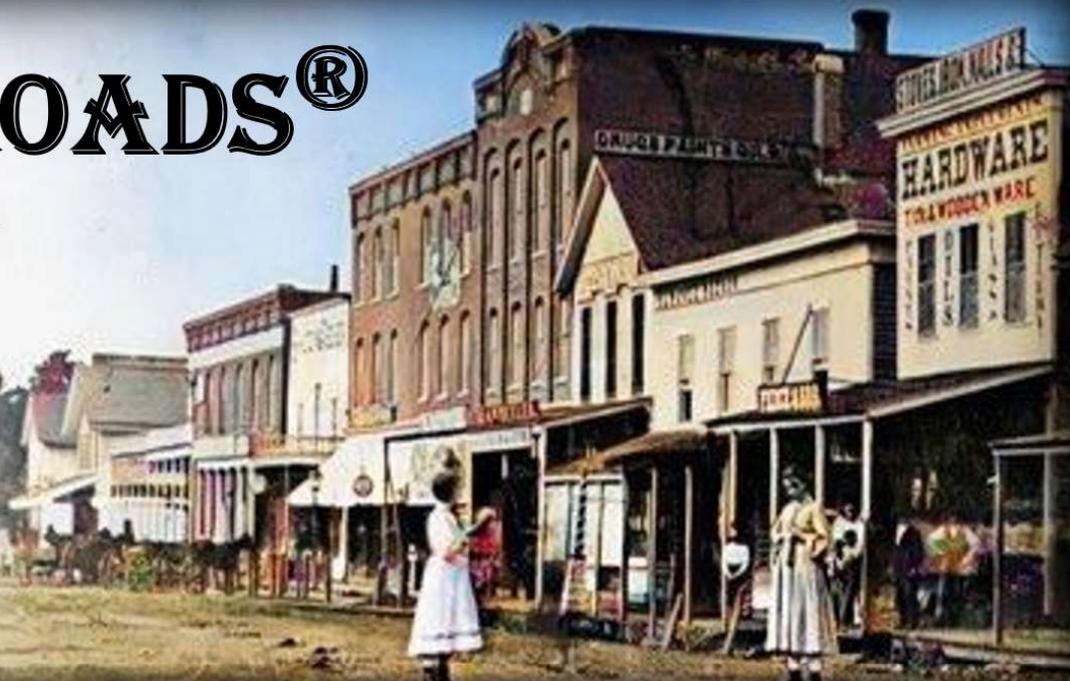


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STORIES OF

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June 2021

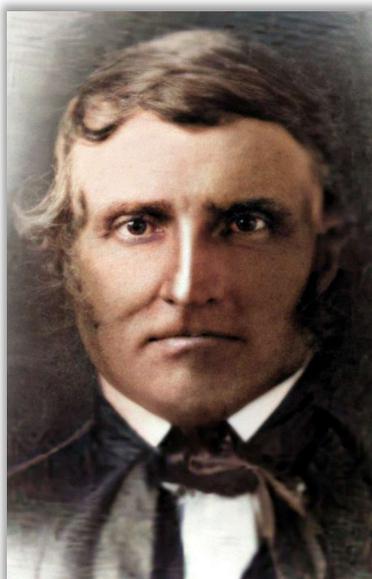
East Park

Veterans' Park Began as Kewanee's Second Park, the First on the East Side of the Village

In 1836, Colonel Sylvester Blish was one of the three men tasked by the Connecticut Association of Wethersfield, Connecticut, to find and buy land for what became the Wethersfield Colony. In 1837, Blish and his family joined about 40 other pioneers to settle the colony. Over the next 17 years, the Blish family became a driving force in the development of Wethersfield.

When the Central Military Tract Railroad was formed in 1851, Col. Blish served for a time on its board of directors. In 1854, when it was clear that the railroad would bypass Wethersfield a mile and a half to the north, Blish, along with Henry G. Little, Sullivan Howard, and R. A. Tenney, acquired and platted the land which would eventually become downtown Kewanee. Those men, along with Nelson Lay who arrived a few months later, were the founding fathers of our hometown.

