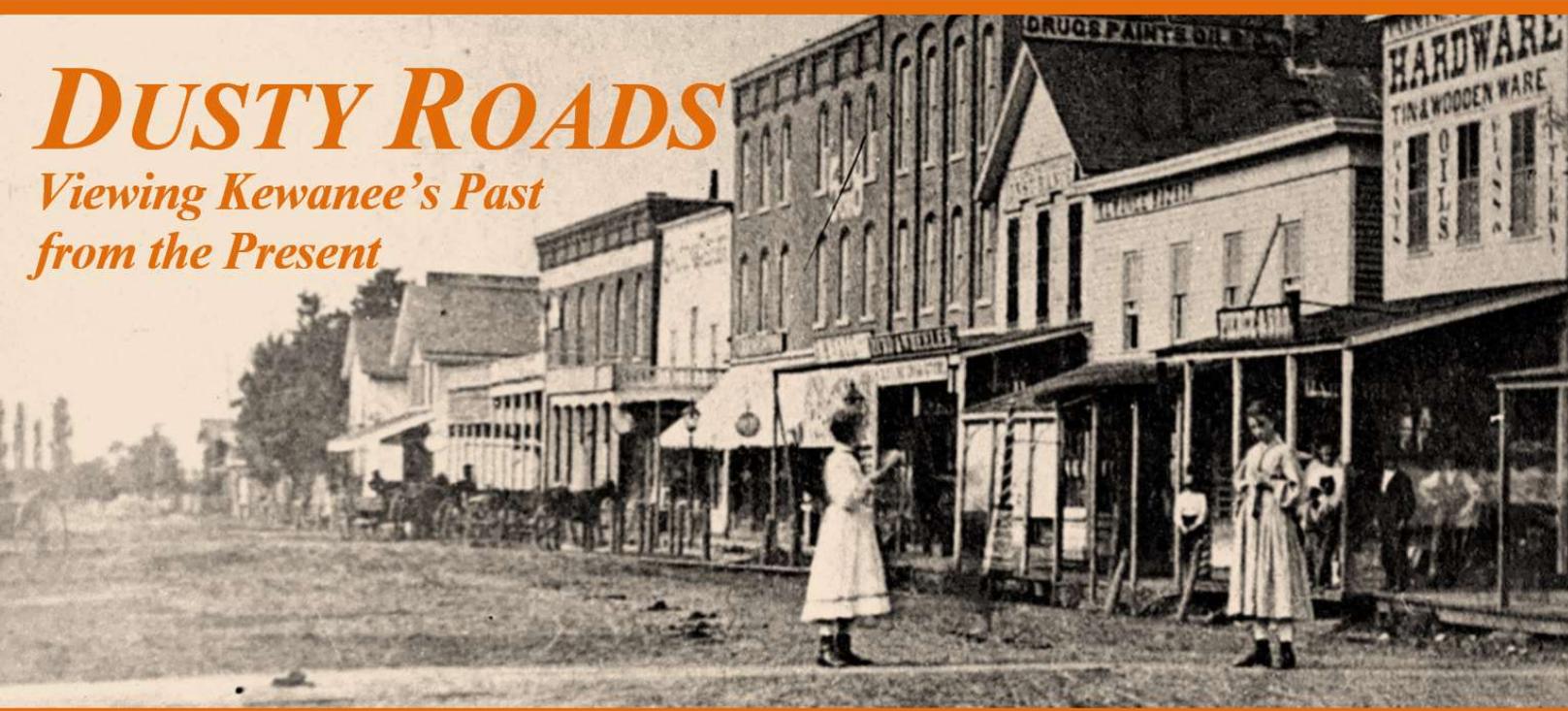


# DUSTY ROADS

*Viewing Kewanee's Past  
from the Present*



*by Dean Karau & Larry Lock*

*September 2019*

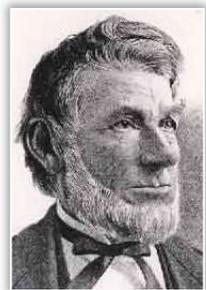
## Wethersfield's First Dwellings

*The First Cabins Were Likely Located Around the Intersection of Division and West Streets*

In 1836, Reverend Ithamar Pillsbury, businessman Sylvester Blish, and a surveyor had arrived at the site of what would become Wethersfield, Illinois. They had been tasked by the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Connecticut, to find and buy land for a new colony. In early May 1836, they purchased 99 quarter-sections of land, about evenly split between what would become southern Kewanee and northern Wethersfield Townships.



