

## About Geneva

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### **History of Geneva, Illinois**

Geneva, Illinois, located in Kane County, is a city of 19,000 located 40 miles west of Chicago. Geneva is situated in the Fox River valley. Native Americans populated the valley for over 9,000 years prior to the coming of the white man. The Illinois and Prairie Pottawatomi tribes inhabited the Geneva area during the 17th, 18th and early 19th Centuries.

White settlers first entered the area around 1830. Daniel Shaw Haight, of Dutch origin, was the first settler in Geneva. He built a cabin near a spring by the Fox River in 1833, and the settlement was called Big Spring. Haight sold his claim in 1835 to James and Charity Herrington and moved his family further north.

James and Charity Herrington were influential in the creation of the town of Geneva. The Herrington homestead served as the center of Geneva for many of the early years. Early names for the town were Herrington's Ford and La Fox. James and Charity's ninth child, Margaret, is considered to be the first child born in Geneva.

Geneva was selected as the new county seat in 1836. The name that was originally selected for the town was "Campbell Ford," after two of the County Commissioners, James Campbell and Thomas Ford. The name "Geneva" was instead adopted, most likely at the suggestion of Dr. Charles Volney Dyer of Chicago, who was a noted abolitionist who had recently come from upstate New York, and was a friend of both Hamilton and Ford. Geneva was an upper New York State name.

James Herrington died in 1839. Before his untimely death at age 41, he had platted the town, helped establish the county seat and was elected sheriff, and opened the first general store, tavern and post office called "LaFox."

By late 1836, a group of settlers from Massachusetts arrived in Geneva. Known as "the Boston Colony," they included some of the most influential of Geneva's early citizens. This group was influential in organizing the Unitarian Church, currently the oldest church in Geneva, built in 1843, and reportedly the oldest Unitarian church west of New York State.

By 1840, Geneva had a courthouse and jail, a post office, a classroom and teacher, a bridge, a sawmill, at least three general stores, a doctor, a furniture and coffin maker, at least two blacksmiths, two hotels and a tavern. There were log cabins and some modest frame and stone houses.

Between 1840 and the Civil War, most of the local economy was tied to the mills. Geneva's industry served agriculture, and local factories produced packed meat, butter, cheese, milled grains, and later glucose and flax.

One important development was the coming of the railroad in 1853. This put Geneva on a main passenger line, as well as providing freight lines. The railroad established a relationship between Geneva and Chicago. Well-to-do city people "discovered" Geneva as an idyllic place for outings and, eventually, for second or country homes. Many people in Geneva today commute to Chicago daily on the train.

Eben Danford, from Massachusetts, was a machinist and inventor. In 1850 he invented and patented the Danford Reaper and Mower. He often received top awards for his invention over rival Cyrus McCormick, famous for his McCormick Reaper in Chicago. At the peak of operation in the 1850s Danford made between 400 and 600 reapers and harvesters each year and employed 50 to 100 men. The Danford Reaper and Mower Works closed in 1862 due mainly to the aggressive and wealthy competitor Cyrus McCormick, which later became International Harvester.

The first town elections took place in 1848. The first sheriff, Bartholomew Yates, hired Allan Pinkerton

as his deputy. Pinkerton went on to found a famous detective agency in Chicago.

Geneva's first free public school was built and opened in 1855. By the mid-1850s, churches were built by the Methodists, the Congregationalists, the Swedish Lutherans, and the Disciples of Christ. The Unitarian church of 1843, the Congregational church of 1856, and the Disciples of Christ meetinghouse of 1857 still stand.

Geneva was officially incorporated as a village in 1858. The village had many worthy attorneys, due mainly to Geneva being the county seat. One was Augustus Herrington, James and Charity Herrington's oldest son. He became U.S. District Attorney for Northern Illinois in 1857 and was later a solicitor for the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad.

A Rand McNally travel booklet titled, "Summer Resorts of the Northwest" from 1879 states this about Geneva:

Many professional men who really belong to Chicago have their homes in Geneva, and the society is, therefore, very agreeable. It is a quiet, restful place, where there is a perpetual air of a New England Sunday afternoon. On warm summer days the shaded streets are cool and quiet; nothing is astir for hours except on one or two of the business corners and about the courthouse. There is a sort of natural atmosphere of *dolce far niente* about the whole place, which is extremely grateful to people who have been working or pleasure seeking on the high pressure plan for seven or eight months of city life. Toward evening everything is gay and active, however, and the scene on the arrival of the evening train is quite like that at many Eastern resorts. There are many pleasant places where board can be obtained.