Blish held many positions of trust in both Wethersfield and Kewanee, including serving as the first postmaster in each village. Unfortunately, before he could reap the fruit of his involvement in the founding of Kewanee, Blish died in 1855.



Col. Sylvester Blish

The Blish family owned significant property in what became Wethersfield and Kewanee Townships, including the northeast quarter of Section 33 in Kewanee Township. A western piece of that land became part of the village of Kewanee's original downtown, and eventually the rest of it became part of village as well.

The original village of Kewanee, including Blish's land in Section 33, was prairie to the east and southeast of Big Barren Grove. That timber land ran from the northwest corner of Wethersfield Township to the northeast, some six miles wide and 15 miles long. The vast, undulating prairie contained only prairie grass, hazelnut bushes, and other scrub trees.

In 1857, Sylvester Blish's heirs donated to the village two pieces of land in Section 33, one for what became the original Kewanee Cemetery, on the corner of E. First Street and S. West Street, and one for a public square bounded by Second, Third, Walnut, and Vine Streets.

The public square, while used to an extent, remain-



Public square (green) and cemetery (red) highlighted on excerpt of 1857 survey map filed with the county



ed undeveloped for a number of years. That changed in the mid-1870s, and soon it became known as a park.

In 1876, the Kewanee Independent applauded the efforts of the village to develop the park, now referred to as East Park, noting that had action been taken earlier, it would now *“be a favorite resort.”*

Soon, the land was thoroughly plowed and graded, then harrowed and rolled, and finally seeded with grass. The village also planted a large number

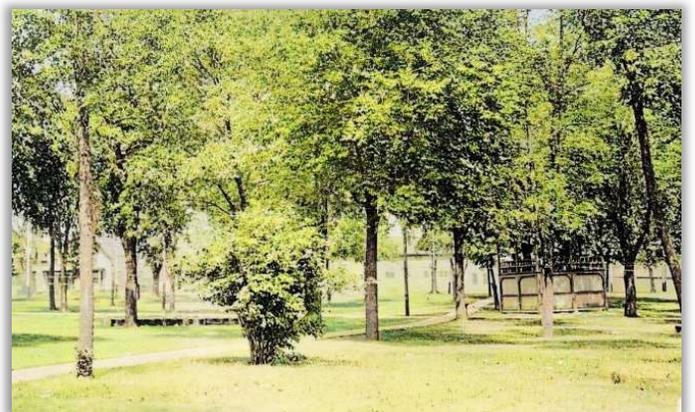
of trees throughout the park along with a row of box elders around the park’s entire perimeter. Serpentine walks covered with gravel were built, starting from a circle in the center to each corner. *“Lawn settees”* were scattered throughout, providing patrons comfortable seating. Two years later, the Kewanee Courier declared that the east park was *“one of the pleasantest parks in Central Illinois.”*

In 1885, the old flagpole which previously stood for years on the ground by Library Hall was moved to East Park. In 1886, an iron fence was erected



Liberty Pole on northwest corner of Third and Tremont Streets, mid-1870s

around the perimeter of the park. In 1887, a band stand was built and soon concerts were being held regularly. In 1891, city lighting was extended to the park. The park’s improvements led to a high level of use.



By the turn of the century, the park was a place for individuals and groups to enjoy peaceful days and entertaining evenings. There were band concerts, public speakers, ice cream socials, and a myriad of other get-togethers at the park. The Kewanee Courier

noted that “[t]here is no chance for any one [sic] to get lonesome in East park [sic] during the warm summer evenings. The grounds are in demand every evening by church and young peoples [sic] societies.”