*Ithamar Pillsbury*



*John F. Willard*

Later that year, Association members Deacon John F. Willard, Reverend Joseph Goodrich, and Henry G. Little traveled back to the colony to begin laying out tracts of land for sale, but a surveyor was not available, so only Willard stayed initially. The others opted to winter in French Grove, between Peoria and the colony, where their families were staying after arriving in Illinois.

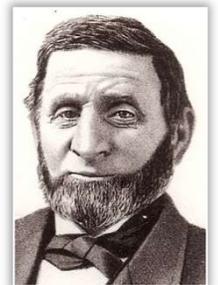
Willard felled trees to build a small log cabin in the land near the southern edge of Big Barren Grove. He stayed with John Kilvington and his family, who had arrived a few months earlier to settle near today's viaduct near the northeast end of Railroad Avenue in Kewanee. Willard trekked daily back and forth for two weeks to build his cabin.

Goodrich and Norman Butler then joined Willard in his small cabin in late 1836, what was later deemed the "Bachelors' Hall" by the other colonists when they began arriving.

Captain Sullivan Howard and his wife Elizabeth Bailey, née Little, showed up in late 1836 – she was the first woman in the colony.

They were followed at the beginning of February 1837 by Henry G. Little and his wife. A week later, William T. Little and his wife came.

On the first of March, Abner Bailey Little (father of all of the Littles), his wife, Nancy Tenney (sister of Reverend Caleb Jewett Tenney, founder of the Connecticut Association), and family reached the colony.



*Howard Sullivan*

Soon still others followed, including Caleb Jewett Tenney Little and his wife, Hazelton Page, Elisha Wolcott, Evan Wheaton, C. B. Miner, Selden Miner, and Sylvester Blish, his family and his son and his family.

The colony's population was growing quickly. But where did all of those settlers live upon reaching their destination?

Captain Sullivan had initially built a small log cabin - some described it as merely a shanty - when he got there. But by the beginning of February, he had hauled in hewed posts and rafters from a sawmill on the Spoon River seventy miles away in order to build the first framed dwelling in the colony, a 14 ft. by 14 ft., one and one-half story house, sided with shaved clapboard. (Later, as his green wood dried, it curled significantly.)

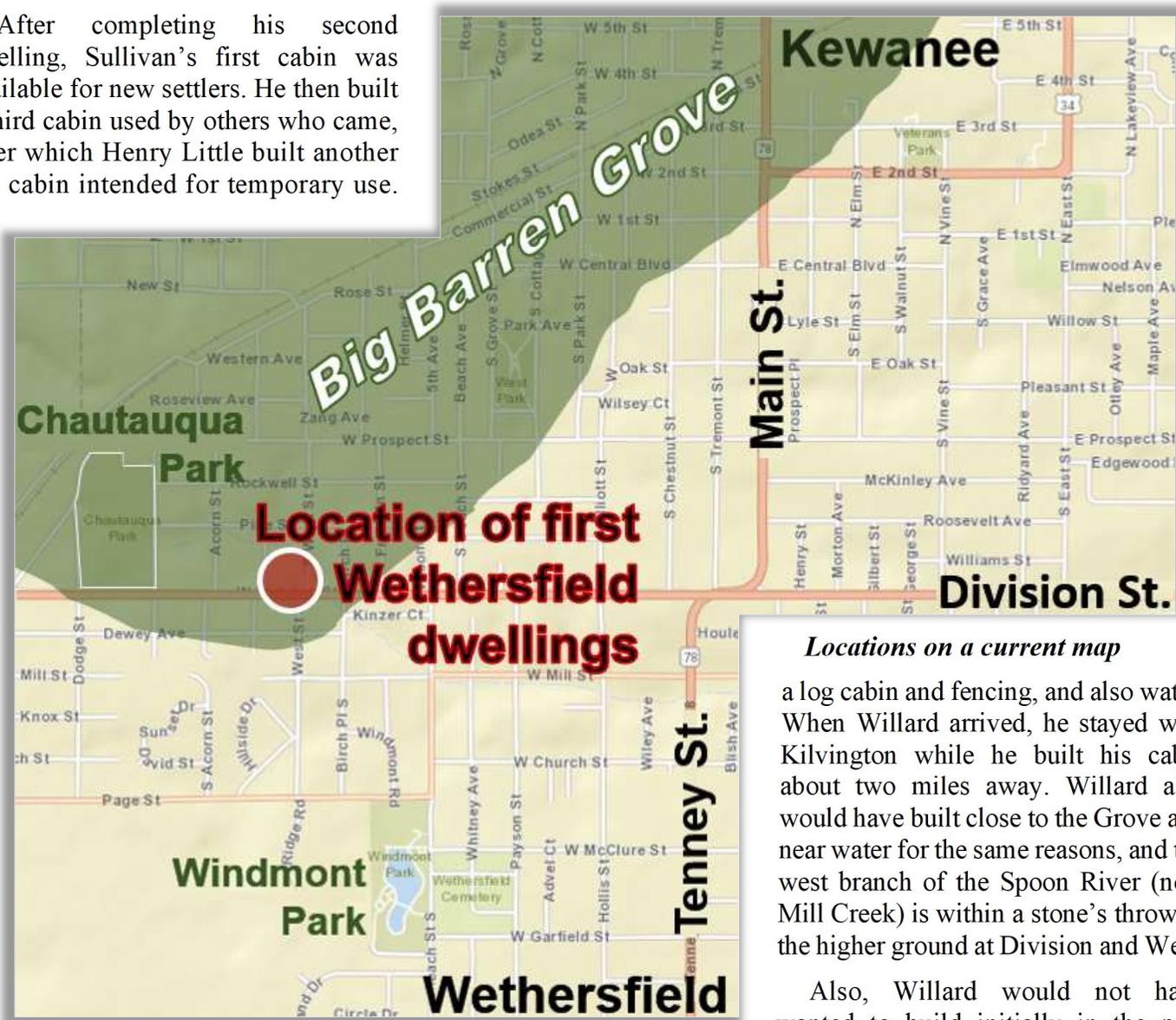
After completing his second dwelling, Sullivan's first cabin was available for new settlers. He then built a third cabin used by others who came, after which Henry Little built another log cabin intended for temporary use.

