



# Wilmette Historical Museum

## **A History of Wilmette by James D. Kline**

When Chicago was a struggling frontier settlement in 1827, very little was known of the region northward and to the northwest. A point of land, a headland, extending into the lake about fourteen miles north of Chicago, had been named by the lake sailors, Gross Point. If, at that time and for some years afterward, one should inquire what was north of Chicago, the usual answer was, “Gross Point Region”; unexplored and untraveled.

Chicago, at that time, consisted of an Indian agency, about fourteen cabins and houses, with a population of about seventy-five to one hundred inhabitants and Fort Dearborn without a garrison – an unprotected trading post.

A deeply worn trail led to this well-known landmark, “Gross Point.” It is hard to believe that from here the trail became lost in a forest wilderness, crisscrossed here and there by Indian trails and densely forested to the far northern timber line. When Alexander McDaniel passed this way in 1836, he walked the distance from Chicago and, after a noon day meal with the Ouilmettes,<sup>1</sup> it was necessary for him to engage the services of an Indian guide to find his way to the present location of Winnetka where he settled at that time. The way was not along the lake shore but westward to the present Ridge Road, where the town of Gross Point was afterward settled, and then northward

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine and Archange Ouilmette

along this ridge and eastward to the present Hubbard Woods hill on Sheridan Road where a tavern was being built.

The Indians must have appreciated the beauty of this location on the lake shore at Gross Point. The Pottawattomies gathered here on the lake bank from time to time where they established their seasonal villages. One of their favorite locations seems to have been just south of the point, protected by the high lake bank from the northeasterly lake winds. From his description, this may well be the site of Marquette's camp when he passed this way in 1673-74 and is marked by the Evanston Light House, known to mariners as the "Gross Point Light," which was erected in 1874.

The only means of communication between Fort Dearborn at Chicago and Fort Howard at Green Bay had been intermittent by water during the summer months. In the late summer of 1827, the Indians became restless and an uprising was in such evidence that it was necessary to send dispatches to the Indian agent at Fort Dearborn. At the time, there was no one at Fort Howard who knew the way by land.

John H. Fonda volunteered to find his way through the trackless wilderness on foot, if he could have one companion, hazarding the dangers of unfriendly Indians, cold and hunger. Fonda had left his home in New York State in 1819, after completing his education and preparing himself for law. Overcome by a desire for roaming adventure, he had followed a wagon train to Texas and, in 1825, paddled into Chicago from the west and then along the lake shore to Solomon Juneau's trading post at Milwaukee and thence to Fort Howard. This, for him, would just be another chapter of adventure. It proved of such importance that his record of it is preserved in the files of the Wisconsin Historical Society and elsewhere. Men of this character were necessary to the

development of our frontiers. They blazed the way for the pioneers who settled and founded our present civilization.

John Fonda covered the distance to Fort Howard, about two hundred and forty miles in approximately thirty days. With return dispatches, he reached Fort Howard a month later.

From necessity, the Federal Government then established regular dispatch service between these two outposts. The pay was about sixty dollars per month. Fonda would not accept the offer. Having done it once, the thrill of adventure was lacking for him. The path these men blazed became known as the Green Bay Trail.

As settlements developed, the trail widened to a wagon road; later the Federal Government improved it and it became known as the Green Bay Road. Wilmette's early settlers established their dwellings of frame and log on either side of this road near the lake bank, a day's journey from Chicago.

The trail which had led northwesterly from Rush Street to the present Rose Hill and then northward along the dry sand ridge, now Ridge Avenue, Evanston to the location on the lake bank known as Grosse Point had broadened to a wagon road. This was their trading route to and from Chicago.

Among the early inhabitants of Chicago was a French Canadian, Antoine Ouilmette, who came to Chicago in 1790, and married Archange, a Pottawattomie Indian woman. Ouilmette, born near Montreal in 1760, was employed by the American Fur Company. A typical French voyageur, he had lived most of this life among the Indians. His friendly influence with them was of interesting importance not only to the history of Chicago and Wilmette but to the settlement of the Northwest. He could neither read nor write but, as a citizen, he owned land and paid taxes in Chicago. At the

time of the Fort Dearborn massacre in 1812, his knowledge of the Indians and good judgment saved many lives and probably directed the course of events in Chicago's early life.

Ouilmette had found frequent domicile with the Indians on the lake shore at Grosse Point and it was here that he and Archange were married in 1797. It appears that he must have established some manner of homesite here where he could have occasional retreat from the turmoil of settlement about Fort Dearborn and perhaps do some trading. It is presumed that his cabin was not built until after the signing of the Prairie du Chien Treaty of July 29, 1829, when two sections of land were granted Archange, his wife, in appreciation of Antoine's influence toward the signing of the treaty by the Indians.<sup>2</sup>

This land became known as the "Ouilmette Reservation"; bounded on the east by the meandering lake shore, on the north by the center line of our present Elmwood Avenue to Fifteenth Street south to Central Street, Evanston, the south boundary. Many acres along the lake bank were afterward washed away by the action of the waves. By the terms of the treaty, this land could be neither sold or leased by Archange or her heirs except by consent of the President of the United States Government.