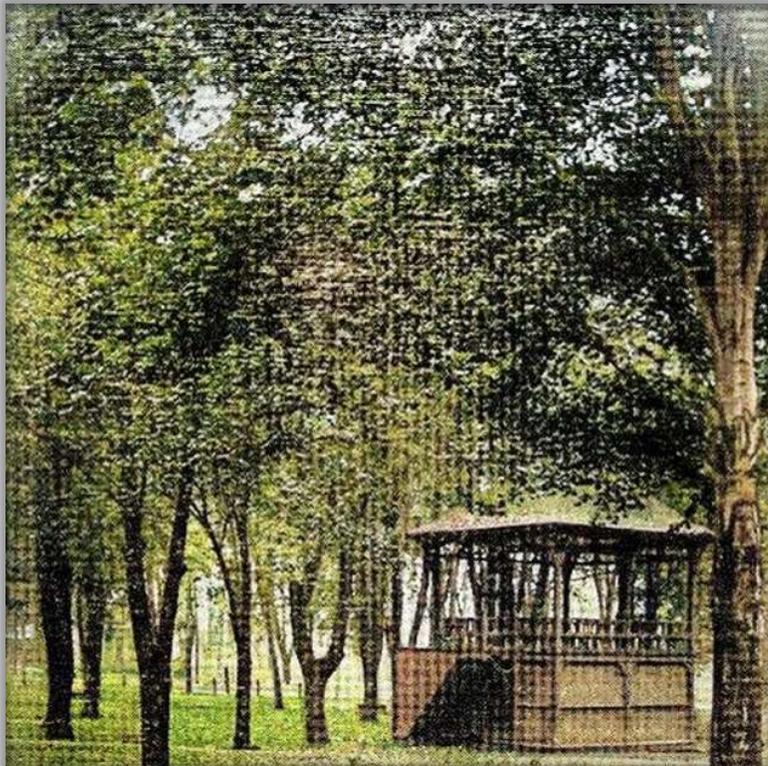
Over the years, the park continued to go through changes. During the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration, it was renamed Veterans’ Memorial Park, but it was often called Memorial Park or Veterans’ Park, and some even continued to call it East Park for a while longer. Today, it’s simply known as Veteran’s Park.

In the late 1970’s there was a proposal to build a

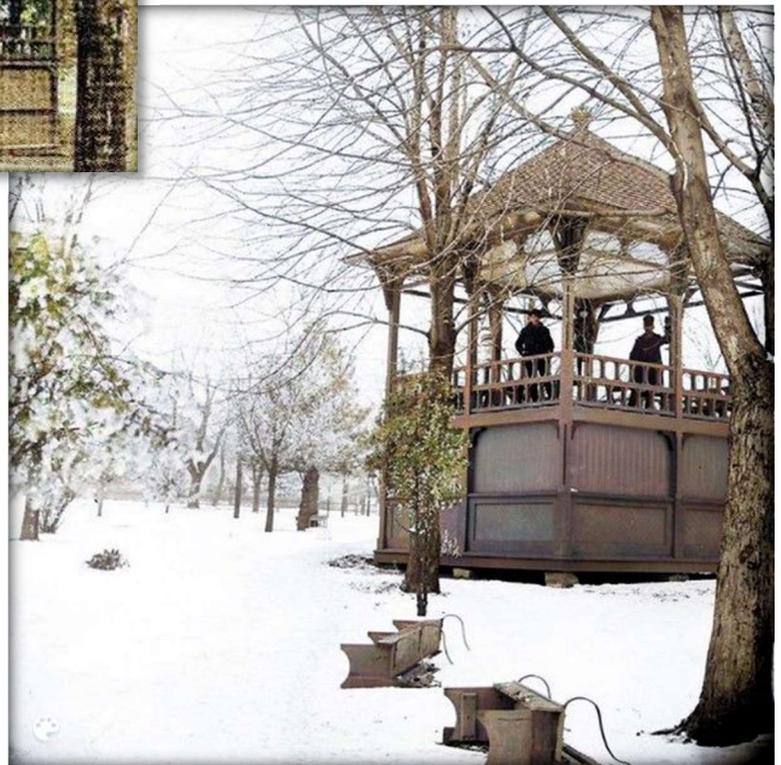
city hall in West Park, but opposition to using park land ended that effort.

Then, in the late 1990s, the Veterans’ Council of Kewanee said they would not oppose using the northern half of Veterans’ Park for a new city hall. The city council decided in 1998 to proceed. The new city hall graced the former park land by early 2000.

One would think that Sylvester Blish, Wethersfield’s and then Kewanee’s first postmaster, would have been pleased to see common sense prevail and his land used for dual public purposes.



Band stand in East Park in 1907



Band stand in East Park in 1913