(A permanent cabin for Henry's parents, Abner and Nancy Tenney Little, was built in the late summer of 1837, and is still standing in its original location south of the juncture of South and Beach Streets after some restoration by the Kewanee Preservation Society.)

*All of those initial dwellings were built quickly at the southern edge of Big Barren Grove, about a mile slightly northwest of what later became the center of the village of Wethersfield, probably on the north side of the intersection of Division and West Streets.*

Here's the basis of our theory for that location, with citations to the record.

We know Kilvington's homestead was on the edge of Barren Grove near a stream, which offered trees for



*Locations on a current map*

a log cabin and fencing, and also water. When Willard arrived, he stayed with Kilvington while he built his cabin about two miles away. Willard also would have built close to the Grove and near water for the same reasons, and the west branch of the Spoon River (now Mill Creek) is within a stone's throw of the higher ground at Division and West.

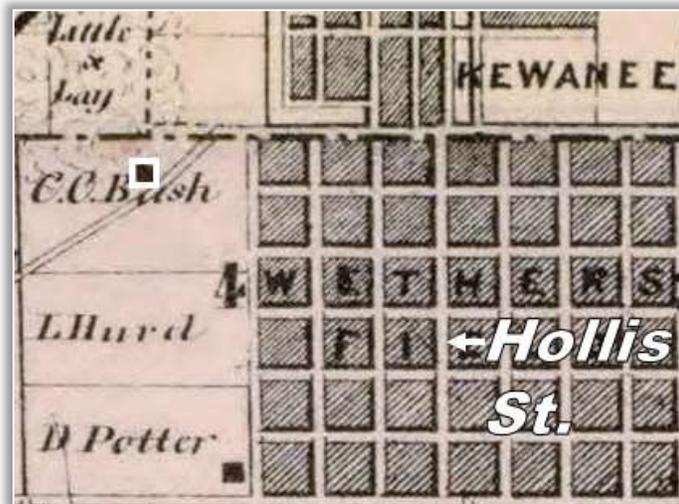
Also, Willard would not have wanted to build initially in the proposed location of the village because

the Association intended to essentially auction off the land, so he built away from there, in or near the grove on the edge of the prairie.

The strongest support for our theory comes from the words of the original settlers which, combined with available documents, make the intersection of Division and West the likely location.