Ouilmette cultivated a small piece of his land, owned horses, a wagon and some farm implements. As Wilmette's first white settler, he was also one of Chicago's first suburbanites and commuter. He preferred to make his way back and forth on foot usually carrying a pack on his back.

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<sup>2</sup> This reason about why Archange Ouilmette was granted the land may be speculation.

The terms of this grant of land retarded its settlement until, by presidential consent, it was sold to land dealers in 1844. It was being despoiled of its timber and the lake bank was fast being washed away. A plea of the heirs of Archange was favorably considered by the government and the land was quickly taken up, except for one hundred and sixty acres reserved by Joseph Ouilmette. This was later sold for a small sum.

The reservation was partly surveyed in 1840, and the survey completed and approved in 1842, almost ten years after the Indians had departed for their reservation west of the Missouri River.<sup>3</sup> From statements by early settlers, all of the Ouilmette family did not go west with the others and were seen about his locality frequently for several years. Within a few years after the signing of the Prairie du Chien Treaty, the Indians again became quarrelsome, one tribe with another. The prairie country to the west of Chicago had become fairly well settled but northward to the timberline, a vast expanse of densely forested unexplored territory remained unsafe for settlement.

The Indians, by various treaties, had now been forced to confine themselves to less expansive territory. By agreements among themselves, each tribe was restricted to allotted hunting grounds. Trespassing led to trouble and tribal warfare. At the same time, white squatters were encroaching upon this Indian country which created more discontent and led to the outbreak of the Black Hawk War in 1831.<sup>4</sup>

In 1830, the state census of Illinois showed a population of 157,445 and was rapidly increasing. Northern Illinois, at this time, had but few settlers but they were appropriating more and more land. Black Hawk, a Sac and a warrior, resented this. He

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<sup>3</sup> It is unclear what date or group of Indians Kline refers to here. Perhaps he is referring to the Treaty of Chicago.

<sup>4</sup> 1832, not 1831

went on the warpath in vindication of abuses by the white settlers. Trouble between the Sacs and other tribes brought on other forays until, in 1832, the Black Hawk War reached its height. Other tribes had taken up the tomahawk as the Indians were driven into Wisconsin until, at the battle of Bad Ax near Prairie du Chien, the Indians were defeated and the army discharged.

The returning soldiers and volunteers, seeing this virgin wilderness for the first time, carried stories of its opportunities eastward. News that northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin were now safe for settlement.

The Black Hawk War was not considered important from the standpoint of military strategy, but it is acknowledged of importance in having opened the way to the development of the Northwest and hastening settlement north of Chicago. It was not until after the Treaty of Chicago, signed September 26, 1833, that the Indians finally left for land provided for them west of the Missouri River.

The Ouilmette family continued to occupy the cabin on their reservation. Many prospective settlers passed this way but because the land title could not be transferred, they did not remain.

Joel C. Stebbins was an exception. Finding Ouilmette's cabin unoccupied, he lived there for a short time and then built a cabin for himself on higher land where he would be safe from the receding lake bank, but on the reservation. His cabin, at the southwest corner of present Linden Avenue and Sheridan Road, was known as Stebbins's Tavern and that location was often designated as Stebbins's Ridge. At the present time, the location of this tavern is marked by several ancient apple trees. He was the first to acquire title to reservation land. Joel Stebbins joined an expedition overland

to California in 1849; he became separated from his party and was never heard from again.<sup>5</sup>

About 1840, John G. Westerfield succumbed to the urge to go to Chicago and see this newly opened country for himself. The latter part of his journey, from Buffalo, was made by boat.

It would be interesting to know something of the details of Mr. Westerfield's adventure and preliminary journey from New York to this frontier north of Chicago. Unfortunately, many of his personal records and memoirs were destroyed by fire.

He came on a mission for Henry A. Dingee. His route and mode of travel can be only a surmise except it is definitely known that, after reaching Buffalo, N.Y., that the latter part of his journey to Chicago was by boat. The more leisurely and comfortable route from New York to Buffalo, at that time, would have been by packet, via the Erie Canal. Mr. Westerfield, no doubt, had his spyglass or mariner's telescope with him; a much-prized possession that, in later years, was so frequently associated with him by reminiscence. It must have been a thrilling adventure for this young man to have an opportunity for travel through this little explored region; passing through the Straits of Mackinac and down to Chicago.

What the inducement was for his further venture to the Grosse Pointe Region north of Chicago is unknown. Perhaps he was impressed by the beautiful landscape as he may have seen it from off shore. In fair weather, shipping at that time hugged the shoreline very closely at Grosse Pointe to shorten the distance to and from Chicago. In foul weather, however, they gave this location a wide birth [sic].

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<sup>5</sup> Kline writes in a footnote: At Gross Point Gulch, California. He either met with foul play or was massacred by the Indians.

He, no doubt, made the acquaintance of a Major Mulford who had a jewelry business in Chicago and owned land about ten miles out on the Green Bay Road where he had erected a board shelter or shanty. Saint Francis Hospital marks this location which was then known as the Ten Mile House and the locality as Mulford's Ridge. Major Mulford never occupied this structure himself but frequently offered it as a place of temporary shelter to prospective settlers who yielded to his persuasive enthusiasm for this easily accessible but then scarcely settled region north of Chicago.

