

History of the Henry County Historical Society and Museum

In August of 1907 at the Annual Meeting of the Old Settlers' Association, the first Henry County Historical Association was formed with F.U. White of Galva, President; James Blish of Kewanee, Vice-President; and, Ella Hume Taylor of Geneseo, Secretary. The meetings of the Historical Society were held in conjunction with the Bishop Hill Old Settlers' annual reunions until the 1930's. Then for about thirty years there was no active historical society in the county.

On Sunday afternoon, January 6, 1963 at a meeting in the court room of the Henry County Circuit, with 125 charter members in attendance, the current Henry County Historical Society was organized. Iener P. Olson, Weller Township Supervisor, presided over the meeting while the formalities of adopting the proposed constitution and by-laws and the election of officers were concluded. The first officers were: President Gilbert Swanson, Cambridge; 1st Vice-President Edward Stone, Geneseo; 2nd Vice-President Alfred Colby, Atkinson; Secretary Lillah Peterson, Lynn Center; and. Treasurer Mrs. Iener Olson, Cambridge. The members defined the purposes of the Society to be: *"To bring together those people interested in the history of Henry County and to collect and preserve articles of historical value to pass on to future generations."*

The Henry County Historical Society initially used the Bishop Hill Heritage Association's Steeple Building in Bishop Hill for the location of its museum. This relationship was very informal until May 16, 1973 when a formal lease agreement was entered into by the two parties. This agreement allowed the Historical Society to use the three story building only as a museum. Rent was set at \$10 per year payable on April 1st and required the Historical Society to pay as additional rent a sum equal to one half of the total donations after deduction of salaries for custodial services, mowing of lawn, and cost of supplies. The lease was for a period of 10 years beginning April 1, 1974 and ending on March 31, 1984. Then on March 11, 1980, the Bishop Hill Heritage Association voted to terminate the lease early due to their need for additional space and asked the Historical Society to vacate the Steeple Building by December 31, 1980. An informal arrangement was made that allowed HCHS to consolidate their artifacts into a single room until other arrangements could be made.

On October 30, 1981, the Henry county Historical Society outbid a Minnesota man for the Bishop Hill Elementary School Building. This one story, brick building had been built by the Galva School District in 1952 and closed at the end of the 1972 school year. It had been offered twice at public auction; however, it failed to draw the minimum price established by the Board of Education. The HCHS purchased the building and its six additional adjoining lots for \$37,200. The Henry County Historical Society then set upon a major funding drive to raise \$60,000 to help with the purchase cost, complete remodeling costs, and help with the annual budget expenditures. After considerable work and restoration, the Society opened its permanent museum to the public in April, 1984.

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The museum consists of five display rooms that include artifacts from early medical/dental offices, blacksmith and harness shops, military memorabilia, one-room schoolhouses and much more. In addition, the old gymnasium, recently dedicated as the “James Berg Ag History Room”, displays numerous early farm items such as a windmill, a horse drawn two row cultivator, a restored John Deere horse drawn sickle mower, and a made in Moline, IL., Velie buggy. The museum is a perfect place to visit for individuals, families, school, church, and tour groups on day trips.

Often referred to as the best kept secret in Henry County, the museum is located in Bishop Hill, two blocks west and one block south of the Steeple Building, at the corner of Knox and Park Streets. Staffed solely by volunteers, with the exception of Saturdays and Sundays when it is staffed by paid hosts, the museum is open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. daily May 1st through October 31st.

The museum receives no state support and is funded solely by tax deductible memberships and visitor donations. Over the years the society has been blessed with several very generous donations from the estates of: Helen Leonhart (1997/1998), Willard Kerr (2001), and James Berg (2017/2018). Donations such as these are critical to the maintenance of the facilities because memberships and visitor donations do not approach full funding.

There are the four annual membership plans available: Patron (\$100); Sponsor (\$50); Family (\$25); and, Single (\$20). Checks may be sent to: Henry County Historical Society, P.O. Box 48, Bishop Hill, IL 61419.