In 1887, at the fiftieth wedding anniversary of original settlers Dr. and Mrs. Lewis Hurd (Caroline Little), Caroline's brother, R. A. Little, explained that the original cabins "were all built near together, about one mile northwest from where we now are, about the edge of the timber upon the land now owned by Mr. C. C. Blish."<sup>1</sup>

In 1887, the Hurds were living on Hollis Street.<sup>2</sup> The property we theorize as the site of the original cabins is, in fact, about a mile or so northwest of the Hurds' home, as seen on the 1860 Wethersfield Township map,<sup>3</sup> which shows the location of C. C. Blish's land and house.



*Excerpt from 1860 township map*

At the same 1887 celebration, C. C. Blish confirmed that "[a]ll of these buildings stood on what is now my farm, about twenty rods north of my house. . . ."<sup>4</sup> Looking at the 1860 map suggests it is only a short distance between Blish's house and what became the intersection of Division and West Streets; in fact, it is about 20 rods away, which will be seen in a moment.

In the 1887 book, *THE HISTORY OF HENRY COUNTY, ILLINOIS, ITS TAX-PAYERS AND VOTERS*, Sylvester Blish's biography notes that he "settled on the N. W. 1/4 of section four (4) in Wethersfield Township . . . where he opened a farm and resided until his death Oct. 8, 1855."<sup>5</sup> The 1860 map shows only one dwelling on Blish land in the N. W. 1/4 of

section four, and C. C. Blish inherited the land and house upon his father's death. So the house appearing on the map can only be the one to which C. C. Blish and R. A. Little referred at the 1887 anniversary celebration.

In the same 1887 text, in the biography of Henry G. Little it states that in the spring of 1837, he and his family "set up their household gods [sic] in a log cabin, near the present home of C. C. Blish . . ."<sup>6</sup> The 1887 text's biography of John Willard also confirms that he initially lived on or near the premises of C. C. Blish.<sup>7</sup> Again, the only house on the Blish property in Section four is only a short distance from our theorized location, and these men clearly describe living near the later-built Blish dwelling.

In documents housed at the Kewanee Historical Society's Museum, James Knox Blish, C. C. Blish's son and Sylvester Blish's grandson, confirms this location for Sylvester Blish's house.<sup>8</sup> (He also confirms that the house served as the first hotel in Wethersfield Township as well as the first Post Office, beginning in either late 1838 or early 1839.<sup>9</sup> According to James, in the late 1840s his father and brother then erected a building in the village on Church St. just east of Tenney St., "in which they ran a hotel until after the Kewanee House was built." That building became a residence for William Blish and family and remains in existence today.<sup>10</sup>)

By superimposing the 1860 Wethersfield Township map over the Henry County Geographic Information System Department's online map,<sup>11</sup> and then enlarging the results, we can roughly identify the location of the Blish house, and thus the location of those first cabins, about 20 rods north of the house.