Where Mr. Westerfield found shelter here, at that time is a matter of guess. From Rose Hill to the Ouilmette Reservation, along the Green Bay Road, there may have been about twenty-five or thirty settlers – any one of whom would have welcomed him. There was a tavern at that time on the hill at our present Hubbard's Woods, and there were settlers scattered here and there west and north of the reservation. But it is more likely that he accepted the hospitality of Joel C. Stebbins on the reservation itself. There seems to be no report of the exact date or year when Stebbins erected his log tavern. The 1844 survey of the reservation shows the location of the Ouilmette cabin as the "Gross Point Hotel".

The duration of John Westerfield's stay here is unknown but he must have been deeply impressed by the natural possibilities for development. The shoreline view then, as now, was the most beautiful along the western margin of Lake Michigan; a virgin forest for timber; fertile land for cultivation and Chicago only fourteen miles distant with a high and dry road (The Green Bay Road) for transportation and, perhaps, he heard rumors of a prospective railroad. The opening of the reservation for settlement was inevitable.

When John Westerfield returned to New York, his enthusiasm for settlement here was not only spontaneous, it must have been contagious. Samuel Merritt Dingee yielded to this persuasive influence and a year or so later decided that wild game could be profitably shipped from Chicago to the eastern markets. His venture was quite successful, but he returned to New York where, for a short time, he resumed his former occupation as construction superintendent on some of New York's important bridges and aqueducts. His fascination for the West impelled him to forsake this activity, and he later joined with Mr. Westerfield in the settlement of what later became the Village of Wilmette. He bought a considerable tract of land and was actively interested in the development and welfare of the village.

It was not until about 1850 that John Westerfield emigrated from New York and bought 270 acres on the northeast corner of the reservation. Family records show that his large farm house at the present southwest corner of Lake and Michigan Avenues was built in 1855. Years later, the structure was moved to its present location, 1118 Greenleaf Avenue, where it was set upon its original sleepers cut from the virgin forest. The Green Bay Road passed thru the property of Mr. Westerfield. The farm house faced east on the west side of the road. The exterior architecture, as it now stands, is little changed and much of the interior trim, doors and window frames are the original.

Mr. Westerfield had visions of industrial activity here and brought with him several families to help carry it out. Among them was Mr. Dan Mahoney to supervise the manufacture of brick from the clay banks of the lake. This activity was attempted about where the Sheridan Shore Yacht Club now stands. Probably because timber was so plentiful, there was little demand for brick. Every northeaster from the lake must have been destructive of these attempts too, and the activity was discontinued. Dan and

Bridget Mahoney took up land north of the reservation line where they prospered. The Mahoney Farm was well known and a portion of it remains as Mahoney Park in Kenilworth.

The Westerfield land was farmed and what was probably the first pickle factory in the West was developed on the farm. The building occupied by the Michigan Shores Club now stands where the pickle factory was erected. The Wilmette Waterworks now occupies the site of the vinegar factory where cider vinegar was made. This building was constructed of grout and was undermined by the eroding waves of the lake. A building was constructed on the farm for the manufacture of yeast, but this was not successful. When the manufacture of pickles was discontinued, Mr. Westerfield developed a special strain of cucumber seed that is still known as "Westerfield's Chicago Cucumber Seed" and, for many years, was popular with commercial growers.

John Westerfield did not become discouraged. He, at one time, remarked, "There will be five hundred people living here someday."

It would be a mistake to convey the idea that the entire settlement was congested within a mile along the lake bank at Lake Avenue.

An 1850 survey of Ridgeville, which preceded Evanston, shows only a scattering of settlers along the Green Bay Road. There were probably forty-four or five settlers on the road itself with a scattered few, perhaps as many more, toward the south and at Rose Hill. Ridgeville extended from Central Street, Evanston to Rose Hill. The population of Ridgeville, as indicated in 1852, was about 443 and that of New Trier, 175 persons. Development along the North Shore was not rapid.

In 1847, a log school house served the purpose of church and social center. By 1863, this had been replaced by a frame structure on the east side of Green Bay Road, at

the present intersection line between Evanston and Wilmette.<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Edward Mendsen, daughter of Matthias A. Gedney who settled on the Westerfield farm at that time, said there were no more than twenty-two students in attendance, including herself. Some of these children came from as far down the road as Emerson Street, Evanston. In telling about the school, she mentioned the names of some of the students she remembered; Fred Merrell, James D. Kline, Cora Merrell, George McDaniel, Mamie Westerfield and Frank Westerfield, John Dusham, Ed Foster and Mary Kelley.

Church services in the log structure must have been irregular and dependent upon circuit riders who were only occasional visitors. After the founding of Northwestern University in 1851, theological students gladly conducted services. Their financial compensation was limited to the generosity of the contribution basket.

One of the early teachers in 1847 later mentioned in reminiscence that, at this location, the sailing vessels came so close to the shoreline that one could distinguish the names of the passing vessels. Mrs. Mendsen, in speaking of her early school days on the lake shore, frequently mentioned this and said, that at times she could see the crew members on the boats and hear the sound of their voices. By hugging closely to the shore line at Gross Point in fair weather, the sailing distance between Milwaukee and Chicago could be shortened. In foul weather, this location was given a wide berth by rounding the point at a considerable distance off shore.

