

KEWANEE—1854-2004

Pertaining to Walworth Company and Kewanee Boiler

By Larry Lock

(Editor's Note: This summary history of Kewanee appeared originally in the Henry County Genealogical Society's "Family Histories of Henry County," published in 2000. It is included here with the approval of the society. The author, who is president of the Kewanee Historical Society and curator of its Robert and Marcella Richards Museum, has made some corrections and additions to the original work.)

BEGINNING AND OVERVIEW

The founding of Kewanee in 1854 was the result of two separate developments: the establishment of the colony or village of Wethersfield some 18 years before Kewanee and the building of a railroad from Mendota to Galesburg in 1854.

Wethersfield was founded in 1836 by the Connecticut Association as part of a New England movement to encourage its Protestant peoples to populate the northern portion of Illinois ahead of Roman Catholic immigrants and Southern pro-slavery elements. The Connecticut Association was started by Rev. Caleb Jewitt Tenney, the pastor of the Wethersfield, Connecticut Congregational Church. Some 50 stockholders pooled \$25,000 and sent Rev. Ithamar Pillsbury, the founder of Henry County's first town of Andover in 1835, Col. Sylvester Blish and Elizur Goodrich to purchase land somewhere close to Andover. Some 16,000 acres in what are now Wethersfield and Kewanee Townships were purchased and a town site was selected and named Wethersfield. The first settlers arrived late in 1836, others followed to the village in the wilderness, and by the early 1850's some 500 to 1000 people occupied the village and immediate surroundings. These Wethersfielders were true pioneers. Their closest contacts with "civilization" back east were Peoria on the Illinois River or Rock Island on the Mississippi River, both about 50 miles away.

As the railroad boom was ready to move west of Chicago in the early 1850's, the owners of the Military Tract Railroad decided to extend their road from Aurora to Galesburg and then Burlington by way of Mendota, Princeton, and southeastern Henry County. The route chosen through Henry County would bypass Wethersfield one-and-a-half miles to the north. The decision was based either on the adverse terrain immediately west of Wethersfield or the unwillingness of the village government to give land or lend money to the railroad. Regardless, the decision to build to the north prompted several Wethersfield entrepreneurs to purchase land, give right-of-way to the railroad, and when the location of a depot was determined lay out the beginnings of a city in 1854.

Before the railroad determined its route most of the land that would become Kewanee was a farm owned by brothers Matthew and John Potter. They built a house in 1850 just north of what would be the corner of Main and Second Streets, thus Kewanee's first house. (In 1903 when the owners decided the house was standing in the way of progress, the Masonic Lodge bought the house, donated it to the Daughters of the American Revolution, and moved it to its current location on Park Avenue where it is used as the DAR's chapter house.) The Potters apparently wanted to be farmers rather than land developers. They sold five acres to George Morse and Silas Willard; the acreage was located where the road to Dixon (soon to be Main Street) crossed the proposed rail line. The Potters then traded the remainder of their quarter section (155 acres) to Henry Little, Capt. Sullivan Howard, Ralph Tenney and Nelson Lay in exchange for farmland immediately southeast of Wethersfield. The land was to the west of Main Street. The above gentlemen then joined with Col. Sylvester Blish, who owned a quarter section east of Main St., in laying out a new town on May 1, 1854. Five of Kewanee's founders (Blish, Howard, Little, Morse and Tenney) were from Wethersfield and were instrumental in founding and developing that village. Silas Willard was from Galesburg and would be one of the founders of Wataga, also a town on the railroad toward Galesburg, and Nelson Lay was from Kensoha, Wisconsin. Lay apparently was looking for a

financial opportunity and he moved his family to Kewanee. They arrived in October of 1854 on one of the first trains into Kewanee.

The city's founders initially named their new town Berrien, after the 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 native Americans in the area 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 and named Kewanee. 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 February 14, 1855.

Kewanee sprang up almost overnight as many Wethersfielders literally picked up their homes and businesses and moved them one to two miles north. Buildings were raised, lowered onto logs and skidded to their destination. They were pulled by teams of oxen. By 1860 there were about 1,500 people in Kewanee. Wethersfield's development 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.