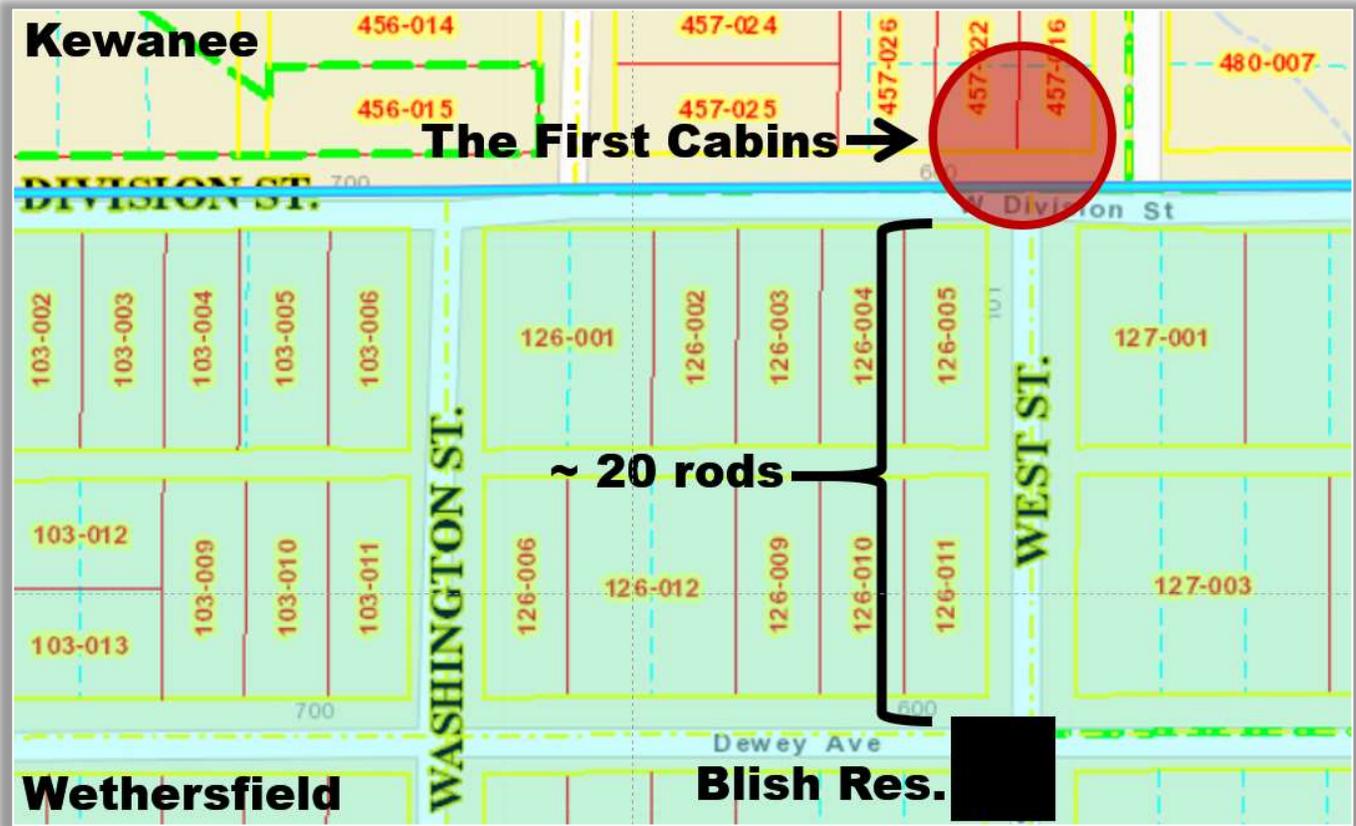
*Excerpt of GIS map overlaying 1860 township map*

Enlarging the GIS map, we can see that 20 rods (about 300 feet) north of the Blish house places the location of the first cabins at the intersection of Division and West Streets.

By the late spring of 1837, the colony had surveyed the land and began making plans for the sale of village lots, prairie land, and timber land. Soon, settlers began building permanent dwellings

within and around the village.

Not too long after that, the old, original cabins were moved to other locations to serve as out-buildings, storage sheds, and the like. But they had served their initial purpose, giving the founding families shelters and places to eat and sleep as they went about the hard work of building a new life in a new land.



*Approximate location of the first Wethersfield Colony cabins on Henry County GIS map*

*(Dean Karau note: Only after reaching our conclusion did I realize that my grandparents lived near that location while raising four kids, including my dad. I have fond memories of playing in that area in my early years. What a surprising coincidence!)*



*Larry Lock, former president of the Kewanee Historical Society, is curator of the Society's Richards Museum. After 32 years of teaching at Kewanee High School, he became active in the Society, and has written extensively on Kewanee history.*



*Dean Karau is a Kewanee native who moved away when he was 12 years old. Now retired, he continues to enjoy the outdoors, genealogy and history. He returns regularly to Kewanee to explore his roots and the history of Kewanee and Henry County.*

---

<sup>1</sup> *INDEPENDENT*, p. 4, col. 3 (Kewanee, Ill., Sept. 1, 1887).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, p. 4, col. 1; *KEWANEE DIRECTORY, 1893*, p. 137 (L. A. Gardner, Kewanee, Ill., 1893).

<sup>3</sup> Holmes, P., and Mendel, Edward, *MAP OF HENRY COUNTY, ILLINOIS* (Illinois: P. Holmes, 1860). Map can be found at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2013593102/>.

<sup>4</sup> *INDEPENDENT*, p. 4, col. 4 (Kewanee, Ill., Sept. 1, 1887).

<sup>5</sup> *THE HISTORY OF HENRY COUNTY, ILLINOIS, ITS TAX-PAYERS AND VOTERS*, p. 479 (Chicago, H. F. Kett & Co., 1877).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, p. 432.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*, p. 489.

<sup>8</sup> Documents obtained by and available at the Kewanee Historical Society from the Henry G. Little Collection, Illinois History and Lincoln Collections, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Web page located at <https://portico.mygisonline.com/html5/?viewer=henryil>.