Ministers of the gospel were not the only members of early social life that were a scarcity. The medical profession was almost entirely unrepresented. There were few doctors of accepted standing. Home remedies were important to the housewife who had

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<sup>6</sup> Apparently, in the vicinity of Canterbury Court and Sheridan Road. There is a plaque at that site referring to the school.

her own herb garden. The Indians understood the medical value of ginseng and many other wild roots and herbs. From them, the “yarb doctor” and peddler of Indian remedies came into being, and then the itinerant white man Indian doctor became a frequent visitor. Liniments and ointments were a regular stock item in the trading post and pioneer store. The advertised curative qualities of early day patent medicines were unlimited in their claims to relieve and to cure all the physical afflictions of mankind. The migratory bone doctor was sometimes considered a benefit even tho, at times, he failed to discriminate between the afflictions of the bone and the flesh. The Kickapoo Indian Medicine Show was as popular in the 1890’s as the small-time carnival. Admission was usually twenty-five cents for the Indian pow-wow and entertainment and all the spellbinder could take from the audience for the sale of his snake oil and other concoctions.

Medical practice followed the wave of westward migration. The accepted and regular physician was a true pioneer who endured many hardships beyond those of the frontiersman. He not only had to compete with the quackery of the self-styled doctor, but his means of transportation was limited to horse and buggy, or wagon and frequently horseback, regardless of the time of year or weather. In the performance of his professional services he traveled long distances over roads impossible to present day convenience, deep in dust or mud, depending upon the weather, and over frozen ruts in the winter time.

Probably the first major surgical operation performed in Chicago was in 1832. A Canadian Indian, while running the mail from Green Bay, Wisconsin to Chicago in the dead of winter, reached his destination with both feet badly frozen. Dr. Elijah Harmon, with some assistance, tied the man to a chair. Without anesthesia and using implements

rusty from exposure to the weather, one foot was entirely removed and a portion of the other.

The earliest record of nearby medical service for the North Shore area is that of the Evanston Historical Society, indicating that Dr. Henry M. Bannister and Dr. James V. Z. Blaney practiced medicine in Evanston in 1856. They were followed by others as the population of the locality increased.

Without telephone service in those early days, it was necessary to send a messenger to notify the doctor and then wait. If his call was made after dark, his approach was heralded by the sound of hoof beats and the rumble of wheels crossing the wooden bridge that spanned the Big Ditch, about where Sheridan Road now crosses the Sanitary Canal. If it was a daytime emergency in dry weather, someone stood by the gate and watched for a cloud of yellow dust rising toward the tree tops. This might be the doctor driving pell-mell.

Dr. Byron C. Stolp came to Wilmette about 1873, to become the much loved and revered family doctor throughout the entire locality. The first year or so of his early practice here were discouraging. He was a young man and many of the families preferred the "older doctor from Evanston" to whom they were accustomed. Mr. S. M. Dingee encouraged him to remain and see it out. A short time after that, a new family came to Wilmette from Chicago. They had scarcely become settled in their new home when their large family of children became stricken with the measles. In response to their inquiry for the nearest doctor, they called Dr. Stolp. Needless to say, they all recovered which many have been the turning point in Dr. Stolp's career.

At that time, there were less than one hundred houses in Wilmette and as yet no telephones, making it necessary to send a message to the doctor's house to have him

call. When this occurred, Mrs. Stolp stepped out upon the porch of their home and blew lustily upon a cow horn. This well-known trumpet sound reverberated thru the woods and could be heard for a considerable distance. The news was carried from person to person until someone met the doctor somewhere or knew where he was and gave him the message that he was wanted. He then drove home as soon as possible to find out who the patient might be.

Dr. Stolp's interests were not limited to the practice of medicine. He took an active part in public affairs and the development of the school system, Central Stolp Schools having been named for him. The development of Evanston Hospital Association was one of his professional interests. Dr. and Mrs. Stolp were active members of the Wilmette Methodist Church in its earliest years. He served fourteen nonconsecutive years on the Wilmette School Board and was a member of the first Board of Trustees of the New Trier Township High School. Many homes were saddened by the passing of Dr. Byron C. Stolp on November 2, 1917.

Dr. Rufus B. Stolp followed in his father's footsteps. True to his heritage and the ethics of his profession, "Dr. Rufus" was as highly esteemed as his father. His willingness to sacrifice personal well-being and comfort for that of his patients was an outstanding characteristic, and his devotion and contributions toward the betterment of his profession placed him in the highest regard of his associates. Dr. Rufus B. Stolp died November 3, 1942.

Lake Michigan served as the great waterway of transportation northward from Chicago to those settlements providing safe harbor for vessels. Intermediate settlements were dependent upon the stage coach for passenger and mail transportation and upon freighting by plodding oxen or horse-drawn vehicles until the advent of the railroad. The

population of Chicago increased from about 28,000 in 1850 to 109,000 in 1860. The greatest amount of this increase took place between 1850 and 1857 when Chicago developed into a railroad center.

