Industries ceased production of Kewanee boilers and closed the plant in 2001.

Politically Kewanee has employed all four types of city government available to a city in Illinois. In 1867 Kewanee was granted a charter for village government that included a five-member board of trustees with one of them chosen as village president. In 1897 Kewanee received a

charter as a city and adopted the mayor-council form of municipal government with an elected mayor and 8-member city council. In 1911 during the Progressive Era Kewanee voters chose to switch to the commission form of government with each of the five commissioners (including one who was elected mayor) supervising one or more city departments. In 1986, after two unsuccessful referenda, the voters chose the council-manager form of city government. It continues today with a council of five members, including a mayor; they appoint a city manager to supervise the operations of the city administration.

While Kewanee as a whole has declined considerably in population since World War II, the “Wethersfield” portion of the city has actually grown, both numerically and commercially. From the late 40s to the early 70s almost all of the new housing development was south of Division St., on both the southeast and southwest corners of the city. After a 20-year “depression” in home building, new houses were being built in the late 1990s, still mostly in that portion of Kewanee that is in Wethersfield Township. The retail business center of the city has moved from downtown, where it thrived for a century, to the south side, a movement that began in the 1960s and was especially boosted in the 70s by the conversion of the Main St.-Tenney St. corridor from two lanes to four. The building of Midland Plaza in 1970 and Wal-Mart in 1984 were major events in the business drift to the south.

In a sense Kewanee is returning to its roots. When Wethersfield, where it all began, was annexed to Kewanee in 1921, the area south of Division St. made up 11% of Kewanee (2,000 of total population of 18,000). However, in 1990 the area south of Division contained 27% of Kewanee's population (3,536 out of 12,969).