Most of the industries in Geneva in the 19th century produced agriculture-related products. There was the Butter and Cheese Manufacturing Company, begun in 1874, which later became the Geneva Rock Springs Creamery. Today the building has been renovated into the Herrington Inn hotel.

The Bennett Mill, established as a gristmill in 1865 by the Bennett brothers, was another important employer. Its heyday was the 1880s and 1890s. It sold their famous "Geneva Belle" flour all over the Midwest, and shipped as far away as Scotland by 1896. They also sold to some of the largest wholesalers in the United States, such as A&P and Kroger. The mill closed in the 1950s, and part of it has been restored for use as offices.

A glucose factory was opened in 1880. A sweet glucose is produced through the chemical transformation of corn. It was later named the Geneva Grape Sugar Company. In 1888, it was changed again to the Charles Pope Glucose Company. A large explosion damaged the factory and killed six. The factory was rebuilt and by 1897 it manufactured one-fifth of the total output of glucose and starch products in the United States.

Eben Danford and William Howell opened a foundry in 1862 where they manufactured smoothing irons, Pickering pumps, and other home necessities. W. D. Turner came in as a partner, and brought his invention called the fluting iron. It was called the "Geneva Hand Flutter." The irons were sold all over the country and had the name Geneva on the handle. The hand fluters were made from 1866 to 1920. It was one of the largest manufactories of irons in the world.

A product of the railroad's location and the burgeoning industries in Geneva was a new population of Swedish immigrants. After laboring to construct the railroad from Chicago to Geneva, many Swedes liked the town and returned to Geneva to live. The largest influx of Swedish residents to Geneva was between 1880 and 1900. By 1895, half of Geneva's citizens spoke Swedish as their first language. Many came to Geneva to work in the factories of Howell & Co., Bennett Mills, and the Pope Glucose Company.

Several Swedish Lodges were formed in Geneva, dedicated to the preservation of Swedish traditions.

Good Templar Park was developed in 1925, which included an athletic field, amphitheater, and summer cottages. A Swedish Day festival was also sponsored in the park each summer, beginning in 1925. In 1949, Swedish Days became a city-sponsored summer festival, held in June. 1999 will host the 50th anniversary of the Swedish Days festival.

Geneva's Swedish citizens were also interested in local government, and have played an important part in the administration of the city since the late 19th century. A total of 29 Swedish men had served on the city council by 1900, and several have served as Geneva's mayor.

Similar to many towns in the Midwest, a variety of ethnic groups settled in Geneva. While not as numerous as the Swedes, the next largest in terms of population were the Italians. While some had their own businesses, many worked for the railroad. There were also Germans, Scottish, Chinese, and Eastern Europeans.

Geneva incorporated as a city in 1887. The first mayor was James Herrington, son of the town's founder. A mayor/council form of government was adopted.

In 1905, George and Nelle Fabyan purchased 10 acres of a farm outside of Geneva and began what would grow to encompass 350 acres at its largest. The estate, known as Riverbank, comprised everything from a zoo, an 1864 Dutch windmill, greenhouses, stone sculptures, 18,000 chickens, a Japanese garden, a Roman-style swimming pool, a lighthouse, a boathouse, formal gardens, and an old farmhouse that was redesigned by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1907.

Colonel Fabyan was also interested in science and research, and began in 1912 what would come to be known as Riverbank Laboratories. Many different activities occurred at Riverbank Laboratories, including decoding and deciphering enemy messages during World War I, deciphering alleged secret coded messages in the works of William Shakespeare, research in the field of architectural acoustics, groundbreaking research in the field of cryptology, fieldwork in the use of hand grenades and military trenches, research and development of tuning forks, and studies of human fitness and anatomy. The list is varied and fascinating. Teams of researchers lived and worked at Riverbank, devoting years of their lives to the furthering of science. Many scientists from around the nation and world have visited Riverbank. The United States' military successes in World War I and World War II have a direct relevance to Riverbank. And Riverbank can be considered to be a direct lineal descendent of the National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency. Riverbank Acoustical Laboratories, a testing laboratory for architectural acoustics, is still considered to be one of the best in the world.

Geneva is well known in the region as quaint, charming historic town. Part of what creates Geneva's character is its historic architecture. Very few large, ornate homes exist in Geneva. In contrast, most of the architecture is conservative and plain, yet always well maintained. Trees and yards are an integral part of Geneva's sense of place. Geneva still retains a large number of its mid-to-late 19th century homes. Many are in specific architectural styles such as Italianate, Greek Revival, and Queen Anne. Many of the older houses are of a common vernacular and built in some part with locally quarried stone found along the river. These separate styles blend together to create an atmosphere of refined and understated elegance, perhaps reflecting the taste of the New England roots of Geneva's earliest settlers.