Kewanee grew steadily but gradually from 1860 to 1890. In 1890 the population was 4,569. Then in the 1890's the city grew considerably along with Western Tube Co. (later Walworth) and Kewanee Boiler Co. The 1900 census showed 8,382. The next major growth period, the last for Kewanee, was the decade of World War I when virtually all Kewanee factories were busy with war work. Another factor was the annexation in 1911 of a large developed area west of Grove Street. From 1910 to 1920 Kewanee increased from 9,307 to 16,026.

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, the population began a decline that has yet to be reversed. The 1960 and 1970 census reports each showed a loss of about 500. The 1980 decline was about 1,600 to a population of 14,500. In 1990 the drop was another 1,500 to a figure of 12,969. Indications are and the hope is that the Kewanee census for 2000 will show at least some kind of increase. (That hope was not realized as the 2000 census showed a population of 12,900—no increase, but at least no substantial decrease.)

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 are being built in the latter half of the 90's, still mostly in that portion of Kewanee that is in Wethersfield Township. The retail business center of the city has moved from downtown to the south side, a movement that began in the 60's and was especially boosted in the 1970's by converting the Main-Tenney 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 contained 27% of Kewanee's population (3,536 out of 12,969).

The remainder of this story of Kewanee follows in a chronological format.

KEWANEE HISTORY TIMELINE

1868 – Rome was not built in a day and the same is certainly true of Kewanee’s two premier industries—the **Walworth** and the **Boiler**. Both had their origin in a small company formed in 1868 at 200 E. Fourth known as **Anderson Feed Steamer Co.** The company originally made boilers for cooking hog feed but soon started making steam heating systems for buildings, which it called “base burners and radiators.” The first system was reportedly installed in 1871 in the Kewanee home of O.H. Loomis, company secretary. Many more were built that year, including one for William E. Haxtun, who would purchase the company in 1875 and change the name to **Haxtun Steam Heater Co.** The young company grew steadily; by 1881 a larger factory was built, the foundry expanded, and 200 men were employed. J.H. Pierce left the wholesale hardware business to join Haxtun in 1881 as a member of the board of directors; he would be instrumental in the growth of the company and would serve one term in the Illinois state Senate and one term as mayor of Kewanee (1897-1899). Emerit E. Baker (known as E.E. or “double E”), another name “always connected with the upbuilding of the manufacturing interests of Kewanee,” had already joined the company and moved onto the board of directors in 1882. In the early 80’s the company began making valves, fittings, pipes and radiators--thus producing all the main components of steam heating systems. The production of pipe resulted in a major expansion of the physical property and plants, which was accomplished by a civic fund drive to acquire and donate to the company the land between the railroad and Third Street where the Walworth would be located until its departure from Kewanee in 1978. The Haxtun Co. continued to thrive in the 1880’s, surviving a major fire in 1888, rebuilding in several months and ending the decade with a payroll of 900. In 1890 employment went over 1,000 and the first “girls” were employed outside the offices, working in the core room. More importantly, National Tube Co. of McKeesport, Pennsylvania acquired a major interest in the company and its officers filled three of seven spots on the board of directors. In March of 1891 the old name of Haxtun Steam Heater Co. was discontinued and the name **Western Tube Co.** was adopted. (See 1891 for more

on Western Tube, which would become Walworth in 1917, and 1892 for more on Kewanee Boiler Co.)

1891 – The **Western Tube Company**, known until 1891 as Haxtun Steam Heater, would grow during the 1890's from a company of 1,000 workers to 2,000 employees, even after it sold off its boiler factory to E.E. Baker and associates in 1892. This growth was directed by John Pierce as company president. (In 1898 Pierce built the magnificent home or mansion at Prospect and Chestnut that today houses Rux Funeral Home.) During a boom period of 1906-07 Western Tube actually reached employment of 4,200 working in plants, mills, foundries and offices on about 40 acres of land in downtown Kewanee. Following a business depression in 1908 the work force dropped back to 2,300. In 1908 the National Tube Co., a U.S. Steel Corporation subsidiary that had gained controlling interest of Western Tube in 1895, changed the company's name once again, this time to **Kewanee Works of National Tube Company**. Writing in 1909, the Kewanee Works president exclaimed prophetically that "on account of its isolated position, away from the base of supplies which run into large tonnages, it is not likely that the mills (where pipe was produced) of this company in Kewanee will ever operate continuously to produce as great a product as in 1906, but the other lines of goods which are manufactured, fittings, valves, and other steam and water appliances, are continually becoming in greater demand and this part of the business will undoubtedly grow to very largely increased proportions." By 1910 National Tube would discontinue the production of pipe, selling the machinery from its pipe mills. And in 1917 National Tube would sell its Kewanee Works to **Walworth Co.**, one of the nation's largest producers of valves and fittings. (See 1917 for Walworth Co., Kewanee Works.)