Pioneer railroads were inclined to seek the most direct course of least resistance between points of greatest economic importance. More than one prairie settlement, bypassed by the railroad, saved itself from stagnation by wheeling its small dwellings down to the right of way to set up store and smithy beside the railroad track. The development of the original Village of Wilmette presented difficulties not so easily overcome.

When the Chicago and Milwaukee Railway, later the Chicago and North Western, was put thru to Waukegan in 1854, the line ran midway between the settlement along the lake shore and the early settlement of Gross Point Village about two miles west. Neither settlement benefitted directly.

The interests of the Gross Point settlers was agricultural and had developed to a state of commercial importance. The low land eastward to the new railroad was marshy, without drainage and at times, being under water, was impassable. From the lake shore westward to the railroad, a dense forest intervened. This area was also without drainage, at times soggy and, in many localities, inundated during periods of continued rain. Neither settlement benefitted directly by the coming of the railroad and further development presented the challenge of a financial problem.

The attention of Mr. Henry A. Dingee of New York was attracted to the possibilities of financial investment here by his pioneer relatives. Mr. John G. Westerfield was no doubt the leading spirit in promoting this venture.

A committee was appointed by Mr. Dingee to represent him in the purchase of land adjacent to and on either side of the railroad right-of-way. When this had been

accomplished to his satisfaction, he re-appointed a committee, as of March 2, 1865, consisting of Henry W. Blodgett of Waukegan, Alexander McDaniel, Laura N. Kline and Obadiah Huse to act in agreement with him in this development of the village. The land was to be subdivided and platted in small lots and parcels suitable for residence and business purposes, put upon the market and sold with as little delay as possible.

Alexander McDaniel was appointed agent and treasurer and resident manager of said property. From the proceeds of wood and cut timber and the sale of lots and from any sums advanced by Mr. Dingee, improvements should be made, such as opening streets and highways, ditches for surface drainage, the construction of bridges, buildings and sidewalks and, in general, any way it was deemed necessary to promote the sale of land and lots. Mr. McDaniel was to consult with the committee and act according to the directions or advice of a majority in their interests.<sup>7</sup>

There were few limitations to retard the activity of carrying out the agreement. Nothing was stipulated as to how it was to be accomplished so a committee was appointed to plan and carry out the project. This committee consisted of Henry W. Blodgett, Alexander McDaniel, S. M. Dingee, John G. Westerfield and Simon V. Kline.

Matthias A. Gedney was appointed to supervise the laying out of the streets, ditching for surface drainage, building of bridges, etc. Mr. Blodgett suggested the name for Wilmette for the town from the phonetic spelling of its first white settler's name. John G. Westerfield did the survey and platting by 1869 and Lake Avenue was the only street east through to the lake at that time. Provision was made for a school at Tenth Street and Central Avenue and no liquor was to be sold on the property for a period of

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<sup>7</sup> See the Alexander McDaniel Papers at WHM for further details.

ten years. A depot building and platform were also considered but the first depot was built later by private subscription.

The original Village of Wilmette, with many of its additional subdivisions was virtually hewn from the virgin forest. Almost every dwelling that was erected stood in a little clearing of its own. The survey of the streets was followed by the felling of trees to clear the way. The timber was either sold outright or cut to cordwood length and sold to a ready market. Simon V. Kline was instrumental in the sale of a considerable amount of white oak to the Chicago and North Western Railroad. The streets were ditched on each side and the soil from the excavation was used to grade or crown the road.

Surface drainage was of utmost importance. From the slope at Ridge Road eastward, Wilmette is underlaid by a stratum of blue clay averaging twenty-five feet or more in thickness and at a depth of three feet beneath the surface in some localities while at others it crops out. At the lake bank, the clay lies at an even greater depth. During periods of frequent or long continued rains, the surface soil becomes saturated with moisture and, as it cannot penetrate the blue clay, the water remains on the surface. This is frequently apparent with our modern system of drainage, when the water flows from the paved streets but remains, at times, like shallow ponds in the yards and back of the curbing.

Wilmette Avenue is, no doubt, the oldest street in the Village. As an ancient trail, it diverted from the old Green Bay Road somewhere east of the present intersection of Chestnut Avenue and Sheridan Road; its course swinging south-westerly, as at present, then westward where, beyond Ridge Road, it bends to the southward and again to the west as Glenview Road. It probably continued to the Des Plaines River and beyond.

Lake Avenue had probably developed into something of greater breadth than a footpath from John Westerfield's west farm yard gate at Fourth Street and Sheridan Road. The short spur from there north eastward was the road or Lane, as it was then known, leading through the farm yard to Green Bay Road which passed along the lake bank, north and south through the farm.

The center line of Elmwood Avenue was the north boundary of the Reservation and the north limits of the Village. Lake Avenue must have been the first street surveyed because, at one time in the settlement of a disputed lot line, Mr. Westerfield remarked that the center of Lake Avenue was his base line. The west limit of the Village was Fifteenth Street; the south limit, Oakwood Avenue and the east limit, Eighth Street, originally known as Division Street.

