

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 previous 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 Jewitt Tenney of the Wethersfield, Conn., Congregational Church, the association was one of several Protestant organizations that established colonies in Henry County, Illinois (also Andover and Geneseo). Col. Sylvester Blish and Elizur Goodrich 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 builders of the Military Tract Railroad decided that the route of their line through Henry County would bypass Wethersfield one-and-a-half miles to the north. The decision was apparently based on the adverse terrain immediately west of Wethersfield. 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 new city in 1854.

Before the railroad arrived most of the land that would become Kewanee was a farm owned by brothers Matthew and John Potter. They 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 they traded their farm to several Wethersfielders for farmland in Wethersfield Township. (In 1903 when the current owners 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 part of the Potters' farm, George Morse and Silas Willard, acquired five acres along the railroad line on what would be Main St. and in 1854 built the “Pioneer Store” just south of the tracks. It would be Kewanee's first store. Buyers of the rest of the Potters' farm included Capt. Sullivan Howard, Henry G. Little, Ralph A. Tenney, Nelson Lay, and Col. Sylvester Blish (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, who also had been Wethersfield's first postmaster. The name of Kewanee for what was still an

unincorporated village 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 2,000 people in Kewanee. Wethersfield's development, meanwhile, was stunted by the loss of many of its leading citizens, including founders of the colony. 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 1891 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 has 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 last 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 40’s to the early 70’s 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 new houses and businesses have been built since the latter half of the 1990’s, 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 Wethersfield or south side, a movement that began in the 60’s and was especially boosted in the 1970’s by converting the Main St.-Tenney St. corridor from two lanes to four lanes. 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 (dividing line between Kewanee and Wethersfield Townships) contained 27% of Kewanee's population (3,536 out of 12,969).