1892 – **Kewanee Boiler Company**, manufacturer of what would be worldwide known "Kewanee Boilers," was formed. The boiler operation was part of Haxtun Steam Heater but became a separate company headed by E.E. Baker shortly after Haxtun became Western Tube in 1891. With Baker as company president, Kewanee Boiler operated for eight years in Western Tube's boiler shop on Main Street. In 1900 the Boiler moved to its present location on the west

side of the city along the railroad. During a 19-month period of World War I the Boiler produced an “astounding total of 19,410 boilers, heaters and hot water storage tanks.” The post-war expansion in 1920 led to the building of a “million dollar addition,” bringing the Boiler works to 13 acres under roof on property of 33 acres. Peak employment reached 1,300 workers in the 1920’s. In 1928 the company’s name was changed to Kewanee Boiler Corporation when it became affiliated with the American Radiator Company. E.E. Baker, who had entered the infant boiler business in 1873 as an office boy, remained as president of the corporation until he died in 1929. He was succeeded by B.F. Baker, long-time company secretary, who had also been mayor of Kewanee from 1911 to 1919. Kewanee Boiler’s war record was again outstanding during World War II as the company earned the coveted Army-Navy “E” award no less than five times in recognition of its war production. Kewanee Boiler continues to operate in Kewanee but has been owned by several different companies since American Radiator ownership. Employment was 700-800 in the 1950’s but has dropped to a little over 200 in 2000. The current owner is Burnham Corporation. (See post-2000 addition.)

1917 – In the midst of World War I the massive Kewanee Works of National Tube Co. became **Kewanee Works of Walworth Manufacturing Co.** Walworth was founded in Boston in 1842 and by 1917 its headquarters was in New York. The Kewanee plant became the largest of its six facilities. Factory floor space in the several buildings exceeded 800,000 square feet. They were located on 40 acres of land that also included two miles of railroad track. The Kewanee plant produced brass, iron and steel valves and fittings on a “high tonnage basis,” ranging in size from three ounces to three tons. “A city within a city,” Kewanee Works had its own water system, police department, fire department, medical staff and more. From 1917 until after World War II employment was usually a little over 2,000. One of Walworth’s outstanding events was on May 29, 1942 when the governor of Illinois, the president of the company and many other military, political and business dignitaries came to Kewanee for a ceremony and celebration marking both the receipt of the Kewanee’s Works first of several “E” awards for military production and the 100th anniversary of Walworth’s founding. During World War

It a “shell plant” was constructed for the production of casings for large artillery shells. For more than half a century, Walworth was to Kewanee what Caterpillar is to Peoria. There were troubled times, business recessions and lay-offs and several labor-management disputes resulting in strikes, but on the whole Walworth for many years was good for Kewanee. But “all good things come to an end” and that is what happened to Walworth in Kewanee during the generation after World War II. (See 1958 and 1978.)

1919 – A United States government **freighter named “Kewanee”** was launched on June 7 at Eilizabeth, N.J. with a delegation from Kewanee invited to attend. Miss Clara Dossche, a 19-year-old employee in the molding room at Walworth Kewanee Works, was chosen to christen the ship since many Walworth products were used in the ship. P.A. Waller, Boss Co. president, spoke on behalf of Kewanee. When Miss Dossche returned to Kewanee, she entered nurse’s training and then became a nurse at Walworth. The USS Kewanee was taken out of service shortly after the end of World War II.