The first house under construction during this survey was probably that of Alexander McDaniel at the south-east corner of Central and Wilmette Avenues. This house was afterwards known as the Dr. Child's house. It was quite pretentious for the period and brought publicity to the new village to such an extent that a group of Chicago men seriously considered the building of a summer hotel in Wilmette. This was not carried out.

Mr. McDaniel used one room of his house as an office. Evanston was then the trading center and post office for this locality. To provide a convenience for mail, Mr. McDaniel had a frame of shelves and pigeon holes suspended against one wall of his office.<sup>8</sup> In the course of going to or from Evanston, someone could take outgoing mail to the Evanston Post Office and return with mail for Wilmette and deposit it with Mr.

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<sup>8</sup> Shelving unit in Wilmette Historical Museum (WHM) collections, 2003.59.16

McDaniel to be picked up later by the various families. Mr. McDaniel was appointed Post Master for Wilmette on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1870, when the regular and first Post Office was established in the store of Henry Kinney<sup>9</sup> which was located on the south side of Wilmette Avenue in the middle of the block, west of what was then West Railroad Avenue.<sup>10</sup> Mr. Kinney was later appointed Post Master and created a building for the Post Office on the west side of Railroad Avenue, about a half block north of Wilmette Avenue. This building is still standing and is used as a bicycle shop.<sup>11</sup>

It is considered that the first two houses built after the town was platted were erected by Absalom Gedney, about 1869. The one for himself is known as the Flentye house at the south-east corner of Lake Avenue and Eighth Street. The one built for his brother, Matthias A. Gedney, stood at the north-east corner of Central Avenue and Eighth Street was moved, in later years, to a different location. The house occupied by Mr. I. R. Adkins at 1112 Central Avenue was supposedly built by Absalom Gedney at about this time.

The house known as the Butz house at 802 Lake Avenue was built for Amelia Glidden [demolished 2019], and the main portion of the residence at the southwest corner, built around 1871, was the home of Amos Shantz. This house has since been remodeled.<sup>12</sup> These three residences at this intersection were an outstanding example of the early growth of the Village.

It would be difficult to picture the Village in its infancy except for the reminiscences of some of those early settlers whose memories were keen at the time the

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Kinney's full name was William Henry Kinney

<sup>10</sup> Certificate appointing McDaniel in WHM collections, 2017.29

<sup>11</sup> Presumably, this is 605 Green Bay Road.

<sup>12</sup> 803 Lake Avenue

record was made of their individual impressions of those early days and placed in the archives of Ye Olde Towne Folks.

After Lake Avenue was surveyed, Mr. Westerfield must have turned his attention to the location of first importance – that adjacent to the railroad right-of-way. The stakes were scarcely driven when some building was under way.

J. Melville Brown who came to Wilmette in 1868 at the age of five years tells of his first impression of the Village at that time. Mr. Brown's father, John Brown, built some of the first houses on Lake Avenue. J. Melville Brown is, at this writing, honored as the oldest resident citizen of the original Village.<sup>13</sup>

The residence of Alexander McDaniel was then, in 1868, under construction at the southeast corner of Wilmette and Central Avenues. A small cabin partially built of logs stood in a small clearing at the southeast corner of Eleventh Street and Central Avenue, built by a German named Rudolph who had farmed the cleared land. And then for an undetermined period of time, it remained vacant. This structure was afterward bought by the Bockius family and remodeled. The original cabin was elevated to become a portion of the present two-story structure.<sup>14</sup>

It is legendary that this location was, at one time, the site of an Indian wigwam village. There is nothing to substantiate this except the fact that a quantity of Indian arrow heads and other relics were found in the yard after the Bockius family took title. Nearby was one small white frame house, and the house at the northeast corner of Eleventh Street of board and batten construction, afterward owned by Frank L. Joy.

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<sup>13</sup> J. Melville Brown died in 1948.

<sup>14</sup> Bockius family lived at 1035 Central Avenue

The first public building erected was the school house at Central Avenue and Tenth Street. This one room structure was used for both school and church purposes, social center, as well as for public and political gatherings. Miss May Sheldon was the first teacher. The Sheldon family occupied the house now owned and occupied by Mr. I. R. Adkins at 1112 Central Avenue. The school house was later enlarged to three rooms.

The Methodist and Congregational churches were not constructed until later, having been preceded by the Evangelical Union.

There was little to impress one from a passing Chicago and North Western Railroad train, as it puffed and chugged its way through the forest, that here a town was being developed from a forest clearing. The first train service for Wilmette consisted of one train a day each way. The baggage car carried mail, express, baggage and, at times, freight. This service was the result of the influence of Mr. Henry W. Blodgett. The first depot was on the west side of the track opposite the present structure as were the early business structures for the Village. The first depot, built by subscription, burned and was replaced by a more substantial one. This later was moved to its present site to become the freight house when the present depot was constructed.

By 1870, quite a change had taken place. Henry Kinney's store was erected by then. Mr. Kinney was at one time station agent, express agent, storekeeper and, after Mr. McDaniel's resignation, became Post Master and also served as Village Treasurer.

Mr. S. M. Dingee's commodious home on Lake Avenue was built around this time with its barn and carriage shed.<sup>15</sup> Beside the house was a well of clear cold water which, in depth and unfailing quantity, was symbolic of Mr. Dingee's generosity and good

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<sup>15</sup> Dingee house at 926 Lake Avenue

nature. When Mrs. Amelia Glidden built her home at the northwest corner of Eighth Street and Lake Avenue in 1870, to be followed by the erection of the Amos Shantz' home on the opposite of the street, the southwest corner, Mr. Westerfield was almost overcome with enthusiasm.<sup>16</sup> Because here were three houses now at one street intersection and at the eastern limit of the Village. Mrs. Glidden's house still stands without exterior change in architecture and is now the Butz house. The land was so low when the house was built that Mrs. Glidden by her individual effort, using a wheelbarrow, brought in sufficient soil from the nearby woods to elevate the surface of the yard. The original Shantz house still stands in the center of later remodeling.

The accepted date from which Wilmette records its anniversary is that inscribed upon the Village Seal – September 19, 1872. When the first meeting of the Board of Trustees was called, November 8, 1872, no municipal building for that purpose had been erected. The meeting took place in the home of Mr. A. T. Sherman. The house stands at present as originally located, 1136 Greenleaf Avenue.<sup>17</sup> The first Board of Trustees consisted of John G. Westerfield, President; Alexander McDaniel, Treasurer; Matthias A. Gedney, Amos Shantz, C. T. Boggs and A. T. Sherman. C. A. Vail was Clerk. Matthias A. Gedney later served as Police Magistrate for four years from 1873 through 1876.

If building permits were issued at that early date, there is no record of them to tell when the one-story rambling structure was erected, where Lyman-Renneckar Drug store now stands at the northwest corner of Central and Wilmette Avenues. This all-purpose building, known by the various activities under its low roof, became the Assembly Hall. It also served for dances, entertainments, church services and was

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<sup>16</sup> Glidden house was at 802 Lake Avenue (demolished 2019) and Shantz house at 803 Lake Avenue

<sup>17</sup> Later demolished and replaced by an apartment building.

known as Library Hall. The building was moved to its present location, 514 East Railroad Avenue. For a time it was Frank Gathercoal's carpenter shop and at present is the plumbing shop of Wm. B. Lucke, Inc.

This building was replaced by a two-story building known severally as Arcanum Hall, Assembly Hall and, as Library Hall, was the home of the Elmwood Library Association. About 1890, the Village Hall was erected, a frame building, on the irregularly shaped piece of property occupied by the present impressive structure. By 1910, the Village had outgrown this structure and the building was sold to A. C. Wolff who had it moved to 625 Park Avenue where it now serves as a private residence. The present Village Hall was erected in 1910 and was outgrown by 1920. The question of remodeling was under consideration when the cyclone of 1920 removed the roof of the building and made way for the addition of the second story, as at present.

The early development of the Village had made scarce headway when the great conflagration, the Chicago Fire, occurred October 7, 1871, causing a widespread financial and economic depression. Many people lost their entire possessions and the source of their income was cut off for the time being. The rebuilding of Chicago also inspired many to seek a fresh start elsewhere which proved beneficial to the further settlement of Wilmette and other North Shore communities where real estate values were in keeping with pioneer improvement.

Board walks on one side of the street were laid where residential improvement warranted, and their structure was regulated by the amount of traffic they had to bear. Planking laid on stringers was sometimes eight to ten inches above the ground, depending upon the high water mark during the rainy periods. Less frequented localities had to be content with planking laid lengthwise and held in place by cross ties.

Wilmette, in the early days, was noted for its variety of water. Every home had its well for drinking water and a cistern for rain water. In place of the cisterns, rain water barrels were placed beside the house to catch the flow of soft water from the roof. From one pump came water one couldn't cook with and from the other, came water not suitable for washing. There was lake water, plentiful but not always placid and, at times, surface water frequently flooded the basements where wash tubs, coal scuttle and scrub pails were conveniently secured to take the place of stepping stones.

Wilmette Avenue west of the track was, at times, an impassable mire in places where the first corduroy sections of road showed evidence of early street pavement.

Mr. J. Melville Brown, as a boy, was Wilmette's first lamp lighter. About 1875, there were fourteen kerosene lamps set on the top of wooden posts. Those street lamps lighted the streets of the Village in the neighborhood of Central and Wilmette Avenues and the close by improved locality. They had to be filled and tended every morning and lighted each evening, regardless of weather. The demand for an additional street light called for lengthy discussion and deep consideration by the Village Board. The lighting system was later improved by lamps that required filling only once each week and by about 1892 when the Village had two policemen, they tended the care and lighting of about one hundred oil lamps.

Every family had one or more lanterns to carry at night to light the way to social gatherings and meetings of importance. The ditches were often full of water and a fall from the walk might easily have had serious results. On arriving at one's destination after dark, it was a simple matter to determine how many had preceded by counting the lanterns on the porch.