1943 – In the midst of World War II the Star-Courier was prompted to tell of the contributions of Kewanee to **the war effort**, both at the war front and home front. Written by C.O. Schlaver and Frank P. Johnson (later a member of the state legislature from Kewanee) in the September 1 issue, the article was a response to the “thoughtless remark” of Eastern newspapers that “the middlewest doesn’t know we are in a war.” An estimated 2,000 from Kewanee and Wethersfield townships were in uniform, they reported. Already nine had been killed. (The number would go much higher as the death toll reached 88 by war’s end.) Kewanee factories were turning out war materials—shells at the Walworth, mines at the Boiler, small shells at Machinery and Conveyor, bomb fins at Kewanee Manufacturing and trailers at Martin Company. Walworth and Boiler had already received the Army-Navy “E” Award for war production. (Others would also before war’s end.) Women, of course, were taking up the slack in the factories as male workers left for the service. The county and city had exceeded their quota in the first two war bond drives.

Rationing began in the spring of 1942 with sugar and had been expanded to include many other staples. Hundreds of women volunteered to help the Red Cross knit and sew surgical dressings, sweaters, mittens, gloves, pajamas, bathrobes, etc. The Civil Defense was organized under the leadership of Dr. Harold Swain of World War I renown. Salvage campaigns for iron and other metals, silk and nylon hose, fats and greases were conducted. Schools conducted programs to involve the children, such as collecting articles for hospitalized soldiers and saving pennies to eventually purchase savings war bonds. There was something for everyone to do.

1958 – For 500-600 **Walworth** employees, and the city of Kewanee as a whole, Christmas of 1958 was more like Halloween (the trick side rather than the treat) as Walworth announced on December 16 that it was transferring most of its Kewanee Works operations to its East St. Louis plant. The foundry would remain in Kewanee as long as it showed a profit, company officials said. That would be 20 years, as the foundry was closed in 1978, completely ending Walworth in Kewanee. The partial closure in 1958 reduced the work force from about 1200 to 600-700, but subsequent reductions soon resulted in a workforce of about 200. The 1958 reduction came on the heels of an extended strike by Walworth unions, prompting considerable criticism in some quarters of union officials and members. To set the record straight local union representatives traveled to New York to meet with company officials. Union officials said they were willing to correct any “barriers” to continued operations in Kewanee, but they were assured by the company that the reduction was necessitated by a decline in business and had been under consideration for about a year. A delegation of business representatives headed by Mayor Campbell Andrews also made the trip to New York and met with the company’s president, not so much to plead a lost cause, but to assure Walworth officials that Kewanee wanted Walworth to stay in Kewanee to whatever extent possible. Ironically, the same Star-Courier edition that announced the bad news also carried an Associated Press national story on page 14 with the headline: “Economically, Things Should Be Better in 1959.”

1978 – Walworth Co. closed its one remaining foundry, completing its removal from Kewanee that began in 1958. Part of its massive property and buildings had been sold to Pines Trailer in 1970, but most of the land would remain an eyesore for the rest of the century. In 2000 the property, having been previously acquired by the city, was being cleared and prepared for other uses, including a park-like area across from the new City Hall.

2000 – The opening of the new City Hall in January at the beginning of a new century, indeed a new millenium, seems an appropriate place to end this chronological summary of the history of Kewanee.

Added since 2000 – The 2000 census showed that Kewanee’s population had stabilized. The total for **Kewanee was 12,900**, a decline of less that 100. An unfortunate economic development, both in real terms and symbolic, was the decision in 2002 of Burnham Corporation, the owners of **Kewanee Boiler**, to close the historic industry that more than anything else made Kewanee known nationwide, if not worldwide. Another disappointing economic development was the closing of two supermarkets—**Kroger’s and Eagle**. On the positive side, a major step forward was taken in 2003 when the City Council voted to replace the south side (Wethersfield) **water tower** and to adapt a **reverse osmosis system** to the city’s water supply. Both projects were virtually complete by June of 2004 at a total cost of \$8.5 million.

Bibliographical Note. This historical survey was researched primarily from three major sources: “The Kewanee Story,” published in 1954 in conjunction with Kewanee’s bicentennial under the leadership of C.C. Pryor; the 1954 bicentennial edition of the Kewanee Star-Courier; and the extensive local history files of Bob Richards and the Kewanee Historical Society. Also important were various issues of Kewanee newspapers; especially the Star-Courier, on microfilm at Kewanee Public Library; the library’s local history files; the 1877, 1885, 1910, and 1968 histories of Henry County and the local history collection of the late Jerry Sarff.