The matter of food supply also required an adjustment by newcomers from more highly developed localities. Fresh fruit and vegetables were not carried in stock at Kinney's store. There was no demand. Everyone had their own vegetable garden and fruit trees. Fresh meat was sold by Baptist Mueller who slaughtered and butchered the animals in the back yard of his butcher shop. In season there was a plentiful supply of wild fruit in the woods – crab apple, plums, raspberries, wild grapes and choke cherries. And in the Fall, there was a harvest of butternut, hickory and hazel nuts. A variety of wildlife inhabited the woods that made it interesting – raccoon, rabbits, squirrels and an occasional wolf or fox. C. P. Westerfield<sup>18</sup> spoke of frequently seeing deer in the 1850's. Owls of several varieties from the little barn or screech owl, the hoot owl to the golden brown great horned owl that frequently measured a wing spread of three feet from tip to tip were seen. There was also the little, white, striped fellow, fond of chickens, who made himself known by his warning fragrance.

Hillville was as well known in the 1870's as Wilmette. This cluster of a few homes, situated in the locality of Fifth Street and Maple Avenue, retained its identity as a distinct neighborhood in the depths of the forest until long after it came within the corporate limits of the Village in 1906. It was named for the family of one of the early 1839 pioneers of this region, Arunah Hill, whose son, B. F. Hill, afterward bought land and built the first houses in Hillville.

An ancient trail cut off from the Green Bay Trail somewhat south of the present intersection of Maple Avenue and Sheridan Road, leading northwesterly it crossed another northeast to southwest trail marked by two trail trees at Seventh Street and

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Westerfield, son of John and Rebecca Westerfield

Linden Avenue. Continuing to about Ninth Street and Central Avenue, through the present school property, it pursued its meandering course to probably somewhat north of Lake Avenue and Ridge Road, which is the approximate location of an Indian Mission Village on the shore of a lake which later became the Skokie Marsh. The antiquity of this trail is fairly well established by the finding of relics, identified with the Mound Builders, along its course.

Father Pierre Francois Pinot may have followed this path in 1696 when the mission was founded and earlier, from descriptions, it was perhaps the trail followed by Father Marquette, in 1674, when he made camp near the present site of the Evanston Light House.

One of the pioneer settlers of this region, Arunah Hill, arrived in Chicago with his wife and seven children on board the schooner, Dolphin, in October 1836, after a voyage of three weeks from Cleveland, Ohio. One of his sons, Benjamin Franklin Hill, who was then six years of age later became one of Wilmette's pioneers.

During his sojourn to Chicago, Mr. Hill met Major Mulford who directed him to the Gross Point region as a locality for settlement with prospect of early development. Mr. Hill hired an ox team and proceeded northward along Green Bay Road to Mr. Mulford's board cabin about ten miles distant, remaining there about a year. This locality became known as the Ten Mile House. Mr. Hill continued farther on to his destination where he took up land and built a log house a short distance north of Lake Avenue on Ridge Road. This locality became known as Hill's Ridge.

Mr. Hill must have followed the route soon to be taken frequently by the stage coaches – West from Green Bay Road on Central Street, Evanston, where the land

surfaces were slightly elevated, Northward on Prairie Avenue to Wilmette Avenue and North on Ridge Road to his destination.

During the gold rush of 1849, B. F. Hill crossed the plains to California and there met Hubbard Latham, a “49’r” who had crossed the plains by ox team from Sandwich, Illinois, requiring six months to make this journey. One member of his party was lost, supposedly having been killed by the Indians.

Mr. Latham returned to his home in 1852 and, in the early 1870’s, went to Evanston where he intended to locate so that his children could benefit by the educational advantages of Northwestern University. Here again he met Mr. B. F. Hill who had bought land, built a home and founded Hillville, where a street had been cut through, later known as Hill Street, our present Maple Avenue.

Mr. Latham built a home on the northeast corner of Hill and Fifth Street where he and Mr. Hill owned a tract of land jointly. In August 1874, the Latham family moved into their new home. Mr. Hill built a new home for himself at the northwest corner of Hill and Sixth Streets. Matthias A. Gedney later occupied the original house of Mr. Hill, after selling his home at Division Street (Eighth Street) and Central Avenues. Mr. Hill and Mr. Latham jointly laid out the subdivision known as Hill and Latham Subdivision.

In addition to these three houses, there were two on the west side of Sixth Street just south of Hill Street, and two others, one on each side of Fifth Street, three hundred feet south of Hill Street. In 1875, James A. Furman of Sandwich, Illinois, built a home on the south side of Hill Street between Fifth and Sixth Streets.<sup>19</sup> Within a few years, James H. Verrall built west of Mr. Furman. Mr. and Mrs. Verrall still occupy this house.

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<sup>19</sup> 511 Maple Avenue

About 1885, Mr. E. A. Burge built on the west side of Fourth Street between Hill Street and Laurel Avenue. This was Hillville.

The Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad extended its tracks from Evanston into this area in 1887 and later built a small depot on the east side of the track, just north of Maple Avenue (Hill Street). They named the station, Llewellyn Park, and attempted a real estate boom in the locality which was not a success but to newcomers, the name Llewellyn Park superceded Hillville.

*James Kline was related to many of the early Wilmette families, including the Klines.*

*This essay is undated, but it was likely written in the 1940s.*

*Thank you to Sarah Hawkinson for making this transcription possible.*